Interview with **Amiri Baraka**
Date: March 31, 1989
Interviewer: Judy Richardson
Camera Rolls: 1072-1073; 2110-2114; 3086-3087
Sound Rolls: 251-252; 340
Team: A, B, C

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Note: These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #1072]
[sound roll #251]

[slate]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Group A.

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it please.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

OK. OK.

00:00:19:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me about—and if you can look at me when you talk—what was your image of Malcolm and how did he influence your writing?

00:00:28:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, it's, you know, it's greater, I think, than, than minds, a particular era, a particular age. And for many of us Malcolm summed up the spirit of the age which was, not only resistance to White supremacy and imperialism but aggressive resistance to it, you know. I think a lot of us had been raised watching Dr. King get beat up and we had seen the students, you know, the students in the Greensboro and people, you know, dumping ketchup on people's heads and dragging people out. And so, when Ma—Malcolm and the Nation of Islam rose up with the whole message of self-defense, you know, along with self-determination and self-respect, it hit a chord in a lot of people. And I think I was just one of them, you know, who took that to be my particular feeling, my, my line about it, you know.

00:01:37:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. What, what did he represent particularly for Black men in terms of that manhood image?

00:01:42:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, you know, I, I, I don't think it was, I myself thought of it as man per se, as opposed to woman. I thought of it as, you know, the image of Black people particularly. I guess there must have been something in that in terms of, you know, maybe, you know, Black man standing up. But, I, I, I took that as, a, an image for all us, you know, like, 'cause when I saw Fannie Lou Hamer, I identified with that too, you know, I thought of it as Black people. [phone rings] You know. And [phone rings]—

Interviewer:

Cut please.

00:02:16:00

Camera crew member #2:

Cut. Stop—

[cut]

00:02:17:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:02:20:00

Interviewer:

OK. If you could describe that meeting at the Waldorf with Malcolm in '65.

00:02:25:00

Amiri Baraka:

Yeah, it was set up by Mohamed Babu.

00:02:28:00

Interviewer:

Oh, sorry. Again, they won't hear my, my questions.

00:02:30:00

Amiri Baraka:

Oh, the meeting in, in 1965 with Malcolm was set up by Mohamed Babu, who was the leader of the Zanzibari Revolution, and the three of us met in the Waldorf and, and talked. Babu was staying in the Waldorf and so, you know Malcolm and I met there and really it was to have a discussion about, you know, the state of, you know, African American politics and African politics, you know. Malcolm had been to Africa. He had come back not long from his tour of Africa, and then I think he went to France, I think. Went to Europe and they wouldn't let him stay in France or something like that. But, he had just come back and we were comparing notes about the movement, state of the movement and what was going to happen.

00:03:23:00

Interviewer:

And what was your impression of Malcolm at that meeting?

00:03:26:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, I thought, you know, Malcolm was a great leader. I mean, I, I mean, that, that further, you know, confirmed that in my mind. You know, he talked about the nature of, of trying, of building a united front, what needed to be done and that particularly with some of us, rather than denounce some of these mass organizations that we should be joining them and trying to influence them rather than just, you know, standing on the side denouncing them as backwards, you know. And he really, I think, was, that was during the time he was trying to put together the OAAU, you know, modeled on the Organization of African Unity, wanted African American unity after, you know, the split with the Nation of Islam. And that's really what we were talking about, how to expand, you know, Black United Front, how to create a stronger kind of Black organizational resistance and presence that would include not just one, you know, particular organization or one particular religion. You remember he was in the Nation, then he came out and became a Sunni, and all these moves of Malcolm's were, were aimed at trying to, you know, come up with a secular Black United Front. You know, it's interesting that that was King's last discussion I had with him a week before he was murdered, when he came to my house here in Newark. He talked about a united front, very interesting, of trying to pull together, you know, the so-called militants and the so-called, you know, non-violent or, you know, mainstream civil rights people. So, it seems that both of those leaders were very conscious ultimately of the need to build a Black United Front in the real terms, not just an organization calling itself Black United Front, which is really, usually what happens. You know, some people get together and then they decide a united front is everybody that they like or everybody who relates to them politically, when that's not a united front.

00:05:27:00

Interviewer:

Could you also give me a personal sense of Malcolm at that meeting? I mean, how did he personally impress you?

00:05:32:00

Amiri Baraka:

Malcolm. Well, I think Malcolm impressed, I mean, pe, people who saw Malcolm and who understood what he was talking about, I think he impressed me like that. He was a, a sincere, forceful man who understood with a great deal of clarity what had to be done to, you know, resist White supremacy and, and to resist the whole kind of national oppression that Black people were subjected to. And I think he was a man who had dedicated his life to that, you know and I could, I could see that and feel that. And indeed I think many of us at the

time felt the same way, that this was what we wanted to do with our lives, you know, to fight, you know, to fight against this kind of, this, this kind of scourge, which by that time was getting even more open, if you remember. I mean Kennedy kno—

00:06:25:00

Interviewer:

Oh, before you get into that.

00:06:25:00

Amiri Baraka:

—knocked off. Yeah.

00:06:26:00

Interviewer:

Yeah. Let me just ask you, how did he personally, again it has, in terms of personal stories, personally affect your writing?

00:06:33:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, you see, it, it, you can't make it more than the influence of ideas, I mean, unless [truck passes] you're going to have him guiding my pen, you know. It's, it's a question of, of, of the ideas and the image that Malcolm represented in terms of, of standing strong, standing tall in terms of what this oppression was. See, the, the, the question of the oppression of Black people is so constant. It's not like it's something that we don't know about. It's so constant in our everyday life, and to see somebody who represents taking a stand, a forthright and sincere stand against that and says the things that have to be said no matter what the consequences are and, you know, tells the truth, the truth about these things. These—that was very impressive to me and to a lot of people, and certainly when you see these, these kinds of, you know, vacillating opportunists, super-cautious negroes that many times are supposed to represent us who will not tell the truth longer than twenty seconds about anything. You know what I'm saying? And at that point, Malcolm came, you know, he came through, because that was after the King thing and, and after King was assassinated. So, Malcolm had come to the fore as the kind of major Black leader, you see, which was why he was killed then, because then, that's when he—I mean King wasn't killed then, but once they killed Kennedy, then a lot of Black people began to see that the so-called non-violent thing, you understand what I mean, was not the way. In other words, I think that Dr. King's influence had come to, let's say, kinda was stalemated by the Kennedy assassination, you know. The March on Washington I think was the kind of high watermark and at the same time

the beginning of the end, I think, for that particular domination. And so, the whole Malcolm's preeminence began to be clear, the fact that non-violence would not work. You know, the fact that Black people had mainly been non-violent and all they had gotten was violence in return, the whole question of self-defense, and also the question of imperialism being the enemy. Malcolm began to be clearer on that. You know, when he came back from Mecca and he used that as his means of saying that finally it was not the color of somebody's skin that was at fault, it was the nature of their politics, you know, and, and the whole question of, of, of internationalism. That was very im, very important, you know. And Black people and, and people generally began to look at Malcolm now more closely because, you know, the non-violent thing had been, I think, proven to be ineffective to, to some extent. And the fact that Kennedy, who Black people looked to as quote, "the only person who's gonna to make this non-violent thing work in the first place," since they had killed him, it became clear that these people would kill anybody, you know, to—I mean, since they killed Kennedy, you know what I mean, it became clear, you know, they would kill anybody. And then, of course, right away, then Malcolm.

