

Amiri Baraka (1934-2014): Poet, playwright, black nationalist

By Fred Mazelis
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Amiri Baraka, the poet and playwright who died earlier this month at the age of 79, was long known for his embrace of the black nationalist outlook that characterized his political activity and much of his writing for the last five decades of his life.

There were numerous political twists and turns, some of them tortuous, in the course of those years, but a constant was Baraka's view of race as the fundamental dividing line in American society. This view fatally afflicted his literary and political efforts, essentially determining the character of his life and legacy.

Baraka was born Everett Leroy Jones in Newark, New Jersey. He became known professionally as LeRoi Jones until he embraced Islam in the mid-1960s and changed his name again, first to Imamu Ameer Baraka and then to Amiri Baraka.

As a somewhat troubled and alienated black intellectual in the years before the mass civil rights movement, Baraka studied at Rutgers, Howard University, Columbia and the New School in New York, obtaining a degree at none of these institutions. He joined the Air Force, but was dishonorably discharged, reportedly after his possession of Marxist or "communist" literature was reported to his commander.

The young LeRoi Jones first came to prominence in New York City's Greenwich Village around 1960. He had earlier introduced himself to poet Allen Ginsberg, and began to move in Beat poetry circles. In the late 1950s he had married Hettie Cohen in New York, and the two founded a quarterly literary magazine and were active in a number of other publishing ventures.

At this stage of his career Jones was not politically active, nor was he focused primarily on race, as he would be soon thereafter. He counted among his influences, in addition to the Beats, such figures as American poets Ezra Pound and Frank O'Hara. Jones's poetry from this period is marked by a concern for the events of daily existence and life in the big city. His poems are infused with an energy he shared with some of the other Beats. There are references to race, and they can be seen perhaps as a premonition of his future direction, but they do not overwhelm his work as they later would.

Jones's outlook began to change and to crystallize as the result of a trip he made to Cuba in 1960, after which he became a prominent supporter of Fidel Castro. In the early 1960s he also began to associate with figures in a nascent New York black nationalist literary scene.

Jones had a lifelong interest in jazz, and his 1963 book *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, his first major work, sheds important light on the aesthetic and political views he was developing at this time and that would shape the rest of his life. These views, it might be added, also have larger significance in terms of the subsequent evolution of subjectivist identity politics and what would become known as postmodernism.

Although Jones exhibits a good deal of knowledge of jazz history, his essentially race-based theory of musical development is embodied in the title of the book itself. Of course the blues originated and developed as the music of the descendants of African-American slaves, but both the blues and especially the related development of jazz also borrowed European musical elements and therefore cannot simply be defined as "Negro music" without further qualification. Just as significantly, as Jones himself is forced to admit, there was almost from its beginnings an interpenetration between African and European influences, a process that led to the further development of jazz, the uniquely American musical form.

Jones's approach to aesthetics also contained echoes of "proletarian culture," the conception encouraged by Stalinism that the working class—rather than assimilating everything progressive in contemporary culture and the whole history of its development in capitalist society in order to lay the basis for a new, socialist culture of the future—had to break from "bourgeois culture" and develop its own literature, art and music.

Jones put forward similarly mechanical and fallacious conceptions, in the process more or less equating “black culture” with “proletarian culture.” In this view, “Black” is associated with all that is life-affirming and proletarian, while “white” is identified with the effete and the middle class, with art as mere “artifact.”

It is interesting to note, in this regard, the contrast between Jones’s race-based theory and the role of such figures as Dave Van Ronk, the folk and blues guitarist whose name and lengthy career have recently generated renewed interest because of the Coen brothers’ film *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Van Ronk, a young white musician from a mostly Irish working class family in Brooklyn, forged the closest of bonds with such blues pioneers as Mississippi John Hurt and the Reverend Gary Davis, who recognized him not as a “poacher,” but someone who had absorbed the heart and soul of the music.

In subsequent years Jones/Baraka expressed his backward conceptions in various forms: anti-Semitism, homophobia and vicious attacks on women. All of these exercises, through which Jones attempted to demonstrate his “revolutionary” credentials, have more than a passing resemblance to fascist demagoguery.

