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Duplicities of Power: Amiri Baraka's and Lorenzo Thomas's Responses to September 11

By adhering to an Afrocentric vision—in voice as well as subject matter—the poems of Amiri Baraka and Lorenzo Thomas acknowledge the painful American legacy of white oppression of blacks, as well as pay tribute to the rich texture of African American culture. Yet in style and tone, their poetry also enacts the struggle for individual integrity inherent in any use of ethnic and racial consciousness as a trope. To appropriate the thinking of K. Anthony Appiah (in “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections”), often in their poems Baraka and Thomas freely depict people, events, and conditions based on (in Appiah’s terms) “false theories [that] play a central role in the application of labels” (96).¹ The result in both Baraka’s and Thomas’s poetry is an exploration of nothing less than a quixotic truth at the heart of American “multiculturalism” itself, namely, that to advocate racial or ethnic identity is to begin to deconstruct it, a paradox American poets are only beginning to articulate with any clarity.

One manifestation of this paradox evident in the work of both Baraka and Thomas is the almost contradictory pose of the poet as avant-garde yet pointedly didactic. As is well known, Baraka has adopted this position for nearly half a century. As Aldon Lynn Nielsen has convincingly shown, since the 1960s Baraka has been committed to “an aesthetics of innovation” (*Integral Music* 99), even at the expense of his own material comfort. Yet as Kwame Dawes and others have also emphasized, “Baraka is a public poet” and “an agitator” who, although in some respects he may resemble the West African griot as “a spokesperson for the community” (xii), is not only speaking for his own community but “constantly . . . involved with the task of shaping an aesthetic” (xiii) to influence that community. For his part, Lorenzo Thomas also delves into both innovative aesthetics and didacticism, though with markedly different results. While he has been consistently aligned with avant-garde writers, from the Black Arts Movement early in his life to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school more recently, one hallmark of both his writing and his life was his abiding interest in the *public* role of poetry (both artistically and politically). In his 1994 essay, “The Blues and the King’s English,” Thomas defines this double function of poetry according to what he calls the “normative” ethics of literary and ethnic communities. Acknowledging the importance of both the experimental and the popular venues for poetry in the U. S., especially (though not exclusively) within African American communities, Thomas argues for how the “pointedly didactic” (438) nature of poetry in the oral as well as the literary African American traditions serves its audience both in “maintaining normative values” and in “offering alternative opinions” (436). For Thomas, neither “normative” values (namely, the social ethics that a poem may openly advance) nor “alternative” values (the avant-garde aesthetics that challenge the status quo) should take precedence when we assess a poem critically. Rather, the unique manner in which poetry can create a dynamic balance between these two motives at once is ultimately its role, *de facto*, in the American canon, even though an individual poem may not at first be recognized as such.²

In applying this critical perspective to Baraka’s poetry itself, for instance, Thomas compares Baraka to Paul Laurence Dunbar when he writes, “Just as Dunbar’s poetic production was cannily and problematically divided between dialect poems and lyrics

in standard English, so does Amiri Baraka's poetry occupy two modes: intensely personal lyrics and incisively political social comment. The persona of Baraka's lyrics, however, is always clearly in this world now, [so it] is not surprising that Baraka brought something of his ideas—as expressed in his bifurcated poetic output—to the developing Black Arts aesthetic” (Bernstein 310-11). In effect, by deserting Greenwich Village to take his version of the avant-garde into the streets of Harlem, Baraka essentially “rejected the bohemian option in favor of the unique position that, however quixotically, denied the notion of avant-garde marginality” (Bernstein 311). As Thomas explains it, rather than devote himself exclusively to aesthetics, Baraka chose to mine the avant-garde as part of asserting “normative” leadership within the black community:

Baraka did not actually vanish into the ghetto; rather, he assumed the role of an intellectual, though he tempered it with the rebellion of bohemianism. . . . The same desire, with which he experimented on a higher and more meaningful level, again finding himself frustrated by the Harlem experience, was succeeded by Baraka's perception and acceptance of a leadership role in Newark's black community. (*Extraordinary Measures* 154-55)

Neither Baraka's penchant for experimentation nor his social engagement ever retreat from each other such that “Baraka's sense of balance . . . seldom reduces even his most ideological pronouncements into mere didacticism” (158), even as his “own works and personality make purely literary questions seem small” (159). It is exactly this balance of the “normative” and the “alternative,” according to Thomas, that has secured Baraka “a lasting place in the history of the African American struggle [as he] has influenced that struggle with his own concerns,” therein revealing the “fundamental consistency” of his art (159). Throughout his opus, writes Thomas in a 2003 tribute to a poet ten years his elder, Baraka's poems, “although brutally honest, somehow avoid solipsism or self-pity; they are more philosophical than confessional and, as a result, open outward toward the reader” (“The Character” 190).

