

**AMIRI BARAKA: The
Formation of an
Intellectual Activist**

**Toulgui Ladi
University of Guelma**

Abstract

The present article traces Amiri Baraka's transformation from poet to political activist. It investigates the dynamic period in the life and work of this controversial figure and how he is situated within the various worlds through which he travelled including Beat Bohemia, Black Nationalism, and Marxist-Leninism. In the process, this work demonstrates how Baraka's deliberate metamorphosis through four distinct phases reflects his cultural approach to Black Power politics and explores his role in the spread of Black Nationalism. Baraka's intellectual activism did not escape critical biases which resulted in the more considered attacks on his recent writing.

The major historical shifts which affected black consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s illustrate that certain significant political and socio-economic events like racial segregation, oppression with its various forms, economic depression, mass, violent and non-violent protests, and the eruption of anti-colonial agitation in the Third World, created global contexts for the development of gifted individual leaders and talented intellectuals with certain distinctive characteristics. Amiri Baraka, formerly known as LeRoi Jones, is a product of these social events and forces. He may be viewed as a representative of a generation attempting to initiate black radical and revolutionary projects hoping to bring positive changes for the African American race which suffered the vicissitudes of racial oppression born from slavery in America.

The formation of Baraka as an intellectual activist reflects a positive affirmation of the cultural, political, social and economic identity of black people. His intellectualism, in its rudimentary forms, reacted to the brutally violent and repressive conditions under which

blacks lived. The most basic expression of Baraka's intellectualism is that black people in the USA were bound by the common experience of racism and the struggle against it. The sense of shared identity, be it in reaction to racism or descending from African origins, produced the concept of racial solidarity, which was the cornerstone of Baraka's nationalist thought and action. He claimed only what was entitled to white Americans: freedom from oppression and sharing of political and economic domains affecting the quality of life. His battle cry is that blacks must claim the rights and responsibilities of self-definition, self-determination and self-reliance (Gaines, 116). An objective look at Baraka's intellectualism in theory and action will reveal progressive tendencies. Its reactionary forms were principally concerned with changing the balance of power from white to black. This is not to be confused with "black supremacy." Baraka never intended to oppress whites. As a reaction to white power, he sought to assert black autonomy in the creation and implementation of all matters concerning African Americans.

As a prolific and active writer, Baraka is classified in the pantheon of black intellectuals, along with such prominent figures as Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others who significantly affected the course of African American literary and political culture¹. Internationally recognized playwright, poet, novelist, political activist, and one of the main leaders and inspirations of the Black Arts Movement, Baraka is unique in the sense that he still represents that dividing line between those who appreciate his provocative works and praise his challenging thought and personal struggle against white racism with all its component parts and who simply deplete the value of his achievements and denigrate his intellectual activism (Driver).

1. Baraka's classification belongs to Arnold Rampersad, editor of the *New York American Library*.

Spanning almost 40 years of his controversial career Baraka, a writer who readily embraced change, claimed: "I have changed over the years because I have struggled to understand and change the world. People who question change cannot really be trying to do this. How can you be in the world and your ideas over the years remain the same. Those who question change are intellectually lazy, or suffer from the passivity of the overstuffed or cryptically satisfied." (Fleming) His intellectual metamorphosis moved through four distinct but complementary stages. Each of these phases respectively comprises the Beatnik/Bohemian period (1957-1962), the Transitional period (1963-1965), the Black Nationalist period (1965-1974), and the Marxist Revolutionary period, frequently referred to as the Socialist period, (1974 present). (Autobiography, 145-156) These four stages constitute Baraka's controversial formation as an intellectual activist and make of him an important political and cultural curiosity.

Born Everett Leroy (later LeRoi) Jones, Baraka attended Newark public schools and studied at Howard University before turning to literature and philosophy. In 1954, he joined the US Air Force where he became increasingly interested in literature, immersing himself in the work of American poet Ezra Pound, Irish novelist James Joyce, and other modernists. Discharged from the Air Force in 1957 for possessing allegedly communist literary journals, Baraka moved to Greenwich Village in New York City and established relationships with members of the avant-garde Beat, Black Mountain and New York School movements. A writer who has worked across a range of genres: poetry, drama, the novel, jazz operas, and non-fiction. Baraka played a crucial role as an organizer, editor, and promoter of the avant-garde movements of the New American Literature in the 1950s and early 1960s and the Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He published his acclaimed book of poetry, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961) and co-edited the poetry journals *Yugen*, and *Floating Bear*, with his then-wife Hettie Jones and poet Diane Di Prima respectively (Harris, xxxi).

