Home Rules: An Interview with Amiri Baraka

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The following is taken from a series of interviews conducted with Amiri Baraka at his house in Newark between January and April 2002. Throughout the conversation, when asked to talk about the transnational or the global, Baraka returned to the specificity of his place and time in the United States, as a young black man growing up in mid-century, a friend of Langston Hughes, and the inheritor of a tradition stretching back to Frederick Douglass. His politics, as well, now seem embedded in a reading of the specificity of the United States, and even a desire that the country finally recognize itself and throw off the shackles of Europe.

Van Gosse: What kind of political work have you been involved in, in the past couple of years?

Amiri Baraka: We've been publishing books, we've been publishing *Unity in Struggle*. We have a monthly program called *Kamako's Blues*, we have a theater downstairs. And now I’m working on my son’s campaign. [Ras Baraka ran for Newark’s City Council in the open May 2002 primary but did not win.]

*Is he running as a Democrat or as an independent?*

It’s nonpartisan in Newark in the local election.
What’s his relationship to . . .
To the Democratic Party?

I mean, you know these people from way back, obviously.

We were talking about this yesterday. I sat on a stage with these people for five hours at this Martin Luther King Day program, with all these politicians and whatnot, with the governor, so I could get my son’s picture taken with the governor, and talked to those politicians about just that: what is the relationship? What are we going to do? . . . They want to help him, but their help for him is less direct, and that’s what I have to do these days, call up and make appointments, go to see them, raise money—because local politics at this point to me is much more important, in the sense that it determines what you can put your hands on.

I have the impression that you never stopped being active in Newark politics. You’re still talking to people, campaigning and supporting candidates, after Gibson finally left, right?

Sharpe James. I put James in there to defeat Gibson, because Gibson began to do nothing. You know, he had betrayed us from the beginning, and then he began to be even worse, so we got rid of him and put James in there in 1986.

How do you evaluate James as a mayor?

The thing about Sharpe is—that’s home rule. So, in the end, when it comes to a struggle between home rule and what we call foreign domination, we’ve got to stick with Sharpe. It’s like Chiang Kai-shek versus the Japanese, you know? Chiang Kai-shek, I got problems with him. But Sharpe James is no fool, see, and even though he’s always an inch or two from being identified with moi—at the same time, my son upstairs, Amiri Jr., was his chief aide, and his name is Amiri Baraka too. [Later in the interview, he adds, “Sharpe basically is a good guy; he’s just a politician. He doesn’t care what you say; he’ll lie to you and trick you, he’ll pay other people to undermine you. He’ll do anything, and shake your hand and grin in your face. That’s the kind of guy he is. He’s the John Kennedy of black Newark.”]

This contradicts that public image grafted onto you as the firebrand, the gadfly, the lone man.

But see, it’s not abstract. To me, power is very practical, very concrete, and there’s a way to ensnare it, bit by bit, inch by inch. The question of revolution is the question of the seizure of power.
Even incrementally?

Absolutely.

[Showing him letters he wrote to mayor Ken Gibson in 1970, 1971, and 1972] What I see in these is your increasing frustration over the lack of patronage, which you had every right to expect. You’re saying, “Why is this person still working here?” When I read that, I thought, this isn’t about whether Gibson is a pan-Africanist or not. This is about whether he’s accountable.

When we came, we had a black and Puerto Rican convention, which mobilized the majority of the community. That’s how we swept those people out of here. They were completely tricked because we had used the weapon of culture. You know, we brought everybody in from James Brown to Isaac Hayes to the Supremes, you know, we had Stevie Wonder riding through the neighborhood on the back of a truck, singing all day.

I understand you got Andrew Young up here?

Sure, Andy Young, Leontyne Price, Adam Clayton Powell, you know, Julian Bond. It was clear that it was black versus white, then, but we had the weapons. We had Bill Cosby put up billboards with his picture on them, pointing at our candidate. Belafonte came in. So we just inundated them with the whole cultural weapon. But then that changes, and you begin to get more and more the question of class struggle. You understand? You’ve sort of won against foreign domination. You’ve kicked out . . .

You’ve kicked out the Japanese?