00:09:57:00

Interviewer:

Talk about, describe what you're doing and how you felt when you hear that, that Malcolm is assassinated.

00:10:04:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, I mean, for me it was a declaration of war. I mean, I felt that it was like—

Interviewer:

Sorry. If you can...

Amiri Baraka:

—open—no, for, you know, the, the, Malcolm's assassination for me was a declaration of war. I mean, I took it as a, as a straight out, you know, attack. I mean, really a kind of open attack that could only be met with, like, some kind of a equal attack. I mean, I don't think there was anything that made me as, I mean, seriously outraged, you know, in the sense not only of, of being angry at the murderers but of losing, you know what I mean, of, of having lost, you know, some kind of great person and, and, and being outraged at the sense of, of the forces who could conspire to do that. That these people thought that they could actually make you submit to them. That, that, they could make Black people submit to them, that they would kill anybody. And, you know, the only thing I think that did—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Amiri Baraka:

—for me and a lot of people was strengthen our resolve. That, you know—

00:11:10:00

Interviewer:

K, cut. I'm sorry, we just had a little—

[cut]

[camera roll #1073]

00:11:14:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:11:17:00

Interviewer:

OK. Describe for me what you're doing and how you feel when you hear, first hear that Malcolm has been assassinated.

00:11:25:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, you know, it was, I don't know, I was downtown at some book party at a bookstore, and it was a Sunday and [clears throat] we'd already formed an organization called the, the Black Arts. And I think hearing about that, you know, that he had been murdered, it just made the people that I was with resolve to—that we were going to go to Harlem, that we're going to move.

00:12:02:00

Interviewer:

And how did you feel? I need to know how you felt.

00:12:06:00

Amiri Baraka:

I felt, I felt outraged. I felt mad. I felt like I should be involved in trying to redress this. That it was like, you know, just too much, that the whole thing had gotten beyond, get—gotten beyond the, the case of just reacting indirectly one way or another or in some other kind of way. That [car passes] there had to be some direct answers, that Black people had to fight back directly and, you know, consistently and continuously against this kind of, you know, the madness of people that actually thought that they could continue to make you a slave, that they could continue for eternity to have you, you know, submit to their madness, you know. And, I mean, I feel that way even today. I mean, that's one thing I think that, that, that the, the whole kind of element of rage in terms of, of, you know, imperialism and racism has never left me. That just, I think, just made it deepen.

00:13:13:00

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. And then what happens, you leave the party and you go to Harlem? During the assassination.

Amiri Baraka:

No, [laughs] not that very moment.

Interviewer:

Oh, I see.

00:13:22:00

Amiri Baraka:

No, you're thinking in the apocryphal way. We organized the, the thing called the Black Arts up in Harlem. I think I was living downtown. I think that by the next month we had, you know, bought this building and opened the Black Arts, which is a group of people, a group of Black people who were trying to put together an, an, an organization of Black artists. And so, to us, that, that meant that that had to be now and it had to be done and, and people needed to quit jiving about it and they need to, like, you know, if art really was going to serve the people, if it really could help make revolution, then those of us who thought that should get on with the work of it or shut up about it. That's the way I felt, you know.

00:14:11:00

Interviewer:

Now, you're so intimately connected with the music and the, the, the other, all the arts. And I'm wondering, you said something about, in your book about Malcolm and Trane being reflectors of the same life development. Can you talk about that a little bit?

00:14:24:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, you know, Trane actually, that whole movement, I mean, the arts reflect the social movement all the time. I mean, the confusion in these Western academic circles, I mean, you know, li, like these universities and these critics that are serving a White supremacy and imperialism notwithstanding, the arts are only a reflection of society. You know, so when you have a social upsurge you always have an artistic upsurge that reflects that, you know. So, the, the whole anti-slavery movement, you get the slave narratives and, you know, the great speeches and, and, orators and rhetoric from the Black convention movement. When you have the whole Garvey, DuBois, African Blood Brotherhood at the beginning of the twentieth century, you've got Harlem Renaissance, you know, Négritude, Negrismo, indigénisme and all that stuff. In the '60s with Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, SNCC, the Panthers, you have a Black arts movement that reflects that because the artists who are most sensitive to what the society is doing and particularly the people that they, you know, who they draw their life sustenance from. The art has the same kind of desires, you know. The art wants the same thing, so that somebody like Coltrane who's breaking out of the, the standard stating of, quote, you know, the American popular song as jazz and jazz solo is a classic kind of case, because just like Malcolm, moving through different levels of experience, I mean, you know, Malcolm at one time was, you know, a, a, a robber, you know, pimp, you know, used to sell drugs. He was intimate with all the musicians because he used to be their drug supplier, still he was a, a man of culture. It's incredible. He was a person who exemplified the African American people in a way that those, you know, civil rights, in quotes, leaders chosen by White academics and White corporations could never be, which is why he was dangerous, you know. And, so Trane, I mean, who'd come up, you know, out of the South and, you know, church music, and then he went to Philadelphia and played with all the rhythm and blues groups, Big Maybelle and, you know, finally coming up through bebop and Charlie Parker and then, finally, you know, had gone through that whole gamut of Black experience. And so, when he came to the point where the society, Black people generally were be, beginning to make a leap, you know, a kind of revolutionary leap in their thinking. I mean, his music paralleled that. I mean, you know, we'd stand up and listen to Trane play a thirty-minute solo, you know what I mean, and you wouldn't even know, I mean, the time had passed because it was all of that feeling, all of that energy, all of that striving and all of that rage and all that beauty just reflected our own feelings at the time. And I think I always hooked him up with Malcolm because of the fire that, you know. I mean, Trane get down and start playing one of those, I mean, just mind-crushing solos that would be screaming for twenty minutes, just screaming and screaming and screaming and screaming. You could hear, say, the rage in Black people talking about, you know, America.

I mean, you could hear not only Malcolm but you could hear, you know, somebody like a Rap Brown, you know. Or you might hear Stokely, or you'd hear, you know, the Panthers. I mean, you could hear that, the rap, in other words, I mean, you know. And, and rap music, I guess, is a further extension of all that, that feeling. I mean, it seems like it's the best part of us, the, the poetry and the music that's come into the '80s, you know, when you get somebody like Public Enemy talking about *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, then you can see that that is a continuum, you know, that it contains both the politics and the art in it. Even though, you know, people want to, you know, diminish it, but they don't understand that they diminish it the same they diminish us. You know, they diminish it like they diminish our children. I mean, how could Public Enemy be serious since our children are like dope addicts and unserious, you know what I mean?

00:18:41:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. Let me cut here.

00:18:42:00

Camera crew member #2:

OK.

00:18:43:00

Interviewer:

'Cause—

[cut]

00:18:44:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:18:49:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

00:18:49:00

Interviewer:

OK. How, how and why does Africa begin to affect the, the culture and politics of African Americans?

