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Amiri Baraka stands by his words

New Jersey's poet laureate, facing a hailstorm of criticism for his fevered 9/11 poem, tells Salon that 4,000 Israelis really did stay home from the WTC that day.

SUZY HANSEN
OCTOBER 18, 2002 12:33AM (UTC)

It seems that the only person who feared that Amiri Baraka might stir up controversy as New Jersey's state poet laureate was Amiri Baraka himself.

Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) warned New Jersey Gov. James McGreevey that he would "catch hell," for honoring Baraka with the title last July. The poet made good on his promise at the Geraldine R. Dodge Festival in Stanhope, N.J., on Sept. 19. Baraka read the now-notorious poem "Somebody Blew Up America," in which he suggested that 4,000 Israelis stayed home from the World Trade Center on Sept. 11 because they had advance warning of the attacks. The following lines were met with boos from the crowd:

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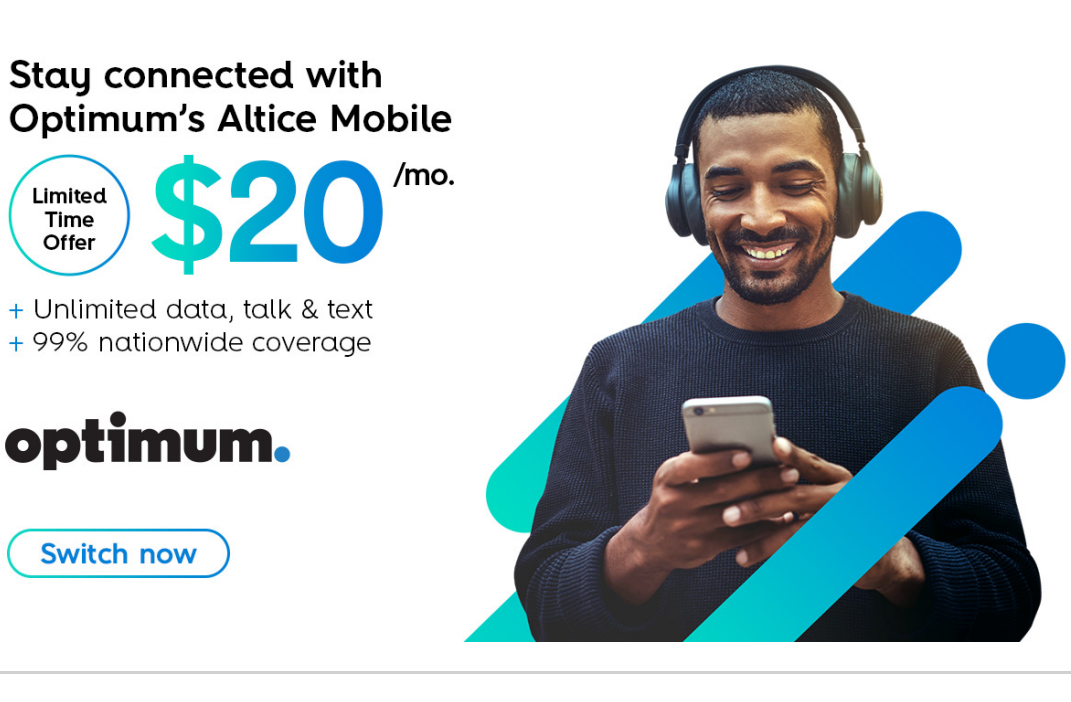

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"Who knew the World Trade Center was gonna get bombed.
Who told 4,000 Israeli workers at the twin towers
To stay at home that day
Why did Sharon stay away?"

The controversial stanza -- one out of over 60 -- refers to the "Big Lie," a conspiracy theory that has been embraced by many people in the Arab world. Besides being widely regarded as anti-Semitic, the theory is a logistical impossibility -- 4,000 Israelis never worked at the World Trade Center in the first place.

