

A Study Of Amiri Baraka's Documentary Poetry With Special Reference to "Somebody Ble w up America"

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Abstract:

The contemporary time is productive of academic actions and literary genres. Documentary poetry, which can be considered a new genre, joins both primary source material, such as war, political events, terrorism, people in detention and many other events with poetry. Amiri Baraka previously known as Leroi Jones was American poet whose poem "Somebody Blew up America" belongs to this genre. It records the September 11 blowing up of the Trade Centre from a perspective different from what the American propaganda and mass media tell the world. This recent paper attempts to clarify on Amiri Baraka's attitude towards this event, the reasons behind it, the real terrorists and the intentions behind this terrorist event according to this poem. The poet contends that the American government knew beforehand that the Trade Centre was going to be blown up and they took no action to prevent the catastrophe and, in this sense, they were partners in the crime. Furthermore, he accuses the Americans of blowing up the trade Centre. The paper is divided into three sections and a conclusion. Section One is Introductory; it sheds light on documentary poetry, its characteristic features and practitioners. Section Two is a biographical note of Amiri Baraka paying special attention to his attitude to American politics based on domination, persecution and genocide. Section Three gives a detailed analysis of "Somebody Blew up America" as a documentary poem recording the September 11 blowing up of the Trade Centre with the aim of finding a pretext to invade other countries. The paper

concludes that this event occurred according to a well-made plan in cooperation with the American government and the CIA as partners.

Key Words: Amiri Baraka Leroi Jones, documentary poetry, September 11, terrorism, Al-Qaeda, Trade Centre, Islam phobia

1. Documentary Poetry

The current age can be described as the age of inventions in science and the age of innovation in literature and art. Poets, writers and artists of the modern age tried to break new ground and this resulted in the emergence of new movements, and new types, in art and literature such as Dadaism, Surrealism, Futurism, the Beats, free verse, the prose poem, visual poetry, sound poetry, and found poetry, to mention just a few examples.

One can safely say that documentary poetry is greatly influenced by and "shares traits of objectivist poetry (e.g. William Carlos Williams) and investigative poetry (e.g. Edward Sanders)"; it is also greatly influenced by found poetry (<http://www.poetryriver.org/docupoetry.html>).

Documentary poetry, which is sometimes called "docupoetry", is one of the contemporary types of poetry. It can be defined as a type of poetry which combines "primary source material with poetry writing". The primary source materials include "interviews, news articles, letters, photographs, dairies, journals, laws, court scripts, medical records, government forms, and a variety of public records" (<http://www.poetryriver.org/docupoetry.html>). In a 2011 essay, poet Joseph Harrington declared it a genre of its own: "creative nonpoetry" (Docupoetry).

The American poet, Professor Susan M. Schultz who taught documentary poetry to graduate students says that the students focused on "women in prison, a homeless woman, a forgotten city, a planned town and its secrets, tourism, food and activism, and a lost grandfather" (Schultz, 1) in their poems.

In "Poetry in the Light of Documentary" in the Chicago Review (Jan., 2016, 59:1/2), Jill Magi defines documentary poetry as "a form of poetry that seeks to document (or capture) a historical moment in words, images, sound, video, and other media" (Magi 3), adding that this type often uses images, quotations and documents from other sources such as mass media. It may also use testimonials for the purpose of disclosing "hidden truth about historical events" (Ibid.), such as the September 11 events. In this sense, Amiri Baraka's "Somebody Blew up America" can be considered a typical documentary poem.

Magi makes a comparison between the documentary film and documentary poetry and he convincingly argues that Documentary film and poetry emerged as a reaction to abstraction in art and literature which was supported by the CIA: "It is now well known that abstraction in painting was supported and encouraged by CIA initiatives in the 50s with the intent to steer artists and audiences away from social realism and aesthetic practices that took up 'reality'" (Magi 5). He adds that there was a "documentary turn" in art and "at the same time

documentary has become a means of attempting to re-establish a relationship to reality" (Magi 7). He therefore affirms that the real beginning of documentary poetry was the nineties of the previous century:

In the mid-90s the poetry journal CHAIN published an issue on "documentary and poetry." Around that same time, at the University of Buffalo, Susan Howe taught a graduate course called "Documentary and Poetry." In peer-reviewed literary studies journals of the late 90s, discussions of Muriel Rukeyser began to describe her work as "documentary." These, according to my research, are some of the first instances of "documentary" and "poetry" used in the same breath. (Magi 8) On the other hand, Philip Metres in an essay in *Poetry* 2007 argues that the documentary poem is meant to "testify to the often unheard voices of people struggling to survive in the face of unspeakable violence" (Quoted in Earl 2).

