the Writer and Social Responsibility

By

Amiri Baraka

Includes the poems: *At The Colonial Y*
They Are Aesthetically & Culturally
Deprived (Y's Later) and
How to Beat Reagan

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Introduction

The lives of working class and Third World people, of women, are buried in bourgeois culture. But, revolutionary culture comes from us. Presenting our own lives, time and history, it is a symbol of our tenacity, as well as creativity. As the political pendulum in the U.S. continues its swing to the right, the time is now to create an artistically powerful and politically revolutionary cultural movement — to create a movement which exposes capitalism's own decay, reveals human transformation and projects visions of a socialist and more humane future.

Amiri Baraka, renowned African American poet, playwright, revolutionary activist and Central Committee member of the League of Revolutionary Struggle, has long been at the forefront of the movement to create revolutionary culture in the U.S. For decades, Baraka, the Father of the Black Arts Movement, has produced a body of work that consistently attacks the capitalist system and calls for revolution.

We present this selection of Amiri Baraka's poetry and his essay, "The Writer and Social Responsibility," as a contribution to the development of a revolutionary cultural front in the U.S.

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The Writer and Social Responsibility

by Amiri Baraka

Writing, by definition, is a social act and the writer by extension of this definition is simply the committer of this act. By this we mean that writing occurs within society and is shaped by society, particularly the socialization of the writer, in whatever class he or she is shaped by, in society.

What remains is the precise orientation of the writing, how it relates to society. What statements it makes or doesn't, what the writing *means*, its content (which to me is principal) but also its form. Even a writer who is committed to making no statements makes one just the same, by virtue of that act.

Mao Zedong has pointed out that all art shows its class stand (i.e., whose side the writer is on), the attitude of the artist (his celebrations and condemnations); it also shows what work and study the artist has been doing and at what audience the work is aimed.

Toni Morrison

So that the artist, no matter his or her subjective pronouncements, objectively is relating to society in some specific way and our works have not only a social definition to them but a political one as well. It is no coincidence that the large publishing corporations prefer to publish and market books and book writers whose ideas are closest to their own. Or whose ideas can be coopted and made marketable.

It is no secret that African American writers, for instance, have a great deal of trouble publishing their works, this is true for all the oppressed nationalities. This is because their works are generally more critical of U.S. society than publishers feel is useful. But it should also be noted that serious writers of any nationality have a similar difficulty publishing consistently and in most cases cannot make a living from what they do manage to get published. This is because, obviously, those corporations are principally interested in making a profit and maintaining the status quo, not seeking after truth and realization and social transformation.

Since the writer does his work in society and his work is by its nature a social statement, the idea of a social responsibility for the writer is linked up not only to the writer's work but his life as well. And Mao's analysis of those four problematical elements of the artist's work remains an important method of measuring that social responsibility and its function in the real world.

The classic bourgeois artist's orientation in capitalist societies states that the writer or artist does not exist in the world but outside it or inside it in some jittery wisdom-laden limbo of the mind. It goes on further to say that neither the artist nor his work therefore are connected with reality and therefore, obviously, the artist can have no social responsibility either in his art or life. One's art is simply

art, it exists unrelated to life, the old literary McCarthyism called The New Criticism of the 50's (which is trying to make a comeback today with Reagan) would have us believe.

Birth of a Nation is a great film because of its form, its epoch scope, its grandiose concept, camera angles, character penetration, &c., &c. on out to lunch. But what of its meaning? The fact that such a film is simply propaganda for the Ku Klux Klan must then be swept under your rug, by bourgeois definition of art. (And we must remember that some of the main new critics were also out of the "Southern Agrarian" school which railed against ol' debil industrialization and yearned for a return to the Agrarian Paradise of the old south and its great culture — a culture flawed only tinily by the teeny teeny defect of slavery. Allen Tate's *Reactionary Essays* were at least aptly titled.)

Leni Reifenstal's *Triumph Of The Will* glorifying Adolph Hitler and the Nazis must be looked at the same way, no matter the "artistic skill" utilized in its creation. Fascist art can be powerful artistically, so that pure formalism becomes complete freakout and social irresponsibility. We must ask Mao's questions — Whose side is the artist on? What are his or her attitudes? What work and study does the work show, that the artist is do-

Bertolt Brecht

Our commitment in the real world to help collectively move it forward, to help bring about the vision of human life triumphant must be seen in our work, and we must learn to make that work both artistically powerful and politically revolutionary.