Not surprisingly, Baraka's poem has inspired outrage around the country. Days after Baraka read the poem at the Dodge Festival, the Jewish Standard, a weekly paper in northern New Jersey, denounced the poem in an editorial. The Anti-Defamation League quickly wrote a letter to Gov. McGreevey and compiled a list of Baraka's previous anti-Semitic remarks on its Web site. Various newspapers across the country also condemned the poem, including Baraka's hometown paper, the Newark Star Ledger, which challenged Baraka on his own terms:

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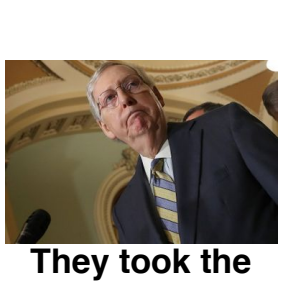

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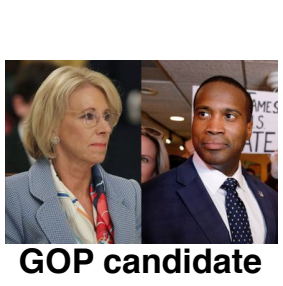

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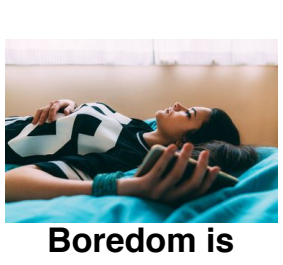

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"Of poets one hates to be critical
But not when they're anti-Semitical
And that's why Amiri
Of whom we've grown weary
Should quit, heeding pleas non-political."

But the 67-year-old Baraka won't quit, something he made clear at an Oct. 2 press conference at the Newark Public Library. "I will not apologize and I will not resign," he said. Baraka has vigorously defended himself against accusations of anti-Semitism, calling such charges an "an insidious attempt to defame and slander me."

In his speech, Baraka also explained that "the poem's underlying theme focuses on how black Americans have suffered from domestic terrorism since being kidnapped into U.S. chattel slavery. The relevance of this to Bush's call for a 'war on terrorism' is that black people feel we have always been victims of terror, governmental and general, so we cannot get as frenzied and hysterical as the people who [are] asking us to dismiss our history and contemporary reality to join them, in the name of a shallow 'patriotism,' in attacking the majority of people in the world, especially people of color and in the third world."

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According to New Jersey law, the governor can't fire its poet laureate, a post that lasts two years and includes a $10,000 honorarium. Now McGreevey is pushing for legislation that will give him the power to do so.

It's a murky situation, especially post-Sept. 11, with a possible attack on Iraq looming. As Shai Goldstein, executive director of the Anti-Defamation League of New Jersey told Salon, and as other journalists have suggested over the past year, anti-Semitism appears to be on the rise around the world. It's no wonder that Gov. McGreevey, under much political pressure, would want to clean up the mess about the state bard as thoroughly as possible.

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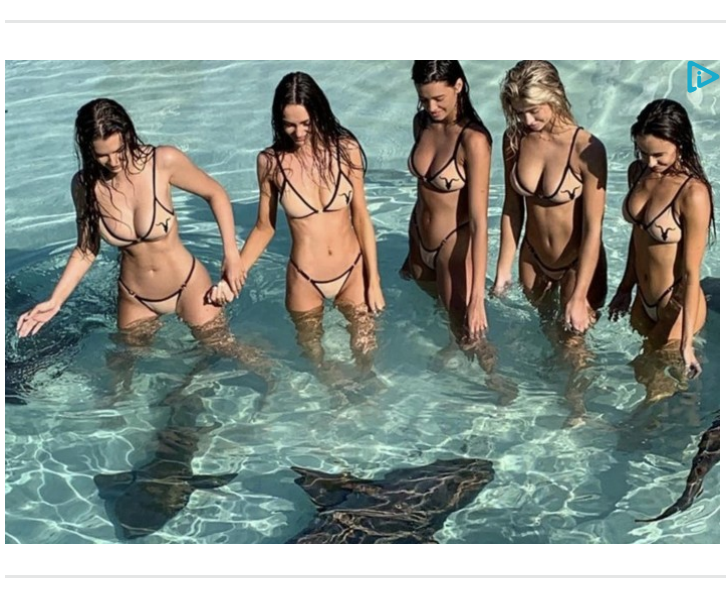

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Two significant questions remain: Would firing Baraka amount to censorship? And why was the notorious incendiary poet and radical activist, who has faced charges of racism and anti-Semitism in the past, selected for the rather prim position of "laureate" in the first place?