The mounting of racial tensions with the assassination of Medgar Evers, a prominent voice in the struggle for civil rights in Mississippi, the murder of civil rights workers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in Mississippi, and fatal church bombings in

Alabama, marked an important turning point in Baraka's career as an activist. In 1960, he paid a short visit to Cuba, met its leader, Fidel Castro, and befriended with Third World intellectuals who were primarily concerned with poverty, famine, and oppression. This favourable opportunity allowed Baraka to clearly realize that a common suffering existed between blacks in America and Third World countries with a more visible inclination towards colonized Africa. Baraka so well illustrated the stated directions of black struggle which, in the tradition of both W. E. B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey, sought to encourage a rapprochement between the various peoples of African descent in America and black Diaspora. As long as the fate of millions of blacks the world overhanged in the balance, the intellectuals, Baraka thought, continued to proffer ideas for black self and group liberation (Driver).

Influenced by the artists of the newly revolutionary countries, as well as the Civil Rights Movement and black political figures such as Malcolm X, Baraka's work became more politically and socially committed. His plays like *Dutchman* and *The Slave* written in 1964 reflect violent assertions of black pride. Their violent imagery and fragmentary style and syntax provide a vivid record of the black intellectual and artist in torment and transformation (Jones, 248). Baraka was also influenced by musicians such as Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, and Sun Ra -- New Jazz players of the late 1950s and early 1960s who demonstrated that it was possible for black artists to produce avant-garde art rooted in African American cultural traditions (Driver).

While Baraka became increasingly involved with militant political organizations in the mid-1960s, it was the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 that led to his final break with the predominantly white bohemian world. After the tragic event, Baraka began to hold white people responsible for Malcolm's murder. But it was this odious act, which was the culmination of a quantitative and qualitative ideological focus that made him move to Harlem and break off all ties with most of the white people he knew, many of whom were his close friends (Driver). To Baraka, Harlem was a place where he was instrumental in establishing the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BARTS) whose impetus was to create a well defined black aesthetic.

Though short-lived, it provided the blueprint for similar theaters across the country and helped develop the cultural corollary to Black Nationalism, the Black Arts Movement. Albeit Baraka left Harlem after a year for his native Newark, New Jersey, he continued to serve as a Black Arts Movement and Black Power leader. To him, "black People are a race, culture, a nation. The legacy of Malcolm X is we know we can move where we are. Our land is where we live" (Hudson, 213). Baraka didn't see anything wrong with hating white people and was convinced that "Harlem must be taken from the beast and gain its sovereignty as a black nation" (Glick).

The BARTS marked a turning point in African American culture, emphasizing black consciousness, self-determination, and Cultural Revolution against white racism. In solidarity with Black Power, the Harlem BARTS experiment inspired the development of a national Black Arts Movement, which made an indelible contribution to the direction of African American culture and consciousness. As poet Haki Madhubuti insisted on the integration of light and dark black people, it delivered a devastating blow to the longstanding prestige of the color caste system in black America. Challenging the hegemony of white cultural critics and entertainment markets over their work, the young artists declared that their audience and critics were to be found in the African American community.

Baraka devoted himself to taking socially militant drama directly to the people it concerned. He explicitly produced plays that were often anti-white and intended for a black audience. Black American artists were advised by Baraka to follow "black" not "white" standards of beauty and value, and stop looking to white culture for validation (Lacey, 112). He declared that "blacks who listen to European classical music are traitors to the cause. Some self-styled black nationalists are schizophrenic and too connected with white culture. They will be digging Mozart more than James Brown. (...) If all of it has to be burned now for the liberation of our people, it should be burned up the next minute" (Brown, 92).