Exactly, you’ve kicked them out. So now, everybody in here is black. Now you’ve got to deal with the question of ideas, the ideological determination. . . . And we started fighting immediately. Because the things that I wanted to do, which he had sworn to do pre-election, now they’re vague. [After a discussion of the Gibson regime’s refusal to support a range of community-controlled cultural institutions, he adds] Once those people get in power again, they’re afraid of us. They can use that to get in power, but once they get in power that’s very frightening to them, the idea of the roaming theater, out in the streets, because that’s a formidable weapon, if used correctly. Now I’m talking about the cultural revolution: to bring the arts out of the movie theater, off the VCR, out of the television set, onto the street, where it’s open and closed, where it’s realized.
I wanted to ask you about 9/11. There are assertions that these events have brought about a unity we have not had since World War II, with claims that black people are rallying around the flag in a way that they did not before, and even supporting ethnic profiling of Muslims.

To the extent that you could say there’s some ignorant people in the world, obviously that’s the case. But I don’t think that’s the main thing. In the main, black folks know that in the end, they’re the Muslims, they’re the Arabs. They’re the brunt of any closure of democracy. . . . That’s why now they’re pulling all these Negroes out of the woodwork. They’ve got a little phalanx of them, and they can do that to create this silliness that there is a unity.

What is the effect of seeing over and over the pictures of Cheney, Rumsfeld, Bush, and Powell, and Rice, at the center of power . . .

Hey, that’s the point.

No one can pretend that to be secretary of state is a token, right?

See, now you have to deal with the question of these Americans who happen to be black. If you can’t deal with that, then you don’t understand what’s going on. Con-
doleeza Rice is an American. She came out of the Hoover Institute. She's as crazy as they are. She's not a Negro pretending to be so she can get over. She's as crazy as Bush.

*He really meant it when he wanted her as his advisor. It wasn't a face thing; it was because she's a woman he trusted.*

That’s right. That’s the same ideological development. They are Americans. And I think if we don’t understand that, that *we* might happen to be Americans of a different ideological tenor, and *those* are Americans of a different ideological tenor. . . . Because I knew that about Powell years ago, when he was with Reagan. My wife and I were laying up in bed one night, and he had just gone to the Soviet Union and said, “I came here with the commander in chief.” I looked around at the television set. This guy’s speaking about the commander in chief, and I looked around, and I said to my wife, very clearly, “My God, that’s an American.” I mean, that’s not no Afro-American, that’s not no black—that’s a straight-up American. And I heard that, not just the *accent*, but the emphasis on certain things, you know: the “commander in chief.” I’d never heard a black person talk about the commander in chief. I’d hear them talking about the president, because that’s a civil term, you know what I mean?

*Perhaps there had never been a black person to talk that way because . . . ?*

There had never been one in that position. That’s what I’m saying. But I recognized it right away. I heard that, Bing!—Oh, no, that’s not your boy there, that’s an American. He’s coming straight out of the thing.

*What do you think it does?*

What does it do for black people? It tricks them into thinking that they’re all part of it.

*They’re all Americans.*

We all are Americans. But the thing is, to the extent that national oppression has been lifted on all of us—that’s not true. Now if they can raise up people, just like they could raise up Chiang Kai-shek or somebody, who’s a straight-out comprador, no connection to you at all—they can come out of the ghetto, they can come out of the suburbs, but they have no connection to the people whom they feign to represent. We’ve always had those folks. But now it’s bulking up into a class. You can actually see that we have a comprador class, a comprador bourgeoisie, a comprador petty bourgeoisie—people who represent imperialism. They might look like us, they might look like whatever they want to look like. They can be anything.
I want to ask about pan-Africanism across the past fifty-some years, and what it’s meant to you, and your experience with it. When did you first become aware of it, of colonial liberation, or pan-Africanism? At Howard, in the early fifties? Before? Later?

The liberation of Africa began to be clearer to me with the whole struggle around the time of Kenya and the Mau Mau. I was still downtown, because I remember there was an Army-Navy store on Broadway and Tenth Street or Ninth Street, where they had pictures of atrocities that the Mau Mau had inflicted. At that point, the Americans . . . were bringing it up because actually they were trying to get their feelies in there, making British colonialism seem of course horrendous, ugly. . . .

The CIA is working with Tom Mboya the same way it worked with the FLN in Algeria versus the French.

Because they had another plan to get in there. So I think that my consciousness begins to rise when the CIA start rising it.

