

2013-J2954

LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTION mourning the death of Amiri Baraka, influential African American writer of poetry, drama, fiction, essays and music criticism

WHEREAS, It is the sense of this Legislative Body to pay tribute to the lives of those prominent individuals who distinguished themselves through their life's work; and

WHEREAS, It is with great sorrow and deep regret that this Legislative Body records the passing of Amiri Baraka who died on Thursday, January 9, 2014, at the age of 79, noting the significance of his purposeful life and accomplishments; and

WHEREAS, Amiri Baraka was an American writer of poetry, drama, fiction, essays and music criticism, and the author of numerous books of poetry and taught at a number of universities, including the State University of New York at Buffalo and the State University of New York at Stony Brook; and

WHEREAS, Amiri Baraka received the PEN Open Book Award, formerly known as the Beyond Margins Award, in 2008 for TALES OF THE OUT AND THE GONE; known to some as one of the most respected and most widely published Black writers of his generation; and

WHEREAS, Born Everett LeRoi Jones on October 7, 1934, in Newark, New Jersey, Amiri Baraka was formerly known as LeRoi Jones and Imamu Amear Baraka; his father, Coyt Leverette Jones, worked as a postal supervisor and lift operator, and his mother, Anna Lois Russ, was a social worker; and

WHEREAS, He attended Barringer High School, and in 1967, he adopted the Muslim name Imamu Amear Baraka, which he later changed to Amiri Baraka; as a child, he was transfixed by poetry and music; and

WHEREAS, In 1951, Amiri Baraka won a scholarship to Rutgers Universi-

ty, and one year later, he transferred to Howard University; his major fields of study were philosophy and religion; he also studied at Columbia University and the New School for Social Research; and

WHEREAS, In 1954, Amiri Baraka joined the United States Air Force as a gunner, reaching the rank of sergeant; after being discharged, he moved to Greenwich Village working initially in a warehouse for music records; and

WHEREAS, It was at this time Amiri Baraka's interest in jazz began; he came into contact with avant-garde Beat Generation, Black Mountain poets and New York School poets; and

WHEREAS, In 1958, Amiri Baraka married Hettie Cohen, with whom he had two daughters, Kellie Jones and Lisa Jones; and

WHEREAS, Together, Amiri and Hettie founded TOTEM PRESS, which published such Beat icons as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg; they also jointly founded a quarterly literary magazine YUGEN, which ran for eight issues from 1958 until 1962; and

WHEREAS, Furthermore, Amiri Baraka worked as editor and critic for the literary and arts journal KULCHUR from 1960 through 1965; along with Diane di Prima, he edited the first 25 issues from 1961 until 1963 of their magazine THE FLOATING BEAR; and

WHEREAS, In 1961, Amiri Baraka published his first book of poems; he also co-founded the New York Poets Theatre with Diane di Prima, choreographers Fred Herko and James Waring, and actor Alan S. Marlowe; in June of 1962, his daughter, Dominique di Prima was born; and

WHEREAS, In 1963, Amiri Baraka wrote a book called BLUES PEOPLE, a volume of jazz criticism, many believe to be his signature work, that changed people's ideas about the importance of African American culture; and

WHEREAS, The assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, during the height of the Civil Rights movement, motivated Amiri Baraka to move to Harlem where he had an extensive presence; he founded the Black Repertory

Theatre/School in Harlem, and became one of the key figures at the forefront of the Black Arts Movement - Black Aesthetic Movement (BAM) which included other notable African American literary pioneers and giants such as Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Maya Angelou, Hoyt W. Fuller and Rosa Guy; and

WHEREAS, The Black Arts Movement was inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, specifically the teachings of the Nation of Islam and the Black Power Movement, and is considered to be one of the most significant periods of African American literature; and

WHEREAS, The Black Arts Movement would endure until the mid 1970s and change the face of literature and arts by inspiring and encouraging diverse literary and artistic works that reflected the various experiences of African American politics, culture and history during one of the most pivotal eras in our country's history; and

WHEREAS, In 1966, Amiri married his second wife, Sylvia Robinson, who later adopted the name Amina Baraka; and

WHEREAS, In 1967, he lectured at San Francisco State University, and his second book of jazz criticism came out, BLACK MUSIC, a collection of previously published music journalism, including the seminal APPLE CORES columns from DOWN BEAT magazine; and

WHEREAS, That same year, Amiri Baraka, still LeRoi Jones, visited Maulana Karenga in Los Angeles and became an advocate of his philosophy of Kawaida, a multifaceted, categorized activist philosophy that produced the "Nguzo Saba," Kwanzaa, and an emphasis on African names; it was at this time that he adopted the name Imamu Amear Baraka; Imamu is a Swahili title for "spiritual leader" which is derived from the Arabic word Imam; he dropped the honorific Imamu and eventually changed Amear, which means Prince, to Amiri, and Baraka means blessing; and

WHEREAS, In 1979, he became a lecturer in Stony Brook University's Africana Studies Department and was recognized by the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts; and

WHEREAS, During the 1982-1983 academic year, Amiri Baraka was a visit-

ing professor at Columbia University, where he taught a course entitled "Black Women and Their Fictions"; in 1984, he became a full professor at Rutgers University; the following year, he returned to Stony Brook, eventually becoming professor emeritus of African Studies; and WHEREAS, In 1987, together with Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, he was .SO DOC S R2954 RESO TEXT 2013

a speaker at the commemoration ceremony for James Baldwin; in 1989, Amiri Baraka won an American Book Award for his works as well as a Langston Hughes Award; and

WHEREAS, In 1990, he co-authored the autobiography of Quincy Jones, and in 1998, was a supporting actor in Warren Beatty's film "Bulworth"; in 1996, he contributed to the AIDS benefit album "Offbeat: A Red Hot Soundtrip" produced by the Red Hot Organization; and

WHEREAS, In July of 2002, Amiri Baraka was named Poet Laureate of New Jersey by Governor Jim McGreevey; and

WHEREAS, Amiri Baraka collaborated with hip-hop group The Roots on the song "Something in the Way of Things (In Town)" on their 2002 album Phrenology; in 2002, scholar Molefi Kete Asante included Amiri Baraka on his list of 100 Greatest African Americans; and

WHEREAS, As an influential ambassador for African American cultural arts as well as a spokesperson for social justice, Amiri Baraka truly distinguished himself as a powerful guiding force for generations of African American poets, writers and musicians, and civil rights leaders; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to mourn the death of Amiri Baraka, prominent African American writer of poetry, drama, fiction, essays and music criticism; and be it further RESOLVED, That a copy of this Resolution, suitably engrossed, be transmitted to the family of Amiri Baraka.