Let's start with the second question. Baraka's poetry, plays and politics have often been inflammatory. Ishmael Reed, another prolific African-American writer who, despite having had some disagreements with Baraka in the past, is publishing the poet's next book, explained, "That's his school. Allen Ginsberg went on trial for 'Howl.' It's a provocative movement. This is not the first time that Baraka's been subjected to controversy. That's part of that movement. Sometimes they go off the deep end. That's theater. That's art."

But Baraka is more than just a provocateur, and his critics have valid reasons for calling his work anti-Semitic. In 1980, Baraka published the essay "Confessions of a Former Anti-Semite" in the Village Voice. It's a long piece that starts with his childhood in Newark and chronicles his artistic growth in Greenwich Village, his prominent role in the Black Arts Movement and the writing of his most famous work, "The Dutchman," in 1964. That play, an attack on white liberalism, was an Obie Award-winner.

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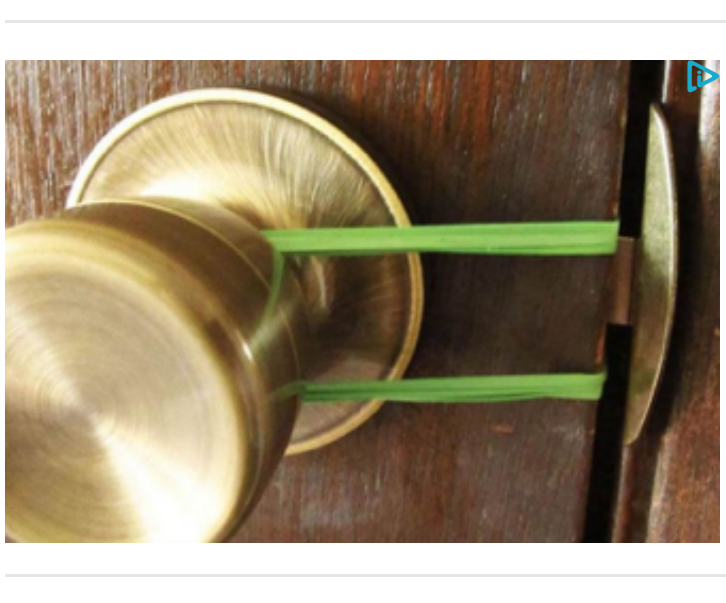

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At the time, Baraka was married to a Jewish woman named Hettie Cohen. But after Malcolm X's assassination, Baraka embraced black nationalism. He divorced Cohen around this time, writing in the article that, "As a Black man married to a white woman, I began to feel estranged from her ... How could someone be married to the enemy?" Baraka later moved back to Newark and adopted Marxism.

Although Baraka insists that it was a Village Voice editor, not Baraka, who came up with the title "Confessions of a Former Anti-Semite," the essay does read like a confession, or at least like an explanation of Baraka's controversial beliefs. He doesn't deny that anti-Semitism factored into his political growth. While he stipulates that his dislike for Jews stems from his problem with whites in general, it's obvious that he has a more complex problem with Jews.

"We also know that much of the vaunted Jewish support of Black civil rights organizations was in order to use them," Baraka wrote. "Jews, finally, are white, and suffer from the same kind of white chauvinism that separates a great many whites from Black struggle." Much of his problem with Jews seems to stem from resentment of their claims to the status of an oppressed people: "... these Jewish intellectuals have been able to pass over into the Promised Land of American privilege." He also addresses his rejection of Israel: "Zionism is a form of racism."