But not so much Nkrumah?

Nkrumah becomes more important to me as I get more conscious. But I certainly was not as conscious as those people like Maya Angelou and Tom Fields who actually went over there. I’d have to be the first one to say that. They were miles ahead of me in terms of Africa. Because, remember, I was coming around the Horn, because I was married to a white woman, I was hooked up with the Beats . . .

Charles Olson, Creeley, that whole world.

So I was over there, into that. Not so much in a sense of dismissing Africa, but of being not really aware of it. I could have met Du Bois. I never did. You know what I mean? Langston Hughes pulled my coat first, because the first poem that I published as a resident of New York, in a tiny little magazine called the Naked Ear, published from Taos, New Mexico, you know, Langston used to publish in that magazine, too. The first poem I ever had in that magazine, which was “Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note,” Langston sent me a postcard, in green ink, that said, “Hail, LeRoi from Harlem. I understand you’re colored.” [Laughing.]

That must have been a wonderful thing.

That was earth-shaking, yeah. At first, I didn’t believe it. I said, somebody’s trying to pull my chain here, you know? Then I said, “No. Maybe.” And true enough, it was
Langston. And Langston became a great friend of mine, because, you know, he was the great poet who suddenly shows up and says, “Hey, hey, you’re all right. You might write a few things. But I just wanted to give you my hand and tell you, come on.” I mean, as egotistical as young people are, still, at a certain point, an older person like that putting out their hand is a great comfort.

*Obviously, then, there’s the death of Lumumba, and the riot at the Security Council in 1961. But in between is Cuba.*

Well, the Cuba thing was the trigger for all of that. The Africa thing had been developed previous to that, but the Cuba thing popped the whole thing open, because once I went there and then got the whole feeling of the whole international correspondence, of motives and actions and ideologies, I was changed, you know? In a deep way. Because I had been inherently trying to get political, but that was the stroke, because it showed me that there was a whole world that was in motion. That opened that up, and then that magazine, the *African Revolution,* comes out about that time. . . . Martin Luther King, Malcolm X’s appearance, Fidel Castro, you know, the Lumumba thing, all that. . . . [Taps on table quickly.] And then the Kennedy thing, and a minute later, Malcolm—I mean, that’s a hell of a period. I mean, that’s like a series of explosions.

*Do you remember when you first read Fanon? Because there’s a lack of clarity about when he reached the U.S. The Grove Press edition of *Wretched of the Earth* came out in ’65, but, after all, in France it came out in ’61.*

First of all, there were excerpts of Fanon in *African Revolution,* and somewhere else—maybe even in *Evergreen Review.* I didn’t actually read Fanon—I mean, get the book and read it until much later. I’d read articles and stuff of his before, and citations of his, quotes of his from people.

*Does pan-Africanism still exist, on either a political level or an intellectual level?*

I think the question of pan-Africanism is alive, but it’s alive, it’s most relevant within the context of an international united front against imperialism. Now, the question of particular sections, like you’re talking about the black liberation movement, at the same time, you’ve got to be in a united front against imperialism, for people’s democracy in the United States. But the question of self-determination means that the people, whether they’re African peoples or pan-African peoples or pan-African peoples, they have the right to organize such as they see fit, but at the same time that cannot negate the idea of larger, more mass organization. And our position now is revolutionaries unite with the workers of all nationalities, across nationalities.
All the democratic middle forces, farmers, oppressed nationalities, in an anti-imperialist united front. That’s basically it. . . . To me, the question today, the principal contradiction, is the people versus imperialism. If you don’t see that the principal struggle is the struggle for democracy worldwide, the struggle against fascism and war here, and the continued aspect of racism and the national question, then you’re missing the boat, because even the labor struggle has to come in the context of the struggle for democracy. They won’t even let them organize! You know, you go to South Carolina today, what is it? Four percent of the people are unionized in South Carolina?

Now I’m really struck by the metaphor of home rule that you’ve used about black, sort of territorial, politics— that it’s more nuanced. It’s not all petty bourgeois sell-out, nor is it all national liberation.

It’s a question of being able to function with some degree of self-determination.

Right. Now, would you extend that to black studies?