In his essay "Docupoetry and Archive Desire" (2011), Joseph Harrington traces the origins of Documentary poetry to the nineteen-fifties; to Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, Ezra Pound, Muriel Rukeyser, Archibald MacLeish, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams and many others. However, in this essay, like Jill Magi, he believes that this type of poetry emerged after the documentary film in the thirties of the twentieth century, "lost some of its luster in the late 1940s and 1950s" and then it flourished again in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century (Harrington 1-2). Throughout this essay, Harrington holds rather a negative idea of documentary poetry, looking at it as an archive or "creative nonpoetry" didactic writing, (11). The reason, according to him, is the dissolving of genres in contemporary literature, especially in America:

In other words, "creative nonpoetry" is a way of describing what actually-existing poetry has become in the US, over the last twenty years or so — an indeterminate space where the histories of genres clash, combine, morph, or dissolve. A space, let us say it, of creative freedom, in which genre becomes an historical tool to employ, reject, or add to — just as "history" is understood as history writing. (Harrington, 13) The merit of documentary poetry, is that it is "associated with left-liberal politics" (Harrington, Note 8, p. 14) and with reality.

Documentary poetry has found a great number of practitioners among contemporary American and British poets. Poetry Soup, for example, is a site of documentary poetry which gives a list of contemporary new documentary poems such as Madison Demetros's "Puppy Love Part 1", Gerald Dillenbeck's "Not Your Ngre", Alex Duffy's "Hip Hop Saved my Life", Bernard Barday's "War is for Fools", Stephen Pennell's ""This is Where Freedom Finds a Way"" and Justin Bordner's "Soul Stance River -36- Final, ([https:// www. poetry soup. com/poems/documentary](https://www.poetrysoup.com/poems/documentary))", to mention but a few examples, bearing in mind that the number of documentary poets is increasing every day.

To conclude, documentary poetry or "docupoetry" is an innovative type of poetry which appeared in the late twentieth century and flourished in the early twenty-first century. Documentary poetry takes its material from reality and from non-literary materials such as newspaper articles, documents, images, videos, historical events, hospital records and a lot of

other materials. It aims at disclosing and revealing hidden truth to the readers, giving information with the purpose of social or political change.

2. Amiri Baraka or LeRoi Jones (1934-2014): A Biographical Note

Amiri Baraka, born Everett LeRoi Jones; October 7, 1934 – January 9, formerly known as LeRoi Jones before changing his name to Imamu Amear Baraka, or Amiri Baraka (after his conversion to Islam), is an African-American poet, playwright, novelist and music critic. He has taught in more than three universities and has won the PEN Open book Award in 2008, (Wikipedia). He became poet Laureate of New Jersey (2002-2003) for about one year and then denied this after the public reading of his poem "Somebody Blew up America". As a poet, his poems mostly deal with black liberation and white racism and this was one of the reasons behind the extreme commendation and condemnation of his poems. He was also accused of anti- Semitism.

Baraka converted to the "Kewaida sect of the Muslim faith" and his name became Imamu Amiri Baraka. "Imamu" a Swahili word which has the same meaning of the Arabic word Imam, meaning "leader" and "Amiri Baraka" is "the Arabic name that Jones adopted", (<http://biography.yourdictionary.com/imamu-amiri-baraka>). He even divorced his Jewish wife, Hettie Cohen in 1967 (whom he married in 1960), and in the same year he remarried the African-American poet Sylvia Robinson and changed her name into Amina Baraka now known as Amina Baraka. The year 1967 also witnessed the publication of his poetry collection *Black Magic* which marks a turning point in his poetry and art; the separation from white culture and white values.

In his "Introduction," to *The LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka Reader* (1991), William J. Harris divides Baraka's career into three periods: The beat period, when he was still known as LeRoi Jones and living in New York at Greenwich Village. At this time, he was associated with the Beat figures Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, Charles Olson and Gilbert Sorrentino. The second period, the black nationalist period (1965-1974), immediately after the assassination of the Malcolm X (the black Muslim leader), Baraka moved to Harlem, where he looked at black people as "a race, a culture, a Nation" and published his collection of poems *Black Magic* which is often accused of being racial. He also defended social violence as necessary to self-defense and nation building. The third period is the Marxist period (1974-2004). In this period, he "rejected black nationalism as racist and became a Third World Socialist" and he published a number of collections of Marxist poetry such as *Hard Facts*, *Poetry for the Advances* and he looks at art "as a weapon of revolution" (Harris 1-10).