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Baraka comes clean in the end. "Anti-Semitism is as ugly an idea and as deadly as white racism and Zionism ... As for my personal trek through the wasteland of anti-Semitism, it was momentary and never completely real."

Still, a look at Baraka's poetry -- lines of which he cites in this essay -- would suggest that his anti-Semitism was very real. In some, his hatred toward Jews is matched by his hatred toward other groups, such as Italians and the Irish. "I have written only one poem that has definite aspects of anti-Semitism ... and I have repudiated it as thoroughly as I can," he wrote. That poem, "For Tom Postell, Dead Black Poet" includes lines like the following: "I got the extermination blues, jewboys" and "so come for the rent, jewboys."

It's lines like these that have compelled such critics as Jerry Gafio Watts, a recent biographer of Baraka, and commentator Stanley Crouch to call attention to the anti-Semitism in Baraka's work.

"The governor has it all wrong," Crouch wrote in the Daily News. "Jones [Crouch insists on calling Baraka by his given name] should not be asked to resign. Those who appointed him should resign ... if they have read his work over the last 35 years. It's an incoherent mix of racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, black nationalism, anarchy and ad hominem attacks relying on comic book and horror film characters and images that he has used over and over."

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Black conservative activist and anti-affirmative action crusader Ward Connerly went further, bluntly suggesting that the committee who selected Baraka were trying to be politically correct.

"It is inconceivable that a white, anti-Semitic bigot who produced 'poetry' like Mr. Baraka's would ever get funding from the New Jersey Arts Council, let alone be appointed as the state's poet laureate," Connerly wrote in the Washington Times. "... Yet, because Mr. Baraka is seen as an 'authentic' black artistic voice, he gets a pass from the council on matters of decency and taste."

It's not only the New Jersey Arts Council who considers Baraka an important poet. Baraka is featured in the Norton Anthology of African-American Literature (of course, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, also anti-Semites, are featured in other Norton anthologies). Last year, he was inducted into the Academy of Arts and Letters, whose members include Stephen Sondheim, Jasper Johns and Mark Twain (members are selected by their peers). The list of notables who think of Baraka as, at the very least, an influential figure, is fairly long. For example, Stanford scholar Arnold Rampersad puts him in league with Frederick Douglass and Ralph Ellison as one of eight writers "who have significantly affected the course of African-American literary culture."

And according to two of the four poets who nominated him -- a committee organized by the New Jersey Arts Council -- Baraka was as logical a choice as any.

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"If you look at any of the critical material and standard anthologies, he is represented," said James Haba, the director of the Dodge Festival and one of the poets who nominated Baraka. "He has the national and international reputation that will persist beyond this moment. He is a New Jersey native, he lived almost all his life in Newark. He also has a strong following in the black community.

"What are you going to do? This is a major literary figure who has been active in New Jersey life for almost four decades."

Gerald Stern, the first poet laureate of New Jersey, who also nominated Baraka, agreed.

"If I were to sit down with other poets in my living room a lot of names would come up: Alicia Ostriker, Stephen Dunn, C.K. Williams and Amiri Baraka, just to name a few," said Stern. "It's not an abnormal choice. It's a legitimate choice."