Thomas's reading of Baraka reveals how he himself also resists the assumption, commonly held even among some of American poetry's most prominent critics, that the most significant contemporary poetry is either obsessively private or openly suspicious of referentiality, in either case approaching politics only obliquely. In fact, though not as well-known nor as outspoken as Baraka, Thomas is also a didactic poet (albeit in a “signifyin[g]”) fashion, to cite Henry Louis Gates's use of that term)—that is, a poet socially committed to inform and guide, as well as to provoke and entertain. While his poems are often parodic, even pointedly anti-ideological, they finally subscribe to the fundamental creed that poetry's function is to challenge the premises of cultural identity in order to assert “normative” values that can unify communities without undermining significant social differences.³ Alice Notley defines Thomas's poetry in comparable terms:

A definitive division of poetry into court and public types no longer seems true; there are other poetics, a spectrum of practice between those two words or worlds, including Thomas's own. For Thomas has invented a form that allows for an innovative coincidence of the public and the private. . . . [His] approach to the ‘problem’ of audience is a sculpted monolithic fusion of courtly and public tradition through the medium of an immaculate line. For the courtly line and the public line are both immaculate. (Notley 96)

Granting, then, that Baraka and Thomas are both didactic poets as well as experimental ones, what of the obvious disparity in their voices? Does each have something different to “teach” us, despite their shared history, or are their idiosyncrasies as poets critically linked? To explore this question, I want specifically to contrast Baraka's widely known, controversial, and often scorned poem about the September 11 attacks, “Somebody Blew Up America,” to Thomas's little-known, as-yet unprinted poem on the same subject, “Ailerons & Elevators.” Such a comparison reveals not so much that one poem is “better,” more sophisticated, or more provocative than the

other, nor that one better conveys the gravity of its subject, but that both poems work equally well, though by dramatically different means, to balance public and private concerns by asserting “normative” values through “alternative” poetics. With its intensely lyrical, fast-paced litany of accusations, evidence, and pleas for the victims of American and largely white capitalism, Baraka’s poem systematically accuses the terrorists (or enemies) he believes are essentially responsible for the violence of September 11 even as the poem’s posturing form and comic overtones suspend much of its own rhetoric. In the end, by lashing out at the American power elite, the poem raises questions about American social and ethical priorities. Thomas’s poem, on the other hand, in its manner and matter, subtly weaves the voice of Baraka’s “terrorists,” as it were, into the very fabric of the poem, thus dissembling the borders between enemy and self, and in the end, breaking down the speaker’s own identity. Put another way, Baraka’s poem draws the battle lines not between al-Qaeda and us, but between the state and us, thereby guiding us toward those *actions*, violent or otherwise, he deems precipitous to revolutionary change (though, it is important to add, without dictating the specifics of that change); Thomas’s poem, on the other hand, works to undermine both enemy and self, together with the battle lines under dispute, not so much to advocate a course of action but in perhaps as equally radical a manner, to open space for the change in *thinking* necessary to salvage American ideology. In this regard, while both poets adopt widely different tactics, their poems both respond to September 11 by addressing critically important *public* concerns without compromising their individual poetics. Though Baraka’s poem may incite some readers by its apparent hysterics, and Thomas’s poem may strike others as too understated or oblique, these two poems taken together ultimately diagnose the ideological dynamics behind the attacks on the World Trade Center and therein provide the normative leadership sorely lacking in so many other venues of American life.

The Logic of Baraka’s “Somebody Blew Up America”

In his indictment in *National Review Online* of “Somebody Blew Up America,” John Derbyshire, who describes himself as “a former teacher of English literature, accustomed to describing and analyzing poems for the benefit of students,” and a poetry editor who believes a good poem should “rhyme, scan and make sense,” expresses his wish “to give you an outline of the thing” (referring to Baraka’s poem) after it was reported that the poet had read it at the Dodge Poetry Festival on September 20, 2002: “My guess is that Mr. Baraka probably regards rhyme and meter as contemptible Ice People devices, far too *verkerampt* to contain his ebullient African soul,” writes Derbyshire, in apparent ignorance of Baraka’s lifelong devotion to rhythms (especially jazz rhythms) in his poetry, his overt rhymes not only on the page and in performance but in his prose, and his practice of asserting “sense” over vague feeling. “Possibly he’s right,” concedes Derbyshire, smugly; “Still, a little sense might have been nice. Langston Hughes didn’t go much for formal structure, either [again: clearly Derbyshire is wrong], but at least his poems had some kind of internal logic” (Derbyshire). Derbyshire’s unwillingness or inability actually to examine Baraka’s structure, or to deliver on his promise to “give an outline of the thing,” not only undermines his critical position on the poem’s ostensibly offensive politics, but raises serious doubts about his own claims as a teacher of poetry. Unfortunately, although Baraka’s poem was hardly noticed in mainstream literary circles for almost a year after its initial appearance in October 2001, and then widely labeled as anti-Semitic, ill-informed comments about it have proliferated, not only among general readers, politicians, citizen groups, and journalists such as Derbyshire, but among seasoned poets and critics as well, as Piotr Gwiżdza has expertly documented (480-82).⁴