Baraka remained in Harlem less than a year and soon realized that he was not the African American who could succeed Malcolm X. Toward the end of 1965 he moved back to Newark where he established the Spirit House Players which produced, among other

works, his plays against police brutality, *Arm Yourself or Harm Yourself*. He also proceeded to change his name LeRoi Jones, starting with Ameer Barakaⁱⁱ. In 1968, he created the Black Community development and Defense Organization, a Muslim group committed to affirming black culture and to gaining political power for his people.

In the same year, under the influence of his fellow black nationalist, Maulana Karenga, Baraka embraced Islam and adopted the name of Imamu Amiri Baraka (Jones, 127)ⁱⁱⁱ. He assumed leadership of his own Black Muslim organization, Kawaida (Harris, 218). From 1968 to 1975, he was chairman of the Committee for Unified Newark (CFUN), a black united front. He was a founder and chairman of the Congress of African People, a national Pan-Africanist organization with chapters in fifteen cities. Baraka was also one of the chief organizers of the National Black Convention to organize a more unified political stance for African Americans (Harris, 289). He was a principal leader of the Modern Black Convention Movement. Under his influence, elements of the Black Arts Movement and sections of the Black Power movement merged to fashion the politics of black cultural nationalism. In the aftermath of hundreds of African American urban uprisings in the late 1960s, Black Nationalism developed quickly at the local level.

“Ameer” in Swahili means “blessed prince” (Arabic Origin).

“Imamu” in Swahili means “spiritual leader. From Arabic origin
“Imam.”

As the founder and leader of the Committee for Unified NewArk, Baraka spearheaded a mass movement for democracy and self-government. He helped lay the foundation of a black and Puerto Rican political alliance that culminated in the 1970 election of Newark's first African American mayor, Kenneth Gibson, who was also the first African American mayor of a major North-eastern city. CFUN established a host of important programs and institutions at the community level. In July 1967 Newark was shaken by a major urban uprising of African Americans against racism. Baraka was one of the first victims at the hands of the police and was nearly beaten to death (Benson, 49-50). In the aftermath of those uprisings, He helped establish a new Black Power group of women and men, the United Brothers. As the group developed it expanded into CFUN.

With these organizations and institutions, Baraka's Black Power movement initiated a number of political dynamics. MBCM entered the national political arena in 1972 with the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, leading up to the Gary Convention to forge independent politics. Between 1974 and 1976, the Modern Black Convention Movement became embroiled in ideological and political battles between black nationalists and black Marxists on the one hand, and between proponents of independent politics and party politics on the other (Harris, 173). As the 1976 presidential races approached, MBCM split into numerous factions, weakening the thrust of independent black politics. Finally, CAP transformed itself from a Black Power organization into a Marxist-Leninist group and changed its name to the Revolutionary Communist

League in May 1976. A pivotal influence in Baraka's turn to the Marxist Left was the black Marxists, Harry Haywood and Odis Hyde who were veterans of the old Left and who engaged black militants of that era with a Marxist position on African American self-determination (Sollors).

To be involved in Baraka's briefly exposed metamorphosis, it is clearly noticed that his contribution to black intellectual activism was conditioned by his dynamic and defiant experience shaped by unfavorable circumstances which compelled him to seek alternatives to the permanently existing marginalization of the black community. Most of the time, these alternatives were misinterpreted, and then

violently repudiated by an extremely racist surrounding. Baraka's experience in political activism reflected an African American cultural tradition which was always considered as an urgent necessity for activists like him, who, during an era of unrest, became the leading intellectual of this tradition learned from the African Americans who preceded him, then forged according to his proper understanding and developed through the circumstances of his time. Baraka tried to operate with a consciousness imbued with a long black tradition, regenerate, and respect a legacy of a variety of black intellectuals that survived and surpassed the hardships encountered during its establishment. The conceptual framework of the critical but dynamic stages may be regarded as problematic derived from the responses of black intellectuals to the then-prevailing hostile situation and the hard conditions of blacks – intellectuals and grassroots alike – all at points.