UNITY PHOTO: BEN FERRIS

Amiri Baraka

ing? And for whom is the work intended?

We are, all of us, collectively, responsible for society. But society *is* controlled, owned in fact, by a tiny ruling class. And it is only to their benefit that we feel we have no responsibility for society or within it. Our responsibility finally is to struggle collectively to wrest control of the world from repressive minorities, from imperialists, from racists, so that we may all go beyond the primitive repressive world of minority rule and majority oppression. Our writing, objectively, either helps force the world into a more positive future or tries to hold it back to our Neanderthal past and present.

DuBois' work is a reflection, in large part, of our actual lives. DuBois, for instance, in his almost century long life, constantly changed in his views: a democrat, a black capitalist, a pan africanist, a marxist, and he did these things because his work issued from a life of activism and tireless search for fact and verification of reality. He was never content merely to write off the top of his head from some

ebony tower of tired intellectualism. Our commitment in the real world to be responsible for society and to help collectively move it forward, to help transform it, to make it less primitive, to help bring about the vision of *human life triumphant* that the most profound artists through the ages have always focused on, must be seen in our work, and we must learn to make that work both artistically powerful and politically revolutionary.

The artist is an important factor in a society. He both reflects society and at the same time in some ways can influence it. What will this influence be used for, truth or falsehood, progress or reaction, freedom or slavery? We can look, for instance, at the Weimar Republic, the last democratic period of German life, before the plunge into fascism. And we read the writers and artists' names who sat on their hands pleading "artist" and would do nothing to stop the advance of Nazism. We are repelled, even dumbfounded, by their elitist subjectivism, which told them that only art mattered and it was, after all, only for a privileged few. Or we watched in horror and anger at those artists like the Futurists in Italy who actually supported Mussolini and Fascism or Schwitters and some others who stayed in Germany and even played some games with the Nazis. And we also look at those heroic artists who used every fiber and element of their life, mind and work, like Toller, Grosz, Brecht, and so many others, to fight the coming of Fascism. We make our easy judgments from 20-20 hindsight.

But now is our time, now is our Weimar and we must be socially responsible, collectively charged with helping the positive development of human life and make no mistake we will be judged and our work, with the same 20-20 hindsight, and ultimately we will be judged by the majority.

We must struggle and write as if our lives and those of our families depended on it — because quiet as it's kept, they do!

Address to American Writers' Congress
October 1981, New York City

At The Colonial Y They Are Aesthetically & Culturally Deprived (Y's Later)

(Diz *Swing Low Sweet Cadillac)*

SHARK MONSTER Rockefeller
Codes. Explosion is War.
For Wha? (The Blood)
Profits
of New
Avant disease come to ya'
What was in the bush / yr society
smoked
EATS EATS
its terror
White Beast
alive w/ Harpoons
inside it the bones
of whole nations

Slavery, Concentration
Camps, Plantations
Gas Chambers

The death of Reconstruction was
the death of the dream
the death of the reality
The death of any wd be American
Democracy!

Bloodless "Jaws" whale shark monster
its kills include cultures
now post McCarthy where
is Grapes of Wrath or I Was
A Fugitive or the truth
of itself? Was Sam Spade
a Communist Sympa-
thizer? Or Philip Marlowe?
But even that individual cry
for straight shot Democracy
cd finally find itself banned in darkness
while Robotic Horror pornography makes us
consumers of masturbation & degenerating
values.
An america where the only academy awards
go to Ronald Reagan w/ Clarence Pendleton
as Ben Vereen. "Boogity Boogity" an
Ellison description of Ellison describing.
The teeth of imperialism is a chant
for the dying things needing to die.
Its poison swelling EAT EAT
Its cry of terror!

You see (a whispered
aside)
even its "humanity"
(a people of slave holders)
was a kind
of minstrelsy

An unconvincing
Black Face Act.

