

**IDENTITY AND WOMEN POETS OF THE BLACK ATLANTIC:  
MUSICALITY, HISTORY, AND HOME**

KAREN ELIZABETH CONCANNON

SUBMITTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR IN PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

SCHOOL OF ENGLISH

SEPTEMBER 2014

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

This copy has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

The right of Karen E. Concannon to be identified as Author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am grateful for the wisdom and assistance of Dr Andrew Warnes and Dr John Whale. They saw a potential in me from the start, and it has been with their patience, guidance, and eye-opening suggestions that this project has come to fruition. I thank Dr John McLeod and Dr Sharon Monteith for their close reading and constructive insights into the direction of my research. I am more than appreciative of Jackie Kay, whose generosity of time and spirit transcends the page to interpersonal connection. With this work, I honour Dr Harold Fein, who has always been a champion of my education. I am indebted to Laura Faile, whose loving friendship and joy in the literary arts have been for me a lifelong cornerstone. To Robert, Paula, and David Ohler, in each of my endeavours, I carry the love of our family with me like a ladder, bringing all things into reach. Above all, I dedicate this to James F. Concannon, III, whose infallible support and unwavering love have helped me be the person I am. Without him, this, like so many things, would never have been possible.

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis takes as its subject the points of connections and comparison that exist between five African American and Black British women poets, whose writings range from 1942 to the present day. It concentrates on the interconnection and reconstruction of their spatio-temporal geographies and their utilisation of musical traditions and historical narratives and ideas of location-dependent selfhood to articulate identity. Whilst previous scholarship tends to focus on the confines of a nation-state modality, with specifically American or British interpretations of African heritage, the methodology here is centred on the importance of a transatlantic poetic discourse to identify how literary and cultural exchanges transcend these borders.

The first chapter examines the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, whose ability to combine traditional forms and African American vernacular, especially in what I identify as her 'blues sonnets', contextualises the voice of the marginalised in segregated Chicago within post-War US culture. The following chapter then shows that Brooks's near-contemporary, Margaret Walker, often also follows the formal conventions of the English poetic tradition yet does so to represent the ordeal of Jim Crow segregation, while also harnessing what I will show is a mythopoeic 'I', which allows her to inhabit traumatic histories of slavery and its long US aftermath. The public, political grounding established by these poets is adopted by Nikki Giovanni, whose categorical voice before and after the Black Arts Movement constructs an historically minded identification for African Americans, with respect to the relationship between a prejudiced society and recognition of African origins, particularly through the musical and oral traditions that predicated the trajectory of African American cultural productions. In the fourth chapter, I then show that the work of Grace Nichols develops this invocation of an African 'source' and that her lyrical aesthetic, likewise, makes use of her journeys across the Atlantic and of a perpetual reconstruction of her Afro-Caribbean and Black British identities; she articulates these through her under-examined tributes to American literary influences. This sense of an Atlantic triangulation then provides the thesis with the locus through which it approaches Jackie Kay's oeuvre. In the final chapter, I show that Kay regularly examines her complex Scottish-Nigerian heritage through the animating lens of African American blues. As such, this thesis assembles together a new and transnational group of poets, examining the intersections of their work and illuminating the shared motifs of home, origins, transformative self-identity, musicality, historical consciousness, and racial and sexual politics.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b><u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</u></b>	ii
<b><u>ABSTRACT</u></b>	iii
<b><u>TABLE OF CONTENTS</u></b>	iv
<b><u>INTRODUCTION</u></b>	1
<b><u>CHAPTER 1: GWENDOLYN BROOKS: TENSION AND POETIC IDENTITY</u></b>	34
Black Arts Movement and the Problems of Form and Audience	34
Precursors and Motivations in Form	39
Development of a Formal Poetics	42
Brooks and the Sonnet	51
African American Vernacular: The Blues Sonnet	60
Women-Centred Poetry: Prefiguring Contemporary Feminism	71
<b><u>CHAPTER 2: MARGARET WALKER: COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND A SOUTHERN VOICE</u></b>	86
Sonnets of <i>For My People</i>	90
Elegy: Intersection Between Public and Private	110
Poems Inspired By Beatitudes	115
Anti-Beatitudes?	122
Future as Interpreted Through the Past	126
<b><u>CHAPTER 3: NIKKI GIOVANNI: HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND METAMORPHOSIS</u></b>	135
Deviation from the Black Arts Movement: Giovanni’s Protean Aesthetic	138
Historical Consciousness Grounds Creative Articulation	143
Vernacular Tradition, Spirituals, and Blues Songs	156
Change as the Nature of Creativity: Paradoxes Overcome	165
Sexuality and Gender: Transcending and Expanding Historical Norms	173
Political and Domestic: Reliance on Close History	180
<b><u>CHAPTER 4: GRACE NICHOLS: JOURNEYING AND AMERICAN INFLUENCES</u></b>	187
Atlantic Crossing: Significance of American Precedents	187
Return to Africa: Journeying with Whitman, Hughes, and Walker	190
The River as Origin: An Historically American Trope	204
Return to Maternal ‘Source’: Brooks, Walker, Hughes, and Ellison	207
American Echoes of Transforming Self and Home	217
<b><u>CHAPTER 5: JACKIE KAY: TRANSFORMATIONS AND COMPLEX DUALISMS</u></b>	234
Empathy and Identity: The Lasting Impact of the Queen of Blues	237
A Link to Africa: A Heritage Inherited	251
Blurring of Boundaries: Rivers, Transitions, and Transformations	266
An Enduring Identity of Doubleness and Fusion	274
<b><u>CONCLUSIONS</u></b>	281
<b><u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u></b>	287
<b><u>APPENDIX: INTERVIEW WITH JACKIE KAY</u></b>	300

**INTRODUCTION**

‘Cover me with the leaves of your  
blackness Mother  
shed tears...  
...for I’m severed by ocean and  
longing’

--Grace Nichols

In this thesis, I examine the intersections between the work of five black women poets, both African American and Black British, who span the post-War years to the present: Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Nikki Giovanni, Grace Nichols, and Jackie Kay. I will show that each of these figures employs her poetry to interrogate—and at times construct—her own identity, through a specifically racialized and gender-sensitive perspective. The establishment of these points of connection, in turn, will suggest that more needs to be done than consider them as participants in their particular national traditions. Whereas critical consensus even now assimilates their poetry to nation-bound visions of literary history, their work itself never stops at the national boundary.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I suggest, they are linked together in a literary community by common elements of transatlantic experience, including historical consciousness, an engagement with musical tradition, and a dependence on location-driven identity.

There has been a surge within the last two decades for academics to adopt a

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*, edited by Charles Henry Rowell (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2013), *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr (New York, NY: Norton, 2004), or *Red: Contemporary Black British Poetry*, edited by Kwame Dawes (Leeds, UK: Peep Tree Press, 2010). Each of these texts defines their writers by the construction of the nation-state with limited ability to transcend these borders. Rowell says, ‘as each of them writes self against the backdrop of community, whose history and current circumstances are a persistent, though muted, presence...they write themselves, they write their communities, entities with particularized and collective histories that frame their lives as individuals and as members of a group, with interests that are aesthetic as well as social, economic, and political...privilege, the result of ancestral struggle and sacrifice and death’ (pp. xxxv, xli). Rowell’s introductory thoughts about African American poets might also equally apply to Black British poets, whose literary resources overlap across the Atlantic. Likewise, Dawes admits to the difficulty of defining the term Black British but suggests that the poets themselves are best left to their own definitions and self-identifications of the delimiting term (p. 19). Within these anthologies, where, collectively, each of these poets can be found, there is a categorisation that tends to preclude a transatlantic relationship between them, a gap which forms the basis for this thesis.

transnational approach to literary criticism. This methodology has been particularly spearheaded by the journal *American Quarterly*, whose publications have turned more and more towards a denunciation of scholarship bound by the confines of the nation-state in favour of the significance of rewritten boundaries and relative geographies to create an interstice in which various cultures and literatures might be in dialogue.<sup>2</sup> This modality was the basis for the recent text *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (2006), in which Wai Chee Dimock explains:

Literature is the home of nonstandard space and time. Against the official borders of the nation and against the fixed intervals of the clock, what flourishes here is irregular duration and extensions, some extending for thousands of years or thousands of miles, each occasioned by a different tie and varying with that tie, and each loosening up the chronology and geography of the nation.<sup>3</sup>

Dimock's understanding of the malleability of time and geography is important groundwork for this discourse, in that, resulting from this notion, "American literature...is seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages, and cultures".<sup>4</sup> Her interpretation of literature as a 'complex tangle of relations' goes hand in hand with discourse on the Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy's famous construction, that has also been

---

<sup>2</sup> Transnationalism and a re-interrogation of international relationships have been the subject of such scholars as Sheila Hones, Julia Leyda, Alfred Hornung, Laura Briggs, Gladys McCormick, J. T. Way, Emory Elliott, David G. Gutiérrez, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Matthew Pratt Guterl. For example, Sheila Hones and Julia Leyda have written, 'Specifically, we want to propose a conceptual shift away from a territorial geography and toward a relational geography, which is to say, a shift away from the practice of viewing space as a kind of container, within which Americanists act and across the distances of which they relate to each other, and toward the idea that it is the acting and the relating that literally produce the space', 'Geographies of American Studies', *American Quarterly*, 57 (2005), p. 1021. See also *South to A New Place: Region, Literature, and Culture*, edited by Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith (Baton Rouge, LA: University of Louisiana Press, 2002), in which southern or American literature is regularly cited in relation to international literary matrices that transcend restrictive boundaries. Additionally, refer to Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn, editors, *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004). The essays within this text ground Southern literature in its complex relationships with the Caribbean, Latin America, and South Africa to broaden transnational dialogue and literary exchange.

<sup>3</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

revisited recently as a means of applying a transnational mind-set to the humanities.<sup>5</sup>

Many of these scholars may have taken their cue from the president of the American Studies Association, Shelly Fisher Fishkin, whose address to the ASA in 2005 called for a major reworking within the academic discourse to deviate from the confines of a nation-state approach towards the ‘nation as a participant in a global flow of people, ideas, texts, and products’.<sup>6</sup> She goes on to say, ‘Our continued focus on local spaces will attend to the ways in which these spaces participate in global phenomena—“internal” and “external” migrations [and] the diffusion of cultural forms’. Despite this call for a change in methodology, the poets within this thesis, including both their poetry and scholarly criticism about them, are customarily encountered in anthologies dedicated to either African American or Black British writing, with little emphasis on texts that transcend, or even eliminate, these borders with regard to the larger, connective diaspora.<sup>7</sup> This thesis, however, simultaneously resumes the transnational trajectory of American Studies and does so with a collection of poets never before considered together.

What is more, I explore palpable commonalities in their work, including the reliance on the cultural significance of music, an historically grounded narrative arc, and the specificities of place, each as a determinant of changing identities in light of

---

<sup>5</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). This work has been taken up most notably by Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia, PA: Perseus Books, 2010); John Cullen Gruesser, *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies, and the Black Atlantic* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005); and most recently by Emila Maria Duran-Almarza and Esther Alvarez-Lopez, *Diasporic Women’s Writing of the Black Atlantic: (En)Gendering Literature and Performance* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014). Each of these critical texts underscores the scholarly shift towards transnational literary interpretation.