Many writers, as Gafio Watts, hold a negative idea of Baraka, looking at the dark side of Baraka's writings accusing him of violence, racism and anti-Semitism (Watts, 2001) ignoring the oppression the African-Americans had endured in the past and even in the first half of the twentieth century. Though Baraka had written some anti- Semitic poems, some poems calling for violence against the whites and a Marxist collection of poems, in his *Autobiography* he expresses his regret over some of them saying "we were all ideologically confused" (Sherman 4). Baraka's mission as a poet and a black political activist was to fight against racial discrimination, to preserve the African American culture and to reveal the truth of American politics in his

speeches, novels, film-scripts, plays and poems. His works are well known for their objective strident social and political criticism that he became a prominent voice in contemporary American literature and a powerful campaigner of black cultural nationalism and a supporter of third-world liberation movements.

3. Amiri Baraka's 'Somebody Blew up America'

Baraka wrote this poem a few days after the September 11 attacks in 2001 but he recited it a year later at Gerdine R. Dodge Poetry Festival in Waterloo Village (on September 19, 2012) as Ervin confirms, "He recited 'Somebody Blew up America' a poem he had written a year earlier" (Ervin, www.hu.mtu.edu), and it was published in the collection *Somebody Blew up America & Other Poems* in 2004. This poem is a magnificent and controversial documentary poem which caused boisterous reactions for its condemnation of the racial injustice practiced by America throughout its history as well as condemnation of America's colonial and imperialistic practices and fake democracy. Furthermore, it reveals the hidden secrets behind the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre.

From the very beginning of the poem, the poet uses verbal irony to accuse "American terrorists" of the crime; the same terrorists who oppressed the "niggers" and "blew up nigger churches", using the word "nigger" because it is an offensive, insulting and contemptuous term for a black person:

They say its some terrorist,

some barbaric

A Rab

in Afghanistan

It wasn't our American terrorists

It wasn't the Klan or the Skin heads

Or the them that blows up nigger

Churches, or reincarnates us to Death

Row

It wasn't Trent Lott

Or David Duke or Giuliani

Or Schundler, Helms retiring (ll. 1-13)

The poem begins with "They say..." which implicitly suggests that they (the Bush Administration) lie. In these lines, using vernacular language, Baraka reminds us of the oppression black people had undergone at the hands of American terrorists in the past and he

mentioned some of them by names. By "Klan", for instance, he means Ku Klux Klan which was a white supremacist (chauvinist) group organized in the South after the Civil War (1860-1865) that used violence and murder against the blacks. A similar terrorist society was founded in Georgia in 1915 whose terrorist methods were similar to that of the nineteenth-century society (Encarta 2008, "Klan"). "Skin heads" refers to racist young white men with closely-cropped or shaven hair, characterized by extreme right-wing views and aggressive behavior.

As for David Duke, he was the founder of the Louisiana-based Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (KKKK). Duke repeatedly insisted that his society was "not anti-black" but rather "pro-white" and "pro-Christian". Though he was against violence, he could not stop members of other chapters of the Klan from doing stupid violent things and he left the Klan in 1980 (Wikipedia). Baraka, as a documentary poet is using historical facts to prepare the reader for what he is going to say about contemporary American politics and the demolition of the Trade Center Buildings.

The poet adds in the second paragraph that black people have not died by gonorrhoea (a contagious disease of the sexual organs that is spread by sexual contact) as America's propaganda claims. They were the victims of organized genocide.

It wasn't

The gonorrhoea in costume

The white sheet diseases

That have murdered black people

Terrorized reason and sanity

Most of humanity, as they please (ll. 14-19)

The poet then begins a long series of 163 rhetorical questions in 163 lines beginning with "who" whose answer is mostly known by the readers or audience. The answer is certainly "America". These questions tell us that the white people of America who mostly migrated from abroad to the New Land slaughtered the American red Indians and settled in their lands. Later on, similar crimes of genocide were committed against the black people as well as rape and lynching:

Who cut your nuts off

Who rape your ma

Who lynched your pa (ll. 31-33)