To defend the poem from charges of its illogic, however unsubstantiated, I would like to trace what “logic” it does convey, structurally, not only as an example of Baraka’s “sense of balance” as a “public” poet, but of the “fundamental consistency” of his aesthetic, as Thomas defines it (*Extraordinary* 159). As a poem, “Somebody Blew Up America” consists of 236 or 237 lines (Derbyshire counts 226 lines, though I can’t see how), divided into ninety-five strophes (bringing to mind, for instance, Martin Luther’s ninety-five theses nailed to the church door). One hundred sixty-three (Derbyshire counts 162) of its lines, or more than two-thirds of them, begin with

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the word *who*, establishing an almost overpowering anaphoric pace and fashioning the poem as a litany, or catalogue, in the familiar biblical tradition as employed by American poets from Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Hughes to Robert Bly, Allen Ginsberg, W. S. Merwin, and Sonia Sanchez. It is in fact by this measure that we can gauge the poem’s development and “sense.” Of the many lines beginning with *who*, twelve consist entirely of that word, usually repeated two to four times, but carefully varied in order to punctuate the passages before and after them. These lines signal not only points of transition, but changes in register (as in a key change in a musical composition), creating a refrain as in a call-and-response recitation. In other words, as initially invoked by the questions Baraka asks in strophe nine, “They say (who say? Who do the saying)” (*Somebody Blew Up* 42), these lines provide a clear measure for the poem, thereby guiding both a listening and a reading audience, functioning the same way the refrain does in a jazz standard; in other words, because of these repeating lines, we always know where we are in Baraka’s poem, despite shifts in tempo indicated by their varied placement in relation to the margin, their letter case, their spacing on the page, and the inclusion or absence of virgules, commas or other standard punctuation. Strophe 42, for instance, reads, “WHO/WHO/ WHOWHO/” (45), whereas strophe 72 reads, “who WHO W H O/” (48)—the same words, yet with dramatically different rhythms and intonations.

What is even more haunting about these lines is Baraka’s repeatedly ambiguous use of *who* as both an interrogative and a relative pronoun. Thinking of Ginsberg’s use of the same word in “Howl,” for example, used as a relative pronoun to characterize the “best minds of my generation,” we might argue that Baraka employs the pronoun similarly, as he strings a long list of subordinate clauses to characterize those “who do the saying.” After strophe nine’s initial question, except for two other questions asked on the poem’s final page, there are, in fact, only four uses of question marks: “Who/Who/ ???” (46), “Who killed Dr King, Who would want such a thing? // Are they linked to the murder of Lincoln?” (47), and the poem’s most controversial question, so often quoted out of context, “Why did Sharon stay away?” (49). But all these uses of *who* are variations from the norm: Even the line about Dr. King has its question mark appended only at the end, not midway through, implying that only “their” motivation (in wanting “such a thing”), not “their” culpability for his death, is in question. Of course, the sheer number of who-clauses cannot also help but create the aura of an interrogation throughout the poem, and elsewhere Baraka uses other interrogatives without question marks (e.g., “Was it the ones who tried to poison Fidel” [47]). But rhetorically, the *who* clauses work both as relative pronouns

and as interrogatives, resulting in a forceful indictment of the “somebody,” whoever it is, responsible for blowing up America. Like the Declaration of Independence, another “radical” American text structured as a litany, Baraka’s poem systematically lists his charges against the enemy and then builds its case rhetorically by introducing various dichotomies. This same pattern is evident in many other Baraka poems, such as “Why Is We Americans?” which closes:

If
 there is democracy in you that
 is where it will be shown. this
 is the only way we is
 americans. this is the only
 truth that can be told.
 otherwise there is no future
 between us but war. . . .

 we is at the end of being under
 your ignorant smell your
 intentional hell. either give us
 our lives or plan to forfeit your
 own. (*Somebody Blew Up* 37-38)

Baraka’s “logic,” his “either/or” assertions, here as well as in “Somebody Blew Up America,” *presume* oppositional thinking (as in you vs. we, them vs. us, or even Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty or give me death!”). As these polarities accumulate in “Somebody Blew Up America,” however, though they may appear at first to fall along racial or ethnic lines, cumulatively, they come specifically to divide the moneyed from the disenfranchised, the rich from the poor, governments from the people they govern, and those with vested interests in capitalist ventures from those without such interests. In fact, in keeping with Baraka’s self-espoused Marxism from at least as long ago as 1980 (Harris 29), these divisions become so obvious in the poem that it is hard to believe any reader would have trouble identifying the named enemy in it. As Kwame Dawes reasons, to read the poem as anti-Semitic requires (1) that readers assume that Baraka’s remarks against Jews in earlier works “shape his thinking here,” when textual evidence suggests otherwise (such as his including the Jews in the concentration camps and the Rosenbergs among those oppressed by “them”), (2) that readers “ignore a distinction that [Baraka] seems intent on making between Jews and Israelis and the Israeli government,” and (3) that they “completely ignore the rhetorical intention of the poem and the central object of the poet’s ire,” namely “George Bush, Jerry Falwell, and what he views as racist America” (Dawes xxiii). To resent Baraka’s poem because it accuses readers of greed and murder might make sense, especially if we are in fact guilty of his charges; but to fault it for being anti-Semitic makes less sense—so much so that we might suspect that the insistent misreading of it as anti-Semitic works deliberately to obfuscate its theme or, to use Baraka’s phrase, “to spread the Big Lie”—that is, to distract attention from the poem’s real target, namely, “Imperialism, National Oppression, Monopoly Capitalism, Racism, Anti-Semitism” (Baraka, “ADL Smear”).

