



## **DEFINITION RHETORIC IN THE AMIRI BARAKA CONTROVERSY**

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The words “poetry” and “politics” resonate in the audible, alliterative sense. But, as New Jersey Governor James McGreevey and his six-member poet laureate selection committee recently discovered, this is the only occasion in which the two words necessarily cohere. This is true, at least, following September of 2002, when New Jersey’s elected poet laureate Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) performed his poem “Somebody Blew Up America,” shocking and appalling his audience at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival at Waterloo Village in Stanhope. It was not this specific performance or reaction that instantaneously converted Gov. McGreevey and Co. into poetry-fearing conservatives but rather the torrent of social and political backlash that followed, including a public reaction from the politically influential Anti-Defamation League (ADL).

The title “poet laureate” carries heavy political implications, as it is an appointed position and represents the literary and artistic interests of the state. Additionally, the established compensation for the title includes \$10,000 in tax dollars. The trouble is that Baraka’s poem is tremendously offensive to many Americans, especially Jewish-Americans and those who lost relatives and

acquaintances in the September 11th tragedy. Of the extensive 226-line poem, certain lines have been recognized as the most offensive:

*Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed  
Who told 4,000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers  
To stay home that day  
Why did Sharon stay away?  
Who knew why five Israelis was filming the explosion  
And cracking they sides at the notion*

Gov. McGreevey's political nightmare would have ended had he possessed the power to dismiss Baraka from his quasi-political position. However, New Jersey's State Legislature had never calculated for the necessity of revoking a poet laureate title, and thus, had never established a related statute. In a veiled cry for mercy, what *The Washington Times*' Ward Connerly refers to as "a cover your ass mode," Gov. McGreevey requested Baraka's respectful resignation. In early October of 2002 Baraka issued a public statement/response to McGreevey, the ADL, the public, and every other outraged organization, denying, among other things, the invitation to resign: "NO, I WILL NOT APOLOGIZE, I WILL NOT RESIGN. In fact I will continue to do what I have been appointed to do but still have not been paid to do." Baraka's decision to remain poet laureate has generated numerous responses in public and political domains.

The political foreground of this matter can be clearly construed as a freedom of speech issue. However, as with a myriad of complicated political issues, freedom of speech remains a personal freedom issue, which many politicians will talk about but generally decline to say or do anything about. Thus, while Governor McGreevey, Edward Koch, and the ADL's William Davidson have acknowledged publicly that they disapprove of Baraka's alleged bigotry by soliciting his resignation, they are virtually powerless to

take action. Historically, any battle against freedom of speech, offensive as that speech may be, has been uphill.

Legislative politics aside, where does the conflict between the freedom of speech and public decency take place? As governmental bodies bow out, it is left to the general public to sort through the rubble of divergence. In cases such as this, it benefits members of the press and community to set their political opinions aside to personally confront the issues. The opinion and editorial sections in newspapers and on-line journals offer a venue for the public to exchange opinions and debate with one another. While this format does not beget immediate change, it offers the citizenry an opportunity to solicit support from the people who supposedly possess the ability to incite eventual change.

My article evaluates the rhetoric, or argumentative techniques, applied by opinion and editorial writers concerned with the Amiri Baraka controversy. This assessment, including opinion columns and editorials from *National Review Online*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Times*, and *The New York Times*, recognizes that all concerned parties express their profound disagreement with Baraka's poem and in no way support its racist rhetoric and outlandish accusations. Therefore, this assessment engages the point at which both sides agree to disagree, the point of *stasis*, where one side contends that Baraka should be removed from his position while the other side argues that he should remain.

The point of stasis, in this case, the point at which the opinion and editorial writers declare their positions on Amiri Baraka's tenure, is defined by Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee in *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* as "the place where two opposing forces come together, where they rest or stand in agreement on what is at issue" (44). This theory, or system of reasoning, which, according to Crowley and Hawhee, was likely initiated by Aristotle during the fourth century BCE, is a cornerstone

to the progress of any argument (44-5). Without having isolated the precise issue, supporters or critics of Baraka's poet laureate tenure might be able to sustain or strengthen the support of audiences who already agree with their opinion. However, supporters or critics would not likely persuade audiences opposed to their claim because these audiences are apt to assess the substance of an argument only in the context of their own position.

