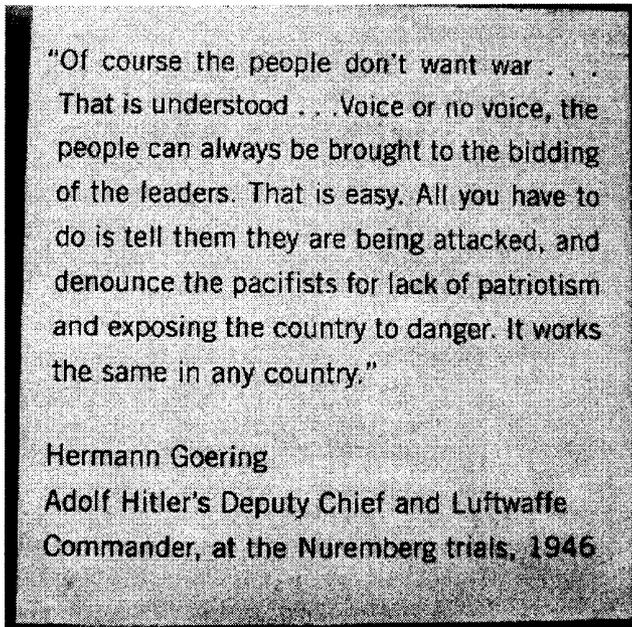


think one of the problems is? When using a card catalogue you really had to think about what terms you were going to use. Now with OPACs and search engines, you're bound to turn up something on a search no matter what word you use. And once again we march into the land of controlled indexing and the debate over whether terms should be derived from set lists (like LCSH) or from the item itself. So maybe someone should devise a search engine that takes the keywords on webpages and categorises them according to standard subjects (with greater flexibility than the current subject headings allow of course) to force a more structured searching approach?



The silent agitator-like sticker reproduced above was found on a lamppost on Broadway and 114th Street in New York City on October 18 or 19, 2002. The quote attributed to Hermann Goering is actually from Gustave Gilbert, a psychologist who visited Goering in his prison cell during the Nuremberg Trials. After his visits, Gilbert would record these conversations, which he eventually published in *Nuremberg Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Co., 1947). Mark Rosenzweig provides the following as a correct citation for the quote:

Gilbert, G.M., *The Nuremberg Diary*, New York: Signet, c1961, p. 255-56.

## POETRY MATTERS! On the Media Persecution of Amiri Baraka

*Poetry is dangerous. What makes Amiri Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" so provocative is that the poem traces a trajectory of human atrocity and culpability without accepting the premise (so widely held in the U.S. after September 11, 2001) that the lives of certain sets of victims are intrinsically more valuable than others. In doing so, Baraka interrogates the arrogant, naive, and dangerously reductive rationales frequently used to explain and promote the perpetual U.S. War Against Terrorism.*

*Little wonder, then, that Baraka was singled out for hysterical censure last fall by the corporate news media's in-house bullies and ideological pitbulls, the vast majority of whom rarely discuss poetry on their evening cable television news programs.*

*Particularly disturbing about the Baraka affair was the conspicuous silence of those who are normally quick to defend poetry and intellectual freedom. The cancellation of the White House's "Poetry and the American Voice" symposium in February – First Lady Laura Bush's pre-emptive attack on dissent – triggered far-flung antiwar poetry actions that attracted some news coverage. Why, then, was there almost never a mention of those who defended Baraka for the same reasons of civil liberty that they backed poets writing and reading against the invasion of Iraq? Neither the Pen Club nor the National Writers' Union, for example, uttered a word in Baraka's support.*

*The "Poetry Matters!" declaration (reprinted here) originally appeared on the Surrealist Movement's website (and was posted on such websites as the Library Juice free speech forum, the Black World and Autonomedia websites, and the anti-racist/anti-fascist One People's Project. Alas, internet searches show that bigoted, reactionary screeds charging Baraka with "hate speech" are far more numerous.*

*In the new millennium, free speech for poets is more precarious than ever.*

*introduction for PL by Don LaCoss*

### POETRY MATTERS!

Poetry Festivals don't usually trigger hate campaigns or Red Scares, but this year's Geraldine Dodge Poetry Festival at Waterloo Village in Stanhope, New Jersey, proved to be different. There, on September 19<sup>th</sup>, Amiri Baraka read his poem "Somebody Blew Up America." The applause was thunder-

ous, but some people apparently didn't like it, for almost immediately the poet was singled out for an incredible barrage of vilification by Murdoch's Fox News, the *New York Times*, the *National Review*, and scores—by now probably many hundreds—of bigoted, neoconservative, white-supremacist talk-shows and periodicals. Leading the assault on the poet is the so-called Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a powerful right-wing political organization notorious for its virulent opposition to Affirmative Action and for its routine use of character assassination against its critics.

