

Amina Baraka: I have piles and piles of boxes that I thought was poetry. A couple of days I began to look at "Dancer" because I was a dancer. But recently going through this stuff, it's a diary. So I changed it from "Dancer" the title to a diary because I go back to things that happened in the sixties, the seventies, the eighties, up to the present time. So I said, "Amina, this is a diary. Some of it ain't poetry at all." So now I'm working on my diary.

Ishmael Reed: So what is going to be the length of the diary?

Amina Baraka: I can't tell you. Right now I am up to about three hundred pages.

Ishmael Reed: Wow.

Amina Baraka: Because I have been keeping this from the day that I met LeRoi Jones because he was LeRoi Jones when I met him.

Ishmael Reed: Tell me a little bit about your dancing career.

Amina Baraka: I don't know if you've seen the movie "The Red Shoes." (1948). I went to see that movie and that movie impressed me. Little did I know that I was going to end up being Victoria Page, who had to choose between her career and a lover. I ended up giving my career for Amiri. I've always loved theater from acting to dancing and I worked with a lot of local musicians here in Newark and I just got up and started dancing. Then some of them told me about Alvin Ailey and Joy Faison so I got a chance to watch them. But before that I saw the dance in the movie, "Cabin in the Sky" (1943) when I was a kid. I was born in 1942, so I'm a World War II baby. When any colored people came on the television everybody would gather around to see Lena Horne and the Blues singers from Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey to Koko Taylor who sang, "You Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog." We grew up in the sanctified church, which we called it back in the day. Interestingly enough I got baptized in Abyssinian Baptist Church, which still exists. But my grandmother, Leona Bacote, still did not like to gossip. She said, "Honey, you don't know what they sayin', you don't know what they doin', so I'm leaving that church and going to a church where they serve the Lord." So that's how I ended up in a Pentecostal church, which led me to being interested in the Yoruba culture because we fell out and spoke the unknown tongues, rolled around in the floor and you couldn't backslide but three times because if you backslid more than three times the Lord wasn't going to help you. I'm just kind of going through these things right now because in my life, giving where I stand and the stories that I hear about LeRoi/Amiri Baraka, I can understand why people need to be in places that make them feel comfortable. That's the truth. Because the truth don't lie. It's very difficult right now especially with our son (Ras Baraka) being the mayor of Newark and doing very, very well, despite his mother and father. I worry about him and his brother Amiri, Junior and people say, "Why is he Amiri, Junior?" I say, "Because he is." His father's birthday, as you all know, was October 7th. So Amiri, Junior, his third son, was born October 6th. That's why his name is Amiri. He was supposed to be born on October 7th, his father's birthday. I told him,

“Honey, he’s too nosy. “He couldn’t wait. He came out the day before. I always think he’s the first, but he’s the third. Obalaji is the first, Ras is the second and Amiri Junior is the third.

Ishmael Reed: Did you know the Jones’s when you were growing up in Newark?

Amina Baraka: No. No. I did not.

Ishmael Reed: So tell me about your meeting him for the first time.

Amina Baraka: You know the painter, Ben Caldwell. I was married before to Walter Wilson and I had two daughters. I was always interested in the music and dancing and Art Williams and all of us would get together. We always went to each other’s homes to listen to the music and hang out, but I was on my way to work downtown and I passed this place at 22 Shipman Street and I called Art Williams and I told him I saw this place. I talked to the people, and they were moving out and I said, “Now you need to talk to them because we need a loft.” Arthur went down there, he did all the negotiations, so we took the third floor and that’s what became “the loft.” We were all musicians and artists and Ben Caldwell came to Newark from Harlem. He’s the one who introduced me to LeRoi Jones. He said, “LeRoi Jones is in town,” and I said, “Who?” He said, “LeRoi Jones.” I said, “I don’t know him.” So he said, “Oh, you never saw ‘Dutchman?’” I said, “No. What about him?” He said, “Well, anyway, he needs a place to rehearse. He wants to do this piece called ‘A Black Mass.’” I said, “Okay. Let me talk to Art.” Arthur Williams was really the founder of this group. He was a truck driver and a bass player. I asked him, “LeRoi Jones is in town and needs a place to rehearse.” He said, “LeRoi Jones? Are you serious?” I said, “I’m serious.” He said, “You don’t know him?” I said, “No, I don’t.” He said, “Okay. It’s alright. You got the keys. If you can open it up and close it down because I have a job.” I said, “Okay.” So that’s how I met him through Ben Caldwell.