First of all, I say that black studies to the extent that it is not self-determining becomes then just a button that the bourgeoisie pushes to push people into getting bourgeois education. Because the purest line of history in black studies is something completely antithetical to what the bourgeoisie in America is.

Some people would say it’s evolved to a position of greater intellectual power and prestige than ever before.

But see, the dichotomy in that, the contradiction in that, is that it was more powerful when it was viewed as a revolutionary doctrine that was then pushed by revolutionaries. Now to the extent that it becomes neatly and calmly encircled by bourgeois thought, it might become more respectable, in quotes, but then less effective as a revolutionary cultural tool. Because, to me, black studies serves its best function when it serves as an aspect of cultural revolution, when it actually serves to make the people in quotes, the students, not only aware of history, but the continuum of revolutionary presence, and what the focus and goals of that are. The question is, where are we? We’re talking about self-determination and democracy. Where are we on that? Where are we? What are the errors? Who are our friends? Who are our enemies? Black studies is supposed to be able to do that, you see. And ultimately, you need a School of Black Studies. In Harvard, they have a department. No, you need a school. You know, like you have a school of social work, medical school. You need a school of pan-African studies.
You mean a school that has many departments within it?

Many departments. And the power to generate programs, publications, academic and other alliances with other institutions, grant Ph.D.s and so forth and so on.

One could argue that Harvard—let’s use it as an example—that they have some power. They certainly have prestige.

Yeah, but then they’re getting chastised about whether they should do a rap record or not. There’s no real autonomy in there. There’s no autonomy in a law school or a medical school. It’s still under the aegis of, but certainly nobody’s running over there telling them how to teach law. I mean, they’re lawyers. I don’t think the president’s going to go over there and micromanage the teaching of surgery.

Strictly in political terms, the degree to which Summers has to back down or the degree to which they bid the market up, could be seen, strictly in pragmatic terms, as evidence of some kind of clout.

That’s true. Because are you going to tell me that if Dylan Thomas was a professor, that you wouldn’t allow him to make records reading his poetry? Or that Larry Rivers pretending he’s Charlie Parker every Monday [laughing] doesn’t in fact help the Museum of Modern Art? It’s that kind of one-sided dimensioning of Afro-American culture as inferior. It’s just stupid. . . . This is the key. The same way that black Americans got a double consciousness whether they are Americans or black or both, white people have a double consciousness; they still think they’re Europeans. They have not actually come to grips with the fact of being Americans. So then we have twenty-seven orchestras in twenty-seven cities that all play European music. And I’m not even talking about jazz. What about Charles Ives and Copland? I mean, what about the shit that you do?

Well, it’s the problem of settler colonialism. The Irish Protestants are more English than the English.

Because in the end, you see, they have still not cut the tie. And all the people that I came up with—whether it was William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson—that’s one thing that they knew. Ginsberg, you see. To the extent that I was influenced by them, that was it. They were saying, “We ain’t English.” You know, George Washington kicked their ass in the eighteenth century.

In the American grain, they really were it. Which is an interesting thing for you to mention.
That was a connection for me. I was “deeply integrated in it,” quote. You know, the Greenwich Village, white American, white European, blah blah blah blah blah . . . bourgeois intellectual. That I know.

That in some way helped you or pointed you in a direction?

Yeah, because at this very moment, actually, the American academy is, as someone said, the last bastion of colonialism in the United States. And American universities still are in the fact that they do not focus on the Western world. Their emphasis on the West is minute compared to their emphasis on Europe, so that the whole field, for instance, of Western Hemisphere literature is barely touched. I don’t even think they have much coverage on American literature, certainly not on Afro-American literature. And if you ask them to focus on Jewish American literature, Italian American literature, Latino American literature, or Canadian literature, or Mexican or Puerto Rican or Cuban or Haitian . . .

Or it’s this little side or balkanized thing.

To me it is one dynamism of the whole stance that the United States takes before the world, and kind of continuing evidence of white supremacy as the ideological shaper of their whole politics.

[Our conversation turned again to Langston Hughes.] He was a writer that I grew up with, in terms of black newspapers, and Langston was a possession of my own sensibility from the very beginning. I never had to look for Langston Hughes. He was very present even in a little town like Newark, which is hardly a literary town, but still I had continuous evidence that there was a colored poet in Langston Hughes . . .

In public school?