When the invoked tradition is thoroughly examined throughout its distinct stages of existence, similarities and continuities as well as important differences are detected that is why it is important to carry on the present work with an awareness of that whole background. For example, the problematic of the generation that preceded Baraka and associated with the black crisis in America – creating a tradition which goes back into the 1870s and early 1950s – was shaped by a situation featuring white racism marching across all America and an evolution of the black protest from a peaceful upsurge to an uncontrollable and bloody revolt. The emergence of strong black movements and organizations represented new forms of anti-racist struggles. This objective situation considerably founded black consciousness and influenced the practice of black cultural nationalism whose records of success and failure remain an extraordinary legacy.

However, the landscape of the era of the 1960s posed new kinds of changes: the black cause became a center-stage through the civil rights movement that transformed into the Black Power movement. Black activism played a catalytic role, a new kind of national situation, with the effort of the US government at all levels to crush a black national liberation as a centerpiece, was in place. A new kind of black Cultural Revolution mixed with the defying desire to establish even at a high cost Black Nationalism in America, with a strong

determination, was in progress. Yet, probably all these ostensibly challenging moments, as well as all those problematics are profoundly connected. Thus, it may be thought of Baraka's activism and intellectualism not as a new paradigm for emulation but as simply a contemporary continuum of this troubled but honorable tradition. In other words, Baraka conveyed a simple but meaningful message to African Americans directly or indirectly based on the principle of learning from and joining the tradition of Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, and many others whom he admired (Kevin). The talk should be about these notable figures as activists, intellectuals, crusaders, and organization-builders of the black protest, not exclusively and purely as mere cultural promoters adorned by black academia. In this context, Amiri Baraka doesn't make any distinction between his activism and intellectualism, as if they are isolated spheres. Individual activism in collectivist organizations and movements can be a method of testing, correcting and gauging one's intellectual efforts. Here is a talk about participation in social and political struggles which forcibly and actually improve the quality of such work in terms of providing empirical evidence, bringing the intellectual in touch with the rest of the world, and even offering a vision to drive one to better understanding of the surroundings. Such compatibility between activism and intellectualism and even their twinning are unavoidable.

According to Baraka, art is one of the most essential characteristics that contribute to the shaping of the intellectual activist's maturation. Most widely known for his activities within the 1960s Black Arts Movement, today, Baraka continues to exert a literary art that is radical and potent. Much of his work is highly politicized revealing his belief that art should be active in instrumenting political change, that, words do not constitute reality itself, but rather empower people to enact change for the purpose of resistance and liberation (Autobiography). The impact of black art emerged in the 1960s, with the rise of the civil rights movement. Many African Americans rejected earlier hopes for an integrated society and began to call for a separate black culture. Baraka's early poems expressed the personal agonies of living in a prejudiced world. But he increasingly considered the problem as

social, not personal. He began to write plays and helped start the Black Arts Movement. The movement rejected the literary forms and ethos of white culture and interested itself in founding ways to support writing that reflected black experience. It was at that moment that Baraka became more politically active and consequently changed his name to Imamu Ameer Baraka, then to Amiri Baraka, to emphasize his African heritage.

It is not unreasonable for the individual to experiment with different forms of activism, the state of his cultural and intellectual work, and his personal situation. The circumstances of the 1960s and 1970s encouraged Baraka to become more visible as intellectual activist in terms of participation to almost every black gathering. The object of his activities was to get as much publicity as possible, not for his own sake but for the extremely excluded black communities. He realized that he could play a role in helping to guide the grassroots people towards a positive change. Hence, there was an evolution in Baraka's intellectual life, his accumulation of experiences, his changing political situation, and even his personal life. Baraka found himself already involved in so much self-expression in his creative and scholarly writing. His literary and political works were much appalling because they reflected the necessity of keeping alive the serious black struggle in America (Weiss).