Now the flicks are a form of Commerce
less and less
of art
Film innovation was revolutionary
Eisenstein's Red Montage
With that connection, the tech
nology & casual populist dream
Equality.
So much popcorn.
The Jews, Italians, Irish, Poles,&c.
had first to give up
being that
to enlarge the baby slave holder
Fat banker fish
to be its evolved "revolutionary"
Sleek sea thing
(Sleek?
A nigger
in its teeth

The feed of bulging monsters
so creative they invented
fascism in the black belt
of democracy.
So the Black Face, Dixie Land, thin rag, non-"race",
Funny hat, Paul Whiteman
stiff seat, noun baked non swing
of the "cool", bebop's cover.
Or for the Shorties & Rodgers
& Bru's & Becks & the green
of our dollar — oh man — to
the "progressive jazz" of glass
adjectives w/ no where to blow.
Until we get fusion & its con
a cool out of new blues
turns a chain to a flexible
rubber unbreakable straw
for yr elevator colored nouveau,

to the gallows garden
of the floating compradors
where their eggs, like body snatcher
pods lay hatching way in the middle
of the air.

This bend of class
to the death of itself
& rebirth in fake neon flames.
Elvis Presley was the FDR of
the 1950's, the philosophy
was workable & when the
Beatles moved in simply slander
them w/ belittling Jesus
& enlarge the American market.
Nigger Music became figure
music. Chocolate death
Plastic. Instead of rejection —
The Huge monster's mouth
Him/Her's protein digesting skin
To Europe? To The Past?
But leave reality to the
real & the living

By the end of the 19th century
they cd convert the sorrow songs
to Barber Shop
Quartets.

— **Amiri Baraka**
May 31, '85

How to beat Reagan

Connect Reagan gestures
to Specific
Dumb Movies

His artificial "dead thing"
hair,
is a picture
of his artificial
"dead
thing"
mind
When he grins
Talk about
Bonzo

When he lies
ask
"Where Is The
Rest of" You ?

When he panders
to public ignorance
educate
the People

We need Special
Anti Reagan
issues of
our magazines
Special anti reagan
blues and jazz
sessions (& themes)

normal anti reagan
cocktail parties &
Special ones
as well

Anti Reagan Songs
and Anti reagan
dances

Sponsor contests
for the best
Anti Reagan
jokes

Give out prizes
to the funniest
Anti Reagan
Quotes

Develope
Anti-Reagan
Walks

Give a long Series
of Anti Reagan
Talks

Some Anti Reagan
Dishes you
progressive cooks
gourmets,
& culinary anthropologists
must reveal

In fact you famous chefs
develope
Anti Reagan
Meals

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We need anti Reagan
agendas
& anti Reagan
retreats

Give anti Reagan names
to our pets
& anti reagan names
to our streets

Write anti Reagan
plays, hold
Anti Reagan
Days

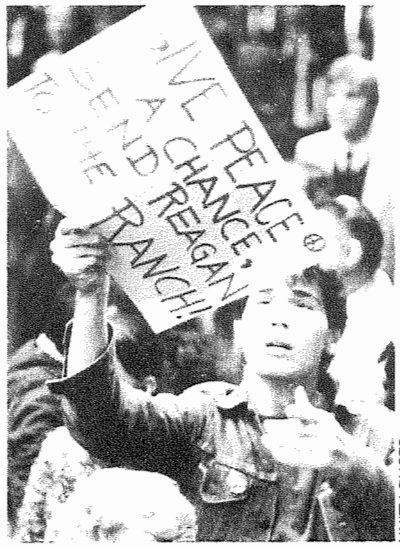
You want to live
You want real life
Start an Anti Reagan
"Craze"

But
This is serious
we're not delirious

We want to live
We want our families
Our wives, husbands,
& children

to live too

The name of life in 1984
is Anti Reagan
The name of beauty
(we squatting near big brother's
door — yeh, it's 1984!)
is anti Reagan.



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Let us mobilize each other
Let us work
Let us think

Let us educate
each other

Let us fight
against Reagan's
Stink

Anti Reagan Religion & Anti Reagan Wrestling
Anti Reagan Hors d'oeuvres, and Anti Reagan
blurbs —

Laughter round here
is Anti Reagan
& sexual passion
is Anti
Reagan

& birth & creativity
is
Anti Reagan

The Future
is Anti
Reagan

Is you Mr "Boy" want to be Man
Is you Ms "Honey" want to be woman
Anti Reagan

Call all yr friends &
enemies
they need to be
tell 'em
Anti Reagan

Look at the Sun
its
Anti Reagan

Any Useful Stuff

is
Anti
Reagan

You understand
its Anti Reagan
You struggle
for land
Its Anti Reagan

You want to be free
its anti reagan
you want to be thee
Its Anti Reagan
Self Determination
Its Anti Reagan