Ishmael Reed: So where were you working?

Amina Baraka: I was working wherever I could find a job. That’s when hair salons got to be popular and there was a place called Diane Martins. Mr. Miller was the manager. I will always remember his name. He was from the Caribbean. My first husband’s sister was leaving there, and she got me the job. Other than that I worked at factories that was making books for Upsala College, I worked at Remco, and such as that. But mostly my first husband came from a family of thirteen and his family was not somebody you could look down upon. They did pretty well for themselves. He was a manager of a store called Royal Shoe Store. I still had to work because when we first got married, we lived in a project called Scudder Homes.

Ishmael Reed: Yeah, I remember Scudder Homes. (I edited a newspaper called the *Advance* during the summer of 1965. I quit when they fired my staff, Myrna Bain and Chauncey Westbrook, photographer and musician, who was a member of The Orioles in the 1950s and performed with Aretha Franklin and Sammy Davis, Jr. The investors wanted to keep me on to front a newspaper run by others.

Amina Baraka: We lived in Scudder homes and things started happening there. That's how I met a community activist named Mary Smith. She's a very well known activist here in Newark and she helped me understand a little bit about tenant organizing. We lived on the twelfth floor, so it got to be a problem with me coming home from work and the elevators were broken and all sorts of mess was happening. We decided that we were going to move out of Scudder Homes. So we got out of there and we moved to High Park Gardens. It still exists and now is a gated community. When we moved in there, the walls were painted White and there were little gold speckles on them. My first husband said, "Sylvia, this is a co-op. I've got to paint my walls." They said, "No, you can't paint your walls." So I organized the people in the community just to get my house painted. I know it sounds silly now. That's how I got into tenant organizing.

Ishmael Reed: This is before you met Amiri.

Amina Baraka: Oh, absolutely.

Ishmael Reed: So you were politically savvy before you met Amiri. The myth is that he converted you to politics.

Amina Baraka: Oh, really? Once again people don't know what they're talking about.

Ishmael Reed: So he came out there after Black Arts Repertory folded?

Amina Baraka: He came back to Newark and that's the other thing. He wrote about it in his autobiography. Nobody wants to read it.

Ishmael Reed: I read it a few times.

Amina Baraka: I was dealing with tenants' organizations and it wasn't about the toilets wasn't working or nothing. You know what I was organizing about? I wanted to paint my house. I didn't want the white walls with the gold speckles.

Ishmael Reed: That's an issue. The aesthetics of where you live.

Amina Baraka: I started knocking on doors and I met another sister who decided she was going on out there with me. We won. It was a co-op. We were paying lots of goddamn money. Once we had the meeting in the laundry room, they said, "Sylvia, I think you should be the Chair." I said, "I can't do that because I'm in the Jazz Arts Society." They elected someone else as the Chair of the Tenants' Organization because I didn't want to consider anything but art. From there on the rest is history because I met LeRoi Jones. He moved from New York to Newark and was living with his parents. Ben Caldwell was a painter. My house was full of his work. Anybody who was an artist came to Newark to the Jazz Arts Society. We had brought Sun Ra here. As a matter of fact LeRoi Jones was very surprised that we brought Ra here. We also brought Alvin Ayler. The Loft was shut down. Afterwards they would come to my apartment there at Hyde Park Gardens and Alvin Ayler was one of my best friends for awhile.

Ishmael Reed: Did he do “Jello” and “A Black Mass” together? How did that go?