<sup>6</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, ‘Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004’, *American Quarterly*, 57 (2005), p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> See the anthologies designated previously, in which the poets are categorised along these national considerations. Although there are more scholars examining literature from a Black Atlantic approach than there used to be ten years ago, it is rarely done with a primarily poetic specialisation, such as I undertake here.

racial and sexual politics. Reading their work together allows for new insights into the way that aesthetics and identity cross borders in poetry. These poets engage in a multi-directional dialogue across the Atlantic that speaks to how identities are multiple, changing, nuanced, and complex; they owe their provenance to different inspirations, cultural locations and productions, interrogation of moments in an historical continuum, and varied levels of politicisation of both the domestic and the public. With attention to form and poetic explication, I examine the poets' responses to their contemporary environments, grounded in interconnected geographies, histories, and cultures in a linguistic exchange that examines the black female voice throughout the diaspora.

Through these common links, the poetry discussed here contributes to a wider study of black women poets. They construct and appellate gendered and racial identity, perhaps with the intent of overcoming the status as marginalised persons. Within this transatlantic framework, the reader can see that their poetic oeuvres, although of course individual and distinct, can also be read in light of their engagement with each or many of the others' work, highlighting the importance of re-drawing boundaries and drafting relative geographies across the Black Atlantic.

Throughout Brooks, Walker, Giovanni, Nichols, and Kay's volumes of poetry, there is a matrix of commonalities, juxtapositions, or relationships. All, for example, mobilise a form of historical consciousness by which they seek to convey social and racial memories that are at once individual and collective. All also engage and identify with the needs of the marginalised and oppressed, specifically with regards to racial and sexual prejudice. And all, too, create location-specific poetry that is at times autobiographical and deciphers how the individual may be conceptualised in light of the power of one's origins and lifelong journeying—the roots and routes of their lives—and a resulting re-interrogation of the meaning of home and the changing self. In

particular—and perhaps most tellingly—all of these poets also interact with musicality as a vital mode of expression, and not least with American blues, to which I will return.

With regard to my selection, structure, and methodology, I feel it is helpful to first discuss my choice of studying primarily women poets. To that end, my aim throughout this work is to moor my analyses within the framework of the feminine voice, as a specific lens through which the poets' experiences and interpretations of them may be viewed. Margaret Atwood suggests that 'Women writers belong together because they are different from men, and the writing they do is different...and cannot be read with the same eyeglasses as those used for the reading of male writers'.<sup>8</sup> This is accurate and a useful means of categorisation, yet another rationale for reading women together is their vocalisation of a type of common protest through which historically omitted voices, perspectives, experiences, and themes may be elucidated and affect change. Barbara Christian argues that for women poets:

themes not only protest the lives of women as they are, they also project visions of what might be. And the forms that [women] poets are using are increasingly based on cultural expressions as women. Images, language, modes of expression heretofore ignored or trivialized are now being mined for poetic possibility.<sup>9</sup>

Certainly the women in this thesis combine protest with vision, as seen in their work.

In the process of voicing what may have been omitted from the literary canon, women poets have been and continue to contribute to a literary dialogue widely dominated by the male perspective, diversifying twentieth century and contemporary verse as they '...engaged with, questioned, subverted or recast mainstream, overwhelmingly male-authored traditions of "English" poetry'.<sup>10</sup> As the poets here mobilise their voices within these traditions and articulate their vital role, they

---

<sup>8</sup> Margaret Atwood, Introduction to *Women Writers At Work: The Paris Review Interviews*, edited by George Plimpton (New York, NY: Random House, 1998), p. xi.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Christian, 'Afro-American Women Poets: A Historical Introduction' (1982), in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (Exeter, UK: Wheaton Press, 1985), p. 125.

<sup>10</sup> Vicki Bertram, Introduction to *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth Century Women Poets* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 2.

simultaneously rely on historical narratives in their ‘self-conscious search for origins, for connectedness, [that] may be...reflective of the more fluid boundaries women enjoy in their attachments to others’.<sup>11</sup> The fluidity of these boundaries, then, establishes a sense of common aim, or communal approach that figuratively supersedes a state of marginalisation, a commonality I explore through my examination. As Adrienne Rich says, ‘It’s not as interesting to me to explore the condition of alienation as a woman as it is to explore the condition of connectedness as a woman. Which is something absolutely new, unique historically, and finally so much more life-enhancing’.<sup>12</sup> Within this paradigm, women’s poetry, particularly that of the five poets collected here, therefore, corrects historical oversight by a patriarchal discourse, protests marginalised subject positions, and in so doing constructs a community in which the individual is articulated in relation to the collective and vice versa. As Audre Lorde says, ‘For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence...Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought’.<sup>13</sup> I anchor my poetic explications within this developed community, centring on the ‘vital necessity’ and literary importance of the female voice.

Through their expression of this voice and their participation in this community, the poets I examine here comprise an intertextual matrix, underscored by aesthetic dialogue and exchange. In their common themes of history, music, home, politics, and border crossing, they are linked by perspective and approach; they comprise a literary network that negotiates a growing transatlantic relationship, where their work facilitates examination of black female identity throughout the diaspora to ameliorate the

---

<sup>11</sup> Celeste Scheneck, ‘Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-Constructing the Elegy’, in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 5 (1986), p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Adrienne Rich, in *The New Woman’s Survival Sourcebook*, edited by Kirsten Grimstad and Susan Rennie (New York, NY: Knopf, 1975), p. 106.

<sup>13</sup> Audre Lorde, ‘Poetry Is Not a Luxury’, originally in *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture*, 3 (1977), reprinted in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984) (New York, NY: Ten Speed Press, 2007) p. 37.

exclusive readings that focus on the boundaries of nationalist identities. Each poet here formulates a plural self-identity in which the individual transforms and is continually re-constructed, even as part of the larger assemblage. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson says:

As gendered and racial subjects, black women speak/write in multiple voices—not all simultaneously or with equal weight, but with various and changing degrees of intensity, privileging one *parole* and then another. One discovers in these writers a kind of internal dialogue reflecting an *intrasubjective* engagement with the *intersubjective* aspects of self, a dialectic neither repressing difference nor, for that matter, privileging identity, but rather expressing engagement with the social aspects of self (“the other(s) in ourselves”). It is this subjective plurality (rather than the notion of the cohesive or fractured subject) that, finally, allows the black woman to become an expressive site for dialectics/dialogics of identity and difference.<sup>14</sup>

Contributing to the literary intersections I explicate and a kind of ‘subject plurality’, Gwendolyn Brooks begins my discussion, forming a cornerstone in the poetic matrix. Yomna Saber explains, ‘Brooks occupies a curious position in the larger African American canon. Brooks was not simply a talented poet as she was also the creator of a black poetic tradition. When she embarked on her poetic career there was no female black poet she could use as a role model’.<sup>15</sup> As such a pioneer within black women’s poetry, Brooks forms the first avenue into my discussion, facilitating examination of her peers and subsequent poets. She was a contemporary of Margaret Walker, who was later an influence for Nikki Giovanni. These poets open the dialogue to which Grace Nichols and Jackie Kay respond across the Atlantic. As I will demonstrate, each of these five poets anchors her aesthetics within the tropes of historical sensibility, musical influence, and the importance of home.

Certainly, there are other poets I may have chosen, such as Rita Dove, Alice

---

<sup>14</sup> Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, ‘Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Women Writers’ Literary Tradition’, in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, edited by Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> ‘This should not imply that Brooks was the first black woman to try her hand at poetry for the black canon had been enriched by the works of other women starting as far back as the eighteenth century with works by Phyllis Wheatley (1753?-1784), and developing in the nineteenth century in the poems of Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson (1875-1935) and Angelina Weld Grimke (1880-1958), and finally moving into the twentieth century with works by Anne Spencer (1882-1975) and others, but there was no modern model which influenced Brooks.’ Yomna Mohamed Saber, *Brave to Be Involved: Shifting Positions in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, 2010), p. 8.

Walker, Audre Lorde, or Maya Angelou. Although these women have been influential, prolific, and vital to the development of a black female poetic voice, their poetry does not cleave to this literary matrix as firmly as the poets I select here. Additionally, the poets I chose to exclude have been amply studied and anthologised, underscoring a critical opportunity to focus on those whose work has been examined with less focus previously.<sup>16</sup> Dove, Walker, Angelou, and Lorde have been routinely analysed as individuals and part of a group, usually within a primarily African American modality.<sup>17</sup> However, because of literary dialogue, figurative commonalities, significant transatlantic border crossing, and their constructed identities, Brooks, Walker, Giovanni, Nichols, and Kay should be examined together to facilitate discussion of their transatlantic intertextuality. The work I undertake is the first to explore how they intersect in this literary matrix of transnationalism.

Likewise, in my examination of their work, each poet occupies her own chapter, as opposed to a structure organised by thematic or formal considerations. Within this methodology, the poets are arranged approximately chronologically in terms of their poetic output, moving from World War II to the contemporary. In doing so, I develop a

---

<sup>16</sup> Within academic databases such as Project Muse and JSTOR, scholarly articles, reviews, and interviews with and about Maya Angelou, Rita Dove, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker vastly outnumber those about Margaret Walker, Nikki Giovanni, Grace Nichols, and Jackie Kay, emphasising the relative critical priority they have been given thus far. In the same catalogues, articles about Brooks and her poetry may be found in abundance; however, her inclusion here is as a direct result of the vital role she played as a pioneer within black women's poetics (see Note 15).

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2011). In this text, although Brooks's poetry is discussed, intertextual connections are drawn primarily between Harryette Mullen and Sonia Sanchez, as opposed to between Walker and Giovanni, or any Black British poets. See Angelyn Mitchell and Danielle K. Taylor, editors, *Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Here, discussion is heavy on Audre Lorde and Alice Walker and only glosses over the poetry of Brooks, Walker, and Giovanni, providing a space in which original connections may be drawn, as I do here. See Janet Gray, *Race and Time: African American Women's Poetics* (Iowa City, IA: Iowa University Press, 2004). Gray's work lays the groundwork for my research in her explication of earlier poets but does not go further than the Harlem Renaissance, whereas I resume her trajectory into the diasporic poets of the twenty-first century. See Monique-Adelle Callahan, *Between the Lines: Literary Transnationalism and African American Poetics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011). Although Callahan emphasises the importance of transnational approaches, particularly with regard to women of the diaspora, her analysis does not include discussion of any of the primary poets included in this thesis, creating critical space for me to analyse the diasporic dialogue of the poets herein.

literary history in which the reader moves through twentieth-century events, as the poets do; as they respond to their experiences, personal and political, their poetry progresses as well. The reader is brought on this historical journey. Margaret Walker may have been suitable as the first poet because her earliest poetry appears three years before Gwendolyn Brooks; however, because she engaged in poetic and personal dialogue more with Giovanni than Brooks did, it seemed fitting that the chapter about her work function as the literary liaison between them. I have also chosen this structure to emphasise the community these women comprise. A community is collective but only exists because of the individuals within it. As the women participate in this exchange and poetic matrix, they develop their unique voices, underscored by individual chapters. Within this framework, as they resume common themes, their work also adopts an antiphonic ‘call and response’, a characteristic of the spirituals and vernacular black musical styles that influenced much of the poetry here. As the reader progresses chapter to chapter, one hears individual voices, singing a shared song, giving shape to the exchange in which they all participate.