Furthermore, America is the one "who made the bombs/ who made the guns/who bought the slaves, who sold them" (ll. 49-51). America robs the other nations' wealth, "stole Puerto Rico", the Philippines, Australia and the Hebrides (ll. 55-58). Though America's crimes are uncountable, the poet enumerates many of them which America hides by telling lies:

Who rob and steal and cheat and murder

and make lies the truth (ll. 85-86)

The poet's memory goes back into history and wars to remind the reader of America's crimes, not only against "niggers" but also against other nations, such as the use of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the crimes committed against the Italians, Irish, Africans and Latinos as well:

Who killed the most niggers

Who killed the most Jews

Who killed the most Italians

Who killed the most Irish

Who killed the most Africans

Who killed the most Japanese

Who killed the most Latinos (ll. 92-98).

The poet then adds "Who? Who? Who?" (l. 99), which is repeated like a refrain several times in lines (54, 70, 99, 134, 223) suggesting that such who-questions are endless because America's crimes against humanity are innumerable and endless. The poet believes that some doubtful societies were behind the election of George W. Bush as president of the United States "Who make Bush president" (l. 110) and he accuses Bush of lying, "Who talk about democracy and be lying". All these were tackled in the ample objectivity of the historian or the journalist, which is characteristic of documentary poetry, rather than the subjective sensibility of the lyrical poet. Furthermore, as a documentary poet, he depends on nonliterary materials to produce his poem which will be a document itself.

In about the middle of the poem the poet turns to the September 11 events, Alqa'ida and Bin Laden explicitly accusing America of creating them, "Who found Bin Laden, maybe they Satan" (l. 135). This very line accuses America of founding terrorist groups and organizations like Alqa'ida. However, the second part of the poem was behind accusing Baraka of anti-Semitism and behind the efforts to oust him from the post of poet laureate of New Jersey.

Baraka straight forwardly states that the Bush Administration knew earlier about the terrorist attacks:

Who knew the bomb was gonna blow

Who know why the terrorists

Learned to fly in Florida, San Diego(II. 137-139).

Furthermore, these lines demonstrate that the poet has assured information that the terrorists who flew the planes have had their training in Florida and at the San Diego air-base.

Like any investigator looking for the truth, Baraka gives convincing evidence about the pre-knowledge of the September 11 attacks. Five Israelis were waiting with their cameras for the attacks to film the explosion which certainly means that they were certain of the time of the attacks:

Who know why Five Israelis was

filming the explosion

And cracking they sides at notion(II. 140-142)

This time his source is the American widespread newspaper The New York Times which published such news about the Israelis. These lines, as well as lines (217-222) were behind accusing the poet of being anti-Semitic:

Who knew the World Trade Center

was gonna get bombed

Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the

Twin Towers

To stay home that day

Why did Sharon stay away?(II. 217-222)

This time Baraka, defending himself against anti-Semitism says that his source for this information was the British newspaper The Daily Telegraph, "And the Israeli Mossad knew that the attacks were going to take place". They knew that the World Trade Centre towers were the targets. This is from British newspaper the Telegraph" (Baraka, 2002: 2). Though the main concern of this paper is how this poem is a documentary one and not to defend Baraka against anti-Semitism, this supports the argument of the poem that Baraka draws his material from non-literary documents such as The Daily Telegraph and The New York Times.

The lines between 142 and 217 try to show the ugly face of American terrorism, both interior and exterior by interference into other countries' affairs. Again the poet uses America's history as a source of information giving a long list of America's crimes. America killed Malcolm, Kennedy and his brother, Dr. King David Sibeko, Chris Hani, Biko, Cabral, Neruda, Allendi, Che Guevara, Sandino, Kabila, Lumumba, Mondlane, Betty Shabazz, Ralph Featherstone, Huey Newton, Fred Hampton, Medgar Evers, Mikey Smith, Walter Rodney, Rosa Luxembourg, Liebneckt and many others (II. 148-179).

This part of the poem accuses America of colonialism, imperialism and exterior oppression. Bearing in mind that the Bush administration Knew beforehand about the attacks but neglected all warnings because it wanted them to happen as an appropriate pretext to attack Arab and Muslim countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq driven by Islamophobia which is the "intense

dislike of Islam . . .; hostility or prejudice towards Muslims" (Wikipedia) and looking at Islam as a barbaric religion of violence and terrorism. One of the reasons behind the September attacks was to increase the sentiments of Islamophobia in the western societies.