00:18:56:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, I guess because the—

00:18:59:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. If you could just mention—

00:19:01:00

Amiri Baraka:

About Africa, I think the whole African National Liberation struggle had intensified after the Second World War. And by the '50s, you know, you began to hear about people like Nkrumah, you know. And then I think the, the most dramatic, I know for us the most dramatic thing was, of course, Lumumba. What was that, 1961? Something like that. When, you know, they killed Lumumba. At the time the United States was in charge of the UN, and Lumumba was, of course, the first premier, independent nationalist premier of Belgian, what had been the Belgian Congo, in Congo. And, of course, Rockefeller and the Belgians, you know, US government colluded to kill him. Mobutu, the Negro that's in there now, was directly responsible for it. And so, for a lot of young Black intellectuals that marked a, a kind of coming to consciousness, you know, I remember lotta people went into the UN. I remember I was picketing in front of the UN and I met people who were writers that I had known were writers, I had met them, for instance Askia Toure, I had met him out there. You know, a lot of people who were artists and, you know, scholars of one kind or another, just young Black people. The Lumumba thing, you know, sparked the kind of rise in consciousness, you know, and the resistance, I think.

00:20:35:00

Interviewer:

And is that why you began to see the African dress and the, and the—

00:20:39:00

Amiri Baraka:

I think that's, it, it deepens from that point on. You know, I mean, Africa at that point, then the whole liberation struggles begin to be emphasized. People like Nkrumah, people like Cabral, people like Sekou Toure, they began to come into, come to the fore, you know. And, of course, the South African struggle, you know, there were people there. And, and African revolution was gaining some kind of a place in, you know, young Black intellectuals' consciousness here in this country. And then, of course, Malcolm talking about Africa and, you know, the, the Mau Mau Rebellion. You know, even, in New York City, you know, which people think is relatively sophisticated, they used to have, there used to be store I remember on Broadway, they used to have photographs in the windows that were trying to depict the Mau Mau Rebellion the way they try to depict the Palestinians now, as some kind of mad terrorists, you know. And they had pictures of Kenyatta and pictures of Mau Mau. They were supposed to be, like, taking White people's heads and, you know, raping White nurses, you know, all kinds of, trying to make the, the Mau Mau seem like they were the beasts and the monsters, not the Belgians who cut off people's hands, and not White supremacy and imperialism, which it is. And you know, even to this day, you know, with the invasion of Grenada and so forth.

00:22:01:00

Interviewer:

So, are you saying that there's a different image that, that African Amer—

00:22:03:00

Camera crew member #2:

We have to change rolls.

00:22:03:00

Interviewer:

Oh, OK.

Camera crew member #2:

Sorry.

Camera crew member #1:

Rollout 2110.

[cut]

[camera roll #2111]

00:22:07:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:22:10:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me the, the personal story of why you decided to change your name. What made you do that?

00:22:15:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, we had been, you know, more influenced by Africa and, of course, the Nation of Islam. And that whole question of African cultural revolution, you know, and the whole question of just Black consciousness, you know, was getting emphasized in the '60s. And after I got arrested in 1967 in the Newark Rebellion, you know, and my head split open and my teeth knocked out, sent to jail and whatnot, [clears throat] I met the brother who had said the prayer over Malcolm, you know, Heshaam Jaaber. He came to my house. At the time I was living on this side of town on Sterling Street. And he came in there with some other people and said if I was a leader, I leaded, I needed leading information. But anyway he, he, I mean, I was right for that. He told me he wanted to give me this name, which was Amiri Barakat, which was Arabic, because they're Sunni Muslims. And since Malcolm had become a Sunni, you know, I was, you know, could be influenced by that to that extent, you know. And so, I thought it was good. I changed it further. I modified it and made it, you know, added Bantu to it, Swahili-ized it. Instead of Amiri Barakat, which is Arabic, you know, it became Amiri Baraka, which is the Swahili pronunciation because I was in, interested in the African emphasis. And that was it. And, and, and, you know, we were identifying with Africa, we were identifying with revolution. And even after, you know, I mean, I got a title, Imamu and I belonged to a cultural nationalist organization. But all the kids that Amina and I had, they all had Swahili names. One got a Yoruba name. And so, it would be kind of out of character for me to be the only LeRoi walking around when I've got, you know, Ras's and Aminas and Amiris and, you know, Shanis and Obalajis, you know.

00:24:28:00

Interviewer:

Was it a big personal decision for you? Or was it [unintelligible]

00:24:31:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, at the time it was, it was, you know, part of the spirit of the time, you know the zeitgeist. I mean, it was something we wanted to do. Whatever we, whatever we thought we had to do to do it, we were gonna do it. Didn't make any difference to us. The question of the slave name actually was kind of a—we thought of it as a honor to take on African names, you know to get rid of, you know—and, and, and, and actually, if you look at our history, you'll find it's not the first time. Although Black people right up to the Civil War abandoned the slave master's name, they would take on Anglo-sounding names, most of them. Some of them took on other names, but they would change their names anyway, because they didn't want to be, you know, named after their slave masters, so they would drop that name and take a name. So, Black people would change their names. See the thing about Black history is why it's so important, is the things that we think that we doing for the first time, we find have been done before. Black people have burnt down every city, Black people have burnt down every major city in the United States at least twice, except the ones that just got settled. I mean, they burnt down New York city twice before the nineteenth century. You know. I mean, they had burnt it down in the eighteenth century. I mean [laughs] I mean, in terms of, they done burnt down New Orleans and Birmingham and Atlanta for the same reasons. So, in terms of our history, once you know it, you see that no, Black people have been tryin' to get out of this for a long time and have been doing the same things.

00:25:50:00

Interviewer:

Talk also about images. Now, what, what are you seeing on, in film, on radio, whatever, in terms of Black images as you're growing up? And I'm talkin' about Tarzan and [unintelligible]—

00:25:59:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, that, I never—all of that stuff, it might've had an effect, but when I was a kid I always looked at that with a cold cast in my eye. I knew that was people making fun of us, you know. I mean—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. If you could back up and just mention what you're talking about.

00:26:13:00

Amiri Baraka:

Oh, in terms of Black images. No, that's why we were starved for them, because that's why when, when somebody like Poitier came on the scene later, and Belafonte, we were so happy. Or even the brother that came before him, James Edwards. We were, we thought it positive, I mean, you know, kids, because we never saw any. I mean, that's one of the reasons we like Sabu and Turhan Bey, because they were colored looking, you know. You know, I remember when Richard Conte, we used to identify with Richard Conte, because he was this dark-lookin' Italian, you know what I mean. But, but, you know, Tarzan and things like that, I mean, we always knew that that was supposed to be some kind of, I mean, I always knew that that was supposed to be a put on of us. And even Mantan Moreland, I mean, it drugged me that people thought that they could do that to us, you know. As a kid, I mean, it, it, it made me be kind of pissed off that people thought that they had the right to make us look like that. But at the same time I thought Mantan Moreland was funny. Same thing with, you know, the rest of those people that were poking fun at, I thought they were funny. The problem was, I knew that the people who had them on were trying to ridicule us, so I always had that kind of a dual—I mean, Mantan Mo, Moreland still has the most reasonable view about death that I've ever seen, stay all the way away from it. You know [laughs].

00:27:39:00

Interviewer:

You think that those negative images, though, had an effect on the way we saw ourselves.