As punctuated by the twelve “Who/Who/Who” lines spaced throughout, the ninety-five strophes of “Somebody Blew Up America” are organized into three basic parts: strophes 1-41, strophes 42-84, and strophes 85-95, with each “movement” in the work, as in a symphony, further subdivided according to focus: The first part establishes the poem’s premise, based on the parenthetical opening lines that distinguish between “domestic / & international” terrorism, explicitly stating that “one should not / be used / To cover the other” (41), as Baraka prefaces his “rant” with a measure of “logic” in his response to September 11, much as he does in his prose explanation, “Postscript: No Black Ink in Fax” (which follows the poem in its 2003 Caribbean edition). After these opening lines, serving as a kind of epigraph, the poem begins:

They say its some terrorist, some
barbaric
A Rab, in
Afghanistan (41)

not only introducing the “they” of the poem (the *domestic* terrorists, who are its real subject), but then listing who, according to “them,” “wasn’t” responsible for blowing up America, namely “our American terrorists” the Klan, Skinheads, “them that blows up nigger/ Churches, or reincarnates us on Death Row,” Trent Lott, David Duke, Rudy Giuliani, “the gonorrhoea in costume,” and so on (41). After the pivotal ninth strophe—“They say (who say? Who do the saying)” —might the pun here on “hoodoo” also be intentional?—Baraka goes on to characterize these sayers by providing details of both their activities (*e.g.*, “Who got fat from plantations / Who genocided Indians/ Tried to waste the Black nation” [42]) and their disposition

Who say you ugly and they the goodlookingest
Who define art
Who define science
Who made the bombs. (43)

Then after the first refrain of “Who/ Who/ Who/” in line 58, he begins to register his major charges against them for what they have come to “own,” acquired through theft and hegemony, as well as for the multiple murders they have committed.⁵ This section is twice more punctuated by the line “Who/ Who/ Who/” at lines 73 and 101.

At line 111, again the focus shifts, the rhythm shifts, and the accusatory tone intensifies, scored by Baraka’s use of all uppercase letters, as though signaling another key change:

Who made Bush president
Who believe the confederate flag need to be flying
Who talk about democracy and be lying
WHO/ WHO/ WHOWHO/
Who the Beast in Revelations (45)

While earlier strophes are right-justified on the page and several strophes are centered, the poem now exploits variations of left-justified, right-justified, and centered lines to create, inauspiciously, three simultaneous yet different voices for the chant, for at least three reasons, as the poet increases the tempo through the next hundred lines or so: (1) to name names, especially of the victims, names the poet gives as evidence to back up his charges against “them,” the “domestic” terrorists (who have now also gone international), (2) to raise philosophic questions about the *religious* motivation behind these acts of terrorism and behind the violent nature of cults in the West, and (3) to historicize the poem’s charges (that is, to view the September 11 attacks from the perspective of Western imperialism and the crimes of the U. S.). Although the condensed list of names of the murdered victims is impressively mixed, ranging from Stephen Biko to Walter Rodney, Ralph Featherstone to Dashiell Hammett, and Princess Di to the Scottsboro Boys (47, 49), no one on Baraka’s list is especially surprising or controversial, nor is any of what he says unsupported by historical debate (if not always actual evidence), so far as I can tell.⁶ Similarly, even his characterization of religious cults almost always subsumes if not directly links them to mercenary forces of greed and materialism:

Who the Devil on the real side
Who got rich from Armenian genocide
Who the biggest terrorist
Who change the Bible
Who killed the most people
Who do the most evil
Who don’t worry about survival

Rather than read “Somebody Blew up America” as anti-Semitic, observes Dawes, “one may be better off . . . quarreling with the easy Manicheism and somewhat uncomplicated look at history” it offers. Yet as Thomas suggested about Baraka before this poem ever appeared, through his sophisticated poetic technique that brackets his insults, mocks (rather than accepts) commonly told lies, and otherwise exploits names and clichés for their musical potential, Baraka avoids “mere didacticism” (*Extraordinary* 158), even as the untethered, syncopated, and frank language of his poems “make purely literary questions seem small” (159). As a “signifying” text, argues Gwiazda, the poem as a satire displays a “skillful manipulation of humor,” as its “subversive rhetoric allows Baraka to underscore the gap existing between the official version of the events of 9/11 and the argument his poem puts forward” (475), an argument “primarily concerned with the concept of evil as an abstraction which informs people’s actions” and a “much more potent and pervasive force” than “the caricature of a cave-dwelling terrorist intent on killing Americans for their love of democracy” (476).