Jones’s outlook was articulated in the play that made him famous. *Dutchman*, staged in New York City in 1964, won the Obie Award for Best Off-Broadway Play of the year. A political allegory set entirely in a New York City subway car, it treats the relationship between two characters, a white woman and a young black man. The woman is flirtatious, manipulative and provocative, alternately taunting the man with racial stereotypes and attempting to seduce him. The two engage in a lengthy conversation on race in America—the young man, relatively naïve and well-meaning, at one point voicing a hostility to integration and assimilation that clearly expresses the view of the playwright.

The play ends with the woman stabbing the man to death, after which she instructs passengers to throw his body out and then begins to look at another young black man who has meanwhile boarded the train.

The critical acclaim for *Dutchman* reflected a mood that was just beginning to grow within a layer of middle class liberals and intellectuals at the time. They shared Jones’s view that whites and blacks in America were separated by an unbridgeable gulf, and that nothing appreciable had changed in the century since the Civil War. Jones’s ahistorical cry of despair and hatred, his forecast of race war, found an audience, especially among those increasingly demoralized and disoriented by postwar American society. This was, in fact, also a mood that found at least a slight echo among some of the Beats.

Within about a year of the premiere of *Dutchman*, after the assassination of Malcolm X in February 1965, Jones left his white wife and their children. Calling himself a “black cultural nationalist,” he soon remarried. Within two years he had allied himself with the notorious Maulana Karenga, also known as Ron Karenga, who became a godfather of sorts to cultural nationalism and anti-white separatism in the US. Karenga, based on the West Coast, later engaged in a bloody feud with the Black Panther Party.

LeRoi Jones embraced Islam and changed his name to Baraka. In the 1970s he returned to his hometown of Newark and spent the rest of his life based there. Baraka’s cultural nationalism found political expression in his support for the campaign of Democrat Kenneth Gibson to become the first African-American Mayor of New Jersey’s largest city. Baraka summed up his position, which corresponded to the interests of African-American entrepreneurs and aspiring capitalists: “To own and operate the businesses. To own and operate the politicians, for our own benefit.”

During the run-up to and the 1971 Newark teachers strike, Baraka played a foul role. He accused Newark teachers, nearly 40 percent of whom were black, of “enforcing white values.” Baraka “hoped the next step in building Black power in Newark, after Gibson’s election, would be the defeat of the Teachers Union.” (*The Newark Teachers Strikes: Hope on the Line*, Steve Golin) Don Saunders, Mayor Gibson’s full-time specialist in labor relations, “employed Black groups [including Baraka, prominently] as a battering ram against the Newark Teachers Union.” (Ibid.)

This was the era of the collapse of the civil rights movement and the launching, under the auspices of the Nixon administration, of the campaign for “black capitalism.” The election of black mayors and other officials was touted as the answer to the appalling conditions that continued to exist, nearly a decade after the 1960s ghetto rebellions, in all of the country’s major urban centers. (Baraka himself was arrested during the Newark riot in 1967 for allegedly carrying a concealed weapon and resisting arrest. An appeals court later reversed a three-year prison sentence.)

Coleman Young became the most prominent of these African-American political figures after his election as mayor of Detroit in 1973, but Gibson preceded him, in 1970, and there were also black mayors elected with the support of the corporate and political establishment in Cleveland, Gary, Indiana, eventually Chicago and New York City and elsewhere.

Baraka, continuing his role as political chameleon and provocateur, later denounced Gibson as well as his successors in Newark, including Sharpe James and most recently Cory Booker. Baraka claimed to have made the startling discovery, in late middle age, that there were “classes within the Black community.” This did not prevent him from trying to install a Democratic administration in Newark that would supposedly represent the black masses and not the “turncoats” like Gibson et al.

Much has been made, in the countless obituaries of Baraka, of the ideological permutations he underwent over the years. In fact there is a clear continuity that runs through his whole political life. What he gravitated toward in later life is often referred to as “Marxism.” If that term has any meaning it refers to a scientific-socialist analysis of contemporary society and an orientation to the revolutionary role of the working class. Neither component of genuine Marxism was ever part of Baraka’s intellectual arsenal.

