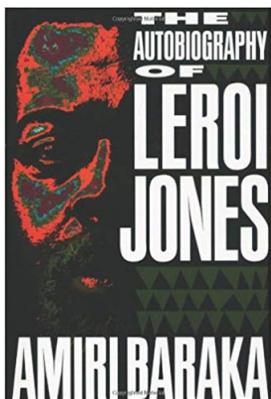


“Poet, writer, teacher, and political activist Amiri Baraka was born Everett LeRoi Jones in 1934 in Newark, New Jersey. Baraka was well known for his strident social criticism, often writing in an incendiary style that made it difficult for some audiences and critics to respond with objectivity to his works. Throughout most of his career his method in poetry, drama, fiction, and essays was confrontational, calculated to shock and awaken audiences to the political concerns of black Americans. For decades, Baraka was one of the most prominent voices in the world of American literature.”¹



The following passage is transcribed from The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones, published 1984.

On pages 371-73, Baraka recounts his experience of confinement in the old Essex County Jail as a political prisoner. After briefly describing the events of the 1967 Newark Rebellion, he writes:

So I was locked up the first night of the Newark rebellion. In its entirety the rebellion went on for six days or so. Thousands of blacks were arrested and thousands more were injured. The official score was 21 blacks killed and 2 whites, a policeman and a fireman. But there were many more blacks killed, their bodies on roofs and in back alleys, spirited away and stuck in secret holes. It was no riot, it was a rebellion. The \$10 million damage, mostly in the black community, was mainly to white businesses. Whole blocks of small white businesses disappeared, never to reappear again. The Kerner Commission stated that the only way to change the cities was to “enhance the ghetto,” which ain’t happening, or convince the blacks to leave. So the Newarks of the U.S. still exist like they did in 1967, trying to drive the blacks out of the hopeless exurbs, so that the whites can urban renew, having found out the ancient teaching of Ibn Arabi is true, that the cities are the chief repositories of culture and the highest thrust of human life. Plus, they are the banking, communications, and transportation centers. Or having read Mao they know that the socialist revolutions in the Western industrial countries *will begin in the cities* and then move out to the countryside.

And these rebellions, check with the Kerner, were not the work of the lumpen, i.e., those already crushed by capitalism, the pimps and the prostitutes, dope addicts, that “dangerous class.” The rebellions were the handiwork, in the main, of the disenfranchised young black workers, enraged at racism and exploitation.

I was taken to the Newark Street jail (Essex County Prison), a joint I used to see all the time in my youth. Either walking with my grandmother over to the election-machine warehouse on Wilsey Street where my grandfather was night watchman or playing baseball in the huge vacant lot across from the jail. I had always wondered what went on behind those walls and now I would find out.

¹ From the Poetry Foundation: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/amiri-baraka>

I was put in solitary confinement by a Negro² who had been an old friend of my father, “Jazz” Jones, who later testified in court that I had not been in solitary confinement. What was so strange about being in jail then is that we still knew that there was a rebellion going on outside. We could look out the windows even during the daytime and see its effects. One day, in the middle of the afternoon, we spotted a car coming around the corner and up New Street. The National Guard had been brought into the city and they were staked out in the vacant lot across from the jail. We could see them clearly from inside the prison. As the car came up the street the Guardsmen started firing at it. They didn’t know who was in the car or where it was going. I guess they could see it was black people inside. The firing brought the car to a halt and it was quickly surrounded. One door opened and a black man and woman stumbled out. The woman was staggering and bleeding. A couple of the Guardsmen seized her and dashed her against a factory wall. The woman was slumping, obviously wounded from the gunfire. The man backed against the wall with his hands up.

All inmates started screaming out the jail. There was no way the Guardsmen could hear us, but the cops inside the prison could and they walked around calling for order. I was screaming, “We need to do the same thing to some white bitch.” The cops ran up and down telling the inmates to shut up, but they kept screaming.

That night someone started shooting at the prison. They shot the lights out around the walls. The firing was coming from one of the factory roofs that extended down the block across the street from the jail. You could hear the pop, pop, pop of what sounded like a .22. Then the National Guardsmen opened up, blasting in the direction of the one .22 for about ten minutes. Then all was silence, except in the prison the guards turned up the canned music until it was almost screaming. It was Patti Page singing “We’ll Be Together Again.”

The Guardsmen were so frightened they had a tendency just to shoot and shoot without even bothering to aim or look squarely in the direction of what they were firing at. (Probably it was something in their own heads. The state policemen, on the other hand, were straight-out murderers. The job they did on a young boy they caught trying to liberate some liquor from Jo-Rae’s tavern on Bergen Street was one grim example. The boy was shot over thirty-five times. He had six or seven slugs through the top of his head. I got hold of the photo of his autopsy after I got out, printed it up, and circulated it. The police and sheriff’s department tried to catch us and lock us up for circulating the photo. The bloody killers were heroes!)

The same night of the shooting into the jail there was an escape plan that was supposed to be carried out. Word of this got to me and I agreed to go along with it, but I did not think we would make it. I wrote a piece in my notebook (published in *Raise Race Rage Raze*) which was meant to be a parting statement. It is full of Islamic and other metaphysical symbolism. It also speaks of my “wife,” Sylvia, who was not then my wife, and what she had taught me, even by then, of my own elitism and selfishness. It is a demand that black people evolve to a higher stage of life, an evolution that can be brought about only by *fire!*

When I was released on \$25,000 bail, which was got by putting up some of my mother’s friends’ houses for collateral, I discovered that the case was a cause célèbre. First of all, \$25,000 bail in those days was higher than most bails—it was blatant ransom. The racist Judge Del Mauro, who was later removed from office for improprieties, gloated like a hate junkie full of his favorite drug when he called out the bail. As the Black Liberation movement went on, the bails got higher and higher, but the \$25,000 was a landmark for that time, 1967.

² This passage is transcribed exactly as written.