As a signifying poem, however, the excessive rhetoric and imagery that close it ultimately also suspend it. “In its concatenation of ‘Who’s,’” notes Philip Metres, “the poem concludes with a comic-gothic, loony-bird quality that suggests the libidinal excess that conspiracy theorizing brings with it,” thereby indicting “the dangers of the slippery thinking of conspiracy theories, even as it courts the same conspiracy theorizing in the process” (221-22). By exposing its own rhetorical excesses, in other words, the poem exploits those excesses for comic effect even as it plays them out. In this darkly ironic manner, the image of the devil’s face appearing in the flames of the World Trade Center towers, as reported by some who witnessed the explosions, functions in opposite ways for Baraka: It works first as an *antivision*, since in deflating it as a spiritual sign of God he reminds us that, while few (perhaps only the elite) get to see the face of God, “everybody seen / The Devil.” Yet it also vividly dramatizes the horror almost everyone (the moneyed *and* the disenfranchised, rich *and* poor, government *and* the governed, those vested *and* those not) admits to feeling while watching the giant towers ignite—“Like an Owl / Exploding in fire”—and hearing (inside, “in your brain in your self”) “the questions rise / In terrible flame like the whistle of a crazy dog // Like the acid vomit of the fire of Hell.” Indeed, by invoking, in however comic a fashion, profoundly Christian iconography to convey the stark quality of the attacks, Baraka simultaneously scorns it as insufficient to represent the full impact of the attacks on *human* integrity.

“Poised and Confused”: Thomas’s “Ailerons & Elevators”

For Baraka, the enemy’s power is duplicitous in the deceptive way it asserts itself through oppression, theft, exploitation, slavery, and genocide. In “Somebody Blew Up America,” his assault on that enemy rings true by virtue of the poem’s arresting, carefully varied technique, its vicious humor, and its seamless fusion of sociopolitical discourse into vitriolic tropes, regardless whether or not “false theories play a central role in the application of [its] labels” (Appiah 96). Yet for all its polemic on what Baraka charges are the duplicitous forces behind the September 11 attacks, the poem does not deconstruct those forces so much as rattles them. For Lorenzo Thomas, “duplicity” takes on a different, less Manichean pose, as the poet folds into the text not only the heinous acts of the other, the enemy, the one whom Baraka identifies as those who do the saying, but the questionable character of the self, or the poem’s speaker, as well. In “Ailerons & Elevators,” Thomas maintains as unflinching a look as Baraka does at the history of white oppression of blacks and

other minorities, including the disenfranchised, poor, poorly governed, and unvested, as it were. Yet he throws into the bargain the poem's speaker as one of the duplicitous, or at least as one as complicit as his enemy is with the very conditions he clearly abhors.

Perhaps because it concerns the September 11 attacks, "Ailerons & Elevators" withdraws tonally from the more caustic poetry of much of Thomas's earlier work in *Chances Are Few* and *The Bathers* (in poems such as "Survivors" and "The Marks Are Waiting," to mention two). At first reading, this poem composed a year after the attacks is much quieter than "Somebody Blew Up America."⁹ Rather than align itself with the theatrical poetics of Whitman, Ginsberg, and Sanchez, Thomas's poem brings to mind the quietly intricate, though equally "public" voices of, say, Hart Crane, Melvin Tolson, and Robert Lowell, weaving together subtle, ornate phrases of subconscious thought with an eclectic set of allusions. On the page, "Ailerons & Elevators" consists of 117 lines (more than 100 less than Baraka's poem has), arranged in thirty-five, seemingly disparate strophes (compared to Baraka's 95), including ten one-line strophes (Baraka's poem has forty). Both the poem's title (which, as a conjunctive pair of airplane flaps, anticipates the poem's volatile, unexpected movement, up and down) and its opening lines require us virtually to circle with the poet around his subject, in contrast to Baraka's direct hit.

True, as in "Somebody Blew Up America," Thomas's poem begins with a general statement, "The backward see / The wise don't say a word" ("Ailerons" 1). But the difference between the two poets' opening lines lies in Thomas's relative obliquity: Whereas Baraka's first seven lines establish his basic dichotomies and patently spell out his accusation of white elitism as a form of terrorism, Thomas's opening catches the reader off-guard. Set at the "Autumnal Equinox 2002" in New York City (and dated September 22, 2002), the opening of "Ailerons" recalls Yeats's somber lines from "The Second Coming" ("The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity" [185]), as much as any other text. Such an opening positions the poem within a Eurocentric context, while it also offers Thomas's variation—namely that there is no "best" or "worst" alternative here. Thus, in sharp contrast to Baraka's division between them and us in his poem, Thomas's poem opens by undercutting the usefulness of dichotomies altogether as an approach to the crisis at hand.¹⁰ Indeed, what is most telling about Thomas's couplet is its articulation of silence: while "the backward" may "see," there is no indication that they have anything more to say than the wise do. Where Baraka opens by pointing a finger at the "sayers," then, by rebutting them, Thomas focuses on the lack of any coherent response at all to September 11.

