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Agitator was a Tireless Force in American Culture

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against the wall mother f-----" — became a counterculture slogan for everyone from student protesters to the rock band Jefferson Airplane. A 2002 poem he wrote alleging that some Israelis had advance knowledge of the Sept. 11 attacks led to widespread outrage.

He was denounced by critics as buffoonish, homophobic, anti-Semitic, a demagogue. He was called by others a genius, a prophet, the Malcolm X of literature. Eldridge Cleaver hailed him as the bard of the "funky facts." Ishmael Reed credited the Black Arts Movement for encouraging artists of all backgrounds and enabling the rise of multiculturalism. The scholar Arnold Rampersad placed him alongside Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright in the pantheon of black cultural influences.

"From Amiri Baraka, I learned that all art is political, although I don't write political plays," the Pulitzer Prize-winning dramatist August Wilson once said.

First published in the 1950s, Baraka crashed the literary party in 1964, at the Cherry Lane Theater in Greenwich Village, when "Dutchman" opened and made instant history at the

height of the civil rights movement. Baraka's play was a one-act showdown between a middle class black man, Clay, and a sexually daring white woman, Lula, ending in a brawl of murderous taunts and confessions.

Baraka was still LeRoi Jones when he wrote "Dutchman." But the Cuban revolution, the assassination in 1965 of Malcolm X and the Newark riots of 1967, when the poet was jailed and photographed looking dazed and bloodied, radicalized him. Jones left his white wife (Hettie Cohen), cut off his white friends and moved from Greenwich Village to Harlem. He renamed himself Imamu Ameer Baraka, "spiritual leader blessed prince," and dismissed the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as a "brainwashed Negro." He helped organize the 1972 National Black Political Convention and founded the Congress of African People. He also founded community groups in Harlem and Newark, the hometown to which he eventually returned.

The Black Arts Movement was essentially over by the mid-1970s, and Baraka distanced himself from some of his harsher comments — about Dr. King, about gays and about whites in general.




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