

## Kimberly W. Benston: Interview with Amiri Baraka

**Benston:** How would you do a self-criticism, for example, of *The System of Dante's Hell*?

**Baraka:** Well, first of all, in terms of form, it tended at times to be obscure. The reason for that is that is that I was really writing defensively. I was trying to get away from the influence of people like Creeley and Olson. I was living in New York then and the whole Creeley-Olson influence was beginning to beat me up. I was in a very closed, little circle?that was about the time I went to Cuba?and I felt the need to break out of the type of form that I was using then. I guess this was not only because of the form itself but because of the content which that form enclosed, which was not my politics. The two little warring schools that were going on then were what I call the Jewish-Ethnic-Bohemian School (Allen Ginsberg and his group) and the Anglo-German Black Mountain School. I was caught between the two of them because they were all literary buddies and so forth. So I wrote the novel defensively and offensively at the same time because I was trying to get away. I literally decided to write just instinctively, without any kind of preunderstanding of what I was shaping-?just write it down.

[. . .]

**Benston:** In the early poetry, is there at any point an attempt to create the same kind of clarity you achieved in *System*, to attain a similar freedom from what you're calling the Creeley-Olson influence?

**Baraka:** The poetry of that period was still definitely relying heavily on the Creeley-Olson thing. But, while the Creeley-Olson thing is still here in the poetry's form, the content was trying to aggressively address the folks around me, the people that I worked with all the time, who were all Creeley-Olson types, people who took an antipolitical line (the Creeley types more so than Olson's followers?Olson's thing was always more political). I was coming out saying that I thought that their political line was wrong. A lot of the poetry in *The Dead Lecturer* is speaking out against the political line of the whole Black Mountain group, to which I was very close.

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