One of the most interesting points concerning Baraka's political maturation is based on the criticism that described him as self-indulgent, "cultivating his soul" in poetry while there were social problems to solve in black America. Whether there is a truth or not in this criticism, Baraka started to openly identify with Third World writers with specific reference to Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, John Pepper Clarke, Christopher Okigbo, Leon Damas, and former president of Senegal, Léopold Senghor, and wrote poems and plays with strong ethnic and political messages (Adubato). Moreover, he understood that it was impressive to portray society and its ills faithfully so that the portrayal would move people to take necessary corrective action. Baraka wrote of the experiences of black Americans with an affirmation of black life. His artistic and literary maturation was parallel with his political formation. His subsequent plays and poems expressed his increasing disappointment with white America

and his growing need to separate from it by urging his people to adopt Black Nationalism which stressed the role of cultural blackness and awaken audiences to the political concerns. He did much to define and support black intellectualism in the black world (Cook and Henderson, 102). What is described here is just his personal, perhaps idiosyncratic, trajectory of activism which he tried to keep in balance with his intellectualism. His struggle was essentially an extension of the civil rights movement which, in turn, grew out of earlier struggles against segregation and inequality. In sum, his intention was to remove barriers to equal access. However, the terrain shifted from explicit segregation to institutional racism. That means that the levers of inequality were more deeply hidden in terms of the white race-bias inherited from the old evil institution of Negro slavery.

When the case of black cultural nationalism is invoked, we become impressed by Baraka's clarifying view of the originally intellectual distinction between nationalism of oppressed blacks and oppressing whites in America, as well as the distinction between national liberation struggles in colonized Africa, and nationalist ideologies embraced by black intellectuals. These offer categories for analysis that can help illuminate issues which confuse us in contemporary discourse on nationalism. First, Baraka argued that the strategy applied by black organizations to the anti-racist movement was important, particularly, the understanding that oppressed blacks vitally needed to organize themselves around their own issues and under their own leadership as a precondition for unity against their oppressor, remains valid to this day (Hutchinson and Smith, 409). Second, Baraka deeply believed in the notion that people of color should not subordinate their interests and demands to whites, especially if whites were slow to take decisions. However, much of the work with which Baraka was involved – both as an activist and intellectual – is in the area of countering foolish attacks with all their forms against cultural, political, and socio-economic black improvements. In this case, it is more than necessary to discuss Baraka's analysis of anti-racist struggles in the context of being an intellectual activist and in this respect, his personal involvement into different political doctrines (Levine, 162).

Baraka understood through his long experience that one of the most optimistic developments of intellectual activist formation should emanate from an effort to work tightly with the grassroots, a vital element frequently ignored by a great number of African American intellectuals (Cook and Henderson, 75). Baraka's work offered a competing assessment of the legacy of twentieth-century black movements. He stressed on the power of Black Nationalism because it manifestly indicated the intensity of black political maturation. The support to the right of self-determination blended well with an overall project of African American unity according to the model he offered in expanding the meaning of the preceding point: the precondition to such unity is that blacks could self-organize and independently choose their own leadership, not subject to majority rule of whites, nor should they be pressured to hold off on demands for racial justice until such a time as whites were ready to adopt them. This vision reflected Baraka's determination to resist any vicissitudes to attain the aspired goal of blacks. He even went beyond black chauvinism by insisting on the concept that unity between those left out was a *sine qua non* (Glaude, 66-73).

Baraka was not formed as a liberal in the 1960s, only to be shaken and traumatized by the turbulence of the decade. Being black, he was already alienated from the system before the 1960s. The black protest gave him an invaluable chance to take part in grassroots activism independent of the two major parties, Democratic and Republican, or of the liberal establishment which were thought to be inhibitors of the black promotion in America. Baraka was emotionally and physically attracted by the work of the civil rights movement. Though it cannot be denied that Baraka's views were pacifist because he believed in self-defense and instantly was an ardent supporter of black organizations which promoted it, police brutality and white bureaucratic treatment were among the principal reasons that compelled him to stand against the theory of pacifism (Kevin).