It so happens that Baraka wrote "Somebody Blew Up America" in September/October 2001, in the weeks following the tragedy known to all as "9-11." The 226-line poem was promptly posted on the Internet, copied onto many websites, and further publicized by the poet at numerous well-attended readings all over the U.S. and in many other countries. It quickly became one of the most widely circulated of his works. No attempt was made to conceal the fact that the poem was, in Baraka's own words, "an attack on Imperialism, National Oppression, Monopoly Capitalism, Racism, Anti-Semitism," and that it was meant to "probe and disturb." Not until the Dodge Poetry Festival, however, did anyone object to it.

What provoked the sudden media war on Amiri Baraka in September 2002? Assuredly it was not merely a difference of opinion regarding the art of poetry. In truth, despite the hue and cry, the poem itself is not the central issue here. In any event, the principal charge alleged against the poem (that it is "anti-Semitic") cannot withstand a moment's critical examination. Indeed, with its salute to the memory of such revered Jewish revolutionists as Rosa Luxemburg, and the questions it raises about U.S. capitalism's little-known complicity in the Holocaust, Baraka's poem is explicitly *against* anti-Semitism and all racism. If the ADL's hollow charge, repeated *ad nauseam* by the media, had even the slightest substance, how are we to account for the fact that it was completely unnoticed by the hundreds of thousands who had read or heard the poem during the preceding year? (The ADL, of course, construes any and all criticism of the Israeli government—even the merest mention of its long support of South African Apartheid, for example—as "anti-Semitic.")

No less spurious is the ADL's puerile argument that Baraka's poem is helping to foment "anti-American xenophobia," but this charge—bristling with sinister insinuations—does bring us closer to the real issues at stake in the media "police action" against the poet. For what the ADL, neoconservatives and repentant ex-New-Leftists really hate about Baraka is that he is a

sharp critic of this country's anti-democratic institutions, and an activist who has time and again protested the U.S. government's repressive role in foreign and domestic affairs. Worse yet, from the point of view of the white ruling class and the politicians who do its bidding, Baraka is also an outspoken *revolutionary*.

Clearly, then, the real target of the ADL's ongoing defamation of the author of "Somebody Blew Up America" is not that particular poem, or any other poem, but *the poet himself*, his revolutionary courage and audacity, and above all his ability to articulate the anxieties and yearnings of those "furthest down" in humankind's long hard struggle against inequality and tyranny.

The question, "Why did the assault on the poet start as late as September 2002?" is easily answered: Because in August, a few weeks before the Dodge Poetry Festival, Amiri Baraka became the poet laureate of the State of New Jersey. An honorary title with a small stipend, this was far from a position of power, but for the state's corrupt "business-as-usual" Establishment, it was evidently way too much.

And so Baraka's poem—or rather, the distorted, out-of-context fragments quoted by his critics in the press and on TV—was made a pretext for racial and political persecution by that arch-enemy of all poetry, solidarity, and freedom: the white power structure.

The ADL and other bigots are demanding that Baraka be removed as poet laureate. Cravenly submitting to white-supremacist pressure-groups, New Jersey Governor James E. McGreevey has formally asked the poet not only to resign as laureate, but also to apologize for his poem! Baraka has refused.

In the current U.S. political climate: a climate of domination, fear, and insipid conformism; increasing government surveillance and curtailing of civil rights and liberties; persecution of immigrants, radicals, and organized labor; massive militarization and flag-waving war hysteria, all promoted by an unelected President and a billionaire-owned media—the assault on Amiri Baraka is a matter of the greatest concern to all who care about human freedom, the right to dream, and the right to speak out.

This attack on a poet is an attack on all poets, all poetry, and all free speech. The persecution of Baraka is about *stifling* poetry, suppressing criticism,

silencing voices of dissent. It is about censorship and coercion; the imposition of conformity and misery; the denial of freedom.

Unalterably opposed to all forms of bigotry, we say:  
Hands Off Amiri Baraka!  
Long live the unfettered imagination!  
An injury to One is an injury to All!

***For the Surrealist Movement in the United States:***

Gale Ahrens, Jennifer Bean, Jen Besemer, Ronnie Burk, Richard Burke, Susan Burke, Dennis Cooper, Laura Corsiglia, Jayne Cortez, Guy Ducornet, Schlechter Duvall, Mel Edwards, Joseph Allen Fees, Sarah Frances, Brandon Freels, Beth Garon, Paul Garon, Robert Green, Jan Hathaway, Joseph Jablonski, Ted Joans, Robin D. G. Kelley, Don LaCoss, Mary Low, Tristan Meinecke, Casandra Stark Mele, Morgan Miller, Anne Olson, Ruth Oppenheim-Rothschild, Irene Plazewska, David R. Roediger, Larry Romano, Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, M. K. Shibek, Louise Simons, Tamara L. Smith, Debra Taub, Jordan West, Joel Williams.

