

*A mixture of Prince and Huey Newton, with the swagger and soul of Archie Shepp*



**Amiri Baraka** (born Everett LeRoi Jones; October 7, 1934 – January 9, 2014), formerly known as LeRoi Jones and Imamu Amear Baraka, was an American writer of poetry, drama, fiction, essays and music criticism. He was the author of numerous books of poetry and taught at a number of universities, including the State University of New York at Buffalo and the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He received the PEN Open Book Award, formerly known as the Beyond Margins Award, in 2008 for *Tales of the Out and the Gone*.

Baraka's poetry and writing has attracted both extreme praise and condemnation. Within the African-American community, some compare him to James Baldwin and call Baraka one of the most respected and most widely published Black writers of his generation. Others have said his work is an expression of violence, misogyny, homophobia and racism. Baraka's brief tenure as Poet Laureate of New Jersey (2002–03), involved controversy over a public reading of his poem "Somebody Blew Up America?" and accusations of anti-semitism, and some negative attention from critics, and politicians.

### **Early life (1934–65)**

Baraka was born Everett LeRoi Jones in Newark, New Jersey, where he attended Barringer High School. His father, Coyt Leverette Jones, worked as a postal supervisor and lift operator. His mother, Anna Lois (née Russ), was a social worker.

He won a scholarship to Rutgers University in 1951, but a continuing sense of cultural dislocation prompted him to transfer in 1952 to Howard University, which he left without obtaining a degree. His

major fields of study were philosophy and religion. Baraka subsequently studied at Columbia University and the New School for Social Research without obtaining a degree.

In 1954, he joined the US Air Force as a gunner, reaching the rank of sergeant. However, his commanding officer received an anonymous letter accusing Baraka of being a communist, which led to the discovery of Soviet writings, his reassignment to gardening duty and subsequently a dishonorable discharge for violation of his oath of duty.

The same year, he moved to Greenwich Village working initially in a warehouse for music records. His interest in jazz began during this period. At the same time he came into contact with avant-garde Beat Generation, Black Mountain poets and New York School poets. In 1958 he married Hettie Cohen, with whom he had two daughters, Kellie Jones (b. 1959) and Lisa Jones (b.1961). He and Hettie founded Totem Press, which published such Beat icons as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. They also jointly founded a quarterly literary magazine Yugen, which ran for eight issues (1958–62). Baraka also worked as editor and critic for the literary and arts journal *Kulchur* (1960–65). With Diane di Prima he edited the first twenty-five issues (1961–63) of their little magazine *The Floating Bear*. In the autumn of 1961 he co-founded the New York Poets Theatre with di Prima, choreographers Fred Herko and James Waring, and actor Alan S. Marlowe. He had an extramarital affair with Diane di Prima for several years; their daughter, Dominique di Prima, was born in June 1962.

Baraka visited Cuba in July 1960 with a Fair Play for Cuba Committee delegation and reported his impressions in his essay "Cuba libre". In 1961 Baraka co-authored a Declaration of Conscience in support of Fidel Castro's regime. Baraka also was a member of the Umbra Poets Workshop of emerging Black Nationalist writers (Ishmael Reed, and Lorenzo Thomas among others) on the Lower East Side (1962–65). In 1961 a first book of poems, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*, was published. Baraka's article "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature'" (1962) stated that "a Negro literature, to be a legitimate product of the Negro experience in America, must get at that experience in exactly the terms America has proposed for it in its most ruthless identity." He also states in the same work that as an element of American culture, the Negro was entirely misunderstood by Americans. The reason for this misunderstanding and for the lack of black literature of merit was according to Jones:

" In most cases the Negroes who found themselves in a position to pursue some art, especially the art of literature, have been members of the Negro middle class, a group that has always gone out of its way to cultivate any mediocrity, as long as that mediocrity was guaranteed to prove to America, and recently to the world at large, that they were not really who they were, i.e., Negroes. "

As long as the black writer was obsessed with being an accepted, middle class, Baraka wrote, he would never be able to speak his mind, and that would always lead to failure. Baraka felt that America only made room for only white obfuscators, not black ones.

In 1963 Baraka (under the name Jones) published *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, his account of the significance of blues and jazz in African-American culture. When the work was re-issued in 1999, Baraka wrote in the Introduction that he wished to show: "The music was the score, the actually expressed creative orchestration, reflection of Afro-American life.... That the music was explaining the history as the history was explaining the music. And that both were expressions of and reflections of the people." Baraka argued that though the slaves had brought their musical traditions from Africa, the blues

were an expression of what black people became in America: "The way I have come to think about it, blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives."