Having reached stasis, both sides toil to *define* the parameters of the agreed-upon issue to correspond with their assertions because the side that defines any issue is most capable of gathering support for its argument. In the Baraka controversy, the point of stasis is met from both sides on one question of definition: "What is the definition of 'grounds for termination' in this particular instance?" Supporters of Baraka's continued tenure, including *The Washington Times*' Ward Connerly, *The Washington Post Writers Group*'s Ruben Navarrette Jr., and The New York Times Editorial Board, focus significantly on blame, while supporters of Baraka's dismissal, including *National Review Online*'s John Derbyshire and *The Washington Post*'s Richard Cohen, focus on issues of civic duty. These two foci offer conflicting views on the definition of the grounds for dismissal from the poet laureate position.

Several supporters of Baraka's continued tenure exploit the blatant impropriety of Governor McGreevey and the selection committee's decision to name Baraka to his current position. Their assertion develops through the common social paradigm that *you get what you pay for*. The columnists apply this ideological archetype, or *commonplace*, to manipulate the definition of the issue. According to Crowley and Hawhee, the *commonplace* is the rhetorical device most often associated with ancient rhetoric, and "the distinguishing characteristic of a commonplace is that it is commonly believed by members of a community" (65). The general consensus among those subscribing to this particular com-

monplace is that “the committee and Gov. James McGreevey got what they signed up for” (“New Jersey Poet’s Dilemma”). The application of the commonplace, then, suggests that because the New Jersey state spokespersons decided that a stipend of \$10,000 in tax dollars should subsidize Baraka’s poetry, he is within his rights to take advantage of this political oversight even though he has been regarded as an exceptional racist.

These pro-tenure columnists believe the governing bodies should be held to their decision to designate one of the most notorious xenophobes in the literary domain as an artistic leader. In his *Washington Post Writer’s Group* column entitled “Don’t Bounce Baraka,” Ruben Navarrette Jr. maintains that “they [NJ selection committee] knew full well what they were doing when they named Amiri Baraka—someone known for his extreme views—as the state’s poet laureate.” This statement is a direct manifestation of the commonplace, reminding the audience that the New Jersey selection committee *got what it paid for*.

Navarrette supports this charge with a rhetorical strategy known as *logos*, which appeals to readers’ ability to make logical evaluations and deductions. In book one, chapter two, of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle recognizes the utility of logos in argumentation: “Persuasion is effected by the arguments, when we demonstrate the truth, real or apparent, by such means as inhere in particular cases” (9). Navarrette’s logos refers to the reality, or proof that the very poem in question, “Somebody Blew Up America,” existed months before the poet laureate selection: “Baraka was appointed in July, but the controversial poem about Sept. 11 was written last October.” This detail not only sustains the commonplace that *you get what you pay for* but also confirms that the New Jersey selection committee had prior access to precisely that which they now deny and condemn. Logically, therefore, Baraka cannot be blamed for being placed in the limelight.

Likewise, *The New York Times* Editorial Board candidly illustrates their application of the same commonplace: “When you name a man known for ferocious political opinions as your poet laureate, you had better be prepared for poems that offend.” This statement uses a second-person address as a convention to activate an ideological reaction. Through use of the second-person construction, the statement briefly removes the focus from Baraka and the selection committee and closes the gap between the reader and writer, prompting the reader to ask, “What would I expect from such a person?” and, thus, “Would I appoint this man to a designated political position?” Hindsight being 20/20, most readers would anticipate the worst from Baraka, and would not agree to appoint him. This second-person narration encourages the reader to question the social consequences of such a decision from a personal perspective, without making it clear that the writer is actually directing them to do so. This combined application of commonplace and second-person narration effectively influences the readers’ perceptions of the issue based on their personal reactions to poor political choices. The article *redefines* the issue, from terms of the appropriateness of Baraka persisting as poet laureate, to terms of blame directed at the people who appointed him.

Ward Connerly’s column in *The Washington Times*, “Amiri Baraka Hits a New Low,” also effectively employs questions as rhetorical strategy. Connerly reminds his audience that “Mr. Baraka has no intention of resigning” and asks, “Why should he?” Connerly employs the active commonplace in unison with a logical method of proof to marshal support for his answer to this question. His logic appears in the form of a reversal where, while his rhetorical opposition points to Baraka as the one who should be fired, Connerly insists that McGreevey and the selection committee should be dismissed: “The entire panel that nominated him should be forced to resign” (3). This takes the commonplace a step

further as it logically convinces the audience that not only did the New Jersey selection committee members *get what they paid for*, but they should also be held accountable for their actions, another generally accepted commonplace.

