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Response 4; Prompt 8  
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*2. As a leader of the Black Arts Movement, and then and now an outspoken political poet, Amiri Baraka is obviously a controversial figure. I would like you to choose to write about his poetry as embodying either an important and visionary voice in American poetic/political/racial discourse, or “nothing more than mere thuggery superimposed on hurt black feelings, impotence and defeat” (Beach, 133).*

Amiri Baraka, aka Leroy Jones, is the type of writer that writes whatever is on his mind and does not care what others may think. If it sounds good to him and relates to him, it makes sense. To me, this is obviously controversial yet revolutionary. Because of this disposition, I find it hard to either put Baraka in a category of visionary or “thuggery.” If a person of race hears his words and has experiences of hate and discrimination, he has a much greater sense of understanding because he has been where Baraka has been. However, on the other side, if someone who has never experienced the kind of experiences that Baraka has, black, white, Asian, whatever, he might not understand and look at his words as nothing but just pure hatred and anger. When I read Baraka’s poems whether they be *Black Art*, *When We’ll Worship Jesus*, *Monday of B-Flat*, or others far and in between, I see him as a poet with a half visionary voice and half hurt black feelings sprawled out on paper; it all depends on who is listening.

This idea of “who is listening” is shown greatly in the film that we watched on Baraka. In the library scene, Baraka told his poetry and throughout the whole presentation, some people would clap at things at said, while others did not. While he was answering questions asked of him, some of his answers appealed to the audience members, while some of his answers evoked no emotion at all. However, with all this being said, no matter what was said or answered, the audience gave him great amounts of respect not only for his great poetry and presentation, but

because he is able to stand up in front of people and speak his mind with no looks of hesitation or nervousness of what people might think.

In *Black Art*, Baraka uses tone and sound effects to get his own point across indirectly that his race has suffered more pain and agony than people of Jewish descent have in the history of the world. In response to the question proposed, *Black Art* is nothing but a hate poem full of stereotypes, personified poetic death devices, and words of pure hate crime. These stereotypes being when he writes about “dope selling wops,” (Line 24)<sup>1</sup> and personified poetic death devices when he talks about “Hearts Brains / Souls splintering fire” (11-2)<sup>2</sup>, or “Another bad poem cracking / steel knuckles in a jewlady’s mouth” (39-40).<sup>3</sup> We all know as readers that poems cannot physically do the things that Baraka speaks of, but that is not the intent of the poet’s words. His intent is merely speaking volumes of other races, stripping them “naked to the world!” (38-9)<sup>4</sup> so that all can try and see that blacks suffered more than anyone and that blacks receive the most prejudice. However, I feel that the way in which Baraka attempts this in *Black Art*; he pushes the line boldly and arrogantly.

With these objects being identified within the poem, it would be very hard for anyone to view Baraka as a visionary voice for the black community. When reading this poem, Baraka’s words are juxtaposed to Hitler’s views of labeling the Jewish community as the “convenient scapegoat,”<sup>5</sup> as the footnote to *Black Art* states, to the reason why the downfall of Germany

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<sup>1</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Black Art,” *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, ed. Cary Nelson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 998. All subsequent Baraka quotations are also taken from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> “Black Art,” 998.

<sup>3</sup> “Black Art,” 998.

<sup>4</sup> “Black Art,” 998.

<sup>5</sup> “Black Art,” 998.

occurred. Sure, Hitler's views to the people of Germany made sense whether it was forced upon them or not, but to the rest of the world, Hitler's views were viewed as demonic, sick, and politically incorrect in an unheard of degree. Whether or not *Black Art* was accepted by the black community, the white community, or the entire world for that matter, Baraka's message was heard "LOUD" (55)<sup>6</sup> and clear.

*Black Art* was written in 1969, and since then, another form of hatred towards racism and politics has evolved through words that being hip-hop. Starting in the early 70's, hip hop took old songs and tracks and mixed them together to create "fresh" beats, therefore allowing artists to "rap" or sing on top of it to create music. Towards the middle 80's, early 90's, the genre transformed into a form of hip-hop called "gangster rap." These lyrics included words of hatred toward other gangs, drug dealers, political figures, law enforcement, and stereotyped races. The same type of material that Baraka wrote about in the late 60's and still writes about today.

Some of the most notorious rappers in the history of hip-hop that have written lyrics that mostly had to do with the issues listed above have been the group NWA, Dr. Dre, Tupac Shakur, and Notorious B.I.G. The biggest topic, however, that rap has tackled over the years has been law enforcement, or the police. NWA, for example, has a song entitled, "Fuck the Police," whose message is clear from the title, and Tupac Shakur has his own song called "Thug Mansion," in which he writes, "Shit, tired of gettin' shot at / tired of gettin' chased by the police / gettin' arrested."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Black Art," 999.