At this point, establishing my understanding of central analytical parameters in the thesis is vital to this discussion. One such concept is identity. Stuart Hall constructively elucidates it in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (1996). He asserts:

Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, are increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation.<sup>18</sup>

Hall’s interpretation of the fluid, protean nature of identity is indispensable for an analysis of the poets within this thesis. Their nonlinear identities are ‘never singular but multiply constructed’, and the necessary malleability of their poetics, used as a lens to

---

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, editors, ‘Who needs identity?’, in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 4.

articulate ‘fragmented’ identities, is multiple and ‘constantly in the process of change’. This is substantial in my proceedings. Through their poetry, I show that the women in this thesis interrogate and construct their own re-shaped and regenerated perspectives. Their influences are diverse, and, throughout the course of their poetic careers, their points of view adapt—as a result of changing historical and political times, travel across continents, and significant personal experiences. Their writing facilitates what Barbara Christian describes as literature being ‘concerned with the definition and discovery of self in relation to the society in which one lives...to declare the truth and therefore create the truth in forms that exist for her or him’.<sup>19</sup> The intertextuality I draw throughout this study demonstrates how the poets, as individuals and as a transnational collective, discover self-identity in relation to society through, as Christian phrases it, ‘truth in forms’ in a poetics of transformation.

The feminist scholar Judith Butler asserts in 2004 that identities are:

...not made in a single moment in time. They are made again and again. This does not mean identities are made radically new every time they are made, but only that it takes some time for identities to be brought out; they are dynamic and historical. In fact, if we ask what is distinctive about ‘being’ human, it will probably turn out that human being is always about becoming. There is always a question of what I will become, even if I am living in such a way that seeks to refuse that question. There is always a question of whether what I was yesterday will be precisely the same as what I become in time. Tomorrow, is there a possibility for me to become otherwise than what I am? This is not just a question of a private struggle with the self, but of the social terms by which identities are supported and articulated.<sup>20</sup>

Each poet in this discussion spends her career ‘becoming’, in which her personal and poetic identities are continually subject to revision and renewal. As they find new inspiration and contribute new poems, their voicing of self-identity—and collectively of gender, race, and community, the ‘social terms by which [they] are supported and articulated’—becomes increasingly nuanced and undergoes a process of adaptation.

---

<sup>19</sup> Christian, ‘Creating a Universal Literature: Afro-American Women Writers’ (1983) in *Black Feminist Criticism*, pp. 159-160.

<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, in interview with Vasu Reddy, ‘Troubling Genders, Subverting Identities: Interview with Judith Butler’, *Agenda*, 62 (2004), p. 116.

The poetics of Nikki Giovanni comes to mind, in which her later work is a much subtler representation of protest compared with her early, more bombastic, poetry anchored in the Black Arts Movement. Grace Nichols emigrates from Guyana to England, and her sense of self alters along with her perceptions of home, perhaps even to the extent of alternative histories. Jackie Kay evaluates her changing identity once she claims the Nigerian half of her heritage. Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker assess their own dynamic identities as reflections of the American locales they inhabit.

These processes mirror Hall's notions about the fluidity of identity:

Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore situated within, not outside, representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as 'the changing same': not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms with our 'routes'.<sup>21</sup>

Hall's thoughts about the changing nature of identity echo Richard Wright's assertion in 1937 that a (black) writer's ability to develop an aesthetic that reinforces a sense of community and solidarity is directly linked to a necessarily malleable perspective on society, in which 'a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed and admired is the one which points the way for Negro writers to stand shoulder to shoulder with Negro workers in mood and outlook'.<sup>22</sup> Each of the poets in this thesis uses the 'resources of history, language, and culture' to articulate and interrogate their changing and nuanced identities, while questioning their dynamic role in society and the development of common ground, 'stand[ing] shoulder to shoulder' with their fellow writers and citizens. Gwendolyn Brooks engages with culture through her use of blues-inspired sonnets. Margaret Walker's poetry directly engages with historical reference to

---

<sup>21</sup> Hall, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', originally in *New Challenge*, 11 (1937), reprinted in *Race and Class*, 21 (1980), p. 405.

evoke a sense of collective memory and to re-allocate the narrative of slavery as her own. Jackie Kay spends a great deal of time within her poetry ‘becoming’ and deciding how to represent herself as she negotiates the space between her Scottish and Nigerian cultures, a craft choice that might be, as John McLeod has suggested, one of several ‘hybrid identities..., never total and complete in themselves, like orderly pathways built from crazy-paving. Instead, they remain perpetually in motion, pursuing errant and unpredictable routes, open to change and reinscription’.<sup>23</sup> This concept of hybrid identities in motion comprises Toni Cade Bambara’s considerations of social change for the marginalised in which:

A repositioning...closer to the center of the national narrative results from, reflects, and effects a reframing of questions regarding identity, belonging, community. “Syncretism,” “creolization,” “hybridization” are crowding “assimilation,” “alienation,” “ambivalence” out of the forum of ideas.<sup>24</sup>

Bambara’s ‘reframing’ is a useful mode of thinking about the poets in my research, whose identities can often be categorized by being a composite of two things, a ‘syncretism’, such as in Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity.

I use hybridity here, as a critical construction, to facilitate articulation about identity within a complex perimeter. The dualities of identity explored in the poets’ oeuvres often create a sense of liminality between two polarities, whether here and there, us and them, inclusion and exclusion, now and then. It underscores the value of the space occupied between said binaries. In *Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha says:

Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.<sup>25</sup>

Bhabha presents a sensibility metaphorically (and sometimes literally) of looking in

---

<sup>23</sup> John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 219.

<sup>24</sup> Toni Cade Bambara, ‘Deep Sight And Rescue Missions’ in her posthumous text *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Interviews* (New York, NY: Random House, 1996), p. 160.

<sup>25</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London, UK: Routledge, 1994), p. 7.

two directions. The poets in this thesis can be seen as occupying an ‘in-between space’, to use Bhabha’s phrase, depending on their ability to reconcile and—perhaps reconstruct—their intervention with personal and political axes and historical dialogues in light of this dual positioning. The ‘in-betweenness’ of the poets’ identities, then, is a signpost to which I return throughout my analysis, whether they are in between the past and present, or journeying from a known self to some transforming entity.

Within this framework, the poets construct their identities, often through the social categorisations of the periphery and the mainstream. Bhabha posits:

Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition.<sup>26</sup>

The poetics included herein inhabit this interrogation of an us/them dichotomy, using hybridity to ‘estrangle’ the power of the authority claimed by the social majority.

Patricia Hill Collins describes this duality when she writes:

People who do intellectual work from outsider-within social locations can draw on a creative tension of being on the margins within intersecting systems of race, class, gender, sexual, and national oppression. They develop a critical consciousness of the need to remain attentive to the connections linking their scholarship and their in-between status of belonging, yet not belonging.<sup>27</sup>

By using poetry as a means of social protest, the women within this literary community are able to draw on the ‘outsider-within’ to interrogate the connections between ‘belonging, yet not belonging’. How they transcend, and at times deconstruct, these boundaries is vital to their articulation of self-identity and literary aesthetics. ‘As border crossers and boundary markers, people in outsider-within spaces contest the meanings of the categories themselves’.<sup>28</sup> By writing poetry and prose that transcends borders, whether spatio-temporal or geographic, the poets thus collapse these polarities.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 162.

<sup>27</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, ‘Learning from the Outsider Within Revisited’ (2004), updated for *On Intellectual Activism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012), p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 68.

Of course, hybridity has become a ubiquitous key word in academic discourse, and Robert Young has suggested that, despite its prevalence and historically problematic connotations, the construction must be used selectively.<sup>29</sup> In a modern application, he asserts that Bhabha's term describes a transmutation of culture 'into a compounded, composite mode'. He says:

The condition of that transformation is held out to be the preservation of a degree of cultural and ethnic difference. While hybridity denotes a fusion, it also describes a dialectical articulation...constructing...a counter-hegemony, an organic hybridization which could contest dominant representations of Blacks in white cultural and aesthetic practices.<sup>30</sup>

For my purposes, I see the use of hybridity as an effective tool, not only to discuss the identities of the poets, but also as a means of doing so from a transnational approach. 'Contest[ing] dominant representations' is a lesson of hybridity that is often heeded in the configuration of modern literature.

However, the transatlantic methodology I undertake explicates the 'counter-hegemony' from a transnational discourse that need not be framed within the confines of the nation-state. This strategy emphasises Bhabha's thoughts that identities can be formed between cultures and majorities. He states:

This 'part' culture, this *partial* culture, is the contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures—at once the impossibility of culture's containedness and the boundary between. It is indeed something like culture's 'in-between', bafflingly both alike and different...The discourse of minorities, spoken for and against in the multicultural wars, proposes a social subject constituted through cultural hybridization, the overdetermination of communal or group differences, the articulation of baffling likeness and banal divergence.<sup>31</sup>

The 'containedness and the boundary between' are often signified by the poets through the forms containing their expression, as discussed in Chapters One and Two. The 'aliqueness and difference' exemplify the dual nature of hybridity. It simultaneously

---

<sup>29</sup> Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London, UK: Routledge, 1995). In Victorian applications, 'hybridity' often refers to miscegenation and lends itself to racist suggestions. In its postcolonial uses, however, it is effective for contesting dominant discourse, pp. 1-22.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Bhabha, 'Culture's In-Between', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, p. 54.

implies, as Young suggests, ‘contrafusion and disjunction (or even separate development) as well as fusion and assimilation’.<sup>32</sup> In the former half of Young’s definition of the term, poetry and/or identities and/or communities encounter each other but remain disparate elements; in the latter half, binary constructions collapse as such, facilitating transformations. This set of dualisms can be seen in my approach to the poetry, whether through analysis of discrete poems that embody different tonalities, or examination of the poetic catalogues as a whole, where they begin to elide, blurring the boundaries, to reveal a more nuanced or complex identity. These kinds of contrafusion and fusion can be seen in the hybridities explored throughout this thesis. They are often re-interpretations of present events or identity in light of the past, where the borders between the two are ambiguous. Sometimes, the poet must be distinctly public or private; later she might be political and emotional simultaneously.

The poets take on a hybridised poetic identity that often depends on transmigrations between one’s origins and one’s transformed and transformative geographies, facilitating a broadening and strengthening of a transatlantic community.

As Howard Winant says:

...It is vital that we examine the contingency and multiplicity of our own identities. No individual belongs to “just” one socially constructed category: each has his or her multiple racial, gender, class-based, national identities, and that’s just a start of the list. Nor are these categories uniform or stable; we are Whitmanesque, we contain multitudes. To recognize our many selves is to understand the vast social construction that is not only the individual, but history itself.<sup>33</sup>

The multitudes contained within the poets’ particular voices form the basis for their aesthetics and their inclusion within this matrix, even as they underscore individualism.

Identity’s ‘contingency’, straddling aesthetic and ‘socially constructed’ divisions, takes on particular significance when related specifically to the

---

<sup>32</sup> Young, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Howard Winant, ‘Racial Dualism at Century’s End’(1997), in *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today*, edited by Wahneema Lubiano (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1998), p. 110.

considerations of black women, a key idea I employ that accesses the perspective and lived experience of each of the poets in this thesis. Carole Boyce Davies, like Bhabha and Collins, engages with boundary crossing as a mode of interpreting female identity:

Black women's writing...should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing. In cross-cultural, trans-national, translocal, diasporic perspectives, this reworking of the grounds of "Black Women's Writing" redefines identity away from exclusion and marginality. Black women's writing/existence marginalized in terms of majority-minority discourses, within the Euro-American male or female canon or Black male canon...redefines its identity as it re-connects and re-members, brings together black women dis-located by space and time.<sup>34</sup>

Davies's emphasis on border crossing rather than border elimination is important when one recalls how hybridity might be a disjunction rather than an assimilation. Crossing over the border does not erase it as such; rather, the agent has the capacity to occupy either space. For Davies, like Hall, identities are fluid. Borders and fluidity are in a unique kind of tension. The more fluid one's identity is, and the greater ease with which one might traverse boundaries, then the potential exists for the subversion and perhaps eventual dismantling of the line of demarcation. Borders, then, like fluid identities, might need to be simultaneously reworked and redefined. However, for Davies, this process of rewriting identity (and social borders if not geographical ones) is with the specific purpose (and/or accidental result) of both re-centring black women away from the periphery and uniting black women separated by space and time.