Baraka (under the name Jones) authored an acclaimed, controversial play *Dutchman*, in which a white woman accosts a black man on the New York subway. The play premiered in 1964 and received the Obie Award for Best American Play in the same year. A film of the play, directed by Anthony Harvey, was released in 1967. The play has been revived several times, including a 2013 production staged in the Russian and Turkish Bathhouse in the East Village, Manhattan.

After the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, Baraka left his wife and their two children and moved to Harlem. Now a "black cultural nationalist," he broke away from the predominantly white Beats and became very critical of the pacifist and integrationist Civil Rights movement. His revolutionary poetry now became more controversial. A poem such as "Black Art" (1965), according to academic Werner Sollors from Harvard University, expressed his need to commit the violence required to "establish a Black World." "Black Art" quickly became the major poetic manifesto of the Black Arts Literary Movement and in it, Jones declaimed "we want poems that kill," which coincided with the rise of armed self-defense and slogans such as "Arm yourself or harm yourself" that promoted confrontation with the white power structure. Rather than use poetry as an escapist mechanism, Baraka saw poetry as a weapon of action. His poetry demanded violence against those he felt were responsible for an unjust society.

## 1966–80

In 1966, Baraka married his second wife, Sylvia Robinson, who later adopted the name Amina Baraka. In 1967, he lectured at San Francisco State University. The year after, he was arrested in Newark for having allegedly carried an illegal weapon and resisting arrest during the 1967 Newark riots, and was subsequently sentenced to three years in prison. Shortly afterward an appeals court reversed the sentence based on his defense by attorney, Raymond A. Brown. Not long after the 1967 riots, Baraka generated controversy when he went on the radio with a Newark police captain and Anthony Imperiale, a Politician and private business owner, and the three of them blamed the riots on "white-led, so-called radical groups" and "Communists and the Trotskyite persons." That same year his second book of jazz criticism, *Black Music*, came out, a collection of previously published music journalism, including the seminal *Apple Cores* columns from *Down Beat* magazine.

In 1967, Baraka (still Leroi Jones) visited Maulana Karenga in Los Angeles and became an advocate of his philosophy of *Kwaidia*, a multifaceted, categorized activist philosophy that produced the "Nguzo Saba," *Kwanzaa*, and an emphasis on African names. It was at this time that he adopted the name *Imamu Amear Baraka*. *Imamu* is a Swahili title for "spiritual leader", derived from the Arabic word *Imam* (إمام). According to Shaw, he dropped the honorific *Imamu* and eventually changed *Amea*r (which means "Prince") to *Amiri*. *Baraka* means "blessing, in the sense of divine favor." In 1970 he strongly supported Kenneth A. Gibson's candidacy for mayor of Newark; Gibson was elected the city's first Afro-American Mayor. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Baraka courted controversy by penning some strongly anti-Jewish poems and articles, similar to the stance at that time of the Nation of Islam.

Baraka's separation from the Black Arts Movement began because he saw certain black writers – capitulationists, as he called them – countering the Black Arts Movement that he created. He believed that the groundbreakers in the Black Arts Movement were doing something that was new, needed, useful, and black, and those who did not want to see a promotion of black expression were "appointed" to the

scene to damage the movement. Around 1974, Baraka distanced himself from Black nationalism and became a Marxist and a supporter of third-world liberation movements. In 1979 he became a lecturer in Stony Brook University's Africana Studies Department.[citation needed] The same year, after altercations with his wife, he was sentenced to a short period of compulsory community service. Around this time he began writing his autobiography. In 1980 he denounced his former anti-semitic utterances, declaring himself an anti-zionist.

## **1980–2014**

Baraka addressing the Malcolm X Festival from the Black Dot Stage in San Antonio Park, Oakland, California while performing with Marcel Diallo and his Electric Church Band

During the 1982–83 academic year, Baraka was a visiting professor at Columbia University, where he taught a course entitled "Black Women and Their Fictions." In 1984 he became a full professor at Rutgers University, but was subsequently denied tenure. In 1985, Baraka returned to Stony Brook, eventually becoming professor emeritus of African Studies. In 1987, together with Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, he was a speaker at the commemoration ceremony for James Baldwin. In 1989 Baraka won an American Book Award for his works as well as a Langston Hughes Award. In 1990 he co-authored the autobiography of Quincy Jones, and 1998 was a supporting actor in Warren Beatty's film *Bulworth*. In 1996, Baraka contributed to the AIDS benefit album *Offbeat: A Red Hot Soundtrip* produced by the Red Hot Organization.