<sup>7</sup> Tupac Shakur, "Thug Mansion," *Better Dayz*, released 2002.

Amiri Baraka also has his own opinions on the police in his poem entitled, *Monday in B-Flat*, as he writes, “I can pray / all day / & God / wont come. / But if I call / 911 / The Devil / Be here / in a minute!”<sup>8</sup> He says that he can pray all day and God won’t come physically, but if you call 9-1-1, the devil, or the police, will be there in a minute. As mentioned earlier about how Baraka is looked at depending on who is listening, he does two things in this poem that the average rapper can relate to. First, he calls the police “the devil,” and he also insinuates that because he is black, they will be there as quick as possible to either arrest him or accuse him of some crime that has taken place. But aside his words about the police and racism, he also touches upon another topic of interest to a lot of people no matter what race, that being religion.

Religion is the topic of discussion in Baraka’s *When We’ll Worship Jesus*, a hundred and thirty seven line poem speaking as the voice of all black people saying that we’re not going to worship Jesus because Jesus can’t save us from what’s going on in the world, so we’re going to worship something that will “visualize change, and force it,” that being “revolution.”<sup>9</sup> *When We’ll Worship Jesus* is a poem that is an important and visionary voice in American poetic/political/racial discourse because of the way he uses the repetition of “we,” speaking for the people of the black community. The reason why I feel that he accomplishes this in a controversial but visionary way is because, just as it was mentioned in class, “black life is rhythm wrapped,” which is shown in the poem with rhythm and diction wrapped up in sound. Because of the repetitive use of “we,” the poem screams comparisons to speeches by civil right leaders such as Martin Luther King, whom of which was actually bashed by Baraka in *Black Art*,

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<sup>8</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Monday in B-Flat,” *Amiri Baraka: Online Poems*. Retrieved 7 Apr. 2008 from < [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/Pbaraka\\_poem9.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/foolingwithwords/Pbaraka_poem9.html) >.

<sup>9</sup> “When We’ll Worship Jesus,” 1001.

and Malcolm X, whose death in 1965 lead to Baraka (then Jones) to “repudiate his former life and end his marriage.”<sup>10</sup> These two leaders especially used repetition expressively, whether it is King’s “I have a dream,” or Malcolm’s “I believe...” to make points and to drive large crowds of people to follow their views and/or missions.

As mentioned earlier, I respect Amiri Baraka and what he wrote about because it takes a lot of nerve, dedication, and belief to say what he said. Looking deeper into this notion of why he wrote the way he wrote without the acknowledgement of fear, I found a poem that he published entitled, *Ancient Music*. It is a very short poem, only six lines long, but yet its meaning digs so deep into Baraka’s carelessness of fear that it speaks volumes as to why he says the controversial things he does.

“The main thing  
to be against  
is *Death!*  
Everything Else  
is a  
Chump!”<sup>11</sup>

In essence, Amiri Baraka feels strongly about his views and beliefs when it pertains to the history of mistreatment to the black race or how much he despises how the black race tries to become part of the white race to be accepted. This notion is something that cannot be contended against. But instead of holding it all back and being afraid of other people hating against him, not being accepted as politically correct, or being shot, he realizes that in life, there is life and then there is death, all the other things to be afraid of are just “chumps.” He fears death only and

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<sup>10</sup> “Amiri Baraka,” The Academy of American Poets, Retrieved 7 Apr. 2008 from < <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/445> >.

<sup>11</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Ancient Music,” AmiriBaraka.com. Retrieved 7 Apr. 2008 from < [http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/poetry/baraka\\_jones.html#ancientmusic](http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/poetry/baraka_jones.html#ancientmusic) >.

when it comes, he realizes that there is nothing he could do about it. Because of this, he takes life on head first, speaks his mind, and if people follow him, great, but if not, he just does not care because as long as he gets his word out, someone will listen. Whether it is whites, blacks, Asians, Jamaicans, English, Jews, neo-Nazis, politicians, the working class, poor, rich, religious, atheists, or the average Joe, someone will listen. To some, Baraka might be another Hitler, full of hate and disposition. To some, Baraka might be a visionary or even a genius for being able to push the boundaries of what is accepted. But no matter what he may be viewed as or how many American Poetry Anthologies he is left out of, he will always be considered one of the most outspoken, controversial, yet greatest poets in American History. Chchchchchchchchchchch...