***The following individuals — poets, writers, artists, musicians, teachers, editors, and activists — have expressed their solidarity with the foregoing statement, and asked to have their signatures added to it:*** Ernest Allen, Ron Allen, Miekal And, Derrick Bell, Max Blechman, Stephanie Booher, Doreen C. Bowens, Daan Boyer, John Bracey, Lisa Brock (School of the Art Institute, Chicago), Dennis Brutus, Paul Buhle, Ed Bullins, Vinie Burrows (Permanent UN rep for Women's Int'l Democratic Federation), Carolyn A. Butts (*African Voices Magazine*), Alexander Cockburn, Carlos Cortéz Koyokuikatl, Polly A. Connelly (organizer, United Auto Workers, ret.), Maria Damon (University of Minnesota), Susan G. Davis, Dave Dellinger, Diane di Prima, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Howard Dyckoff, Patricia Eakins (ed., *Frigate: The Transverse Review of Books*), Katie Eppich, Martin Espada, Torvald Faegre, DuEwa M. Frazier (CEO, Lit Noire Publishing), Chris Funkhouser, Nicole Henares Garland, John Higginson, Steve Garabedian, Regie Gibson, Stephanie Gilman, Maurice Greenia, Jr., Michael Gregory, Tyree Guyton, Mary Ann Hansen, Elaine Harger (*Progressive Librarian*), James V. Hatch, Patrick Herron, Herbert Hill, Amy Hufnagel, Noel Ignatiev, Michael James (*Heartland Journal*), Joseph Jarman, Carolyn Karcher, Marie Kazalia, Joel Kovel, Kari Lydersen, Harry Magdoff (co-editor, *Monthly Review*), Clive Matson, Deborah Meadows (Calif. Polytechnic State U., Pomona), David Meltzer, Naeema Muhammad (Black Workers for Justice, NC), Saladin Muhammad (Black Workers for Justice, NC), Sheila Nopper, Mark Nowak (ed., *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics*), Rob O'Brien (ed., *ache magazine*), Alix Olson, Jim O'Neal (founding ed., *Living Blues*), Simon J. Ortiz, Martin Paddio, Robert Penny (founder, Kuntu Writers' Workshop, Pittsburgh), Eric Perkins, Elizabeth Peterson, Utah Phillips, Peter Rachleff, Margaret Randall, Adrienne Rich, Henry Rosemont, Jr., JoAnn Rosemont, Mark Rosenzweig (Councilor at Large, American Library Association), John Ross, Ron Sakolsky, Sonia Sanchez, David Sands, Archie Shepp, John J. Simon, John Sinclair, James Smethurst, Gary Snyder, John Starrs, Dan Stern, Nelson Stevens, John Stevenson, William Strickland, Rodrigo Toscano, Askia Touré, Tony Menelik Van Der Meer, Joseph Verilli, Lise Vogel (Rider University, Lawrenceville, NJ), Darryl Lorenzo Wellington, Christopher Winks.

## BOOK REVIEWS

***Vandals in the Stacks? A Response to Nicholson Baker's Assault on Libraries*, by Richard J. Cox, Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002.**

**Review & commentary by Lincoln Cushing**

*Poking a Hornet's Nest*

Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold*, published in 2001, was a provocative analysis of how certain library policies and practices had profoundly negative consequences on public access to the content of historical documents in print. The book unleashed a firestorm within the library and archive community. Although a few librarians defended Baker's premises and criticisms, the majority were angry at what was perceived as an unwarranted and ill-informed attack on the profession. Numerous articles, letters, and book reviews were devoted to critiquing the book and denouncing the author. *Vandals* is the first book devoted entirely to extending this defense of librarianship.

The nature of the library community's response to *Double Fold* has been remarkable, and I would suggest that much could be learned about the profession by analyzing these reviews. Before Richard Cox's book came along, I noticed that virtually all other articles and reviews boiled down to the following commonalities:

- Hostility towards anyone making criticisms of the profession.
- Hostility towards Mr. Baker as an outsider.
- A begrudging acknowledgement that many of the points Mr. Baker makes are true, or at least worth consideration.
- The viewpoint that Mr. Baker's suggestions, though well-intentioned, are simply impractical.

Unfortunately, despite its length, *Vandals* proves to be no different. Like other critics within the profession, the argumentative escalation begins with the title. Barbara Quint's scathing review in June 2001 *Searcher* was "Don't Burn Books! Burn Librarians!" and Cox's provocative title comes from a review of *Double Fold*, not from anything actually written or said by Baker.