In July 2002, Baraka was named Poet Laureate of New Jersey by Governor Jim McGreevey. Baraka held the post for a year mired in controversy and after substantial political pressure and public outrage demanding his resignation. During the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival in Stanhope, New Jersey, Baraka read his 2001 poem on the September 11th attacks "Somebody Blew Up America?", which was criticized for anti-Semitism and attacks on public figures. Because there was no mechanism in the law to remove Baraka from the post, the position of state poet laureate was officially abolished by the State Legislature and Governor McGreevey.

Baraka collaborated with hip-hop group The Roots on the song "Something in the Way of Things (In Town)" on their 2002 album *Phrenology*.

In 2002, scholar Molefi Kete Asante included Amiri Baraka on his list of 100 Greatest African Americans.

In 2003, Baraka's daughter Shani, aged 31, and her lesbian partner, Rayshon Homes, were murdered in the home of Shani's sister, Wanda Wilson Pasha, by Pasha's ex-husband, James Coleman. Prosecutors argued that Coleman shot Shani because she had helped her sister separate from her husband. A New Jersey jury found Coleman (also known as Ibn El-Amin Pasha) guilty of murdering Shani Baraka and Rayshon Holmes, and he was sentenced to 168 years in prison for the 2003 shooting.

## **Death**

Amiri Baraka died on January 9, 2014, at Beth Israel Medical Center in Newark, New Jersey, after being hospitalized in the facility's intensive care unit for one month prior to his death. The cause of death was not reported, but it is mentioned that Baraka had a long struggle with diabetes. Baraka's funeral will be held at Newark Symphony Hall on January 18, 2014.

## Controversies

Baraka's writings, and the covers of his early notebooks with large images of erect penises which were on open display in the Greenwich Village cafes where he sat, have generated controversy over the years, particularly his advocacy of rape and violence towards, at various times, women, gay people, white people, and Jews. Author Jerry Gafio Watts contends that Baraka's homophobia and misogyny stem from his efforts to conceal his own history of same-sex encounters. Watts writes that Baraka "knew that popular knowledge of his homosexuality would have undermined the credibility of his militant voice. By becoming publicly known as a hater of homosexuals, Jones was attempting to defuse any claims that might surface linking him with a homosexual past." Critics of his work have alternately described such usage as ranging from being vernacular expressions of Black oppression to outright examples of the sexism, homophobia, antisemitism, and racism they perceive in his work.

### The following is from a 1965 essay:

Most American white men are trained to be fags. For this reason it is no wonder their faces are weak and blank.... The average of a [white person] thinks of the black man as potentially raping every white lady in sight. Which is true, in the sense that the black man should want to rob the white man of everything he has. But for most whites the guilt of the robbery is the guilt of rape. That is, they know in their deepest hearts that they should be robbed, and the white woman understands that only in the rape sequence is she likely to get cleanly, viciously popped.

In 2009, he was again asked about the quote, and placed it in a personal and political perspective:

Those quotes are from the essays in *Home*, a book written almost fifty years ago. The anger was part of the mindset created by, first, the assassination of John Kennedy, followed by the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, followed by the assassination of Malcolm X amidst the lynching, and national oppression. A few years later, the assassination of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. What changed my mind was that I became a Marxist, after recognizing classes within the Black community and the class struggle even after we had worked and struggled to elect the first Black Mayor of Newark, Kenneth Gibson.

In July 2002, ten months after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, Baraka wrote a poem entitled "Somebody Blew Up America?" that was controversial and met with harsh criticism. The poem is highly critical of racism in America, and includes angry depictions of public figures such as Trent Lott, Clarence Thomas, and Condoleezza Rice. It also contains lines claiming Israel's involvement in the World Trade Center attacks:

*Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed*

*Who told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers*

*To stay home that day*

*Why did Sharon stay away?*

[...]

*Who know why Five Israelis was filming the explosion*

*And cracking they sides at the notion*

Baraka said that he believed Israelis and President George W. Bush had advance knowledge of the September 11 attacks, citing what he described as information that had been reported in the American and Israeli press and on Jordanian television. He denied that the poem is antisemitic, and points to its accusation, which is directed against Israelis, rather than Jews as a people. The Anti-Defamation League though, denounced the poem as antisemitic, though Baraka and his defenders defined his position as anti-Zionism.