The activist and intellectual formation of Baraka is measured by the events which closely contributed to creating the "Negro problem." Baraka's formation was very often perceived by a clique of intellectuals – black and white alike – who were not particularly

supportive of his rebelling and provocative works, as racist and damaging to race relations (Perazzo). For much of the thought of these badly-intentioned critiques, the invocation of the "Negro problem" concretely refers to an offending language and probably it more than implies that the root of any racial crisis lies with the oppressed, in this case, African Americans. Put more crudely, if the "Negroes" changed, then whites would no longer have a "Negro problem." Consequently, by modifying the status quo, there would be no Baraka to defend the black cause and no effective strategy for well-intentioned blacks to smash white supremacy. On one hand, the same opponents believed that Baraka's political achievements had no place in the emerging canon of African American literature. On the other hand, the Baraka of political writings was apparently swimming against a current for which his very existence as an intellectual activist was in question. Yet, it is a compelling irony that the sensibility behind the previous subjective argument is easily felt because it is this category which culturally and politically undermined any black reaction to the architects of segregation and systematic racist terror, thereby, refuting a black self-defense by denying and even by rejecting the common sense that articulated the message spoken by Baraka who was haunted by one basic desire: black self-determination (Pinsker).

The most crucial of Baraka's formative moments was his involvement in various black projects which were intended to alleviate the socio-economic suffering of black grassroots while organizing for jobs, decent housing and welfare rights in the 1970s. In the case of his local projects at Newark, New Jersey, from which he was native, he strongly advised and elaborated plans – take the example of the Kawaida Towers project (Autobiography, 302). Equally important, Baraka tried to carry out participatory democracy based on decision-making processes by appealing to the massive participation of deprived Newark electorate in the local elections and to vote for black candidates (Autobiography, 304). Baraka's involvement in the election of Kenneth Gibson as the Newark first black mayor is an evidence. This type of electorate was formed of black and Puerto Rican communities that Baraka considered an integral part of the

locality. In other words, the exclusion of one group would forcibly lead to the exclusion of all of them.

Starting with the feeling of the full force of ghetto conditions mainly in Baraka's native Newark's enclaves and ending with a full support of the black needy, he came to see that his disgust with middle and upper-class culture was not, in his case, the snobbish elitism of those who thought that they were truly educated, but that such disgust was founded on the kind of values he encountered in literary and political documents dealing with the forgotten blacks in America. So, he was all set for some sort of definitive moral, cultural and intellectual break with capitalist society. The problem was that the alternative perspective embodied in Black Nationalism and Marxism was purged from academic, intellectual, and cultural life at that point because of the federal governments' classical conspiracy with its combined levels.

Baraka took his ideas seriously in that experience and aimed at action to change the society. As an intellectual, he understood that he needed a broader view of history and society to develop some vision of the part that he might play, outside and in opposition to the dominant culture of the system it supported. So, while he was hardly alone in making the transit from Black Nationalism to Marxism in the 1970s, he did not share the view that Black Nationalism had to be rejected as a failing black movement. Though he was not exactly repudiating black nationalism, he felt a lot of skepticism about the movement and the existing political groups in particular (Adubato). It seems as if he saw more continuity between Black Nationalism and Marxism. He openly announced that the goal of his socialist art was the destruction of the capitalist state and the creation of a socialist community. Baraka stated:

I think fundamentally my intentions are similar to those I had when I was a nationalist. That might seem contradictory, but they were similar in the sense I see art as a weapon of revolution. It's just now that I define revolution in Marxist terms. I came to my Marxist view as a result of having struggled as a nationalist and found certain dead ends theoretically and ideologically, as far as nationalism was concerned and had to reach out for a communist ideology (Cook and Henderson, 80).

His socialist art was addressed to the black community which had, he believed, the greatest revolutionary potential in America. His adoption of a Marxist-Leninist political philosophy expressed his vision to elevate economics and class to a level equal to that of race. He was convinced that capitalism played a large part in the underdevelopment of black Americans and that nationalism contained serious shortcomings as a liberation program because it failed to adequately address economic issues (Hudson, 31-32). In sum, Baraka's political and literary influence peaked between 1966 and 1976. He represented a transition that many black Americans made during that decade, a transition from LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka, the move from Greenwich Village to Harlem and the transformation from the Beat movement to the Black Arts Movement, were all portions of Baraka's personal life that symbolized the larger quest of black America to define itself in terms of a black aesthetic. Although Baraka was not the seminal influence of the black nationalist movement of the 1960s, he embodied many of the promises and problems of that movement.