Amina Baraka: Yes. When Ben Caldwell introduced us, he told me, “He’s going to do a play called ‘A Black Mass.’ Do you want to try out for the part?” So I did. I tried for the part and I got the part of Tyler. What people need to understand is this. Newark and the Nation of Islam was very, very heavy in Newark. My first husband, Walter Wilson, and the daughters we had, Vera and Wanda, they went to Clara Muhammad’s School. His friend introduced me to the Nation of Islam and the problem I had was that women had to be out of sight at the time and you couldn’t dance in public. I said, “I’m out of here.” When I met LeRoi Jones my daughters were in the Nation of Islam. I took them out of the Nation. They were in the Nation before Malcolm X was assassinated. The point I’m trying to make is that the Nation was important to Newarkers, particularly in the Third Ward. I saw men and women who had been out on the street doing this and that and the other. They got cleaned up. I’m from North Carolina. In the Nation you couldn’t eat sweet potato pie. You had to have bean pie. It was really good. So I decided I’d do both. That’s when they began to question the health of certain foods. You couldn’t have lima beans. I’m not understanding cultural aggression at that time. Even recently I am trying to understand it. In the Nation, you can’t eat collard greens, you can’t cook pork, you can’t do this, you can’t do that. Now Leona, my grandmother who raised me, didn’t want to hear none of that. My grandmother died. I never went to her house. I divorced Walter and my grandmother had problems because she thought he was a nice guy and he was. She came and we had painted the house on 33 Sterling Street red, black and green, after Marcus Garvey, so I said, “Mommy, you wanna come?” And she said, “I’m not coming up in there” and I said, “Well, what is wrong with it?” She said, “Nothin’ honey. But I’m going to ask you one thing.” I said, “What?” She said, “What happened to your hair?” I said, “What happened?” She said, “Why did you have to cut it off to be Black?” because I had very, very long hair almost to my waist and I said, “Lord have mercy. What does this have to do with anything?” She said, “Honey, don’t you get it? Don’t you know what they did with Samson? They cut his hair off.” My grandmother was very Biblical. Everything went back to the Bible. She said, “Well Lord, I hope that don’t weaken your ass.” And there it was. Now I’m going over these things. Interestingly enough, my grandmother died, well my grandfather was already dead so he never met LeRoi Jones, but he got to meet my grandmother. That’s who I call Mama.

Ishmael Reed: What was her name?

Amina Baraka: Leona. Her maiden name was Stover. She married Patrick Bacote, who always thought he was a Black Irishman, but let me tell you he was as black as a cast iron pan. He had wavy hair. I don’t know what his connection was, but he always seemed to be on the side of the Irish. I don’t get it. I guess because his name was Patrick. I don’t know. I will never know. And then he got Leona who was a very, very proud Cherokee. Very proud, and she always said, “They raped your mother (talking about Africa) and stole your father’s land (talking about North America) and don’t you forget it.” It sounds like some old, country story that they would tell, but it turned out that Mama was right and I’m not going to forget it.

Ishmael Reed: Tell me about the front page of *The New York Times* where you and Amiri were going to court.

Amina Baraka: Which one?

Ishmael Reed: The poem that the judge said was seditious or something.

Amina Baraka: "Somebody Blew Up America?"

Ishmael Reed: No, earlier.

Amina Baraka: Was this after the rebellion or before?

Ishmael Reed: After. And the judge said the poem riled people up. You guys went to court.

Amina Baraka: No we went to court because of the Newark rebellion. That's what happened.

Ishmael Reed: So tell me about the court appearance.

Amina Baraka: The 1967 court appearance?

Ishmael Reed: The police came to your house?