Amiri Baraka:

Well, there's no doubt they would, given that—

Interviewer:

Sorry, can you mention—

00:27:46:00

Amiri Baraka:

In terms of the negative imagery, did it have an effect on us? There's no doubt that it does have some effect in the sense that it, it, it begins to, you see a parameter, a limit, you see what the society wants to make you. But usually in terms of those of us who, who—the great majority of Black people, I think that the great majority always knew that that was somebody else's limitation on us. I don't think we totally, I mean, the, the ones who actually thought that they were those characters, we see them in public office and whatnot, those Negroes, the,

the little, you know, weak-hearted, you know, scary acting Negroes. We, we can see them in our lives and they're a minority, they've always been a minority. I mean, most Black people saw that and always stood away from it, you know, and knew that that was people who didn't like us trying to make fun of us. You know, and certainly if I didn't know it from just my perception, my parents and grandparents kept up a steady line of rap about it. There was no way you could get away from the dinner table and not know about everything that was going on that White folks was trying to do to you because they would be running it down, they were not just sitting there passive, now. You know.

00:29:00:00

Interviewer:

Do you think it effected the way White folks saw us?

Amiri Baraka:

Well, it, it, it, it effected, they, they saw us like that for two reasons. One—

Interviewer:

Sorry, if you could just—

00:29:08:00

Amiri Baraka:

Yeah. The, the, the—talking about did it affect the way White folks saw us. It reflected the way White folks saw us. Number one, you see the, the whole Amos 'n' Andy and Beulah syndrome. It reflected their attempted caricature. What they didn't understand is that there was a legitimate humanity and humor that they wanted to ridicule that couldn't stand ridicule. They wouldn't, couldn't, they wouldn't understand it. For instance, when they have Stepin Fetchit come by and they ask, you know, when, when one of these people was trying to get Stepin Fetchit to do work, because Stepin Fetchit makes a conversation, Stepin Fetchit wants to know is Franco still dead yet? And that's a heavy question. See? Now you gonna ask this man, is Franco still dead? Franco, of course, is the leader of the fascists. Now, if the man's gonna to get off into a long dialogue about Franco being dead, it might take five or ten minutes to get through that conversation, and Stepin Fetchit hadn't done no work yet. He's just standing there. You know, so that's not lost on us. You know, and we realize that—

00:30:07:00

Camera crew member #1:

I have to change tapes.

Interviewer:

OK, lets—

[cut]

[sound roll #252]

00:30:10:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:30:13:00

Interviewer:

If you could set the scene for me, for 1968, a sense of the, the Nixon law and order, [inaudible] Agnew, Cointelpro, that kind of thing. What does it, what does it mean for Black folks in '68?

00:30:25:00

Amiri Baraka:

1968. I think that we had this feeling of all-out conflict, all-out war. I mean, Nixon, Agnew obviously were corrupt and mad. The police were killing Black activists, you know, certainly they were killing the Panthers. I mean, the kind of backward leadership that had taken over from Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. Cleaver had this kind of backward line of, of, of engagement where they would actually hole themselves up in these little places and be assaulted by the, the state.

00:31:09:00

Interviewer:

Excuse me. If you could start that again, we will not have seen the Panthers.

Amiri Baraka:

OK.

Interviewer:

So, if you'll just mention the Panthers and, and not get into—

Amiri Baraka:

All right.

Interviewer:

So, if you—

Amiri Baraka:

[clears throat]

Interviewer:

—start again.

00:31:20:00

Amiri Baraka:

No, the thing about '68 is that it, it was, you know, a feeling of war. It was conflict. Nixon and Agnew, who on the face of it were corrupt individuals who did not represent anything but violence and hatred of Black people. And I think that from '67 certainly the intensity of, of Black resistance, I mean, there was Black people getting killed every week. I mean, Black Panthers getting killed, Republic of New Africa getting killed. All kinds of Black people getting locked up, ram, people having to leave. Robert Williams, you know, Herman Ferguson, people in exile. And then people started getting murdered, you know. I mean, they actually did a kind of bloodbath of the Black Liberation Movement. I mean, not only after the, the, Malcolm X thing, you know, but then all the people in between that, you know, Bobby Hutton and Ralph Featherstone, Fred Hampton and Medgar Evers, and, you know, they were murdering people. And I, my own view is the people in the White House now, those far-right Republicans, had a hand in that. I don't see why we wouldn't believe that this country could go so sharply to the right with only one Democrat being elected since Johnson, and that was Carter, around the Watergate, and not see that the whole wipeout of the Black Liberation Movement, and the other liberation movements, 'cause there was, you know, Chicanos and Puerto Ricans, you know. They tried to destroy the Young Lords in the Puerto Rican community, you know, the Brown Berets in the Mexican community. And all these things were aimed at destroying the back of the resistance, the back of the anti-imperialist—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Amiri Baraka:

—movement that now had joined with the anti-war movement for a kind real furious kind of force.

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

Camera crew member #1:

That's a rollout.

[cut]

[camera roll #2112]

00:33:11:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:33:14:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, why is important, now, this is 1972, we've got the Nixon—

00:33:20:00

Amiri Baraka:

Mm-hmm.

00:33:20:00

Interviewer:

—oppression. Why do you feel it's important to have a Gary convention at this point? A Black political convention.

00:33:26:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, I think that the whole question of Black Power had arisen from, even from King's marches and from the SNCC people, particularly Carmichael and the others. And the Black Power conventions that Adam Powell had set in motion in Washington, the second one in '67 was in Newark, and in '68 in Philly, and then, I think, '69 they had one in Bermuda, that the government of Bermuda banned most of the activists from even coming to. And so, 1970 the Black Power Conference was transfer—formed into the Congress of African People meeting. And at the Congress of African People meeting in Atlanta, a conference, a, a, a congress, a conference was, was called to be held in 1972. I was the person put in charge of putting it together, which would be a national convention to, you know, choose Black candidates, to try to organize Black political, you know, power development. And the Gary convention which had, you know, two, three thousand delegates, about eight thousand people there, was an attempt to do that, to set up a congressional structure, if you will, kind of. In terms of Black history, if you know about the convention movement and things like that.

00:34:55:00

Interviewer:

Oh yeah, I can’t really. But let me ask you also in terms of '72. So, what, why, why particularly '70, '72? Why '72?

00:35:02:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, '72 was the elections coming up. And what we felt is that if we could organize Black political participation, that we would have much more influence on American politics in '72 . And so, we had laid out a thing where we wanted to run candidates locally and, you know, statewide and, you know, even, and have some kind of consistent national political influence on, you know, candidates running for Congress and Senate, and mayors and everything else, to try to really get some kind of a consistent, you know, Black political presence, and that's what Gary was about. And if you remember, we had Shirley Chisholm declared for president that year. And then she gave her, I think she gave her support to, what was the Democrat's name who ran against—?

Interviewer:

Mondale.

Amiri Baraka:

No. That was the who lost so miserably. I can't think of his name. Got beat to death.

Interviewer:

Mm.

Amiri Barak:

But anyway, Gary, Gary demonstrated that the, not only the, that, that Black people felt that they needed some kind of organized national political representation, but that that was an important thing to do. But what, what wasn't scienced out, or what we failed to be able to deal with, was the fact that the whole Black electoral movement, you know, which was headed up mostly by those middle-class Black politicians, that they would align themselves with the status quo institutions in many cases, and—

00:36:56:00

Interviewer:

Talk specifically about the Coleman Young walkout. I mean, what, what's, what's that about?