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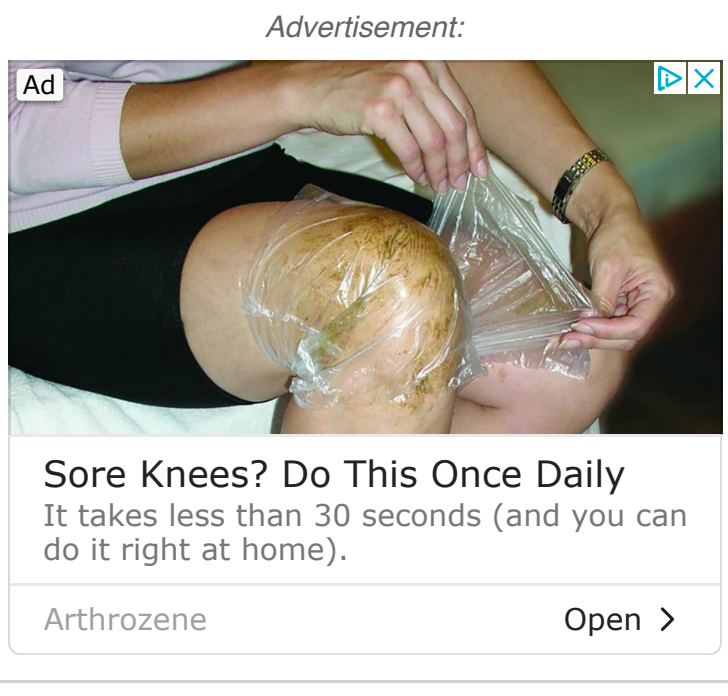

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Both poets had not read "Somebody Blew Up America." Baraka wrote the poem in October of 2001 and while it was circulated on the Internet and throughout the world, the only media attention it received at the time was in an article in the Daily Princetonian, the Princeton University student newspaper.

Both Stern and Haba cited Baraka's 1980 confession in the Village Voice as evidence that he has repented for his sins. Neither of the poets believe he should be fired.

"Did he write anti-Semitic things at one time? Yes. He did," Stern explained. "He apologized profusely so I took him at his word. I know his poetry and plays well. But I didn't sit down for hours and ask to see his latest poetry. Maybe we should have. We should have done a lot of things. There was a sense that he had mended his ways."

Stern suggested that he might not have nominated Baraka had he read "Somebody Blew Up America": "'Israeli' is a code word for 'Jew' and he knows that, too. He's a brilliant man. And there's a long history of black-Jewish animosity, as well as friendship.

"I am sensitive to what appears to be the anti-Semitic utterance which reflects that Jews knew in advance [about the Sept. 11 attacks]. I'm sensitive as a Jew. However, a man is allowed to be paranoid."

What might be most disturbing about the episode, however, is that Baraka -- who phrases all of his ideas in the form of questions in the poem -- really does believe that 4,000 Israeli workers stayed away from the World Trade Center on Sept. 11.

"Yes, I believed it," Baraka told Salon. "I wouldn't have written it if I didn't believe it. They have no right to call me anti-Semitic. I can't have a position about a foreign country? They're trying to protect the image of Israel so Bush can make war."

In fact, Baraka believes that other Western nations, such as France and Germany, also had advance knowledge of the Sept. 11 attacks, although it is the U.S. and Israel that he specifically targets in the poem.

"They couldn't 'connect the dots'? The fact is that the U.S. and Israel know they will be exposed. I know it will be."

Baraka also called attention to other parts of his poem -- stanzas that express sympathy for the suffering of Jews:

"Who put the Jews in ovens,
and who helped them do it
Who said 'America First'
and ok'd the yellow stars"

According to Goldstein of the Anti-Defamation League, one stanza does not help Baraka's case.

"He claims to respect the victims of the Shoah," Goldstein stated, "but his words are designed to perpetuate the murder of millions of Jews in Israel."

But it is rash to shove Baraka out the door as if he's some lone lunatic? Both Stern and Haba raised the logical point that surely, if Baraka believes this, he's not the only one -- and that's a much bigger problem than one man and a poem.

"I'm sorry to say that he's not the only one who believes that's true," Haba said. "I don't believe it's true. Are we going to find some way to talk with people who believe that? That's a serious issue that we might be tending to."

Deborah Jacobson, executive director of the ACLU of New Jersey, agrees. "We can't continue to use our pain and fear to justify our disregard for freedom, justice and equality. When we all allow for the disintegration of our core democratic beliefs, then we're really giving in to the terrorists."