At the present time, there is sound evidence confirming Baraka's argument that the demolition of the World Trade Centre was not a result of the 9/11 attacks, but it was a carefully planned scheme of the CIA. One is Major General Albert Stubblebine's testimony who completely denies, in a televised speech, that the demolition of the WTC buildings was the result of the attacks. Stubblebine says that he has taken the measurement of the Pentagon building, checked the length of the plane's wings and nose and he concludes that the hole in the building was not made by the plane but by a missile. Replaying the original video of the attacks, he reaches at the conclusion that the flying object was not a plane but a missile and the "imagery was changed; it got a new suit. It now looks like an airplane; when you take that suit off, it looks like a missile". Furthermore, the fuel of the airplane is not enough to melt the steel of the tower. (<https://youtu.be/VqKzaf6xYRc?t=5>). Stubblebine adds that all the sensors of the Pentagon were turned off that day which means that everything was planned beforehand, and the collapse of the building was caused by controlled demolition (ibid.).

As for World Trade Centre, no airplane hit it and a man can be heard in the video saying "pull" and then the building collapsed. Stubblebine affirms that all the air- defense systems in that part of the country were turned off at the orders of the Vice President who was in Colorado. He concludes with rhetorical questions: "Who planned for this attack? Why was it planned? Were the real terrorists the people in Arab clothing or were the real people who planned this; the people sitting in authority in the White House?" (ibid.) and the answers are evident.

On the other hand, the ninety-seven-year-old retired CIA agent, Malcolm Howard, in July 13, 2017, confesses on deathbed that the CIA blew up WTC7 on September 11. He says that they had "orders from the top" and that "when you are a patriot, you don't question the motivation of the CIA or the White House. You assume the bigger purpose is for a greater goal." Explaining how the WTC was brought down, he says "It was a classic controlled demolition with explosives. The hard part was getting thousands of pounds of explosives, fuses and ignition mechanisms into the building without too much concern", bearing in mind that WTC7 was completely rented by the CIA. On September 11, he explained, while the North and South towers burned, "fuses were ignited in World Trade Centre 7, and nanothermite explosions hollowed the building, destroying the steel structure, removing the enforcements, and allowing the office fires to tear through the rest of the building, hollowing it out like a shell". He adds that they thought that people are going to question this because it went so smoothly, "We thought there would be a revolution. It would go all the way to the top, to President Bush. He'd be dragged out of the White House" (Malcolm Howard. <http://yournewswire.com/cia-911-wtc7>).

Stubblebine's analysis and Howard's confessions affirm what Baraka says in his poem about the September 11 attacks and that Bush administration not only knew about it but was the real

terrorist who planned and performed them to use this as a pretext for distorting the image of Islam and Muslims and to invade two Muslim countries: Afghanistan and Iraq.

Baraka's poem also ends with the same question word "who" which the poet expects to be asked by everybody. This goes with Stubblebine concluding questions above about the real terrorist; "the real people who planned this; the people sitting in authority in the White House" (Stubblebine) and not the people in Arab clothing. The poet promises that he will never stop asking the who-questions that accuse America of the many injustices exercised against people, especially blacks, in America and peoples of other nations:

Exploding in fire. We hear the questions rise

In terrible flame like the whistle of a crazy dog

Like the acid vomit of the fire of Hell

Who and WHO who who Whoooo and

Whoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!(241-246)

To go over the main points, throughout the complete poem, the poet is anti-American rather than anti-Semite, as he was accused by Zionist organizations which led to ousting him from the post of poet laureate of New Jersey. The poem is highly critical of American white racism throughout history and of the Administration's involvement and participation in the September 11 attacks.

Conclusion

Documentary poetry is an innovative type of poetry that works with nonliterary materials such as newspapers, cultural and historical documents and archives, advertisements, family records, TV news and a variety of other public records. The documentary poet is an objective observer who employs these materials sententiously for the purpose of improvement, enlightenment, revealing hidden truth and enhancing social and political revolution. In this sense, documentary poetry is impersonal and objective rather than subjective. In "Somebody Blew up America", for instance, Baraka depends on information that had been reported by newspapers such as The New York Times and The Daily Telegraph and by some TV channels as well as the history of the African Americans and their suffering. One can safely say the documentary poetry is the voice of the people and an expression their unuttered thoughts. Baraka's poem is a documentary poem atrocious it presents history and works with non-poetic materials and events. It is highly realistic and it deals objectively with truth rather than with personal feelings.

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