This is an admittedly essentialist approach in that 'Blackness or Africanness, then, in operational terms, has more to do with a sometimes essentialized, tactical assertion as a counterpoint to overwhelming "whiteness" or Eurocentricity'.<sup>35</sup> Black women are positioned in tension rather than agreement with this race centrality, when she goes on to suggest that, 'femaleness...interferes with seamless Black identity and is

---

<sup>34</sup> Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (London, UK: Routledge, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

therefore either ignored, erased or “spoken for”<sup>36</sup>. In this framework, black women’s identities are linked, in so far as their representation of the ‘other’, namely outside a dominant cultural discourse, in the African diaspora, is generally overlooked, necessitating the need for more critics, writers, and poets to end the erasure.

These identities are further intertwined by a strong, articulate voice, such as that described by Karla F. C. Holloway, who writes, ‘The province of the work for black women commands a perspective that does not isolate it from its community source...[They] concentrate on shared ways of saying, ...where language and voice are reconstructed...as categories of cultural and gendered essence’.<sup>37</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr addresses this specific black female voice as the device through which silence is broken and new utterances are expressed, much like the poet Audre Lorde:

...This is the sheer energy that accompanies the utterance of a new subject matter, a formalized breaking of the silence of black women as authors. In doing so, they have generated a resoundingly new voice, one that is at once black and female, replete with its own shadings and timbres, topoi and tropes.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, these ‘shadings and timbres’ become the sites of transitions, which for Davies are ‘those places where different cultures, identities, sexualities, classes, geographies, races, genders and so on collide or interchange’.<sup>39</sup> The interchange takes place through the crossing of borders. Importantly, borders between literary geographies should be crossed, or attempted to be crossed, such as the transatlantic journey I undertake within this thesis. By incorporating both African American and Black British women poets in my cross-cultural examination, I follow Davies’s trajectory when she writes:

Without it, we remain locked into the captured definition of the terms “Black” or “American” or “minority” as it is in the dominant discourse. In this context, the work

---

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Karla F. C. Holloway, *Metaphors and Moorings: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp. 7, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr, Introduction to *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (New York, NY: Meridian, 1990), p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Davies, p. 16.

of Black women writing in Britain has to be significantly addressed. For here [is] a whole dynamic of Black women's writing which matches in intensity the output of Black women writing in the United States...<sup>40</sup>

The scholarship that Davies endorses here not only takes up the importance of women's writing and the identities captured therein. It also examines this arena from both sides of the Atlantic, through the cultural bounty this exchange provides, following the cue of Paul Gilroy and his transnational modality, termed the Black Atlantic.

The next critical concept I explore is Gilroy's construction drawing connectivity between black culture in the US and in Britain and the categorisation that followed his 1994 text *The Black Atlantic*. I adopt his scholarly transatlantic crossing that facilitates the linking of inspiration as well as cultural practices, bolstering the connections I draw between African American and Black British women poets.

Thus the role of external meanings around blackness, drawn in particular from black America, became important in the elaboration of a connective culture which drew these different 'national' groups together into a new pattern that was not ethnically marked in the way that their Caribbean cultural inheritances had been.<sup>41</sup>

Gilroy's 'connective culture' forms the spine of the poetic analysis here. Unlike Davies, however, Gilroy, through work that overcomes nation-minded thinking, neglects the significance of how women writers, critics, and feminists figure in this construction. Aside from his disagreement with Patricia Hill Collins and his brief mention of the trauma of infanticide, persuading Toni Morrison to write *Beloved*, he refrains from an extended engagement with women writers and critics.<sup>42</sup> He says:

These stories raise complex questions about the mediating role of gender categories in racial politics and in particular about the psychological structures of identification facilitated by the idea of maternity. It is impossible to explore these important matters here.<sup>43</sup>

Although Gilroy may have been operating under space constraints as well as a desire to keep his work tightly focussed, his omission of women from his critical discussion

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>41</sup> Gilroy, p. 82.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, pp. 51-53.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 68.

means he has left the volume with a rather large critical blind spot. I, however, provide an analysis that includes considerations of women and crosses borders to evaluate the relationship of these women's voices and cultures across the African diaspora. Perhaps in response to Gilroy, Collins writes in 2010:

From the social location of this synergistic relationship among experiences, analyses, and actions, these Black women intellectuals were able to look beyond the specificities of time and space to build on the ideas and actions of African American women from the past as well as Black women in transnational contexts.<sup>44</sup>

Reading the poets here together in light of this transatlantic engagement enables an interpretation of their changing poetics and plural, fluid identities.

Whilst I note that Gilroy's text overlooks a feminine-inclusive transatlantic approach, his work has been instrumental in my own analysis, particularly his idea of double consciousness, which he, in turn, borrowed from W. E. B. Du Bois:

Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness. By saying this I do not mean to suggest that taking on either or both of these unfinished identities necessarily exhausts the subjective resources of any particular individual...The contemporary black English, like the Anglo-Africans of earlier generations and perhaps, like all blacks in the West, stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations.<sup>45</sup>

'Striving to be both European [or American or Caribbean] and black' is paramount in the interpretation of the poetics and identities of the poets included in my research. That they struggle with being a simultaneous amalgamation of various dichotomies links the poets across the Atlantic and is integral to their identities, for 'to acknowledge racial dualism is to understand the malleability and flexibility of all identities, especially racial ones'.<sup>46</sup> Many of the poets embody this specific 'dualism' in their writing, a duality that stems from, for example, having a Scottish mother and Nigerian father, living in two locations such as Guyana and Britain, being American with a specific

---

<sup>44</sup> Collins, 'Still Brave? Black Feminism as a Social Justice Project' (2010), rewritten for *On Intellectual Activism*, p. 52.

<sup>45</sup> Gilroy, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Winant, p. 107.

affinity for Africa, drawing one's sense of identity from current events as well as a distinctly historical perspective. Gilroy's attentiveness to these kinds of essential pairings has allowed me an avenue into my own analysis.

Gilroy's transatlantic approach is grounded in, not only culture, but also music, another expressive mode I explore throughout this thesis. Musicality, particularly the history of black music, is another means of interrogating identity for these poets. It is one of their common poetic strategies, specifically the influence of American blues, spirituals, and work songs. The musicality I refer to throughout can be as direct as inhabiting a particular type of music, a reference to a singer, or as oblique as musical rhythms within the verse. Sometimes its influence is unavoidable. At other moments, I suggest its more subtle textures. It is a means through which the poets access oral traditions and transcend boundaries. As Gilroy suggests, musicality is an element that traverses the Atlantic, crossing over borders and forging a sense of the collective:

It was facilitated by a common fund of urban experiences, by the effect of similar but by no means identical forms of racial segregation, as well as by the memory of slavery, a legacy of Africanisms, and a stock of religious experiences defined by them both. Dislocated from their original conditions of existence, the soundtracks of the African-American cultural broadcast fed a new metaphysics of blackness elaborated and enacted in Europe and elsewhere within the underground, alternative, public spaces constituted around an expressive culture that was dominated by music.<sup>47</sup>

Based on this account, the common musical link explored in the poetry throughout the thesis articulates voice at the cultural level, where black culture in Britain engages with and responds to that created in the US, which 'fed a new cultural metaphysics' of race. Music is about various temporalities, returns, refrains, and repetition. I examine an indebtedness to musical tradition in the process of constructing identity. As Gayl Jones writes, 'the black artist in music and literature attempts to use his exclusion to create

---

<sup>47</sup> Gilroy, p. 83.

and recreate himself—to make music out of invisibility’.<sup>48</sup> This creative inspiration is often approached through historically black forms, such as the spirituals, field hollers, and blues. Houston A. Baker describes this musical trajectory:

The blues are a synthesis (albeit one always synthesizing rather than one already hypostatized). Combining work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more, they constitute an amalgam that seems always to be in motion in America—always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World.<sup>49</sup>

Grounded in vernacular and enabling the sounds of shared experience, within this study, musicality ranges the gamut from poems that function as blues songs—such as several of Kay’s—to those that employ a spiritual tone—such as Walker’s—to those whose rhythmic qualities are adapted from African beats—such as the tight meters used by Gwendolyn Brooks. It forms the poets’ aesthetics and also determines their ability to traverse boundaries (the Atlantic even), as Gilroy suggests, who is not alone in arguing that music can create a connective and cultural cohesion. The musical scholar Simon Frith, too, has examined the ability of music to transcend barriers. He writes:

Music is thus the cultural form best able both to cross borders—sounds carry across fences and walls and oceans, across classes, races and nations—and to define places; in clubs, scenes, and raves, listening on headphones, radio and in the concert hall, we are only where the music takes us.<sup>50</sup>

The ability of music to conjoin both sides of the Atlantic is vital to these poetics.

Frith additionally associates music with identity—its evocation of childhood memories and its construction of a sense of self—resuming Hall’s groundwork on the process of identity formulation and Baker’s concept of the synthesis of music:

First,...identity is *mobile*, a process not a thing, a becoming, not a being; second,...our experience of music—of music making and music listening—is best understood as an experience of this *self-in-progress*. Music like identity is both performance and story, describes the social in the individual, the individual in the social, the mind in the body

---

<sup>48</sup> Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Traditions and African American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 30.

<sup>49</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Simon Frith, ‘Music and Identity’, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, p. 125.

and body in the mind; identity, like music, is a matter of both ethics and aesthetics.<sup>51</sup>

Each of the poets contends with the racial and cultural legacies of Caribbean and African musicality, the development of spirituals, work songs, and the blues, and, as a result, with the ‘self-in-progress’. Music, for Frith, is a living construction. It allows for the development of individual identity in relation to wider society, an idea that Kay has certainly subscribed to, especially with her personal affinity for the American blueswoman Bessie Smith, which I explore in Chapter Five. By her own reckoning, the blues helped Kay form her identity. As Angela Davis has argued, the blues was integral to the development of a social voice or collective identity for African Americans, and Smith participated in this articulation. According to Davis, Smith:

assisted in the creation of a new consciousness of African-American identity, a consciousness that was critical of the experiences of exploitation, alienation—and for women, male dominance—in the North, which had been the focus of black people’s hopes and dreams since the earliest days of slavery. Her songs, more than those of any other blues performer of the era, constituted aesthetic bridges linking places and time and permitting a collective *prise de conscience* encompassing both the unity and the heterogeneity of the black experience.<sup>52</sup>

Here, Davis suggests that blues helps represent what she calls the black experience at large, facilitating a collective realization of racial awareness.<sup>53</sup> As music unites and speaks to cultures, so it also helps define the wider matrix between the poets in this thesis, particularly as they use music as a means of adopting a long tradition for those in the African diaspora. As Nikki Giovanni ponders in 1993, ‘But the spirituals were not and are not today sorrow songs but records of our history. How else would a people

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 109.