00:37:00:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, Coleman Young walked out because Coleman Young at the time was representing the United Auto Workers. He might still be representing United Auto Workers as mayor of Detroit. But he walked out because somebody had proposed a, a Black union where the unions wouldn't serve Black people, that there should be a Black union organized. So, Young had to hit the silt because he represented, you know, the UAW, and so he pulled the whole Michigan delegation out. I was the secretary general. I was presiding on the floor and I didn't know what, what he was doing. So, we had to call a, a recess, and I had to go back there and find out what was on his mind, you know. And it turned out that was it.

00:37:37:00

Interviewer:

What did he say to you when you went back?

00:37:39:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, he first wanted to get, you know, he was just goin' through this kind of, like, quasi-hysteria about it. But then people hit me to what was going on, and I talked to him and he calmed down a little bit and told me, I can't go for this! I can't go for this! And he was

assuming that I was pushing it. I mean, people always assumed since I was the secretary general that I was pushing the various resolutions on the floor when it was just my job to raise them and to get votes on them, you know. Same thing with the question of Israel. Same thing with the question of busing. People assumed they knew my position based on the way I was handling the floor vote, you know.

00:38:16:00

Interviewer:

Well, Coleman. What, what are you thinking as you see the walkout?

00:38:19:00

Amiri Baraka:

I didn't know what it was. I mean, you know, I didn't know.

Interviewer:

Sorry.

00:38:21:00

Amiri Baraka:

When I saw Coleman Young, when I, I didn't even know him at the time. I just knew it was the Michigan delegation and they were one of the largest delegations in the convention, because one thing that was done very well is that we had proportional representation by Black people, according to the, the number of Black people in a particular state. And we had, you know, delegates. Those delegates were elected and they represented Black people in those states. So all the states were represented. It was amazing to me. It was really impressive. One of the most impressive things that I've ever seen throughout the whole convention center. Of course, Richard Hatcher was the mayor at that time, so we had complete access to the town, you know, to the police and to the, the institutions. And seeing that whole hall set up like that with, you know, the banners for each state, Black people being represented and passionately arguing for these points, I think it filled us all with, with a sense of deep self-respect, knowing that ultimately the only thing keeping us down was the madman's gun. That it wasn't anything else, that we knew exactly what we wanted, you know, and all we needed to develop was how to get there, you know.

00:39:31:00

Interviewer:

So, in terms of Coleman, now, you're standing there at the podium and he's walking out. What are you thinking?

00:39:36:00

Amiri Baraka:

I just wanted to know, you know, it was my job to see that things were running smoothly in terms of the floor, you know, presiding on the floor. I think all three of us presided, Hatcher presided, Diggs presided and I would preside. That was the, the kind of little triumvirate that we put together. One was electoral politician Diggs on the congressional level, Hatcher represented local politics, and I represented the activists and the nationalists, you know. And so, we tried to keep their balance which I thought was a good formula for dealing with our different constituencies. But, I didn't know what, what the Michigan thing. There were so many different kinds of wild things going on. At one point, Roy Innes—

00:40:16:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. If you could—

Amiri Baraka:

—led some kind of demonstration.

Interviewer:

Yeah, if you could just keep on for a second because we have the footage—

Amiri Baraka:

Oh.

Interviewer:

—of Coleman Young. If you could just talk about what you're thinkin' about when you see that happening.

Amiri Baraka:

Well, I didn't know what to, to make of it. Later I, you know, I attributed very negative things to it, knowing that it was just the UAW demonstrating against Black organizing.

00:40:36:00

Interviewer:

But when, when you're standing there and you're looking at it, what are you thinking?

00:40:39:00

Amiri Baraka:

I just think like I always think, it's my job to do something about it. I mean, it's certainly not intimidating or anything. It's just a crazy, you know, thing that's happening and it's got to be dealt with, you know. So I called a recess, you know, and said, We've got to deal with this. These people are walking off. I don't know how many delegates, a hundred and some delegates getting up, walking off the floor. You know, obviously, I guess like they would do in any big convention. You have to call it to a halt. I think we called it to a halt another time when I was up there. They called and said there was bomb in there. We had to call it to a halt again, you know. Although, to tell you the truth, I wasn't going to call it to a halt with the bomb scare until the police came out there, the Black police chief said, You better call it for a couple of minutes, because I didn't think there was a bomb. I thought it was just, you know, racists at work, you know, which it proved to be.

00:41:27:00

Interviewer:

The other thing you mentioned, Diggs. Now, at one point on Saturday, Diggs over—does this thing where he overrides the voice vote. I think, I think it was on the agenda. And you were then, and it's, it's almost a sense of unraveling. And you then go to the delegations that night. Can you talk about that?

00:41:42:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, you see, there was alwa, all, already that kind of internecine struggle between, you know, the forces of electoral politics. You know, the little, petty, bourgeois, status quo Negroes, although I thought Charlie Diggs finally came a long way in, in, in, in trying to be more sympathetic to the mass line, and I think he paid for that, you know, because he was supposed to be chairman of the House Committee on Africa, and then they bounced him outta there, you know, just about that time, which is what they do, which is a pattern—

Interviewer:

But then you go, you go to the delegations, right. What happens that night?

Amiri Baraka:

Well, I have to convince them not to—

00:42:17:00

Interviewer:

Sorry, if you can mention—

00:42:19:00

Amiri Baraka:

I mean, I went to the delegations to try to find out if—how people wanted to handle that. People obviously were angry at the way it was handled. The electoral politicians had certain things that they refused to deal with. I mean, they no longer saw it as, quote, their constituencies. Although that was their line, that it was their constituencies that they were reacting to, they were really reacting to their relationship with the United States government in some kind of way. Certainly the lines they would find embarrassing. The NAACP disassociated themselves from the convention the day before the convention opened and we hadn't said a word. Roy Wilkins came out with an editorial saying he didn't wanna have nothing to do with us, you know what I mean. But the electoral politicians who had to be drawn in it, because we drew them into it, we knew what we were doing, I mean the activists, the nationalists, we drew the electoral politicians into it because they wanted a national strategy and there was no other way to go except the way we proposing. [clears throat] But once they get in there on the floor, some of the questions that came up were controversial, the thing on busing, the thing on Israel, for instance, the thing on the unions, the whole thing about a Black political party. Jesse Jackson, for instance, got up and, and resolved that we should, you know, declare a Black political party.—

Interviewer:

Did you—

Amiri Baraka:

Percy Sutton— got up and talked about a, a, a, a Black presidential campaign to nationalize the votes. We can see which way that went, Percy Sutton, [laughs] won out, [laughs].

00:43:40:00

Interviewer:

Did you support the idea of a third party?

Amiri Baraka:

Always, sure.

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, could you—

00:43:44:00

Amiri Baraka:

Sure. We thought that what we were doing was providing the transitional form for a third party, you see. And we thought about national Black assembly, national political council. In my mind, I thought that what we were trying to set up was a kind of focused headquarters, if you will. A kind of developmental outpost for the beginnings of a third party—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Amiri Baraka:

—I mean, I mean, it's no secret that most of the stuff—

00:44:11:00

Interviewer:

Sorry, we're gonna have to—

Amiri Baraka:

Yeah.

Camera crew member #1:

Last of the roll—

Interviewer:

—yeah.

Camera crew member #1:

—2012.