The interest in talking about Baraka and his formation as an intellectual activist is to attempt to show that his adoption of black cultural nationalism was, nonetheless, a philosophy of black liberation, and that his deliberately controversial shifts represented a genuine alternative to what was perceived as a tendency in the 1960s and particularly in the 1970s of black intellectuals to follow one of the variants of black culture which unfolded the concept of black nationality formation and engendered a split between what was simply American and what was truly African American. Baraka's formation as an intellectual activist becomes significant when it is known that by adopting any concept of Black Nationalism, he traced his trajectory of political and cultural aspirations for during his apogee, black nationality formation represented a red thread that ran through the history of black freedom movement.

It is absurd to disclaim connection between activism and intellectualism principally in the case of African Americans. However, if assumption is given to Baraka's decline as an activist, his intellectualism remains untouched and is more than ever defying the American white conservatives who think of him as racist and anti-

Semitic justifying their thought as well as their position by exaggeratingly dramatizing the context and the meaning of his recent work. Appointed to a two-year term as poet laureate in September 2001 with endorsement from the New Jersey Council for the Humanities and the State's Council on the Arts, Baraka found himself the center of controversy after writing and reading his recent poem titled 'Somebody Blew Up America' at the September 19, 2002, Geraldine Poetry festival in Stanhope, New Jersey (Somebody). Although lacking the power of removal, New Jersey Governor, James McGreevy, did his best to oblige Baraka at least to apologize and step down from his position. Baraka refused and issued a statement defending his intentionally misinterpreted poem and his legal right to keep his post as New Jersey Poet Laureate (Weiss). Reacting to a false accusation, Baraka stated that "the recent dishonest, consciously distorted and insulting non-interpretation of my poem, 'Somebody Blew Up America' by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) is fundamentally an attempt to defame me. And with that, an attempt to repress and stigmatize independent thinkers everywhere. This trashy propaganda is characteristic of right-wing zealots who are interested only in slander and character of those whose views or philosophies differ from or are in contradiction to theirs. (Kevin)

He convincingly declared that the poem's underlying theme focused on how black Americans had suffered from domestic terrorism since being kidnapped into US chattel slavery, e.g., by slave owners, government and state laws, Klan, skin heads, domestic Nazis, lynching, denial of rights, national oppression, racism, character assassination throughout the United States (Adubato). Being what some called a racial "provocateur" (Adubato), Baraka seems to *bother* (emphasis added) a great number of minds not because of his so-called anti-Semitism revealed in his poem but because of his traditional stand as African American intellectual activist who has daringly reached full political and cultural maturation and who has permanently kept the black society alert and conscious of the fragile race relations in the United States.

People, who are familiar with the history of race, are not surprised by the white negative, vague, and sweeping generalization towards Baraka's poem because similar unfavorable and often

inimical attitudes were seen in different occasions during which Baraka and previous African American intellectual activists would emerge with stronger determination. The frequently violent attacks and dejectedly biased criticism are a manifest reflection of the pretentious claim that Baraka's intellectual activism is obsolete. It is very legitimate to consider Baraka's intellectual activism as a positive reference because his success is shaped by the idea that it is impossible "to understand that revolutionary black literature without understanding the people to whom it is addressed without understanding some of the earlier writers (...) presently engaged. For in this writing black people are not only the poets and the audience, they are also the poems. The poet knows that the people know, that is the people judge (Cook and Henderson, 102).

Finally, Amiri Baraka assumed his role as a black intellectual leader. Yet, it came the time when he was supposed to decline. In his work, *Amiri Baraka: the Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*, Jerry Watts who preferred the time of Le Roi Jones to that of Amiri Baraka argued that "it is sad to witness the decline of an artist of Baraka's talents. Once a creative dramatist, he is now content to place polemical essays into the mouths of his characters. A former artistic innovator, he is now trying to revitalize the dreaded aesthetic uniformities of socialist realism" (Watts qtd in Driver). With a more damaging intention, he added "the main reason for reading Baraka's political pronouncements at this stage in his life is to examine how a former serious and creative artist has intellectually deteriorated since attempting to become a political thinker and activist" (Watts qtd in Driver). Through his misapprehension, Watts attempts to diminish if not efface Baraka's political activism which reflected his complete self-dedication, self-determination, and self-defense, three characteristics the African American has been struggling for.