Goldstein rejects the claim that Baraka's First Amendment rights would be violated if he were fired. "He has the right to say anything he wants," Goldstein said. "He does not have the right to be honored for his speech. Does the First Amendment protect your right to not be fired for something you said?"

Still, according to Robert Pinsky, former U.S. poet laureate and author of "Democracy, Culture, and the Voice of Poetry," "Poet laureate is not a job or a role or a government position, it is an honorary term. It is a form of recognition, like the key to the city ... 'Poet laureate' does not entitle one to anything or oblige one to anything. It is like being given a compliment. You can't fire somebody from a compliment.

"The poet laureate of New Jersey has the same right as any other American to make a fool of himself. Compliments can be regretted, but not revoked."

Well, it's pretty obvious that the governor of New Jersey regrets the compliment he paid the artist Amiri Baraka. Baraka, however, doesn't seem particularly concerned about how his politics might be affecting his art.

"Does anyone doubt that the 'Cantos' would be much better if [Ezra] Pound's thinking were less cockeyed, provincial, demented, nasty?" said Pinsky. "Poets are people; their works are human works. We all likely know, or can easily imagine, people capable of saying stupid, vicious things who also sometimes say beautiful or wise things.

"If a poem or a person espouses a stupid or vicious proposition, that makes the poem or person worse, in my judgment ... In other words, each of us, and each of our works, is to be judged on the merits. Moral viewpoint is among the merits, I think."

SUZY HANSEN

Suzy Hansen, a former editor at Salon, is an editor at the New York Observer.

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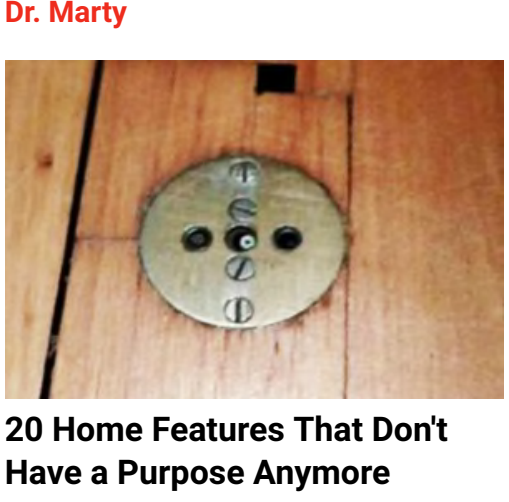

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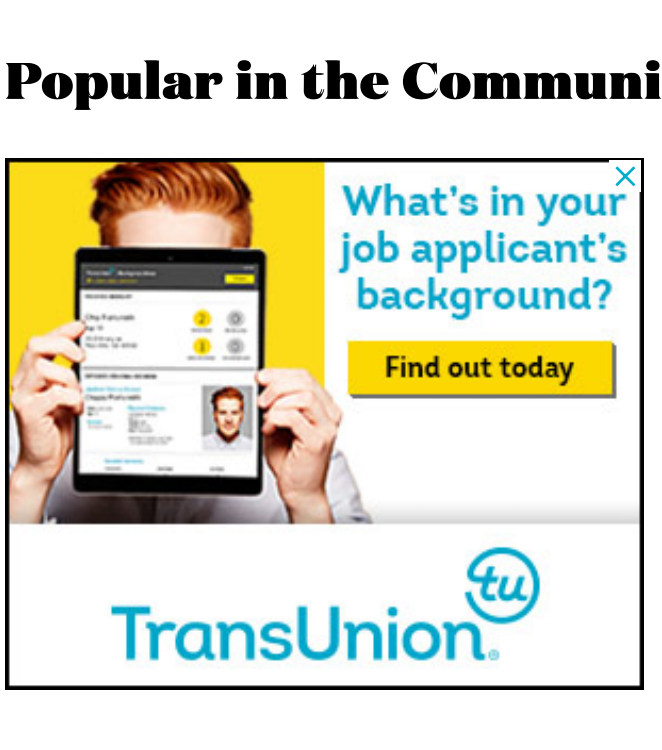

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