[cut]

[camera roll #2113]

00:44:16:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:44:19:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, why does the idea of a third party not get endorsed by the, by the convention?

00:44:24:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, there was a furious struggle over it that came up in many different ways.

Interviewer:

Sorry.

00:44:28:00

Amiri Baraka:

The idea of a third party did come up repeatedly. The idea of a third party, either a Black political party and variations of that, it came up. But you see, as I said, the electoral politicians who were committed in the main to the Democratic Party, some to the Repub—Republican Party, they were opposed to that, you see. Jesse Jackson, as I said, came up with the idea. He supported the idea of a Black political party. The Black bourgeoisie, on the other hand, Percy Sutton came up with the idea of, of nationalizing the Black vote by running a Black candidate, which of course is an idea whose time has come for the last eight years with Jesse Jackson. Now Jesse's taken that line, which was Percy Sutton's line. But I think it was the electoral politicians, the Black Caucus that militated, you know, and, and the various kind of electoral politicians who were connected to one of the parties, they're mainly Democrat, who always militated against an independent party because they always saw their particular interests hooked up with the Democrats or the Republicans. And it's still the same way.

00:45:29:00

Interviewer:

How did you feel about that, that yourself? I mean, what did you—

00:45:31:00

Amiri Baraka:

I didn't like that. You know, and I still think that's a, a debilitating factor in the Black Liberation Movement, that our so-called representatives are more hooked up to Democrats and Republicans than they are hooked up to the evolution and development of the Black Liberation Movement. That is very negative and it must be opposed.

00:45:54:00

Interviewer:

OK. And go back again for me to the, to where you're going that night. Delegation after delegation after delegation and trying to keep them together, 'cause you're afraid that it might unravel. Let me get a description of that.

00:46:05:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, a lot of the delegates felt, you know, the masses felt that they had been used, that they'd been betrayed, that they'd been—[car radio passes]

Interviewer:

Sorry, there's—

Camera crew member #3:

Stop. Yeah, let's, let's start again.

Camera crew member #1:

[unintelligible]

00:46:21:00

Interviewer:

OK, fine. Let's go right on.

00:46:23:00

Amiri Baraka:

A lot of the delegates felt they'd been treated undemocratically, that they'd been roughed off, chumped off by, you know, Black electorate officials, Black elected officials. I mean, Charlie Diggs was up there and he was, you know, chairing. And, you see, there was the perception that whoever was chairing was running the meeting, you know. Although, it was true to a certain extent, you know, that Diggs and those electoral folks did not want certain things to come up, did not want them to get voted on. And their line of reasoning was that if you take this position, you're going to destroy this organization or this united front attempt. You're going to destroy it as a mass vehicle because people will shy away from it, you know. Well, obviously they were talking about their relationship to the mass media and their relationship to the Democratic Party more than they were talking their relationship to Black people, 'cause I don't think the majority of Black people woulda shied away from the idea of a Black political party.

00:47:27:00

Interviewer:

And what do you do? I mean, to describe that night of going, 'cause people tell, tell me you were tireless. I mean, you just went delegation to delegation.

00:47:32:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well I, you know, that was, I saw that as my job. I was trying to see that the majority who I always thought, I, I, I was going to speak for 'cause ***I wasn't an elected official. I wasn't a mayor or wasn't a congressman, but I was a Black Nationalist. I was an activist. And I thought a lot of those people had come to Gary because of our organizing, our, you know, pleading with people to come and, you know, be part of a whole Black political development. And I thought it, it was important that the thing not fly apart.*** That we talk to the people and find out what could be done other than, you know, just walking out or, you know, just breaking down into, you know, like, some even worse tactics. Because, you know, I mean, the—

00:48:24:00

Interviewer:

Tell me what you do then. What do you do?

00:48:26:00

Amiri Baraka:

What do I do when I talk to them?

00:48:28:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, no, what do you do when you decide, I've gotta, I've gotta keep this from unraveling?

[radio interference]

Interviewer:

What do you do?

Amiri Baraka:

Well, you go, you—

[radio interference]

Camera crew member #2:

Hold it, hold it.

[production discussion]

Camera crew member #3:

I don't know what that is. It's some kind of truck.

Camera crew member #2:

OK.

[cut]

00:48:42:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:48:46:00

Interviewer:

OK. Can describe going around to each of the delegations to try and keep it from unraveling.

00:48:52:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, it was the question of a lot of people felt that they had really just been dismissed and deprived of their democracy by the way the elected officials, through Diggs, were, you know, handling this particular question. I don't remember what the question was, whether it was the question of busing or the question of Israel or the question of Black party. One of those things, 'cause they were the ones that were really, you know, controversial. But a lot of people felt that that wasn't right. That the things should be struggled out. And, and, you know, the elected officials were using their slick parliamentary manner and, and the fact that they were organized to try to keep things from getting said and resolved that would embarrass them in terms of their relationships with the Democratic Party and the media and so forth and so on. Although they would always cite their constituency, who we were supposed to be in the first place, as the reason that they didn't. So, I was in, in the main, trying to discuss with people, you know, what they thought, how they were going to approach it—

00:50:06:00

Interviewer:

And how did you do that?

00:50:06:00

Amiri Baraka:

'cause I didn't think that—just by talking to the leaders of the delegations, the heads of the delegations.

Interviewer:

Describe it.

Amiri Baraka:

The people that I know. Well, you know, you'd find that, you know, you'd talk to people who—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry.

Amiri Baraka:

—had influence.

00:50:18:00

Interviewer:

If you could set the stage, say, 'cause see, the sense I got was that that night you've been up all night and you go in, delegation. I want people to know that.

00:50:26:00

Amiri Baraka:

Yeah. Well, it was, everybody was, I mean, ***after those meetings people wouldn't go to sleep, they would caucus, and each state would caucus, you know, and, and then there would be caucuses inside the caucuses because then you'd have the elected officials caucusing inside the state, and then you'd have the Black Nationalists caucusing inside there, and then a lotta time there was, there was Marxists or somebody else, they'd be caucusing.*** So, I'd have to get to the, the heads of the various kinds of power focuses, you know, in there and find out what each thought they were going to do and whether there was some kind of, whether we were gonna have some kind of accord. Whether there was gonna to be a united front or whether they were gonna to have crazy or, you know, what they were gonna do. Whether you were gonna put up a resolution or you're gonna walk out, or what you gonna do, and try to get some kind of accord. And really, I guess, like you would do if you were Speaker of the House in the regular thing, you go around and you try to get people to understand, you know, what the greater good is, and to see that we have to be in this and that I didn't like what was done, you know. And I'm talking to them, we discussing it, and we gonna try to find out how the democratic procedures gonna go on here because that can't go on. You know, and trying to, you know, at one hand relate to my own constituency, you know, which, in terms of Black activists and nationalists and so forth, the people who were not elected officially, the masses of people. And to, in, in other words, give them a sense that we were not going to be just misused, but at the same time I thought that trying to hold the convention together and the National Black Assembly together, that I thought openly that was a good idea and it was an important idea, and we had to be willing to fight in there with these people and not just, you know, nut out and throw up our hands, you know. So it was a, it was a kind of endless talking to people in delegation after delegation, because I thought that it had to be done. Particularly in delegations where you saw people had real problems, you know, where, there were delegations who were protesting, or delegations who were threatening to walk out, or delegations who had had resolutions that couldn't be heard and things like that, you know. So you had whole piles of papers that characterized different