In fact, it is the rise and demise of leadership that guarantee the permanent phenomenon of the dynamics of black cultural nationalism. There would be permanently new concepts and strategies that may help and work in favor of blacks (Cruse). Despite the shortcomings in Baraka's leadership style, his intellectual activism took shape in a mid of relatively limited resources and during an era of severe political and socio-economic disabilities. His achievements were expected to act as

a source of inspiration for blacks. Watts dated the beginning of Baraka's decline around 1970, with his dreadful books, *It's Nation Time* and *In Our Terribleness*. Yet Baraka's story is not one of intellectual decline. He began low. His literary career is one of constantly accelerating race-baiting. While he demonstrated a penchant for attracting media attention, Baraka was never the virtuoso that critics portrayed. In the racial dynamics of the late 1960s and the early 1970s, they mistook Baraka's anger for eloquence. The main reason to read Baraka is not to see how much the intellectual has changed, but to see how much the times have changed. Baraka's contemporary works, though less sophisticated than those of the 1960s and 1970s, have evolved just as the word "warrior" itself has evolved, as well as the world and the people for whom he writes. There is no longer an embroilment in open racial warfare, as when *Dutchman*, the first play by Amiri Baraka, then LeRoi Jones, was produced.

ⁱ Baraka's classification belongs to Arnold Rampersad, editor of the *New York American Library*.

ⁱⁱ "Ameer" in Swahili means "blessed prince" (Arabic origin)

ⁱⁱⁱ "Imamu" in Swahili means "spiritual leader". From Arabic origin "Imam."

WORKS CITED

Adubato, Steve. *Baraka: A Dangerous Distraction*. 13 Feb. 2004
<www.politicsnj.com/adubato010203.htm>

Baraka, Amiri. *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1997.

Somebody Blew Up America." 23 July 2004
<www.amiribaraka.com/speech100202.html>

Benston, Kimberley, ed. *Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones): A Collection of Critical*

Essays. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1978.

Brown, Lloyd W. *Amiri Baraka*. Boston: Twayne, 1980.

Cook, Mercer and Stephen E. Henderson. *The Militant Black Writer in Africa and the United States*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969.

Cruse, Harold. *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. New York: William Morrow, 1967.

Driver, Justin. "Pillar of Ire." Rev. of *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black*

Intellectual, by Jerry Watts. *Powell's Books review* 25 Mar. 2002: 3.

Fleming, Robert. "Trouble Man," *Black Issues Book Review*. Gale Group. March-April 2003.

25 Sept. 2004 <http://www.findarticles.com>

Gaines, Kevin K. *Uplifting the Race: Black leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth*

Century. Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1996.

Glaude, Eddie S., Jr. *Is It Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black*

Nationalism. Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2002.

Glick, Jeremy M., "In Defense of Amiri Baraka." *The Blacklisted Journalist*. January 1, 2003.

5 June 2004 <<http://www.bigmagic.com/pages/blackj.>>

Harris, William J., ed. *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000.

Hudson, Theodore R. *From LeRoi Jones to Amiri Baraka: The Literary Works*. Duke, N.C.: Duke University press, 1973.

Hutchinson, John and Anthony D. Smith, eds. *Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Jones, LeRoi. *Home: Social Essays*. New York: Apollo Editions, 1966.

Kevin, Christopher. "Baraka Buys Bunk: Furor over poet's conspiracy paranoia." *Skeptical Inquirer*, Jan-Feb, 2003.

Lacey, Henry C. *To Raise, Destroy, and Create: The Poetry, Drama, and Fiction of Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)*. Troy, N.Y.: Whitston, 1981.

Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Perazzo, John. "Racist Yale Laureate." *FrontPageMagazine.com* | July 24, 2003.

Pinsker, Sanford. *Surveying the Black Intellectual Scene*. The Virginia Quarterly Review.

3 Feb. 2004 <http://www.vqronline.org/index.php>

Söllors, Werner. *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism."*

New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.

Watts, Jerry. *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*.
New York: NYU
Press, 2001.

Weiss, Philip. "If Poet Amiri Baraka Becomes Ex-Laureate, Is it Bad For
Writers?" *The
New York Observer*, Oct 21, 2002.