Amina Baraka: No. No. No. Truth of the matter is I grew up with a lot of Newark musicians. They were all at 33 Sterling Street that night. LeRoi Jones and Grachan Moncur III (a Blue Note artist) and the driver who I think was named Sonny were taking Grachan Moncur home. In the midst of taking Grachan Moncur home they were caught in the crossfire. Even though it was a block away from us we didn't hear the gun shots or anything. There was a rebellion going on in the city and they got stopped by accident and as Amiri will tell you in his autobiography that the truth is that they got locked up that evening. Our son Obalaji Malik Ali was two weeks old and he was a bassinet baby. I'm looking out the window because we were living on 33 Sterling Street, which got to be known as the Spirit House. I hear my neighbor across the street talking to another neighbor because it's a very narrow street and she said, "I heard LeRoi Jones got beat by the police." And you know who was living with us at the time? Barbara Killens, John O. Killens daughter. She was with Barry who was also caught up in that mess and Charles McCray who was a friend of Amiri's. He went to Howard with him. I hear this and I say, "What?" because LeRoi and I were not legally married. Barbara Killens and I run up the street to the Fourth Precinct where the driver set it all off because it was police brutality and they wouldn't let us in anyway, so there was a woman standing next to me. She said, "Well who are you looking for?" I said, "I'm looking for my husband," and she said, "Oh, you better go to Martin Medical. That's where people are being taken." I told Barbara to go back to take care of Obalaji. He was two weeks old. I left him in the closet with the door open enough where he could breathe. I rush from the Fourth Precinct to the hospital over there and then I get there and they said, "Nobody can get in. You can't come in." They got police horses and everything. I used my

acting skills. I decided I was going to fall out and I did. I fell out on the street. The police did exactly what I wanted them to. They brought me into the hospital. I looked and it was Charles McCray and Barry Wyn who Barbara Killens was with at the time. I get well I said, "Where's Roi? Where's Roi?" I don't know if it was Charles or Barry. They pointed in that direction and I went in the direction. Sure enough there he was. They had him chained to a goddamn wheelchair. Blood is running down his face. He couldn't even open his eyes because of the blood from the trauma. The blood was stuck to his eyes. There are two damn police officers on each side of him like he could do something. He's in a goddamn wheelchair. They had chains on his arms and neck. So I run in there and I don't know what to say. I walked up and they allowed me to do that. I took spit out of my mouth to open eyes. He opened up his eyes, but he couldn't say nothin'. Then you know what this police officer said? "Is this the first time you've ever cared about him?"

Ishmael Reed: What?

Amina Baraka: Yeah, man, and let me say something else about this. You know what the doctor says? They had taken the butts of the guns and put them across his hands. He said, "He will never be able to write again." How wrong was that mother fucker?

Ishmael Reed: Wow.

Amina Baraka: Now they are trying to restrain me. "You've got to leave. You've got to leave." They were trying to get me to leave. They grabbed me out and it was a Black police officer when they were pulling me out and who leaned over. He was being part of the crowd but he leaned over and said, "Get. Out. Of Here. They will kill you." And I listened to him. I got out of there. I called his parents to let them know. The next person I know was Ray Brown, who said he couldn't do anything because he was part of the National Guard, so I called my best friend, Buddy Booker who was a Black lawyer. Wasn't famous or anything and I asked if he could help me and he said, "Yes, I will." Buddy took the case first. He lost the case. Now there were a lot of super rebellion shit around the world, particularly in Harlem who wanted to attack Buddy because he lost the case. I didn't know what to do. I looked through his phone book and I saw Allen Ginsberg, so I called him and Allen was in shock so he said, "Okay, I'll do what I can do." He called Jean Paul Sarte. I didn't even know Diane di Prima had a daughter by him. I called up every mother fucker I could find in his book. Next thing I know Diane di Prima called me. I didn't know who she was. I just knew she was a writer and the Queen of the Beats. I didn't know her and I didn't care, anyway. She calls me back and she's a very kind, very good woman. So it's a wonderful thing. Now my children have another sister.

Ishmael Reed: What did Jean Paul Sarte do?

Amina Baraka: According to Ginsberg he used all the power he had to get Roi released. That's all I know. Only person I knew to call was Allen.

Ishmael Reed: And he got released.

Amiri Baraka: Yes, he did.

TO BE CONTINUED