In the newspapers. Sometimes in public school, but mostly in the newspapers. Langston published in the Herald News, the Afro-American, the Chicago Defender, the Pittsburgh Courier . . .

How known was it that Hughes had this relationship with Nicolás Guillén, that this was one of the major influences on him?

I knew it much later, but one interesting thing is that the works of writers from Latin America and even Spain that I first encountered were all translated by him. The first Lorca I read was translated by Langston Hughes. The first Guillén, the first Jacques Roumain—Masters of the Dew [in 1947]. It was Langston who provided, interest-
ingly enough, a whole way into that world. Lorca became one of my favorite poets when I was in college, and that was Langston’s translation—the *Romancero gitano*, the gypsy ballads.

*He’s pointing you in a direction?*

Because I knew his name, you understand? So anything that had him on it, even as a young boy, I would be drawn to look at that person. That signified that it had something to do with me.

*Now you are in that role. There are plenty of younger would-be poets, writers, and not only African Americans, who would ask you, “Who should I read?”* They do it all the time.

*I’ve seen that interview that Kalamu ya Salaam did, and you’re talking about Douglass in particular. If a young poet came to you and said, “Well, where’s an American voice?” who would you recommend?* [The interview is available at www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/baraka/salaam.htm.]

Well, I would recommend all those people I came up on. Because I was reading, say, Richard Wright and Frank Yerby when I was twelve years old. But I also had read the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam, and Dickens, and Kipling, and H. Rider Haggard—I still have my original H. Rider Haggard volumes. My grandmother brought those back. She used to work for this wealthy white woman in the suburbs. She used to do her hair. She would bring back these sets. I had a whole set of Kipling, which I discarded later when I found how Kipling was. Still, if you look at Kipling, Kipling was not just an abusive colonial mentality. It was an effusive colonial mentality. He was not trying to be unfair. That was the way he perceived the world. He was not an aggressive—although you could say in some of those tales, “Wee Willie Winkie” and those tales, he was a colonial mind. Well, so was H. Rider Haggard, a colonial mind. But they were interesting writers to me as a boy, that exotic world that they put together. By the time I got into college, Rutgers down the street there, and I started reading people like Pound and Eliot, I had already assimilated a high-level kind of writing that I had been reading all my life. Because I could always read well. That was one of the distinguishing points in the reports from the schools and so forth, from those early days, that I was always reading something.

*You just mentioned Haggard, and for an American boy, in any sense in the fifties and sixties, that was one of the few ways to read about Africa, with this exploration of the sort of nobility . . .*
Yeah, these mysterious dark people with mysterious information. I have the original volumes right there. Those are first editions [pointing].

*So, a teenager, who’s fifteen years old and wants to write, would you encourage them to read—obviously Hughes and Guillén, but also Haggard and Kipling?*

Absolutely. Because I came to wherever I came to not by excluding but by including anything I could find. I had to read my way through to where I wanted to get. It wasn’t by excluding things, it was by winnowing them out as I came. . . . It would be a chronological pantheon I gave people. I could say that the greatest writers in the world were Du Bois and Douglass, and Herman Melville, I could say that. But, you know, people like Langston who were just what-would-you-call-it, interior—I just feel that without saying it. Because I read Langston all the time. Now I have his collected works. It’s like going back to Du Bois, and Marx, and Lenin, and Mao. There’s Langston, there’s Sterling, there’s Margaret Walker. Sterling Brown was my English teacher, at Howard. And I didn’t know it, but I was in his class, and he used to tell people, “Well, Baraka never paid attention to me—he was always looking at the window.” But that’s not true. I used to pay close attention to him. I was looking out the window because my roommates were getting ready to steal all the food, and I was trying to see, were they going to get past that window before the class? No, I heard him. And he was a very profound teacher. And it wasn’t just, say, his celebrity, because I didn’t notice his celebrity. I didn’t know who Sterling Brown was. So what he said came to me with a freshness that had nothing to do with reference. I wasn’t saying, “That’s Sterling Brown.” It was, “That’s my English teacher.” I still call him that: my English teacher. Then, later on, I said, “My God.” I mean, I learned about Shakespeare from Sterling Brown, about the blues under Sterling Brown. He taught us about music. He took us home, me and A. B. Spellman, and sat us down in front of his gigantic library of records, labeled, pigeonholed, referenced, by genre, period. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Fletcher Henderson. That kind of specific, historiographic—I’d never had that kind of understanding.