<sup>52</sup> Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1999), pp. 89-90.

<sup>53</sup> The black playwright August Wilson, in interview with Miles Marshall Lewis, *The Believer* (November, 2004), agrees with Angela Davis when he says, ‘I think blues is the best literature that we as black Americans have...If all this were to disappear off the face of the earth and some people two million unique years from now would dig out this civilization and come across some blues records, working as anthropologists, they would be able to piece together who these people were, what they thought about, what their ideas and attitudes toward pleasure and pain were, all of that. All the components of culture’. Accessed online at [http://www.believermag.com/issues/200411/?read=interview\\_wilson](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200411/?read=interview_wilson).

tell its story if not through the means available?’.<sup>54</sup> Musical historicization and legacies become a vehicle through which history might be accessed.

Another central construction I explore in this thesis is history. For the poets included, the historical perspective is the basis for their literary imagination, functioning as a symbol to which they return. It can be either the recollection and re-evaluation of childhood memories (close history) or voiced as more public collectivity or long temporality, in which the narratives of African oppression in the Western world are appropriated by the speakers as their own. As Richard Wright advises in 1937, ‘Theme for Negro writers will emerge when they have begun to feel the meaning of the history of their race as though they in one life time had lived it themselves throughout all the long centuries’.<sup>55</sup> This re-appropriation of historical events and experiences allows the poets to employ a mythopoeic ‘I’, in which the stories of their ancestors facilitate personal and collective myth-making. As Karla Holloway says:

In black women’s literature, temporicity (an emphasis on specific times and certain places for metaphorical meanings) acts not as the generative spark for...‘associative clusters’ of archetypes, but rather generates clusters of community from the gathered (re)membrances of language, voice, and psyche.<sup>56</sup>

Within this framework, history is a kind of shorthand for the collective mythologies an historical perspective facilitates.

This participation in a shared remembrance comes to symbolise the trajectory of pain and subjugation, a narrative common among displaced persons of the African diaspora. As Paul Gilroy says:

This...special redemptive power produced through suffering has its ready counterparts in the writings of black thinkers who have...identified similar relationships between the history of modern racial slavery and the redemption of both Africa and America.<sup>57</sup>

This dialogue with deep time, as Wai Chee Dimock phrases it, spans the Atlantic, as

---

<sup>54</sup> Nikki Giovanni, ‘Black is the Noun’, in *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation*, edited by Gerald Early (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 1993), p. 118.

<sup>55</sup> Wright, ‘Blueprint for Negro Writing’, p. 410

<sup>56</sup> Holloway, p. 87.

<sup>57</sup> Gilroy, p. 216.

this thesis will explore. Homi K. Bhabha says of time-driven narratives that, ‘the partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory, ...give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole’.<sup>58</sup> Perspectives that transcend constructions of time thus enable these writers to access a communal memory of oppression and also to make meaning of spatial locations, and the poets write themselves out of the periphery. As Bhabha suggests, the identity that marginalised persons might glean from the outside of dominant discourse allows them to establish a sense of community and brings a gravitas that is formed out of the foundation of historical recollection. In Bhabha’s framework, their work can challenge and disrupt the expectations of dominant or Eurocentric culture; these sources of inspiration in their writing allow them the power to make social interventions. These historical mythologies, particularly for diasporic populations are means through which ‘the plural...Self by using a series of historical formations...connects the centered subject to the experiential lives of his genetic or his sociogenic (or both) fore[mothers]’.<sup>59</sup>

Historical interventions are political and personal, enabling the experiences of the group to be appropriated by the individual. This process underscores the literary community in which the poets here all participate. Furthermore, history is an important discourse within my interpretation of their poetics, as I establish a literary history. As I mentioned previously, I arranged the poets approximately chronologically and also provided the publication date for each poem, interview, and their works of nonfiction. This substantiates the intertextual matrix in both time and theme as the poets respond to each other and their surroundings. Because some of the American poems are published

---

<sup>58</sup> Bhabha, ‘Culture’s In-Between’, p. 58.

<sup>59</sup> J. Lee Greene, *The Diasporan Self: Unbreaking the Circle in Western Black Novels* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008), p. 40.

after some of the British ones, it is therefore conceivable that, within this literary history, the poets engage in a kind of poetic dialogue across the Atlantic, engaging with the images, forms, influences, and metaphors of each other. These responses are linked by historical events of the twentieth century, those from centuries before, and separate but similar experiences of their respective childhoods. As they engage in this historically based matrix that transcends boundaries, they examine their individual narratives and articulate their own perceptions of time as a means of expressing identity, both autobiographical and poetic, ‘delineat[ing] a specific history of colonization and offer[ing] a compelling metaphor for the human spirit’s dependence on the communities and forms of expression to which it belongs’.<sup>60</sup> This communal preoccupation with history, then, in its access to ancestors, experiences, and mythologies, is often a simultaneous engagement with place.

The final theme I explore is the place-specific or location-dependent notion of home. This is a simplified construction of an individual’s relationship to either geographic-specific or psychologically dominated thinking and identity. It can be where one’s childhood was spent, where one lives as an adult, or a mythologised representation of origins, such as Africa or the Caribbean or the South or Bronzeville. It is an interpretation dependent on a dynamic sense of self and a feeling of ‘in-betweenness’. As Toni Morrison posits, home may be the trope to encapsulate one’s own constructions of race, within a racial house:

In no small way, these discourses are about home: an intellectual home; a spiritual home; family and community as home; forced and displaced labor in the destruction of home; dislocation of and alienation within the ancestral home; creative responses to exile, the devastations, pleasures, and imperatives of homelessness as it is manifested in discussions on feminism, globalism, the diaspora, migrations, hybridity, contingency, interventions, assimilations, exclusions. The estranged body, the legislated body, the violated, rejected, deprived body—the body as consummate home.

---

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, ‘My Statue, My Self: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women’ (1988), in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, p. 199.

In virtually all of these formations, whatever the terrain, race magnifies the matter that matters.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to the political re-interpretations of home, regularly, for these poets, their long-held personal formulations of home must be re-examined, especially for the poets in the thesis who journey from place to place, such as Grace Nichols, who emigrates from Guyana to Britain, and Jackie Kay, who travels between her inherited cultural homelands of Scotland and Nigeria.

Carole Boyce Davies says of this shifting ground:

The autobiographical subjectivity of Black women is one of the ways in which speech is articulated and geography redefined. Issues of home and exile are addressed. Home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement in autobiographical writing. The family is sometimes situated as a site of oppression for women. The mystified notions of home and family are removed from their romantic, idealized moorings, to speak of pain, movement, difficulty, learning and love in complex ways.<sup>62</sup>

The malleability of home, as either an actual place or a site of emotional grounding, is dependent on the individual's perspectives, location, awareness, selfhood, as well as the conditions in the homeland itself, which is, in turn, subject to the effects of time, as well as political and geographic alteration. For Grace Nichols, home shifts through both her imaginative and actual transatlantic journeys. Jackie Kay interrogates home through the process of both claimed and biological heritages as a result of her adoption as a child—links she is only able to explore in adulthood. She addressed this issue in an interview I conducted with her in Spring 2013:

Just as you shift, so the notions of home and what home is shift and become more complex as you get older; it becomes layered with nostalgia and all sorts of other things...My default home would be my imagination...Feeling at home or feeling at ease is, I think, something we all strive for...I like the idea of life being a search to feel at home.<sup>63</sup>

For Kay, home is inextricably linked with fluidity and exploration, as both the individual and the place undergo transformations.

---

<sup>61</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Home', in *The House That Race Built*, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup> Davies, p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> Jackie Kay in interview with K. E. Concannon, 18 April, 2013, Newcastle, UK, printed in entirety as the Appendix to this thesis.

As Kay has searched for a feeling of being home, so, too, have the other poets in this thesis. Sometimes, as Kay suggests, home exists within the figurative rather than the literal. For example, Nikki Giovanni associates home with the emotional lure of Africa as the mother continent, and Margaret Walker crafts much of her identity from her Southern roots. Gwendolyn Brooks identifies home with the poverty-stricken South Side of Chicago. Often, for the poets I discuss, the pursuit of home is postulated through the trope of the river as a place where one might be led home, or the figure of the mother or child as a means of accessing a homeland and its associated identities, whether nostalgic or objective. This kind of maternal nostalgia associated with home and homeplace is described by bell hooks as the site where black mothers:

took this conventional role and expanded it to include caring for one another, for children, for black men, in ways that elevated our spirits, that kept us from despair, that taught some of us to be revolutionaries able to struggle for freedom...Working to create a homeplace that affirmed our beings, our blackness, our love for one another was necessary resistance.<sup>64</sup>

‘Home’ becomes the shorthand, for these poets, as imaginative spaces, nostalgia, sites of political and personal development, wherein the myths of the individual and the community are borne, as seen in the close reading of their poetry and prose.

Chapter One explores the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, primarily before 1967, a turning point in Black Nationalist thought and the point at which Brooks’s aesthetic disrupts the subtlety she crafts in her early work. Within the constraints of several types of forms, she uses their innate tensions as a metaphor for the stresses upon society’s underclasses. I argue that her use of formal poetry is a deliberate device that mobilises her voice and amplifies tensions, rather than a simple reliance on Eurocentric forms.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> bell hooks, ‘Homeplace (a site of resistance)’, in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), pp. 43, 45.

<sup>65</sup> Henry Taylor suggests that her use of form was a dependence on tradition rather than a deliberate craft device. I demonstrate, however, that she is in control of her formal choices and selects them to articulate her chosen subject matter. ‘Gwendolyn Brooks: An Essential Sanity’, in *On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Contemplation*, edited by Stephen Caldwell Wright (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 273.

She pairs a high literary tradition with social protest, common subject matter, and black vernacular—particularly the blues—in a mimetic way of politicising life for poor black citizens in post-War Chicago. Poetry is a stage upon which to elevate the status of the marginalised. Within this performance, she adapts and fractures the sonnet form to bring the periphery into the mainstream and interrogate identity through a community lens, giving her early voice a politically charged anxiety that is nuanced by her soft, subtle approach. Her complexity, then, disrupts cultural assumptions and evaluates the role of women and the black working class, demonstrating her dedication to voicing the specificities of a subjugated audience. She constructs an intervention in the contemporary American socialscape and simultaneously formulates composite entities of a ‘self-in-progress’ dependent on location-specific and historically based narratives, often enacted through a dynamic understanding of home, inclusion, and the resulting self, in the US and in Africa. In Ghana, she says to a young woman, ‘You *know* this country is *yours*—that you *belong* here. We Blacks in the United States don’t know *what* we are’.<sup>66</sup> Her poetry becomes the means to address that uncertainty.

In Chapter Two, I analyse Margaret Walker’s poetry that re-envision the voice of the oppressed, through racial and gender-specific considerations. As I argue in this chapter, Walker’s poetics is heavily substantiated through historical and geographic concerns, which construct her distinctive voice. She says about this influence:

The South is my home, and my adjustment or accommodation to this South—whether real or imagined (mythic or legendary), violent or nonviolent—is the subject and source of all my poetry.<sup>67</sup>

The implications of the American South and its racially fraught history form the spine of her aesthetics, as she adopts a sense of collective memory in which she uses the long transatlantic narrative of slavery and oppression as the lifeblood to her literary

---

<sup>66</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part Two* (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 1996), p. 51.

