

In Memoriam: Amiri Baraka



Beowulf Sheehan/Xinhua

Amiri Baraka (1934-2014), was born in Newark, New Jersey, he was a well-known African American writer of fiction, drama, poetry and music, and thus one of the most widely published African American authors of his generation. He earned a B.A. in English from Howard University in 1954. He taught at the New School for Social Research, the University of Buffalo, Columbia University, San Francisco State University, Yale University, George Washington University, served as professor emeritus of Africana Studies at the State University of New York in Stony Brook, and was co-director with his wife of Kimako's Blues People, a community arts space.

Baraka published his first volume of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note*, in 1961. From 1961 to 1963, he was co-editor with Diane Di Prima of *The Floating Bear*, a literary newsletter. His two plays, *The Slave* and *The Toilet*, both written in 1962. 1963 saw the publication of *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, which he wrote, and *The Moderns: An Anthology of New Writing in America*, which he edited and introduced. His reputation as a playwright came about with the production of *Dutchman* at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York on March 24, 1964 as it won an Obie Award and was developed into a film. In 1965, following the assassination of Malcolm X, he moved to Harlem, where he founded the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (the company dissolved in a few months), and next, he returned to Newark, New Jersey and in 1967 he married Amina Baraka and founded the Spirit House Players, which produced, among other works, two of his plays against police brutality titled *Police* and *Arm Yrself or Harm Yrself*.

In 1968, Baraka co-edited *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* with Larry Neal and his play *Home on the Range* was performed as a benefit for the Black Panther Party. From 1968 to 1975, he was chair of the Committee for Unified Newark, a Black united front organization. In 1969, his *Great Goodness of Life* became part of the successful "Black Quartet" off-Broadway, and his play *The Slave Ship* was widely reviewed. Baraka was also a founder and chair of the Congress of African People, a national Pan-Africanist organization with chapters in 15 cities, and he was one of the chief organizers of the National Black Political Convention, which convened in Gary, Indiana in 1972 to organize a more unified political stance for the Black community. In 1983, he and his wife Amina edited *Confirmation: An Anthology of African-American Women*, which won an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, and in 1987, they published *The Music: Reflections on Jazz and Blues*, and *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*.

Baraka's numerous literary prizes and honors include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, the PEN/Faulkner Award, the Rockefeller Foundation Award for Drama, the Langston Hughes Award from The City College of New York, a lifetime achievement award from the Before Columbus Foundation, the James Weldon Johnson Medal for contributions to the arts, the American Academy of Arts & Letters award, the Poet Laureate of New Jersey and he is listed in Molefi Kete Asante's list of *100 Greatest African Americans*.

Baraka joined the ancestors on January 9, 2014 in Newark, New Jersey. His wife of forty-seven, Amina Baraka, and nine children (Kellie Jones, Lisa Jones, Dominique DiPrima, Maria Jones, Shani Baraka, Obalaji Baraka, Ras Baraka, Ahi Baraka, and Amiri Baraka) survives him.

Amiri Baraka: A Selected Bibliography

Poetry

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The Dead Lecturer (1964)
Black Art (1969)
Black Magic: Collected Poetry 1961-1967 (1969)
It's Nation Time (1970)
Spirit Reach (1972)
Afrikan Revolution (1973)
Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones (1979)
Reggae or Not! (1981)
The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader (1991)
Transbluesency: The Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones (1961-1995) (1995)
Wise Why's Y's: The Griot's Tale (1995)
Funk Lore: New Poems (1984-1995) (1996)
Somebody Blew Up America and Other Poems (2003)

Prose

Home: Social Essays (1966)
Raise, Race, Rays, Raze: Essays Since 1965 (1971)
Kawaida Studies: The New Nationalism (1972)
The Creation of the New Ark (1975)
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The Essence of Reparations (2003)
Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music (2009)
Razor: Revolutionary Art for Cultural Revolution (2012)

Drama

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Four Black Revolutionary Plays, All Praises to the Black Man (1969)
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Fiction

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Other

Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing [co-edited with Larry Neal] (1968)
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