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Humanist captivates students with poetry, speech

By John Doucette
Special to the Campus

The Office of Multicultural Affairs, the African American Studies Association and the Maine Center for the Arts welcomed poet, playwright, author, activist, teacher and soon-to-be actor Amari Baraka Thursday evening.

Baraka held the crowd in the palm of his hand while he talked about Ebonics, slavery and the overall struggles of the African Americans.

"We have never spoken English in the United States. I don't know if you knew that," Baraka said as he tried to explain Ebonics. "Most of the people that came to this country from Ireland, Scotland, Wales, they never spoke English, either. There are about 50 varieties of English in the world. More people from Nigeria speak English than people in this country; more people from India speak English than in this country."

Baraka said there is no one way of talking, and explained that when people are in their homes they speak differently from when they are in class or in a restaurant.

"Language is shaped by use, not dictionaries," he said. "Nothing is standard in America except oppression."

Baraka stressed that people are not all that different. He said that rock 'n' roll, or so-called white music, is a product of rhythm and blues. Language, just like everything else, is political.

"Political power defines what is correct and what is incorrect in speech," he said. "If you say 'I got a gig,' then someone with a gun says, 'No, you're supposed to say, 'I got a job.' Then you say, 'I got a job.'"

Mike Long, a UMaine student, said, "It was amazing how he looks at the English language. He explained that you have to get a grasp on how all languages are used before you can understand the English language."

Baraka said democracy was not what it seemed in the United States. He urged that Americans unite. He said he wanted to unite the middle working class and get one vote as one people, and said that is where people will get their power.

"The democracy, as we call it, in our country is backwards. Why if you only get 51 percent of the vote in a state do you get all of the electoral votes?" he asked. "Get rid of that and have each vote count as one vote."

During the question-and-answer portion of his talk, a man asked Baraka to read an O.J. Simpson poem. Baraka said he wished the church burnings were on the news every day and not the O.J. trial.

"They did it all wrong over there," Baraka said. "If O.J. was tried where he should have been, in the white neighborhood with his peers, he would have been in jail a long time ago. O.J. did not belong in the black neighborhoods."

"If you people were not afraid of what happened in the Rodney King trial, then he would have stayed among his peers and he would have been convicted," he said.

He read poetry to the capacity crowd of approximately 60 or 70 people in the Bodwell Lounge.

Assistant Dean of Multicultural Student Affairs Adonis Ferreira said, "I hope students and teachers that are here can bring this back to their class and encourage other people to go out and see speakers like Amari and to read and



Amari Baraka speaks at Bodwell Lounge in the MCA on Wednesday. (Dave Gagne Photo.)

be influenced by Amari and not MTV. I am glad to see an African-American man say what he has to say. Amari does not hide anything. Many African-Americans feel the same way as him, but they cannot say it because they feel oppressed. I hope people hear him and talk about him."

James Allen, a UMaine student, said, "He was very stimulating. It was a good reminder of how selfish we are in this country. It is so rare to have a so-called radical come to Maine and talk — it was refreshing."

"I thought he was intense. He conveyed a lot of powerful images in a short period of time," UMaine student Sabrina Keisch said.

Baraka wrapped up by saying that people are not as different as people think and language and people can not be defined in one way. Most educated people are bilingual; we just speak two versions of the same language.

"It is hard to put into words how I feel. I would say nothing could distract me from what he was saying, and that is a very good thing," UMaine student Shontay Delaloe said.