*You were very advantageously positioned, chronologically, because you were young enough to be a very young man in the sixties and yet just old enough to have that generation at Howard, whereas all those people who went to college from the War on Poverty on, when the white colleges opened up and started admitting more than one black kid, it’s gone—all of those scholars are gone.*

Because then all of those teachers could go anywhere. When I was there, Owen Dodson was head of the drama department. Margaret Just Butcher was another one of my humanities professors. You know, to show you the kind of thickness of that,
Toni Morrison and I were in college at the same time at Howard. I thought she was one of the most beautiful women of all time. Her name was Chloe Wofford. But you know, that’s because it was a national—in the sense of Afro-American—national university, so there was everybody there.

You used this term home rule. And people make assumptions that Baraka’s been a very committed Marxist-Leninist for twenty-five years—so what would he care about regular Democratic Party politics?

That’s because they don’t know anything about Marxism. There is no road to socialism without going through democracy. What you have to do is raise the level of peoples’ intentions in the democratic struggle. We haven’t had a complete democratic revolution in the United States. That’s why you have racism and national oppression, because the democratic revolution, which was supposed to be the Civil War, was aborted by force and violence. If there was a democratic revolution in the United States, the whole of the South would be largely controlled by the Afro-American people. And it would have been controlled throughout the whole twentieth century.

Right. And a fraction of white allies. That’s why it was aborted.

Absolutely. And that is the great untold story. That the poorest white people in the world live in the South with the other poorest Americans in the world. Why do you think he would let the Confederate flag fly in Mississippi? That’s a divisive force in this nation. That’s like if you were in democratic Russia—I’m not talking about socialist Russia—but in democratic Russia you were to let the czar’s flags fly. Or if you were going to let the Nazi flag—let them fly the Nazi flag over some public institution in America, see what the Jews do. That’s not going to happen. That’s never going to happen. But for us, hey, they say, “You ain’t nobody.” You can do it. I’ve been urging people to tear flags down, take them down. When I was in Florida, I was downtown—where they have a big black college student convocation at Bethune-Cookman. They had in the window of this store a Confederate flag shaped like a bikini bathing suit on this white model. So I went in and asked her, “You know, that’s offensive. Will you take that down?” [In a higher voice:] “I can’t take it down.” I said, “Well, look. There’s going to be fifteen thousand black college students here in a few hours. I’m going to bring them right down here and have them request it.” [In higher voice:] She says, “Okay, we’ll take it down, we’ll take it down.” That’s very consciously meant as a point of division in this country. Because until you pull this nation together under democracy, then you can’t go no further. I mean, the Confederacy is in power now.
So your relationship with Mayor James is essentially a popular front politics?

Yeah. Because I’ve been very critical of the mayor for all these years. I’ve been critical because that’s been my role, since we were not wise enough to actually take power. Because we were nationalists, we figured that if they were black, they would do something for the people. Which is a gross kind of idealism. But then when it comes to a challenge from outside . . . [discussing Cory Booker’s well-funded attempt to overturn James in the Democratic primary in May 2002, which failed despite support from many prominent Republicans] When I say foreign domination versus home rule, I’m saying that this is our own little national bourgeoisie, our own petty bourgeoisie, homegrown, flawed for sure, often guided and directed by the interests of others, greedy to a certain extent, but still there is more. . . . And what these people don’t understand is that if Booker is elected, that whole infrastructure down there at city hall, which is all black and Puerto Rican and a few whites, that changes automatically. They’re gone. That’s 16,000 jobs, right there.

That’s a lot.

They criticize Sharpe, and there’s a lot of room to criticize. But at the same time, see these little scatter-site houses over here? Now maybe people on Wall Street or in the suburbs wouldn’t like them, but for people who don’t have nothing, hey, that’s about as close to paradise as they’re going to get. What these people who come in to joust with Sharpe James might not understand is that Sharpe is a very shrewd politician. He’ll hit you in your groin just as quickly as he’ll hit you in your chin, and then claim that you failed him. That’s the way he knows how to fight. What these people hope to do with the gloss of youth and the kind of normal dissatisfaction that one is going to have even with its own homegrown bourgeoisie—these people don’t realize that what this man, Booker, would do if he got in would be to privatize the entire structure, including public education—that reminds me, I’m going to send him another fax. Because I talk to the mayor all the time. Like he started talking about Booker wasn’t black enough. I said, that’s the dumbest you could say. The Star-Ledger, which was Booker’s chief supporter, they get all of these petty bourgeois Negroes in all these academies like Poussaint at Harvard to say, “What do you mean, he ain’t black enough?” Because they sympathize with that because that’s who they are. They’re part of that little three-tenths of, two-tenths of the population. . . .

