

For Amiri

Ammiel Alcalay

More than ever before we are in need of words that shock, startle, cause to question unquestioned assumptions, cause pain, vigilance, ambivalence, and bewilderment. The powers that be would have us think that the shock and the pain is in the words and not in the deeds — in a city and a country where 5 kids were pronounced guilty in a public show trial by racist media and corrupt, unmonitored police behavior, where some of those innocent kids served up to 13 years in prison **for nothing but the public's** complacency and willingness to believe in the face of unbridled terror, I must applaud the audacity of Amiri Baraka to speak whatever may be on his mind. In a city and country whose newspaper of record tells me very day that Israeli Jewish life is worth much more than Palestinian life, an act of public manipulation that enables violence and allows the actual killing of civilians to take place, killing that is paid for by our tax dollars, I must support a poet willing to wound in word but not in deed.

In 1957, Henri Alleg, a European Jew who edited an Algerian daily, was captured by French paratroopers and tortured in the infamous cells of El-Biar, in the suburbs of Algiers. The testimony he was able to smuggle out was published as *The Question*, the first book banned in France since the 18th c. **The book ends with a plea to the French people to know “what is done IN THEIR NAME.”**

Israel has become our Algeria, and what we condone there, even more than what we have condoned in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and other parts of the Middle East, will come back to haunt us as lawyers like Allan Dershowitz work on the idea of legalized torture, as politicians like Netanyahu invade our public spaces and tell us what will be in store **for us if we don't play the game their way. But I say:**

put it in reverse

rewind the tape

take me back

to Babylon:

each olive tree ripped out
incinerates another page

of my history

so I say

back out

rewind the tape

back me right out

of the book: take me to Babylon