After the poem's publication, then-governor Jim McGreevey tried to remove Baraka from the post of Poet Laureate of New Jersey, to which he had been appointed following Gerald Stern in July 2002. McGreevey learned that there was no legal way, according to the law authorizing and defining the position, to remove Baraka. On October 17, 2002, legislation was introduced in the State Senate to abolish the post which was subsequently signed by Governor McGreevey and became effective July 2, 2003.[46] Baraka ceased being poet laureate when the law became effective. In response to legal action filed by Baraka, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit ruled that state officials were immune from such suits, and in November 2007 the Supreme Court of the United States refused to hear an appeal of the case.

## Honors and awards

Baraka served as the second Poet Laureate of New Jersey from July 2002 until the position was abolished on July 2, 2003. In response to the attempts to remove Baraka as the state's Poet Laureate, a nine-member advisory board named him the poet laureate of the Newark Public Schools in December 2002.

Baraka received honors from a number of prestigious foundations, including: fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, the Langston Hughes Award from the City College of New York, the Rockefeller Foundation Award for Drama, an induction into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Before Columbus Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award.

A short excerpt from Amiri Baraka's poetry was selected to used for a permanent installation by artist Larry Kirkland in New York City's Pennsylvania Station.

*I have seen many suns*

*use*

*the endless succession of hours*

*piled upon each other*

*Carved in marble, this installation features excerpts from the works of several New Jersey poets (from Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, to contemporary poets Robert Pinsky and Renée Ashley) and was part of the renovation and reconstruction of the New Jersey Transit section of the station completed in 2002.*

# Works

## Poetry

- 1961: Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note
- 1964: The Dead Lecturer: Poems
- 1969: Black Magic
- 1970: It's Nation Time
- 1970: Slave Ship
- 1975: Hard Facts
- 1980: New Music, New Poetry (India Navigation)
- 1995: Transbluesency: The Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones
- 1995: Wise, Why's Y's
- 1996: Funk Lore: New Poems
- 2003: Somebody Blew Up America & Other Poems
- 2005: The Book of Monk

## Drama

- 1964: Dutchman
- 1964: The Slave
- 1967: The Baptism and The Toilet
- 1966: A Black Mass
- 1969: Four Black Revolutionary Plays
- 1978: The Motion of History and Other Plays

## Fiction

- 1965: The System of Dante's Hell
- 1967: Tales
- 2006: Tales of the Out & the Gone

## Non-fiction

- 1963: Blues People: Negro Music in White America
- 1965: Home: Social Essays

1968: Black Music  
1971: Raise Race Rays Raize: Essays Since 1965  
1979: Poetry for the Advanced  
1981: reggae or not!  
1984: Daggers and Javelins: Essays 1974–1979  
1984: The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka  
1987: The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues  
2003: The Essence of Reparations

### **Edited works**

1968: Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing (co-editor, with Larry Neal)  
1969: Four Black Revolutionary Plays  
1983: Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women (edited with Amina Baraka)  
1999: The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader  
2000: The Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka  
2008: Billy Harper: Blueprints of Jazz, Volume 2 (Audio CD)

### **Filmography**

One P.M. (1972)  
Fried Shoes Cooked Diamonds (1978) .... Himself  
Black Theatre: The Making of a Movement (1978) .... Himself  
Poetry in Motion (1982)  
Furious Flower: A Video Anthology of African American Poetry 1960–95, Volume II: Warriors (1998) .... Himself  
Through Many Dangers: The Story of Gospel Music (1996)  
Bulworth (1998) .... Rastaman  
Piñero (2001) .... Himself  
Strange Fruit (2002) .... Himself  
Ralph Ellison: An American Journey (2002) .... Himself  
Chisholm '72: Unbought & Unbossed (2004) .... Himself  
Keeping Time: The Life, Music & Photography of Milt Hinton (2004) .... Himself

Hubert Selby Jr: It/Il Be Better Tomorrow (2005) .... Himself  
500 Years Later (2005) (voice) .... Himself  
The Ballad of Greenwich Village (2005) .... Himself  
The Pact (2006) .... Himself  
Retour à Gorée (2007) .... Himself  
Polis Is This: Charles Olson and the Persistence of Place (2007)  
Revolution '67 (2007) .... Himself  
Turn Me On (2007) (TV) .... Himself  
Oscene (2007) .... Himself  
Corso: The Last Beat (2008)  
The Black Candle (2008)  
Ferlinghetti: A City Light (2008) .... Himself  
W.A.R. Stories: Walter Anthony Rodney (2009) .... Himself  
Motherland (2010)

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