This definition of the issue of the grounds for dismissal is vital to Navarrette, *The New York Times* Editorial Board, and Connerly, as it transfers the majority of blame from Baraka to Governor McGreevey, the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. While the assertions that support their definition rely upon a variety of rhetorical strategies, the generally American assumption that *you get what you pay for* is the backbone of their argument and elicits support for the definition that blame plays the principal role in the grounds for dismissal. If the audience agrees that it is the selection committee, and not Baraka, who is to blame, they must also agree that he should be allowed to remain the poet laureate of New Jersey.

Supporters of Baraka's dismissal, or forced resignation, apply a different commonplace to support their contrasting definition of the grounds for dismissal. They depend on the commonplace of the *immorality of racism* and thus Baraka's civic duty to the citizens of New Jersey: "I grant you that the poet laureate sounds like some sort of joke, but the post does pay \$10,000 a year and it comes with some authority, if not obligations" (Cohen). Cohen and Derbyshire use numerous rhetorical strategies to substantiate their definition of the grounds for dismissal as they attempt to persuade their audience that Baraka should lose his position.

Richard Cohen's *Washington Post* column, "Anti-Semitism, Not Poetry," focuses on Baraka's racism as the source of New Jersey's predicament by provoking an emotional response in his reader through the commonplace of the *immorality of racism*. In rhetorical language, this strategy can be referred to as a pathetic appeal, or *pathos*. While some modern debaters might dismiss

pathos as ineffective on perceptive audiences, ancient rhetors and many contemporary rhetors regard pathos as a powerful device. Aristotle discusses the potential of pathos: "Persuasion is effected through the audience, when they are brought by the speech into a state of emotion; for we give very different decisions under the sway of pain or joy, and liking or hatred" (9). Cohen's discreet, yet effective, pathetic appeal relies on the audience to utilize this type of demonstrative decision making because of fear and shame, as he quotes Baraka's most popularly insulting lines and scoffs at those who consider them excusable: "Baraka's anti-Semitic bleat was, of course, promptly denounced. Some called it appalling while others insensitively called it insensitive-as if Baraka had told a woman he didn't like her dress" (2). This statement generates the pathos of self-reflection and puts readers in a position where to excuse Baraka by allowing him to uphold his position is to moderate the *immorality of racism*.

Logically, Cohen organizes his case with a comparative example illustrating the implications of the *immorality of reverse racism* in this issue. He paraphrases former New York Mayor and fellow Baraka opponent, David Koch, who introduces the implausible and arguably irrelevant possibility that similar atrocities could be committed by a white racist: "The response surely would have been different if David Duke had been appointed poet laureate of Louisiana and had read 'a virulent attack against blacks, using every canard in the book.' Then, everyone would have demanded that the Louisiana legislature choke off his funds." It is easy for readers to interact with this logic without recognizing that they are being influenced by a distortion of the issue. Cohen stretches his use of logos by placing all types and levels of racism into one category. While some readers might detect the incongruity of comparing apples to oranges, others may perceive this association as flawless logic. Cohen's distortion of logos is directed at the latter who might



find it a compelling argument for Baraka's dismissal.

John Derbyshire's *National Review Online* column, "Like an Owl Exploding," employs the *immorality of racism* commonplace to assert the same definition that civic duty defines the grounds for dismissal but uses a more distinct and volatile approach. As all of the columnists involved in this study have very similar jobs working for similar organizations, there is a common ground of established credibility known as situated ethos among them. However, this parallel of situated ethos poses a problem as each writer tries to distinguish himself as more credible than the opposition. Each must generate additional credibility, or invented ethos, to separate himself from the herd. Each of the columnists or groups involved in this analysis do strive to invent ethos, but Derbyshire's method of situating his own ethos is especially pertinent to his assertion of definition.

Derbyshire, like his rhetorical cohorts and adversaries, invents his ethos with a variety of methods, including a combination of ethos and pathos to persuade his audience that Baraka failed to uphold his civic duty. Derbyshire invents his ethos with a method called "demonstrating intelligence by doing the homework," which is illustrated by Crowley and Hawhee: "Rhetors can construct a character that seems intelligent by demonstrating that they are well-informed about issues they discuss" (112). His entire argument pointing to the *immorality of racism* is based upon his close literary reading of "Somebody Blew up America": "As a former teacher of English literature, accustomed to describing and analyzing poems for the benefit of students, I should like to give you an outline of the thing." This statement gains credibility with his audience in two ways. He confirms that he has done his research in poetry and establishes good will with the audience by assuming that they can make conclusions based on his close reading.