<sup>67</sup> Margaret Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. xvii.

imagination. To do so, she, like Brooks, employs the sonnet form, as well as both personal and political elegies. Along these lines, I draw a concerted intertextuality between Walker's work and that of Brooks and Giovanni, as well as Nichols and Kay, the kind of close reading overlooked by other Walker scholars.<sup>68</sup> In this chapter, I also examine her handling of the seemingly contradictory beatitudes (and then anti-beatitudes, as I have coined them) to analyse binary constructions. Her poetic identity can be found in the 'in-betweenness' of forms and dualities, a significant kind of border crossing. Walker follows Brooks's cues and employs hybridities of form and expression. She incorporates elements of the past into her ideations of the future and erases the lines between domestic and public as she interrogates the vital question of a fluid diasporan identity a century after manumission.

Chapter Three explores the work of Nikki Giovanni, the most experimental and politically outspoken poet in this thesis. This sensibility is paired with her quiet, more contemplative poetry, a complex combination that, I argue, makes her a protean poet. This characteristic is overlooked by some critics, heightened by her adherence to and deviation from the Black Arts Movement.<sup>69</sup> I contend, however, that the heart of her poetry lies within an aesthetics of change, a reflection of Stuart Hall's fluid notion of identity. Giovanni, like Walker, utilises a debt to the historical arc of oppression, which

---

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Joyce Pettis, 'Margaret Walker: Black Woman Writer of the South'; Minrose C. Gwin, 'The "Intricate Design" of Margaret Walker's "Humanism": Revolution, Vision, History'; Eugenia Collier, 'Fields Watered with Blood: Myth and Ritual in the Poetry of Margaret Walker'; Eleanor Traylor, "'Bolder Measures Crashing Through": Margaret Walker's Poem of the Century'; Phyllis R. Klotman, "'Oh Freedom": Women and History in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*'; and Esim Erdim 'Jubilee, or Setting the Record Straight'. Each essay is anthologised in *Fields Watered With Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001) and omits an extended explication of Walker's poetry in relation to Brooks and Giovanni, and certainly any kind of transatlantic intertextuality.

<sup>69</sup> Don L. Lee, Amiri Baraka, and Caryl Phillips negate her work as being either too simplistic, too commercial, or too far removed from the aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement, as I explore in Chapter Three. William J. Harris writes of her in 1984, 'Giovanni is a frustrating poet. I can sympathize with her detractors, no matter what the motives for their discontent. She clearly has talent that she refuses to discipline', 'Sweet Soft Essence of Possibility: The Poetry of Nikki Giovanni', in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1984), p. 228.

then informs her public protests and personal lyrics. I identify an emphasis on musicality, specifically African and African American music, as an avenue through which the poet accesses historical narratives in story and song. She has said of herself in interview: ‘I’m an old blues singer at heart. If I’d been born 50 years earlier, I would have been Bessie Smith or something’.<sup>70</sup> This link to blues is a means of establishing an historical and cultural thread that forms a significant connection between the poets. She, too, explores African origins through oral tradition and the spirituals that comingle her ‘roots’ and ‘routes’. This African association facilitates examination of both gender and race, allowing the past and present to conjoin, a way in which boundaries are blurred. Hers is a voice of both outrage and desolation, with a long historical awareness that innovates poetic form. This could be considered a kind of hybridity, but she and her poetry are not resolved by the commingling of her multiple facets. ‘Change’ as a device reveals a poet in whose work the timeline of history no longer seems linear, and attributes of her poetic voice cannot be contained neatly in simple halves of dualities.

Chapter Four crosses the Atlantic and demonstrates how the trope of journeying in Grace Nichols’s poetry is integral to her formation of identity. The cultural construction rather than geographic locale of her Caribbean homeland pervades her perceptions even as her notions of home are re-interpreted. I correct a critical oversight, in that her work can be interpreted in conjunction with American poetry, most notably that of Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes, specifically in their democratic and egalitarian work.<sup>71</sup> My reading in light of this American influence offers a previously unmentioned interpretation that lends her poetry even more complexity and importance.

---

<sup>70</sup> Nikki Giovanni in an interview with Rohan Preston, ‘Poet Nikki Giovanni Writes of a Love Supreme’, *Star Tribune* (22 January, 2009). Accessed online <http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/38000304.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Sarah Lawson Welsh, for example, the most prominent scholar of Nichols’s work, in her 2007 text *Grace Nichols*, omits any intertextual analysis between Nichols and Whitman and Hughes, links that I flag in Chapter Four as significant in the development of the poet’s aesthetics.

Taking this association further, I suggest that her work, and that of Jackie Kay, can be interpreted differently when read in alignment with the US poets in this thesis. Reading her oeuvre in this exchange, I establish new insights, namely that she is a vital participant in a construction of a transatlantic identity for black women poets. Identity, for Nichols, often comes through the experience of journeying. This is partly explored through river imagery and metaphorical return to the womb and therefore invocations of motherhood, which facilitate a re-evaluation of the lasting memories of her own childhood, a space in which she, too, associates with the nostalgia of music and its implications. She says: ‘It is the music of my childhood through which we got the news and scandals of the day; love and celebration, crime and tragedy, fantasy, politics and philosophy; in fact all of human experience and all in the people’s language’.<sup>72</sup> Examining identity and childhood nostalgia is part of the search for sources and therefore futures. She finds herself positioned between the tension of origins and the forces of her adult life, as her poetics becomes diverse and she journeys from one place to another. My inquiry facilitates a metaphoric voyage along with her.

In Chapter Five, I examine Jackie Kay’s articulation of complex cultural heritages. Of Scottish and Nigerian descent and adopted by white Scottish parents, Kay uses much of her poetry to interrogate her place within these communities and to reconfigure lifelong experiences of prejudice. As a transatlantic poet, she links Scottish racism with American racism. As a child, she grew to love American blues, specifically the blueswoman Bessie Smith. With this affinity for black US culture and her two equally important heritages, her work triangulates her between Scotland, the US, and Nigeria. Throughout her poetry, several recurring tropes appear in which she is able to inhabit imaginary territories, including blues—and by extension the racism that it often

---

<sup>72</sup> Grace Nichols, in Introduction to *Sunris* (London, UK: Virago, 1996), p. 3.

decries—and rivers as the pathway to one’s origins.

Kay’s position in this thesis clinches its overarching narrative; she singularly embodies a transatlantic link composed of transitions. She said to me in interview, ‘When I first came across lots of black women, black writers from the States, I found it really liberating, and I started to become obsessed with black American or African American writers’.<sup>73</sup> This geographic and cultural anchoring has informed and inspired her writing and character. Her poetry allows her the space in which she, not only describes the duality of her identity, but in fact constructs it. Her staging of a double self is both aesthetically complex as well as anxiously fraught. She forges a space in which she creates her own Atlantic borders and adopts the resulting interstice between. Reading Kay’s poetry in conjunction with the American poets here allows the reader to understand each more fully. As this thesis distinctively demonstrates, it’s a novel approach that lends both her and her predecessors a more nuanced sensitivity through dialogue, because, as Kay says, ‘what we do when we write is we create conversations, if you like, relationships with absent presences’.<sup>74</sup>

In this way, the thesis addresses the dialogue between American and British poets, in shared influence, common aims, and similar examinations of self and self-expression, as they partake in the exchange of a literary community. By conjoining this selection of poets, I aim to evaluate how they work together within the framework of culture, geography, and history—as explored through notions of home, origins, music, and politics—as the means to articulating a type of interconnectedness. Of course, as I have suggested previously, they are individuals with their own designs and integrity. However, by adopting a transatlantic approach to their poetics, I elucidate their changes, transformations, and re-definitions of identity as part of a larger discourse that

---

<sup>73</sup> Interview, Appendix.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

transcends Atlantic borders and reconfigures demarcations.

Analysing the work of transatlantic black women poets together, rather than as isolated figures, allows for myriad perspectives that regenerate and reconstruct the importance of each poet, as part of a vital larger whole. Each operates with a shared emphasis on identity, that is both singular and multiple, individual and collective.

**CHAPTER 1****GWENDOLYN BROOKS:  
TENSION AND POETIC IDENTITY****Black Arts Movement and the Problems  
of Form and Audience**

In this chapter, I primarily evaluate Gwendolyn Brooks's early poetry that engages in the history of formal verse and then disrupts that trajectory with African American musicality in order to articulate an aesthetics grounded in the black neighbourhood of Bronzeville in Chicago. I focus on her work before 1967, as it represents a turning point in her career as well as in black cultural productions in the US. Before her participation in the Black Arts Movement, she predominantly bases her aesthetics in formal poetry, as opposed to free verse. Her navigation and reinterpretation of these poetic conventions are integral to my analysis of her work that centres on the struggle her marginalised personae face to overcome social injustices—poverty, run-down and crowded neighbourhoods, unemployment, and systemic classism and racism. She writes within and against the confines of verse to symbolise the difficulty of living in and overcoming societal prejudice. For Brooks, formalism was especially important as she experimented with the traditional line and stanza—notably her debt to the sonnet—and juxtaposed them with various African American vernaculars, most notably the blues.

The process of selecting these particular poetic modes was fraught with struggle, even in her early work, which more widely embraces what might be perceived as somewhat Eurocentric forms. The tension was borne out of a combination of demonstrating a schooled mastery of poetic technique, historically dominated by white writers, publishers, and readers, as well as the desire to speak to and for African Americans. Charles Henry Rowell describes these opposing influences when he says:

...members of black communities expected African American writers to commit their art to the political and social struggle of African Americans, to use their art, for example, as instruments to help free black people from white oppression; white publishers and white readers, on the other hand, expected African American writers to create texts they desired, an expectation which varied with the times.<sup>1</sup>

Black liberation and white expectation positioned Brooks in a difficult position, regardless of whether she selected formal verse or not. Although black citizens regularly comprise the subject of her poetry, they do not always form the audience of her early work. This creates an aesthetic tension that she works to correct in her later poetry.<sup>2</sup> Brooks recognizes the desire to reach a black audience with a vested interest in the representation of their needs, marginalisation, and subsequent empowerment so as to create a common voice, one that could even transcend the boundaries of the Atlantic; she also acknowledges that, throughout the course of her career, she may have at times written for a white audience or failed to captivate black readers. In her first autobiography, *Report From Part One* (1972), she promises that '[her] aim, in [her] next future, is to write poems that will somehow successfully "call"...all black people...'.<sup>3</sup> This was likely in direct response to LeRoi Jones's 1966 poem 'SOS', in which he writes: 'Calling black people/ Calling all black people, man woman child/ Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in'.<sup>4</sup> It is important to adduce here that, even with the Jones's example and the development of the Black Arts Movement, attracting a black audience was not a straightforward process at any point in her career, particularly as many black writers had been criticized for targeting a white bourgeois

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Henry Rowell, editor, *Angles of Ascents: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2013), p. xxxvi.

<sup>2</sup> See Yomna Mohamed Saber, 'But hardly any of these [black] critics paid any adequate attention to her earlier works that had been disregarded as works directed more to a white audience', *Brave to Be Involved: Shifting Positions in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, 2010), p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One* (Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1972), p. 183. 'True to her wish to reach a wide audience, her books were quite affordable', quote by Henry Louis Gates, Jr and Nellie McKay, editors, in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. 2 (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 1623.