"Ailerons" then suggests its own structure by referring to "Three dreams" that "Are haunting me, disturbing me," although this implicitly logical progression soon collapses once the poet begins to bring in other associations. The first dream, the "foolish" one, a dream of predestination, is quickly dismissed in the third strophe; the second and third ones involve daydreams, which are "better," according to the poet. The first of these, "watching the planes come in / On the last day of summer / Airport peaceful" (2), is introduced as a "Nice" dream; the other, less-discernible dream, is described as "this shadow / Cast across the coming season" (2), maybe the shadow of the plane landing. But both dreams turn out to be of no consolation to the speaker, anyway. Instead, the poem's real theme emerges in the fifth strophe: "The danger is seeing the world / as two extremes" (1), an idea that Thomas then metonymically inscribes through a *private*, not public, example: "The afternoons of rushing home to see her / Balanced against / turning the corner / Hoping that her car will not be there" (1). This statement is reiterated in strophe 15, though phrased differently, then brought to its closure in the last six strophes, beginning with the line, "But here's the truth" (4). In relation to the opening lines, the "backward" may *see* the world, but is Thomas not insinuating that they conceive what they see only as extremes, as polar opposites? So what is it, then, that the "wise" see, about which they are silent?

What may at first seem the speaker's dismissal of polarized thinking as insufficient turns out to be not so simple. In the passage between these pivotal statements, the speaker explores his own immediate situation, juxtaposing imagery and history and bringing to bear on them the associations that inform his three daydreams: The late-summer airport scenario, where passengers "deplane calmly," recalls for him Dayton, Ohio, in 1890, when both the Wright brothers and Paul Laurence Dunbar "finished high school" and

 Their neighbors knew
 That they'd go high up in this world

 Paul as an elevator boy in downtown Dayton
 Orville and Wilbur
 Going swimming in thin air (2)

The extremes here, and as implied in the poem's title, are racial, not nationalistic, nor even particularly ethnic, as Thomas complicates if not undermines his initial claim about the danger of seeing the world as two extremes by introducing the polarization of black and white. (Put another way, it may be easy to accept the wisdom of the poem's earlier statement about the danger of seeing the world as extremes, until one is confronted with extremes that have real consequences.) Had the good folks of Dayton been aware of "Richard Gallup, David or Romare Bearden," the speaker reflects, they might have better understood the absurdity of their assumptions about the Wrights and Dunbar. "Such are the baffling deficits that time imposes," he concludes. Lacking such knowledge also means

 They never dreamed
 Someone would use an airplane
 To drop bombs made of oilfield dynamite
 and set Greenwood aflame. (2)

Here, the ambiguous pronoun "they" could easily refer not only to their neighbors in Dayton, but to Paul, Orville, and Wilbur themselves. Set in 2002, of course, the line "They never dreamed" cannot help but also echo what nearly everyone—from my neighbor in New Orleans to Condoleezza Rice—remarked again and again in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks: "We *never dreamed* someone would use a passenger plane for such a purpose," as Thomas simultaneously reminds us of the long history *behind* the "unprecedented" events of September 11. Yet in contrast to Baraka's impressive lineup of historical precedents of American terrorism and its victims, Thomas selects his precedents from a past not so well-known (at least to me) and not so evidently associated with September 11. How many of us have thought about how Dunbar grew up near the Wrights, for instance, before Thomas pointed it out? Or how many of us are familiar with the biography of Andrew Smitherman, "the irascible editor of the *Tulsa Star*, Greenwood's leading publication and its most authoritative public voice" at the time of the Greenwood, Oklahoma massacre of 1921 (Madigan)?

The poem's second daydream also links nationalism to race: "In the still watches of the Negro night," Thomas writes, "Fear rising like mist off a bayou, / The danger in the world / Is seeing it as two extremes" (3). The tangibility here of both the metaphor ("Negro night") and the simile ("fear rising like mist") is typical of Thomas's tropology, as he resets the poem's tone and, figuratively, its location.¹¹ The "season" itself is depicted by a full moon that allows "even liars [to] prosper" and a "harvest of deceit" that has left "the fields outside the city / flat and sere"—with only a lone egret left behind, oddly, "in the parking lot at the Post Office / Poised and confused" (3). As he does so often in his poetry, Thomas plays against expectations with the popularly single-faceted phrase "dazed and confused," here becoming the more

ironic, highly illuminating “Poised and confused”—simultaneously depicting the egret as *poised* as in dignified, *poised* as in victimized, and *poised* as on the verge of collapse.

The next twelve strophes build on this subtle play of phrasing, in a demonstration of “the world automatically recoil[ing] / Into itself” (3), as Thomas splices football, the coming war, “ashen cities,” and Marcel Duchamp’s comment that “Dust-covered glass / Might offer auguries / Of our predicament” (3)—all cognitive allusions to the layers of steel dust that rained down from the burning twin towers. But then, like the wicked stepmother of Sleeping Beauty, he transforms Duchamp’s prophetic glass into a mirror, which he then asks, “How have my people been distracted so / They don’t care any longer who they are” (4). This mirror image serves to shift attention to self-conscious questions about American complicity raised through the next eight strophes, as the poet wonders how to stir up both the backward and the wise: “How so misled that they believe / Punishment does not apply / To crimes committed in their name?” Not only is Thomas asking the same question that Baraka does, as to who are the *real* terrorists, them or us, but he is asking what the “wise” need to ask themselves, namely,

If all are suspect
Could my own duplicities
Be causing this—
The way we’re all responsible
for air pollution

None are innocent; all are implicated—not just the terrorists, not just the elite, not just the white oppressors, but the rest of us, whether we benefit from the actions of the powerful or not. Yet if “we’re all responsible,” does that not also imply that we might be able to effect change? The poet’s reply, phrased in the conditional, comes after an open parenthesis that doesn’t close: “(if you keep breathing // If you believe in magic, yes // And that same magic, yes / Could stop the rush to madness, too)” (4). Does the poet’s admission that magic is powerless run counter to his acknowledgment of our complicity? Or is this former activist in the Black Arts Movement here recognizing that, after all, nothing can be done to salvage American values, therefore justifying why “the wise don’t say a word”?