The pathos of Derbyshire's poetic translation relies upon the

ability of his audience to trust his reading and to make conclusions about its racist rhetoric. He separates several sections of “Somebody Blew up America” and summarizes their racist implications:

*Who know who decide*

*Jesus got crucified*

*“This seems to be a rephrasing of the oldest anti-Semitic cry of all: They killed Our Lord!”*

*Who know why five Israelis was filming the explosion*

*And cracking they sides at the notion*

*“Looks like it’s those bloodsucking Jews.”*

Derbyshire expects his audience to share his view that the *immorality* of Baraka’s *racism* constitutes a breach in his civic duty because they have been given reason to trust his opinion. He concludes his column with a humorous parody of “Somebody Blew Up America” to emphasize his assertion and definition:

*Somebody Stuck It To New Jersey Taxpayers*

by John Derbyshire

Who took help from Jews while getting his scam started

Then turned and spat on them when a cozy sinecure came along [...]

Who believes the most transparent driveling anti-Semitic lies about 9/11

Who thinks ‘Tom Ass’ is a really, really funny way to write ‘Thomas’

Who mau-maued the governor

Who put one over on guilty white liberals at those fool Art Councils

Who’s an illiterate moron

So stupid he can’t even keep his racism straight . . .

Derbyshire’s means may be peculiar, but his rhetoric can be effective. His audience has been given reason to accept his judgment

when he reveals his belief that Baraka should be forced to resign due to his failure to perform his civic duty.

Cohen and Derbyshire rely heavily upon this commonplace of *the immorality of racism* because they associate it with Baraka's civic duty as a public figure whose salary is provided by state taxes. More importantly, it draws attention away from the opposition's definition, which is based upon blame. Cohen and Derbyshire, like the pro-tenure advocates, use all available rhetorical strategies to gain support for their definition of the grounds for dismissal.

Possibly the most intriguing quality of this dispute is that each side submits, to some extent, to the other's assertions. The supporters of Baraka's continuance agree that he is a disgraceful, racist example of a poet laureate. Connerly, who, interestingly, is alluded to in "Somebody Blew Up America," refers to Baraka's poetry as "nothing more than the rantings of a teen-aged, wannabe gansta-rapper." Navarrette admits, "Baraka's poem doesn't make good politics or good art." And *The New York Times* Editorial Board agrees that Baraka's intent is "to spread this hateful anti-Israel myth."

The supporters of Baraka's forced resignation agree that the selection committee should have had the prudence to avoid Baraka as a choice for poet laureate. Cohen acknowledges that "Baraka wrote it [the poem] shortly after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11" and therefore should have been eliminated as an option for the position. Even Derbyshire hints at veiled acquiescence with the blame game through his sarcastic tirade: "If I keep at it [hateful poetry] long enough, maybe I could become Poet Laureate of New York State."

This agreement between sides can be explained by the fundamental nature of the commonplace. If one side does not submit to the other's commonplace, that adage would fail to meet the classification of the commonplace because a commonplace is not a decision; it is intrinsic to the community's belief system.

However, while the two sides agree on particular aspects of the issue, the disagreement hinges upon which side defines the grounds for dismissal. So, who earns the honors of definition? What brings about the removal of a state poet laureate title and stipend? Is it failure to uphold civic duty by advocating racist rhetoric? Or, is the ground for dismissal negated by the fact that the poet laureate is an appointed position? If the former is true, future restrictions should be put in place by state or national legislature to remove poet laureates based on inappropriate poetic content. If the latter is true, there can be no way of removing or censoring a poet laureate.

The fact of the matter is that Baraka will remain New Jersey's poet laureate until his two-year term expires in July of 2004. And he will be paid his \$10,000 because the selection committee entered into a binding contract. What remains to be seen is whether the people side with Cohen and Derbyshire by pressuring state legislatures to enforce stricter rules and regulations for their poet laureate position, especially including reprimands for poets who disregard the *immorality of racism*, or whether they side with Navarrette, Connerly, and *The New York Times* Editorial Board by trusting selection committees to make responsible choices about their states' artistic representatives-and to *get what they pay for*.

Once again, it is the agreed upon point of stasis-in this issue, the dispute over what constitutes the ability to remove Baraka from his position-that provides the foreground for any debatable issue before either side can activate their definition or point of view in a way that may possibly appeal to or persuade the opposition. In examining the rhetoric used by a handful of writers, we can see that the favor of the people-in this case, concerning one issue within the broad spectrum of discussions about art and politics-depends almost entirely upon which side earns the right to define the foundation of the agreed upon issue.

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