

PASSAIC COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE NEWS



Poet, Educator Author and Activist Amiri Baraka Appears in Program for African American History Month

Posted February 13, 2013

Poet, writer, dramatist, educator and activist Amiri Baraka was the featured guest at a special February 7 program honoring African American History Month 2013 at Passaic County Community College (PCCC).

The program was sponsored by the Student Programming Committee in association with the Organization of African Ancestry.

Students, faculty, and staff gathered in the Paterson Room on PCCC's Main Campus to hear the speech and poetry reading by Baraka, one of most respected and recognized voices to emerge during the Civil Rights movement and what came to be known as the Black Liberation movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Now 78, Baraka read from his works while offering recollections of his famed past, particularly the intense racial conflicts in Newark, New Jersey, where he was born and raised, as well as memories of civil rights leaders Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"There would be no Obama," he said, referring to the United States' first Black president, if not for the struggles of those earlier activists.

"You have to fight to get change," Baraka insisted in his continuing criticism of racial and social oppression, citing examples throughout history of colonialism and capitalism which, he said, is "built on slavery."

Often criticized for advocating violence and hate in his writing, Baraka took the position that when minorities collaborate with white leaders of oppressive social structures in an effort to find socially approved remedies discrimination and inequality, they usually did so to their detriment.

A writer of biting wit, Baraka sometimes clothed his critiques in humor. “When I was a kid in Newark, I was a weird kid,” he said, revealing that as a youth, he enjoyed reading Japanese haiku.

“Now I wrote some, but I call them low-ku,” he added, drawing laughs from the audience when he read a series of haiku containing sharp jabs at political figures, corporations, and the wealthy.

A former professor at Rutgers University and Columbia University, Baraka also taught at the State University of New York (SUNY) in Buffalo and Stony Brook and numerous other colleges. He is currently professor emeritus of Africana Studies at SUNY Stony Brook.

For his work as an author and poet, Baraka has received the PEN Open Book Award, American Book Award and Langston Hughes Award, as well as fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, among others.



Poet Amiri Baraka held the audience rapt in his February 7 presentation, a program celebrating African American History Month at PCCC.

He was named Poet Laureate of New Jersey in 1999, a position he held “for a few minutes,” he joked, referring to the widespread controversy over his appointment.

Baraka concluded the nearly two-hour program with a reading of his poem “Somebody Blew Up America,” a powerful indictment of racism in the United States and oppressors everywhere, written shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the country. A standing ovation followed.

The program also included music and dance presentations by students of the local Rosa Parks High School performing arts department.