In the next strophe, the poem’s speaker returns to his immediate present at the moment of the fall equinox, where “scraps of summer laughter” can still be heard “on the street” and “two backyards away / The Funkadelics and Jay-Z resist denial” (4). The distant music promises not to surrender but to oppose both the season and the times. Still, in an even further complication of the theme of complicity, in a passage at once straightforward and deftly ironic (as is Thomas’s signature style), the poem closes:

But here’s
The Truth:
You have the right to keep your mouth shut
Trust me,
Across the room
A person looking like a crazy version
Of somebody you once knew
Might be our Savior
One who can draw fire
Out of ashes
At least a lover, maybe
The one to take you up a little higher
Or let you down easy.
But don’t look this way,
It isn’t me (“Ailerons” 4-5)

In an impassioned claim for self-determination, the speaker defends the silence of the wise, seemingly to provide an escape for himself, as though with his angry cynicism he refuses to take responsibility for his own people's predicament. A further irony, of course, is that he is also implicitly defending the right to free speech as including the right to remain silent: One viable response people have against a mandate pressured against them by their government is simply not to participate, or to join the Funkadelics in refusing to be "our Savior / One who can draw fire / Out of [the] ashes" in our "ashen cities": "don't look this way, // It isn't me," he concludes, simultaneously drawing attention to, and distracting attention from, himself.

Yet in the normative fashion of the poet as griot, the one who informs and shapes the spirit of his or her community, the final irony of "Ailerons & Elevators" lies in the fact of our reading the poem (or listening to it) at all, regardless what "false theories" or "labels" it builds on or whether its speaker is a mask for Thomas or not. In other words, while Thomas's poem voices the speaker's distrust of both the world and himself, what it also does with its sophisticated candor and tricky formal maneuvers is to *gain* our trust in the poet's unwillingness to compromise his thinking, as well as through his abject refusal to endorse the unearned leadership of others. Strophe by strophe, like the figure of the lover, or like ailerons and elevators on a plane, the poem "take[s] you up a little higher / Or let[s] you down easy." It speaks not *at* us, in the accusatory manner of Baraka's poem, but *through* us; it rouses us not through a brilliant array of invectives, nor through the music of a syncopated belligerence (undoubtedly the underlying reason why Baraka's poetry stirs up such wrath among some readers), but through its surprising elision of what we sense to be true about the world around us, if not *collision with* (and here is the unique part) the world *inside* us, two worlds we too readily dissociate from each other. Where Baraka points a finger at the duplicities out there, Thomas uncovers the duplicities within. By saying, "It isn't me," his poem's speaker admits, paradoxically, that it *is* me. And it may well be that only by first acknowledging our duplicity will we create the basis for the kind of genuine change which Baraka has been advocating for fifty years.

Looked at this way, Baraka's and Thomas's poems on September 11 form a partnership that comprises one of the few truly resonant literary achievements to result so far from that day. Without the precedent set by Baraka's longstanding polemic, incisive humor, and "brutally honest" poetry that, as Thomas says, "somehow avoid[s] solipsism or self-pity" ("The Character" 190), Thomas's own more cerebral poetry might be overlooked as too intellectual or oblique outside avant-garde circles. On the other hand, Thomas's voice (as "poised and confused") and his postmodern technique of splicing history and self re-imagine the polarized forces that Baraka indicts in a poetry that substantiates his Manichaeism by tempering it. Once we acknowledge the normative motive of both poets—that is, how both "Somebody Blew Up America" and "Ailerons & Elevators" enlist whatever devices they can to speak *plainly* and *accurately* for themselves, yet still guide us as a community—it seems to me that their contribution to our understanding of September 11 is considerable, and their place in the American canon indisputable.

Notes

1. Appiah asserts that for Afrocentric cultures as for other "collective identities," "false theories play a central role in the application of the labels; in all of them the story is complex, involves 'making up people,' and cannot be explained by an appeal to an essence" (96).

2. As Nielsen writes about Thomas, "Throughout his published works, Thomas can be seen subjecting the literary heritage of English poetics to a transfiguring interrogation" (*Black Chant* 147). That interrogation is essentially an Afrocentric one, as Nielsen demonstrates, for instance, in his readings of Thomas's accounts of the Black Arts Movement, as well as in such early Thomas poems as "Inauguration" and "The Bathers," and it often results in what Nielsen calls a "kind of deterritorializing ethnic irony practiced by Tolson" (*Black Chant* 148). In other words, for Nielsen, Thomas's Afrocentricity is less African-centered than

American-centered in its revision of American literature and culture as being *at least* as Afrocentric as Eurocentric: “In the colored colloquy of American discourse,” observes Nielsen about “Inauguration” (Thomas’s response to Robert Frost’s “The Gift Outright”), “white and black are never alone, never nations with separate language traditions, no matter how much anyone might wish it so” (*Black Chant* 150).