From the outside, the bottom line on home rule is the cops. In Detroit, Coleman Young stopped STRESS, and all you have to do is drive around Detroit, and you see black cops everywhere. Has Sharpe James, or Gibson before him, made a difference there?
The thing Sharpe has done, although we have not always cheered him on, is that he’s put a kind of mute on the whole police process. So that not only do they know that they will get some sharp scrutiny, because Sharpe knows—and this is the thing about home rule—there are enough people here that know him, that put him in there, who can jump up and down and scream and holler.

_Is Mayor James backing your son?_

He backed him. We had Danny Glover here on Sunday. And the mayor came up and supported him, saying he was going to give him money. The congressman too, Donald Payne.

_I’m wondering what kind of goals you have at this point. You have plenty of things you can look forward to, either in literary terms, aesthetically, or politically._

First I’d say my goals are for my son to win this campaign and to establish some kind of stable outpost of progressive politics in this town, because this country is going to the right, and part of that right-goingness would be to suck all of the resources out of cities. We have to have some stable political defense against that. We have to have some stable political offense for transforming the historic and aesthetic and historical-cultural. We have to have influence on the schools; we cannot continue to let our children grow up with no knowledge of their history or of America’s history. You know, the American high school students in Texas—they asked them where Mexico was, they didn’t know. Seventy-five percent of them didn’t know where Mexico was. And they are in it, actually. And then the whole question of the economy. The only way you can repair the economy is to have cooperation between the people, city government, big and small business, and federal government. You must have cooperation, in everything that you do. So that privatization has to be put at the last rung of that ladder. What we ultimately have to be free to do is build cooperatives that will not exclude big business—we wish we could, I make no bones about that—but cooperatives which would allow us to raise the level of productive forces in the city. We have to be building some transitional pathways to a higher level of economic development, and the only direct understanding of that I have is to begin to build these cooperatives which can still deal with big business and small business but can then collectivize the economy on the lowest level, and by so doing can raise it without cutting off the lives of these big corporations. And why do I say that? Because no matter what you might think in your romantic idealistic way, unless you can run down there and destroy capitalism with a stroke, the only way you can work this is to use the legitimate power that you have, the legitimate stable power, build stable political organizations, finally build a national people’s democratic assembly that’s an alternative to the Congress of the United States.
A national people’s democratic assembly suggests a form of dual power, but in a very nonconfrontational mode.

Well, the confrontation is to create an alternative superstructure, and a stable continuous method of doing battle with it. We have to create some kind of scaffolding, some kind of rope ladder to try to complete this democratic revolution. At the same time, these people are plummeting towards fascism.

Two weeks ago, I heard Henry Louis Gates Jr. give the Jefferson Lecture in Washington. One of the things I was struck by is that at the very beginning of his career, when he was unknown, you helped him a lot. You played a big role in guiding him, and he was very grateful. Do you remain friends?

Well, we remain—what would you call it? Friends of person, but not ideologically. Skip, to me, represents one leading force in the whole thing. That’s because he still privileges his education as an extraordinary thing rather than what it actually is. His book—Black on Black or whatever it is about his being the first black Ph.D. from Cambridge University. He dumps on me and says, “I liked him when he wrote like Yeats and T. S. Eliot.” Those things have privileged a kind of reaction that was what we were striving to overcome. That’s the very opposite of the Black Arts Movement. If I did write like Yeats and Eliot, although I’d admitted liking them, but if I did write like them, certainly that wasn’t my intention. I mean, at a certain point the point was to get away from that. And to not understand that, and then to use those as the paradigm for excellence—there’s no Hughes to mention? No Margaret Walker, you know? No Sterling Brown mentioned. So—no black writers mentioned, so what are we to do about that? To be sorry that we don’t write like T. S. Eliot and Yeats? Yeats who was a nationalist, but a cultural nationalist, and right-wing? Eliot who was an Anglo-Catholic rightist? So what am I supposed to do? Except to see that those are confirmations of the backwardness. And their desire to be notable in the phenomenon of Anglo-European, Anglo-American hegemony. You know, in the recent pantheon of Britannica, the one hundred authors, there’s only one woman in it, there’s no blacks. Willa Cather’s the only woman. There’s no blacks. They mention Du Bois, but of course they said they had to exclude him because he kept fucking around with reality. I mean, that’s an extraordinary statement. That’s what we’re fighting—to accept that as some kind of objective evaluation of the world or the world literature?