<sup>4</sup> LeRoi Jones, in *Black Art* (1966), reprinted in his text *Black Magic: Poems, 1961-1967* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

audience and possibly alienating others, for example, by exploiting African American vernacular for the purpose of entertainment, or by limiting the scope of the black experience in literature.<sup>5</sup>

V. P. Franklin details the intricacies of this dynamic:

This issue had first come in the 1920s and most younger poets and novelists saw the advantages of using the rich cultural heritage—the folklore, music, religious practices—as a source for their creative works aimed at both black and white audiences. Black writers of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, writing sometimes under the ideological sway of the white left, understood that most of their audience would be white, although some, like Langston Hughes, particularly with his Jesse B. Semple stories, consciously sought to expand their black readership by choosing subject matter that would have mass appeal. With the coming of the Civil Rights-Black Power movement, however, the poets, writers, and other artists saw as the major objective the creation of poetry and other literary works that would raise the political consciousness of the black masses.<sup>6</sup>

Brooks had to decide throughout her oeuvre whether to cater to a white audience who might be interested in a subtle poetic aesthetic or a black audience who might be more interested in political priorities (poems of didactic affirmation), and thereby social liberation. In her later career, she chooses more predominantly to write towards a black readership, often actualised though the stylistic choice to primarily deviate from strict structures and devices she employs in her early work, a shift that, according to Henry Taylor, stems ‘partly from increasing doubt about dependence on the Eurocentric tradition she had so thoroughly commanded for most of her career’.<sup>7</sup> However, the use of these formal devices in her early work is profound from the onset, more complex than a ‘dependence on’ American and European writers. Although Brooks does demonstrate a mastery of long-established poetic modes, to be respected, Taylor narrowly suggests that, during her early career, which forms the basis of this chapter, the adherence to tradition, and by extension poetic expression, was free from doubt and

<sup>5</sup> Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. 2, pp. 1357-1365.

<sup>6</sup> V. P. Franklin, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African-American Intellectual Tradition* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1995), p. 389.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Taylor, ‘Gwendolyn Brooks: An Essential Sanity’, in *On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Contemplation*, edited by Stephen Caldwell Wright (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 273.

therefore not problematic. On the contrary, Brooks unsettles conventional aesthetics as she employs them to articulate her own identity and injects them with a subject matter that is grounded in the specificities of twentieth-century racism and sexism, despite her reports that this failed to attract black readership.

This poetic foundation is analogous to the way the blueswomen Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey in the 1920s and 1930s use their blues songs as a means through which to talk about love, family, poverty, and powerlessness. Songs such as ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find’ (1927), ‘Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out’ (1929), and ‘Young Woman’s Blues’ (1926) adhere to musical traditions but speak to the particular identity of women and African Americans.<sup>8</sup> Brooks’s juxtaposition of the blues form (even sometimes through its lingering textures rather than direct imitations) and Eurocentric formal properties creates her precarious position between black subject matter and white publishers: a concept which I also examine in relation to Margaret Walker in the next chapter. This tension, which I analyse in this chapter, dissipates in her later work, after 1967, when she removes herself from formalism in favour of a firm alignment with the Black Arts Movement and its legacy.

In that same year, Brooks attended the Second Black Writers’ Conference at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, where her experiences and encounters with other writers, such as Don L. Lee and Amiri Baraka, launched her more fully from the Civil Rights Movement into the Black Arts Movement, which concentrated on the centrality with which black Americans were to represent themselves in the arts, focussing on black themes and audiences.<sup>9</sup> The poetry that emerged from the Black

---

<sup>8</sup> Lyric of each song reprinted by Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1999), pp. 62, 295, 356, respectively.

<sup>9</sup> This was an extremely formative experience for Brooks. However, like most conversion experiences, it did not unfold painlessly. At the conference, her work was attacked for not being ‘black enough’. Yusef Komunyakaa recalls the event when he says, ‘That night, in the midst of silence and loneliness, I thought

Arts Movement is dynamic, aggressive, and powerful. However, artists who identified with it were often obliged to write within a hostile, revolutionary framework. Ron Karenga famously dictates the parameters of the era in 1968 when he says:

For all art must reflect and support the Black Revolution, and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid...Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution...For all our art must contribute to revolutionary change and if it does not, it is invalid.<sup>10</sup>

The poets of the age, including Gwendolyn Brooks, are limited by the modalities of the Black Arts Movement, a proscriptive framework that, according to Rowell, was:

“an aesthetic” that—by prescribing for poets what they were to write, how they were to write it, and to and for whom they were to write—[actually] policed artists...For the advocates of Black Power it was the *liberation* of African Americans by African Americans, while *freedom* for all Americans together was the battle cry of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>11</sup>

He suggests that the strict racially drawn lines of the Black Power Movement truncated creative expression. Brooks’s early publications are crafted in the years leading up to the developing Black Arts era, allowing her the *freedom* to adopt greater subtlety and nuance in tone, subject matter, and form than what she articulates in her later work, a tendency also seen in Nikki Giovanni’s work in Chapter Three (although she is less well known for her subtle poetry).

For example, Brooks’s later aesthetics can be seen in the following poem, in which an assertive tone, implicit anger, and operation within free verse drive the lyric.

In ‘The Third Sermon on the Warpland’ (1969):

Fire.  
That is their way of lighting candles in the darkness.  
A White Philosopher said  
“It is better to light one candle than curse the darkness.”  
    These candles curse—  
inverting the deeps of the darkness.

GUARD HERE, GUNS LOADED.  
The young men run.  
The children in ritual chatter

---

about how members of the Black Arts Movement had badgered Robert Hayden and Gwendolyn Brooks at Fisk University in 1967’. Reprinted by Rowell, p. xlv; Gates and McKay, ed. 2, p. 1837.

<sup>10</sup> Maulana (Ron) Karenga, ‘Black Cultural Nationalism’, *Negro Digest*, 17 (1968), pp. 5-9.

<sup>11</sup> Rowell, pp. xlv, xxxiii.

scatter upon  
their Own and old geography.

The Law comes sirening across the town.

A woman is dead.<sup>12</sup>

This poem responds to the race riots of 1968, but it is also an example of Brooks selecting free verse and an aggressive and brazen tone uncommon in her early poetry. This analysis does not suggest that this poetry is of lesser quality; rather, I contend that her later work dispenses with the tension between protest and restraint she cultivates in her early style. Her understated approach from the 1940s to early 1960s lends her early work the strength and profundity which led to her being awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1946 and the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for *Annie Allen* (1949). This moderated voice is accompanied by the use of both traditional and contemporary forms, such as the sonnet conjoined with the blues, a combination which allows her to write through and against convention whilst being informed by current cultural politics. This early poetics is the primary point of discussion throughout this chapter.

### **Precursors and Motivations in Form**

Even in their historical presence, there is a contrast between Brooks's traditional forms and their content. Although the sonnet has been employed for hundreds of years, since its inception in Italy in the thirteenth century, to convey private and reserved themes, such as romantic love and religious zeal, it has been continually reinvented to encapsulate more public, politically charged motifs.<sup>13</sup> Writers such as John Milton in 'To the Lord General Cromwell, May 1652', William Wordsworth in 'London, 1802',

---

<sup>12</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, 'Third Sermon on the Warpland', reprinted in Gates and McKay, ed. 1, p. 1598 (entire poem).

<sup>13</sup> Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* (London, UK: Routledge, 1992), p. 1.

and Percy Bysshe Shelley in 'England in 1819' used the sonnet to challenge political powers and write in favour of English Liberty.<sup>14</sup> More recently, the sonnet has been re-envisioned by black poets to illustrate daily living conditions, deep-set emotional turmoil, and the lengthy history of American racism for the socially dispossessed. These black poets articulate and examine black identities while tightly drawing poetics into a traditionally Eurocentric form. For example, the sonnets of Claude McKay are celebrated for their anger and their interrogation of prejudices against black people. In his poems 'To the White Fiends' and 'If We Must Die' (both 1919), he directly addresses the dignity of African descendants, whose 'dusky face[s]' are 'set among the white/ For the[m] to prove [themselves] of highest worth'.<sup>15</sup> These are the same people, whose strength and anger are lauded when he says:

[...]then even the monsters we defy  
 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
 Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;  
 Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave[...]<sup>16</sup>

Derek Walcott follows McKay's example and also crafts sonnets, including those in the sequence 'Tales of the Islands' (1962), that, whilst less blatantly political in nature, elevate and celebrate the daily lives of Saint Lucians, people who spend their days 'dancing with absolutely natural grace/ Remembered from the dark past whence [they] come'.<sup>17</sup> These black sonneteers echo the political and racialized example of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, whose famous poem of 1896, 'We Wear the Mask', encourages black people to preserve their dignity when confronted by a hostile and prejudiced white population. He says:

---

<sup>14</sup> Milton, reprinted in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. 7, vol. 2, edited by M. H. Abrams and Stephen Goldenblatt (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2000), p. 1813; Wordsworth, reprinted in *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. 5, edited by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2005), p. 795; Shelley, *Ibid*, pp. 871-872.

<sup>15</sup> Claude McKay, 'To the White Fiends', in *Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (New York, NY: Bookman, 1953), p. 38, ll. 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> McKay, 'If We Must Die', *Selected Poems*, p. 36, ll. 9-12.

<sup>17</sup> Derek Walcott, *Collected Poems: 1948-1984* (New York, NY: Noonday Press, 1986), Chapter V, 'moeurs anciennes', p. 24, ll. 8-9.

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
 It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
 This debt we pay to human guile;  
 With torn and bleeding hearts we smile.<sup>18</sup>

In this poem, Dunbar suggests a biting paradox that must be endured by the oppressed black Americans of the post-Reconstruction era: that they have torn and bleeding hearts (if not also overworked bodies) which are largely perpetuated by the dominant white society, from whom they must also hide their weariness and grief in order to protect their sense of integrity. He continues in 'Slow Through the Dark' (1913):

Slow moves the pageant of a climbing race;  
 Their footsteps drag far, far below the height,  
 And, unprevailing by their utmost might,  
 Seem faltering downward from each hard won place.<sup>19</sup>

In this sonnet, Dunbar encourages black diasporic peoples in their struggle for freedom in the knowledge that their journey is long and arduous; every inch of progress comes with seemingly insurmountable barriers. However, he reminds them in the final line, 'The clouds grow thickest when the summit's nigh', encouraging them to continue the fight for equality even though it may seem an impossible goal, a line of advice applicable for those throughout the African diaspora.

In common with these other poets, Brooks uses the sonnet to elevate common subjects, though still beautiful in their commonality; daily minutia are ennobled, and the fight against an ideological white supremacist majority for decent housing, jobs, wages, education, and respect is brought from the periphery to the mainstream in her cultural productions. Within the confines of restricted formal considerations, she presents for herself a challenge and opportunity of communicating her powerful and sometimes fraught topics while both adhering to and overcoming poetic constrictions. This functions in the same way that African Americans and women of the inter-War

---

<sup>18</sup> Paul Lawrence Dunbar, *The Collected Poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar*, edited by Joanne M. Braxton (London, UK: University Press of Virginia, 1993), p. 71, ll. 1-4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 211, ll. 1-4.

and post-War US had the challenge of breaking through social and political confinements in order to ‘better their condition’, to borrow from Cayton and Drake in *Black Metropolis* (1946), while also living in and enduring the very constraints they were trying to overcome.<sup>20</sup> Residing in a run-down building with exorbitant rent that must be paid for through menial labour jobs in industry or personal service, while also struggling to put food on the table, forms the backdrop of citizens of the cities in the Northern US, who fought for legal and political improvements that might change their daily circumstances. The Chicago-based citizens Brooks represents, and through whom she derives much of her poetic identity, are described by Richard Wright in 1941 as ‘the children of black sharecroppers, the first born of city tenements’. They have:

tramped down a road three hundred years long. We have been shunted to and fro by cataclysmic social changes. We are a folk born of cultural devastation, slavery, physical suffering, unrequited longing, abrupt emancipation, migration, disillusionment, bewilderment, joblessness, and insecurity—all enacted within a *short* space of historical time!<sup>21</sup>

These ‘folk born of cultural devastation’ are the ones who inspire Brooks’s verse. Adhering to and excelling at the criterion of tight form could itself be seen as a means of overcoming the sociological and political struggle of the marginalised in the US. As she is bound by the proscriptive rules of formal poetry, so, too, are the people bound by the restrictions of society; as she overcomes these rules, at least in the realm of poetry, so do black communities in the US and throughout the Western world.