3. As Thomas himself asserts in “Don’t Deny My Introduction,” his unfinished introduction to his posthumous collection of essays, *Don’t Deny My Name: Words and Music and the Black Intellectual Tradition*, “It might be said that the didactic mode in African American art has sometimes appeared in the guise of political comment, sometimes as social directive, sometimes as religious exhortation—always, however, an important element of the artistic motive” (195).

4. In his response to the charge of anti-Semitism brought by the Anti-Defamation League in October 2002 (two weeks after he read it at the Dodge Poetry Festival), Baraka reports that he composed “Somebody Blew Up America” on October 1, 2001, and “[a]lmost immediately . . . circulated it around the world on the Internet” (“ADL Smear”). My own copy received by e-mail is dated October 13, 2001. The poem was published by blackdotpress as *SOMEbody blew UP America* in chapbook form in 2001 and can also be found on AmiriBaraka.com (also dated “10/01”). The *Star Ledger* of Newark, New Jersey, printed the poem in its entirety on September 28, 2002 (the day after New Jersey Governor James E. McGreevey called for Baraka’s resignation as New Jersey poet laureate), but in the margin next to the poem, the newspaper’s editors isolate lines taken to insinuate Baraka’s anti-Semitism, to which he vigorously objects in his response, published online in *Counterpunch* on October 7, 2002 (“ADL Smear”). For this essay, I am using the virtually identical version of the poem reprinted in *Somebody Blew Up America & Other Poems* (2003).

5. It is especially odd how Derbyshire, for one, accuses Baraka of employing misleading logic in the line, “Who killed the most Africans” (*Somebody Blew Up* 45), with the rebuke in answer to Baraka’s question, “Other Africans, without any doubt. Tribal warfare has been endemic in Africa since remote antiquity, except for the few decades when European colonizers suppressed it” (Derbyshire), yet he voices no objection nor response whatsoever to the questions that follow on the next page, “Who killed the most people / Who do the most evil / Who don’t worry about survival” (44).

6. Gwiazda discusses the viability and relatively commonplace nature of several of Baraka’s political views expressed in the poem. Indeed, it is central to his essay on the poem; see, for instance, where he states, “[M]y purpose is to ask why the same kind of political position we are accustomed to seeing in the pages of mainstream and left-leaning publications such as the *Nation*, the *New Republic* or the *New York Review of Books* becomes a target of condemnation when it is presented in the form of a disturbing, difficult poem composed by an African American poet who has an antagonistic relationship with ‘the American way of life’ ” (468).

7. For opposing portraits of Ward Connerly, see “Ward Connerly” on his own American Civil Rights Institute website, as well as Tonyaa Weathersbee, “Commentary: Ward Connerly Needs a French Lesson to Clearly See America’s Reality,” *AntiRacismNet*, 22 Nov. 2005, and David A. Love, “Ward Connerly’s Super Tuesday for Segregation: Color by Law,” *Black Commentator Online* 262 (31 Jan. 2008).

8. About this same passage, Gwiazda writes: “If seemingly facile, Baraka’s deliberately offensive images underscore his disgust with some of the icons of the contemporary African American elite. They render a scathing commentary on what he views as these icons’ complicity with the forces of capitalism and imperialism in the United States” (475).

9. Except for personally circulated (copyrighted) manuscripts (the source I am using here), Thomas’s poem first appeared publically on Aldon Nielsen’s website, *HeatStrings*, but is now also published electronically in his chapbook, *Time Step* [5 Poems, 4 Seasons] at http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/thomas/thomas_time_step.html. I first heard Thomas read the poem aloud at a reading in New Orleans in December 2002.

10. The allusion to Yeats illustrates again, in my view, Thomas’s fundamental principle of Afrocentrism as a significant component of an American “multicultural” perspective—not as a discrete, exclusive entity, but in a more profound manner. In an interview, he remarks, “I am very much concerned to understand, and hope that people understand, that to be an American, that is, a citizen, a cultural product of the USA, is to be someone whose way of moving in the world, whose way of looking at the world, is as much informed by the Puritan notion of what an African religion called Christianity is, as it is to be informed by the cultural outlook of Africans who were brought to this continent as slaves, bringing with them another set of African religious concepts which are as much extant as the Puritan notion of what Christianity is. All of that is part of being a cultural product of the USA. All of that is immediately apparent to other people on this planet. They do not ask us, ‘Where did you go to school?’ As soon as we walk in the door, as soon as we sit down in a certain way, as soon as we look expectantly for the things we expect to get, they know that we are Americans, and they know that we are presenting this unique mixture of the world’s cultures. Only we are the ones who do not seem to know that, or want to recognize that” (Pinson 304).

11. For a similar example, see, for instance, the simile of the stretched elastic in underwear in Thomas’s “The Marks Are Waiting” (*Dancing* 108).

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