Is this [Gates et al.] in some form, not the intended form, but a consequence of the Black Arts Movement?

Well, they are sort of, like Du Bois said, the Sisyphus syndrome. You drive it up that mountain, and they’re part of the force you use to drive it back down. What would you call it? The—what would you call it, after the French Revolution?
Thermidorian.

Yeah, that’s what it is. Thermidor, comprador. Comprador, Thermidor. I mean, they are used to drive the ball back down the side of the mountain. At first, against the left, they use nationalists. You know, black nationalists, cultural nationalists, used against the insurgent forces of the left who are trying to influence the universities. Then they swept them out of there, and they put in these notable, in a sense, compradors. Now, in Philly, you’ve got a cultural nationalist comprador—what’s his name, Molefi Asante, who wants to privilege Africa. He’s got a book out that has pictures of Colin Powell and Booker T. Washington and Karenga, but no pictures of Malcolm X.

So Asante is linking Karenga to Booker T. Washington and Powell? Well, it makes perfect sense in one perspective.

And Garvey. And Garvey came here looking for Booker T. Washington. He disapproved of Du Bois, who he met in Jamaica. He disapproved of him because he disapproved of the NAACP. There were too many white people. White people helped found the NAACP. Socialists, you know . . .

William English Walling, people like that.

Yeah, and then to end up meeting with the Ku Klux Klan, getting compromised by Hoover. Then coming back here and talking about black purity and all of that stuff. But that’s where it’s at. And for Molefi to keep talking about he’s the creator of Afrocentrism, I mean that’s like a mouse pretending to be John Brown, or James Brown.

So, it seems as if at the end that you’ve returned to the position of Du Bois.

Sure. I would be closer to what you would call a Du Boisian now than anybody else. And all those great black writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, the whole Harlem Renaissance group, with their checks and balances, their ups and downs. It’s people like Langston and Sterling and Margaret Walker, Lorraine Hansberry, Jimmy Baldwin. Those, to me, are the greats. And on another level, people like Henry Dumas, Toni Morrison—those are the great writers. Maya, who brings a whole experience of activism that people don’t understand.

Her time in Africa.

Yeah, and then there’s a lot of great young writers. Like my son, Baz. Like Sekou Sundiata, Pedro Pietri, Gaylan Caine, Felipe Luciano, David Nelson—they’re not going to get no play, because this is a period of extreme backwardness. And most of the writers, the Negroes that they pump up now, are usually complaining about hav-
ing to be with black people. And their main thrust, like Crouch, and this guy who just wrote this book on me . . .

Jerry Watts.
They had this forum at Amherst. They had Watts and Crouch. They were talking about my work, and life, to push his book. And they had this one white man there, you know, the German.

Oh, Werner Sollors.
Yeah, Sollors up there. And I get a report from someone who says, “Well, look. The two Negroes were fools. Sollors was the only one who had any kind of analytical . . .” So it really plays into white supremacy, even by the backdoor, that this guy comes in with the only kind of objective analysis. The rest of those guys are screaming and hollering because, (a) they don’t know what the work is about, and (b) they want to sell some kind of solidarity with a vanished kind of white supremacy. They want to say [different voice:] “No, he wrote better when he wrote like Yeats.” And also because that’s the way they earn their living, by putting down black people. Well, that’s impotent at this point. No matter that you’re trying to roll the rock down the hill, all traces of it being up the hill are not vanished, you know? But it’s good that they want to do that. Like Mao says, it’s a good thing to be attacked by your enemies. It means you’ve still got some power and force left.