delegations. And then I would recognize, from, you know, standing on the floor, serving, I mean, you could see problems in different delegations, what they were, and people were bringing me messages and sending me messages saying, you know, New York wants to talk. You know, Illinois is going to walk, you know. South Carolina says so and so. And so, then you'd have to look at these papers and you'd have to play fireman and go to these different delegations and find out what their story was, why, you know. And then there might be independent groups like Roy Innes in CORE, who got some other kind of, like, half-baked scheme that they want to try to mash on people, you know, and it's, and then, you know, people want to get into all kinds of pushing and shoving and, on one hand, like those kind of real, uninformed types, you know. So, it, it's the gamut of political reaction. And if you're going to manage it, if you're going to see it, if you're going to be the secretary general, I took the job seriously, then you're going to have to deal with all those people and see that come time for that gavel to hit, everybody was sittin' there and everybody was ready to go and that they were, they were there for business, no matter how drugged they might be, you know. Brother So-and-So or Mayor So-and-So, that they was ready to do, do business and that they would be there, you know what I mean. And the thing was gonna go on and was gonna follow the agenda, and that's really what it, what it's like. You know.

00:54:01:00

Interviewer:

Now, the, the slogan of the conference is Unity Without Uniformity. Could you mention the slogan, just talk about what that meant?

Amiri Baraka:

Well, actually, that slogan came from Ron Karenga because we—

Interviewer:

Sorry. Can you just mention the slogan?

00:54:11:00

Amiri Baraka:

Yeah. Unity Without Uniformity. And I had gotten, you know, associated and influenced by Karenga, influenced and associated with Karenga back in, what was it, about '67, you know, about that time. And that was one of the slogans that in his so-called doctrine, Unity Without Uniformity, which actually is a united front, which meant that people had the right to maintain their own political views even though they would submit in a united front formation to the greater need that they could agree on. You understand what I mean? That it didn't mean you had to completely abolish your views, but that there was an area in which

you could submit to common kind of, you know, common accord, you know, common discussion and diplomacy, negotiation for the sake of everybody's development.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Amiri Baraka:

And so, even though Karenga and I had separated by then—

Interviewer:

OK. Rollout.

00:55:15:00

Camera crew member #1:

That's the rollout on 2113.

[cut]

[camera roll #2114]

00:55:18:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:55:22:00

Interviewer:

OK. It's the last day at Gary. You've been through all this. What is your feeling as you're leaving Gary?

00:55:27:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, I had been given a job to do. The, the, the assembly voted that I had to go down to Miami and see that the, the Black agenda, which we put together, which was printed, we tried

to get John Johnson at Ebony to print it and distribute it, but we printed it. And it was the demands that the Black delegates made of any candidates who wanted their vote, President and so forth and so on. Unfortunately, when we got down to Miami, most of the Black politicians didn't do nothing.

00:55:54:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. OK. What I do need is to get that sense of what you're feeling, though, that day.

Amiri Baraka:

Oh.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:55:59:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, Gary I felt that that was one, one long and positive step that we had accomplished. I thought that Gary was something that we had done that had been very positive and that now was the next step, because I always saw it in terms of increments and steps and degrees. And it was, you know, like any journey, you know, to get there you had to take a series of steps, and I thought Gary represented a large step forward. And since I'd been given responsibilities that went past Gary, it simply meant I had to get ready for the next gig [laughs].

00:56:36:00

Interviewer:

And personally, I mean, do you feel tired, do you feel jubilant, do you—?

00:56:39:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, I mean, the tiredness is always, I think, you know, the physical part of that is momentary. You feel really, now you begin to get your mind ready to analyze what has to be done now. What, what are the new tasks, you know, what folks do you have to contact, you know, what things do you have to do. You know, and you, you begin to sum up and take a postmortem, at the same time, you know, congratulating people, and I guess yourself to a certain extent. But, you know, I think there was a deep feeling for the people involved, that

we felt, I think, great respect for each other because it was a large project, you know, and it meant coordinating great many Black people from all over the world. And to see that done and to see it done with such impact was a deeply satisfying feeling, you know. We thought for sure that we were, you know, on the winning track, you know, without a doubt.

00:57:39:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut please.

00:57:40:00

Camera crew member #3:

That's fine. Good.

Interviewer:

Yeah, it's nice. Yeah.

[cut]

[camera roll #3086]

[sound roll #340]

[slate]

00:57:51:00

Camera crew member #1:

Blackside, *Eyes on the Prize part two*. Interview with Baraka.

00:57:56:00

Camera crew member #3:

OK.

00:57:57:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, all right. If you can talk about your, your work in the late '60s, early '70s, before '71. In, in, in the prisons, but particularly New York State Prisons, and what kinda transformation you're seeing within the Black prisons.

00:58:13:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, you mean Black prisoners. You know, there was a great spirit of camaraderie and solidarity in the '60s and early '70s in the people on the outside and people in the prisons because so many people were getting arrested in the '60s. You know, people were locked up with demonstrations. People were locked up in various organizations. Organizations were always going in, ta, talking in the prisons to the extent that they could. I remember we organized a great deal in Trenton State and Rahway, here. Not to mention we were locked up in some of them, most of them. I know we were in Rikers and Sing Sing. Then there's a woman's prison over there in New York by the, West Side waterfront that we were in speaking. I didn't even know it existed. But we've been in prisons to speak, and, and I know the activists always looked at prison as one way of reaching a kind of, potentially militant brothers and sisters who were already locked up, who had been, you know, say, disillusioned by America, or who had been disabused of their illusions about America and many times were jailed, either illegally or jailed simply, you know, based on White supremacy. And ***we always thought of the jails as a, as a, as a kind of explosive resource for, you know, revolutionary change. Certainly people like Malcolm X had come out of prison, and the Nation of Islam had done a great job of, you know, transforming a lot of people who had been in prison. And some people in prison, you know, had been in the Panthers and things like that. So, we saw revolutionary activity as a means of transforming prisoners into revolutionaries,*** and so the, you know, the program of going into prisons organizing and speaking.

01:00:12:00

Interviewer:

And do you begin to see a change in the late '60s, for example, within the prison popul—are they reading, are they—what kind, kind of things are you seeing?

01:00:18:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, the prison, you know, you get to change the movement. The, the, the, the people are the same essentially. The movement itself changes. When the movement goes into decline, the relationship between, say, movement activists and prison activists declines. I mean, just like the Black family gets weaker. I mean, it's all related to the question of social organization within the group. When the social organization of the group is more revolutionary, you

know, you see more progressive and positive, you know, dimensions and definition to the group.

01:00:49:00

Interviewer:

So, in terms of examples, now, when you're going into, say, New York State Prisons, what are you seeing the, the prison is doing that is changing then?

Amiri Baraka:

Organizing. You know, now you—

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

01:00:57:00

Amiri Baraka:

—see more prisoners laid back, just doing their time, you know, or—

01:01:02:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. In, in the late, before Attica, for example, there's that whole prison movement around George Jackson. What are you beginning to see prisoners doing in terms of reading, in terms of being open to what's going on around the Black consciousness movement?