His latter-day embrace of Maoism changed hardly anything as far as his politics were concerned. Baraka, who as a young man had embraced Castroism, found in Maoism an outlook that suited his bitter hostility to the working class. Maoist doctrine glorified national-based, peasant guerrilla warfare, the encircling of the cities and the war of the so-called Third World against the capitalist West. This fit in completely with Baraka’s view of the white population as the undifferentiated oppressor.

For the last three or four decades of his life, Baraka wrote less than in the past. His career as a playwright was largely confined to the 1960s. While he published several collections of poetry in more recent decades, his major focus became teaching black studies as well as his political activity, especially in Newark. In 1979 he began teaching in the Africana Studies Department at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Despite Baraka’s reputation as a literary and political provocateur, he received numerous awards and considerable official recognition. That recognition included grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations.

In 2002, then-Governor Jim McGreevey of New Jersey named Baraka Poet Laureate of the state, an action that led to the last major controversy in the writer’s career. In July 2002 Baraka recited a poem he had written after the September 11 attacks, entitled “Somebody Blew Up America?”

Although Baraka acknowledged his previous anti-Semitism and now claimed to have left it behind, he continued to spread confusion on the subject. “Somebody Blew Up America?” lent credence to a conspiracy theory that the Israeli regime planned—or knew about—the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and “told 4000 Israeli workers at the Twin Towers/To stay home that day.” (Although the same confused—and unconvincing—“ultra-radical” poem also condemns the reactionary forces “Who put the Jews in ovens,/and who helped them do it/Who said ‘America First’/and ok’d the yellow stars.”)

“Somebody Blew Up America?” provoked predictable howls of outrage and calls from the neoconservatives and the ultra-right in New Jersey for Baraka to be stripped of his laureateship. Because this was not legally possible, the New Jersey legislature ended up officially abolishing the post the next year.

Baraka’s reactionary outlook allowed the supporters of Zionism to cry foul while legitimate questions about the role of the Bush administration in allowing the September 11 attacks to take place were either ignored or minimized.

Mention must also be made of the role of the pseudo-left, outfits like *The Nation* magazine, whose editor Katrina van den Heuvel rushed into print after Baraka’s demise to call attention to the magazine’s earlier connections with the poet, and to claim that “Jones celebrated the cultural achievements and dignity of African-Americans while unblinkingly exposing the grave injustice of this country’s condescending attitude toward and often-brutal treatment of his people.”

Black nationalism and the pseudo-left share a profound agreement, a hatred of the working class and a bitter opposition to a genuine struggle against capitalist exploitation and inequality. Their professed opposition to racial discrimination is in fact based on support for the profit system and the demand that a small privileged layer of the black population share more equally in its spoils.

This was spelled out in an interview that Amiri Baraka gave to the *New York Times* only about a year before his death. In reminiscing about the 1967 ghetto rebellion in Newark, which left 26 dead and hundreds injured, Baraka emphasized the changes that had taken place. “This is another era,” he asserted. “My son is a councilman in the South Ward. In a sense that’s what we always wanted, that he’d go away to school and not disappear into the suburbs with some degree. His brother is his chief of staff. His other brother is his chief of security.”

Ras Baraka, the aforementioned councilman, is running for mayor of Newark in the election later this year, to succeed newly elected US Senator Cory Booker. This is the legacy of Amiri Baraka in his own words. His demagogic rhetoric was merely another route to the same goal pursued by Coleman Young, Cory Booker and every other big business politician. The high-flown words about “cultural achievements” and “injustice,” in the end, were only window-dressing to camouflage the grasping for power and privilege at the expense of the masses of working people of every race and background.

Baraka’s legacy is part of the unsavory legacy of the middle class radicalism of the 1960s. Cut off from the working class by the betrayals of Stalinism and the trade unions, the mass movements of workers and young people against the war in Vietnam, poverty and inequality were succeeded by the reactionary politics of black nationalism and various forms of identity politics.