A developing
Nation
It's Anti
Reagan

You got one line, you gonna hear it
all the
time
Its Anti Reagan

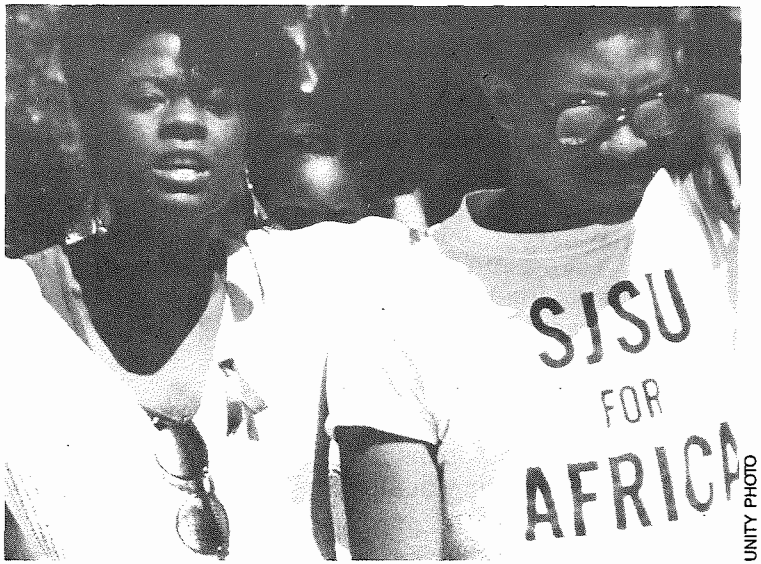
We criticize Mondale
Its Anti Reagan
We question Jesse
its Anti Reagan

No way atomic bomb hair
No way embarrassing actor
No way Chimp pimp
You babble w/o hemp

You are Anti Reagan
the cautious parts
of yr own
mind
Know yr crazy
Thats why yr mind
aint together
Thats why we shudder
at the Charlie McCarthy
lines at the edges of
yr obscene Mouth

Squinty conk-wearing
dead cow boy yipeeeyie yeay
Come in in an ice cold wind

Yr laughter can be heard
at lynchings
Yr nervous shrug
seen
at the white hood
death brothers
ball



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You want all women to be like
Nancy Reagan

& even Nancy Reagan
wdnt be Nancy Reagan
if she cd safely be
anything
else.

Humanity at the edge
of a Primitive
world.
Poised, just
balanced
at the cross roads
between claws
& hands
between
beaks
& mouths
Dangled
between
gills
& lungs
between fur
& hair
Battling against recontrol of society
By Ignorant
Wizards
Witch Doctors
Sorcerers

Cannibal
Magicians
Who suck on human bones
& belch lunch
afternoons

as they try to
memorize
their latest
script

WEIMAR, WEIMAR/ ONE MO' TIME!!!

The one where
Animal suit things, fat things, low nasty
animals, thief and murderer animals racist
animals robber animals killer animals
(the animals is out!)

The one where a' merican flag
be dis-rapping
un-rapping
mis-rapping

Next station
Annihilation
end
of
planet

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But clarity
is anti
reagan

organization
is anti
reagan

evolution
is anti
reagan

Democracy
is anti
reagan

Socialist Revolution
is anti
reagan

Workers'
Power
is anti
Reagan

Full Employment
is anti
Reagan

Any sane enjoyment
is
Anti Reagan

Any genuine
Intelligence

is Anti Reagan

This task is clear
The lines are drawn
Which side are you on?

The chanted question

Which side are you on?

The Spirit of the Times.

Our Answer
"Anti Reagan"

in the
flying fortress of all of us
ourselves the crowd, the songs, the
dancing color
ourselves a festival
a congress
a convention
of Anti Reagan

The task is clear
the lines are drawn

Which Side are you on?

ANTI REAGAN

ANTI REAGAN

ANTI REAGAN
ANTI REAGAN

(fade to whisper, then scream)

The task is clear
the lines are drawn

Our exclamation
Which Side Are You On?

ANTI REAGAN!!

Amiri Baraka
San Francisco,
Newark, Boulder,
July 1984

Jayne Cortez

Poet and political activist

I read Unity for information about cultural events and for analysis of national and international affairs. Unity is bilingual and shows a spirit of solidarity with various liberation struggles. That appeals to me.

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Please send photographs or photocopies of drawings, paintings or other graphics. Please include a biography (no more than one half page) which can be printed with your work.

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