01:01:14:00

Amiri Baraka:

Like I said, there was a, a big connection between the movement and the prisoners because a lotta people in the movement were getting locked up, and so they would be carrying that message into the prisons. And a lotta people were locked up directly related to movement activities, and so when they put them in prisons, it became, you know, a, a place where, where you could organize. I know when I lock, was locked up in Trenton the police did everything they could to put me in solitary. I dodged that, but when I was in Newark, the, the pen over here in Newark, Essex County pen, they put me in solitary. They, they never wanted to have the activists in the population, you see what I mean, but it didn't matter. There were still strong ties between militant activity and people in prison because the people in the prison would resent the fact they were in prison in the first place, particularly if they were

there around revolutionary activities. So, there was a stronger tie, and as the, the revolutionary motion began to stall out, you know, the murders of Malcolm, the murders of Dr. King, the murders of, wholesale murders and slaughters of Panthers and activists and lockups of people. Then, like the movement itself, you begin to get a stalling and a reactionary kind of tone sets in.

01:02:29:00

Interviewer:

Now, when you get somebody like a George Jackson who is beginning to, to talk about reading kinds, those kinds of things, are you seeing that also when you go into prison?

01:02:37:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, you always that. It depends on the focus. I mean, Bumpy Johnson, when he went to Alcatraz for twelve years, I mean, he educated himself. He had, I guess, a triple postdoc in, in literature and, you know, world culture. I mean, based on people who were locked up, like Malcolm said he read the dictionary when he was in prison. I mean, people make use of their time depending on their consciousness in prison, and you find some very well-educated people in prison because they got the time to do that. But during the period of revolutionary insurgence, the, the, the kind of focus of that reading becomes different. People then are reading, you know, Fanon, Malcolm X doctrines and so forth and so on, and Nkrumah, and, you know, the, the whole question of, of, of organizing in prisons and relating the prison movement to liberation movements, this becomes much more of, of, of the time. Nation of Islam was always well organized in prisons. Some of the other organizations, like I said in New Jersey, we were well-organized in prisons, Congress of African People, we had teachers in the major prisons who went there every week, you know, teaching, you know, about cultural revolution and the Black Liberation Movement and things like that. So, there was a closer tie based on the revolutionary, you know, character of the times.

01:04:01:00

Interviewer:

And do you remember seeing that when you went into the prisons? I mean, you remember seeing—

Amiri Baraka:

Yes. Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

And what, I mean, how would you see that?

01:04:06:00

Amiri Baraka:

By the way that they were organized. They had many different organizations. The, the inmates were organized in different organizations. Like I said, they had the Nation of Islam, the Congress of African People, the Black Panther Party, they had them in the prisons. They had a, you know, a prison Black Panthers, a prison Nation of Islam, a prison Congress of African People. You know, the same things you saw on the outside. Now, in the inside, there's still are Black consciousness movements, but not nearly as many as there were. The Nation is probably still there, not as much as it was, but you see more people now who, when you say it's the same as the outside, meaning the people are smoking as much dope or shooting as much dope inside as they are outside, you know, that's true. But you still have a core of people who develop their consciousness in there, when they're in prison because it's, you know, they're in school. They see it as a school, not just a prison.

01:04:56:00

Interviewer:

And again, back to Malcolm, particularly since you mentioned that. What—OK, could you tell me again, what was your image of Malcolm then, before he gets assassinated?

Amiri Baraka:

My image of him?

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Amiri Baraka:

Well, I thought he was a maximum leader in the movement.

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, if you could mention Malcolm’s name.

01:05:11:00

Amiri Baraka:

Malcolm X, I saw him as the maximum leader of the movement. I, I saw him as the spearhead, as the kind of, you know, really, I think that sums it up, as the kind of leader, both inspirationally and terms of politically, that he was the spearhead of the movement and the cutting edge of it.

01:05:33:00

Interviewer:

Is he beginning to take promise in terms of, as opposed to what you've seen with Dr. King, or—?

01:05:38:00

Amiri Baraka:

Well, for me, Dr. King, I, when I was a young man, I, I [laughs] never really approved of Dr. King, what Dr. King did. I always saw that as something imposed upon us by people thinking that we had to qualify to be free. I never agreed with that. I just recently came to see Dr. King in, in a more progressive light, because Dr. King was much more progressive than even the image that was given out by his sycophants and followers, you see. But make no mistake, Martin Luther King was a positive force in our movement. The fact that a whole lot of these preachers think they can do the same thing, just stand in the pulpit—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Amiri Baraka:

—is not true. Dr. King was an activist, you know.

Interviewer:

Sorry—

Amiri Baraka:

And he was a very progressive man.

Interviewer:
I just wanna do one more.

[cut]

[camera roll #3087]

[slate]

01:06:28:00

Camera crew member #4:

Hold it. Second sticks!

Camera crew member #2:

Second sticks!

Camera crew member #4:

Second sticks!

[slate]

01:06:31:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK, OK, you can go back.

Camera crew member #4:

Oh, I'm sorry.

Camera crew member #3:

Go again.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

01:06:41:00

Interviewer:

You had talked earlier about the image of people, you know, the sit-ins getting beaten in and that whole sense of, you know, not being able to retaliate. Can you put Malcolm's image for you in that context, that he was a different kind of voice?

01:06:55:00

Amiri Baraka:

He represented a different class of people.

Interviewer:

Sorry—

Amiri Baraka:

Yeah. I mean, Malcolm represented a different class of people that I identified with. He represented the masses of people. Masses of Black people never willing to sit still and let anybody spit on them. And, you know, then to be brutalized so that they could appear to be, you know, civilized to White people, the most uncivilized people on the planet. So that, you know, a lot of us, when we were young, rejected that, you know, that the idea that somehow, because Black people had never been violent in that sense. You know, our protests in the main were nonviolent. When Black people got violent, then you would know about it, you know. So, that, that, that never appealed to me. What appealed to me about Dr. King later was the way I began to understand his thinking as it developed around the question of Vietnam, the question about activism. Finally, when he began to talk about a united front to deal with the whole issues of the workers, you know, which finally got him killed, the whole Memphis garbage strike, you know, then he became much more dangerous to the establishment, but I think then I began to see King in a little different way, you know.

01:08:07:00

Interviewer:

And how was Malcolm a different voice for you at this point?

01:08:10:00

Amiri Baraka:

Malcolm, to me, represented the masses of people straight on. You know, he was trying to talk about self-determination and self-defense and self-respect. He wasn't trying to appease, you know, any part of the establishment, you know. That's essentially what. The establish, the establishment, the White supremacist establishment was corrupt, and the Negroes attached to it were corrupt. That's what I felt. That's what I feel now. And I thought that when King first appeared, too much of what he said appeared to be couched in the rhetoric of the Black establishment as it kowtowed to the White establishment. You know, and later on, as I said, I began to see King in a different light based on his activism and based on the fact of the development of his thought.

01:08:55:00

Interviewer:

And how was Malcolm different from that?

01:08:57:00

Amiri Baraka:

That he never represented that. He represented to me straight-out resistance to racism and imperialism.

01:09:06:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. [truck passes]

Camera crew member #2:

That's a cut?

Interviewer:

That's a cut.

Camera crew member #1:

End of tape?

Interviewer:

I think that [unintelligible] [truck passes]

Amiri Baraka:

You're sure—

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:09:17:00