### **Development of a Formal Poetics**

I begin the examination of Brooks’s poetry with poetic techniques other than the sonnet because her re-interpretations of that particular form segue into other areas of discussion later in this chapter. ‘kitchenette building’ appeared in her first book, *A*

---

<sup>20</sup> Horace Cayton and St Clair Drake, *Black Metropolis* (London, UK: Jonathan Cape, 1946), p. 385.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (Philadelphia, PA: Basic Books, 2008), p. 142.

*Street in Bronzeville* (1945). Her subject matter in this spare thirteen-line poem is the location-specific, racially segregated slum residences of the South Side of Chicago. The kitchenette is a euphemism for an apartment that has been subdivided by a landlord (usually white) into several smaller apartments, each with no more than a stove and sink. They often had shared bathrooms and were regularly allowed to fall into disrepair and unsafe and unsanitary conditions.<sup>22</sup> Because the rent was exorbitant, many people regularly had to live together to pay it, with several tenants in one small space, resulting in overcrowding, rundown buildings, lack of privacy, and bedraggled families.<sup>23</sup> Richard Wright, having also lived in the Chicago kitchenette buildings, describes them as ‘our prison, our death sentence without a trial’.<sup>24</sup> To encapsulate the kitchenettes and the people who live in them, Brooks writes:

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,  
 Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong  
 Like “rent,” “feeding a wife,” “satisfying a man.”

But could a dream send up through the onion fumes  
 Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes  
 And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,  
 Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,  
 Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,  
 Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!  
 Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,  
 We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.<sup>25</sup>

Although mostly adhering to strict three-line stanzas, or tercets, a tight form that mimetically captures the apartments themselves, Brooks makes a vivid and intentional break with them in the second stanza to force the reader to linger over more potent imagery that is vivid, pungent, and unpleasant for the tenants, as well as the audience.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Kitchenettes’, in *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*, edited by Jerry W. Ward and Robert J. Butler (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), pp. 220-221.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 220.

<sup>24</sup> Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*, p. 106.

<sup>25</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, ‘kitchenette building’, in *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), reprinted in *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 4 (entire poem).

Instead of *aba*, the second stanza is in *abca*. The extra unrhymed line functions so that the obstacles to be overcome by the ‘dream’ (and the tenants in this building, for that matter) are sharply conveyed. The dream is, in this instance, a metonym for the larger social goals of the black citizens residing in this neighbourhood: freedom from squalid living conditions, poverty, unemployment or underemployment, lack of education, segregation, and racism. Despite the importance of this dream, Brooks insinuates that its status as an ideal could never overcome the difficult lived actualities; it could not compete with paying the rent, feeding a family, or satisfying one’s partner; it becomes a ‘dream deferred’ to ‘dry up like a raisin in the sun’, as Langston Hughes says in 1951 in his famous poem ‘Harlem’.<sup>26</sup> However, through her use and change of form, she allows space for consideration of the dream and the possibility that the reality of this environment is insufficient for human flourishing.

In a poem set in a building of kitchenettes, the speaker cannot be contained in the three-line restriction of her own choosing. The extra space she requires as a poet for emphasis and imagery functions metaphorically for the confined tenants and their need for additional space, even if that space is in the form of social freedoms rather than apartment size. Her tight stanzaic construction is apt because she must then write beyond its restrictions in order to become more than one who is ‘grayed in’. The combination of traditional formal poetics, and the deliberate deviation from it, editorialises the subject matter so that the reader becomes keenly aware of the limitations to be overcome in Bronzeville and the paradox of both aspiring to surmount barriers whilst being confined by them. It is a reserved strategy that lends her aesthetics subtlety even as she comments on the socioeconomic inequities of her neighbours; people are ‘things’ rather than agents in an ‘involuntary plan’. These diction choices

---

<sup>26</sup> Langston Hughes, 1951, reprinted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr and Nellie McKay, ed. 1, p. 1267.

convey that there is little or no control for the marginalised in the United States, particularly black persons who have undergone the ‘peculiar institutions’ of slavery, the Jim Crow regime in the South, and the ghettoization of Northern American cities after black people migrated in search of jobs and opportunity in an industrialised economy.<sup>27</sup>

The historical narrative of American racism that informs Brooks’s poetics (and perhaps disillusionment) is also prevalent throughout Jackie Kay’s work, as I examine in Chapter Five. Brooks and Kay operate within the importance of this South-to-North framework, a migration dictated by social and legal patterns of racist discourse. As Daphne Duval Harrison summarises, ‘Blacks were fleeing the violence and oppression of the post-Reconstruction South—lynchings, a new form of peonage called sharecropping, labor farms and chain gangs, and poll taxes’.<sup>28</sup> Loïc Wacquant elaborates on these conditions further when he suggests:

But restrictive covenants forced African-Americans to congregate in a ‘Black Belt’ which quickly became overcrowded, underserved and blighted by crime, disease, and dilapidation, while the ‘job ceiling’ restricted them to the most hazardous, menial, and underpaid occupations in both industry and personal services. As for ‘social equality’, understood as the possibility of ‘becoming members of white cliques, churches and voluntary associations, or marrying into their families’, it was firmly and definitively denied.<sup>29</sup>

Brooks addresses these overcrowded and impoverished circumstances with understatement but unambiguous representation. The garbage ripening in the hall and the tepid bath water concretise sociological abstractions with clarity and gravitas.

Richard Wright praises the authenticity of her poetic representations in 1944:

She takes hold of reality as it is and renders it faithfully. There is not so much an exhibiting of Negro Life to whites in these poems as there is an honest human reaction to the pain that lurks so colorfully in the Black belt. A quiet but hidden malice runs through most of them... Only one who has actually lived and suffered in a kitchenette could render the feeling of lonely frustration as well as she does—of how dreams are drowned by noises, smells, and the frantic desire to grab one’s chance to get a bath

---

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

<sup>28</sup> Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> Loïc Wacquant, ‘From Slavery to Mass Incarceration’, *New Left Review*, 13 (2002), pp. 48-49.

when the bathroom is empty.<sup>30</sup>

This powerful imagery (reality ‘rendered faithfully’), adherence and deviation from formal properties, and subtle commentary or ‘quiet but hidden malice’ contribute to the formation of Brooks’s aesthetics: a nuanced, sometimes soft, voice that is nonetheless political in tone and intention. Adrienne Rich advises in 1983 that poetry can:

root itself in politics. Even if it defends privilege, even if it deplores political rebellion and revolution, it can, may have to, account for itself politically, consciously situate itself amid political conditions, without sacrificing intensity of language.<sup>31</sup>

Brooks’s ‘intensity of language’ is what makes her poem so resonant because it submerges itself within racial politics, rather than overt protest. However, by constructing her rhetoric within the images of the dispossessed in a geography-dependent framework, she engages in specific socioeconomic commentary, even if that modality serves to expose these conditions to a white reader, rather than work through activism to overthrow the status quo in the form of the poem.

These aesthetic elements can also be seen in ‘the ballad of late Annie’, in the opening sequence of her second book, *Annie Allen* (1949). Brooks uses the ballad stanza form, which is, according to Edward Hirsch:

a narrative song preserved and transmitted orally. It unfolds in four-line stanzas, and customarily alternates three- and four-stress lines, the second and fourth lines rhyming...The ballad, a form of great antiquity, has been built up and scoured down by oral transmission to a work of eloquent simplicity...The individual singer stands in for the community, serving as the deputy of a public voice...The literary ballad perhaps always resonates with nostalgia for a lost oral poetry.<sup>32</sup>

The use of this form based in ‘oral transmission’ for Brooks, then, is concordant with an African American spoken tradition, resonating from the lost history of routine song and mythologies in Africa, spirituals in the New World, work songs on the plantations, and a variety of black contemporary musics, a motif explored in great detail by Nikki

<sup>30</sup> Wright’s letter to Harper & Bros. reviewing *A Street in Bronzeville*, reprinted by Franklin, pp. 354-355.

<sup>31</sup> Adrienne Rich, ‘Blood, Bread, and Poetry’ (1983), reprinted in *Arts of the Possible* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2001), p. 48.

<sup>32</sup> Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1999), pp. 269-270.

Giovanni, Grace Nichols, and Jackie Kay, as I examine in Chapters Three, Four, and Five.<sup>33</sup> About a distinctly African American vernacular, originating from the oral nature of slave songs and folk tales, Gayl Jones writes, ‘the syntax and expressive language and rhythms of the folk orators...presage contemporary ways of transcribing dialect or folk speech as a self-authenticating language...Poets turned to the oral tradition for the “whole form” of [language]’.<sup>34</sup> The ballad form enables Brooks to honour this trajectory of specifically black heritage, the ‘whole form’ of language; she is not merely writing within the construct but rather in the rich cultural legacy of black utterance.

In ‘the ballad of late Annie’, she again addresses the tension revealed in the first poem between the desire to dream the ideal and the reality of addressing one’s present circumstances and responsibility, exacerbated by the conditions of the urban ghetto. In the alternating lines of tetrameter and trimeter prescribed by ballad stanza, she writes:

Late Annie in her bower lay,  
 Though sun was up and spinning,  
 The blush-brown shoulder was so bare,  
 Blush-brown lip was winning.

Out then shrieked the mother-dear,  
 “Be I to fetch and carry?  
 Get a broom to whisk the doors  
 Or get a man to marry.”

“Men there were and men there be  
 But never men so many  
 Chief enough to marry me,”  
 Thought the proud late Annie.

“Whom I raise my shades before  
 Must be gist and lacquer.  
 With melted opals for my milk,  
 Pearl-leaf for my cracker.”<sup>35</sup>

By using this form for Annie’s wistful musings, Brooks is able to bring the child’s

---

<sup>33</sup> The legacy of oral traditions and the development of specifically African American musicality based on historical and geographical progression is thoughtfully mapped in the first seven chapters of LeRoi Jones’s (later to become Amiri Baraka) text of 1963 *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York, NY: Quill Publishing, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Traditions and African American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 24, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, ‘ballad of late Annie’, in *Annie Allen* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1949), p. 10 (entire poem).

voice to the poem, with the whimsy and musicality that is associated with the four- and three-stress lines. She embodies her subject's need to fantasize about an alternative life as a means of escaping the harsh reality of a disillusioned and stern mother and labour-intensive chores in an impoverished existence. However, according to Wallace Stevens in 1965, this *is* the job of the poet: to use the real as the basis for the poetic. He says:

The subject matter of poetry is not that 'collection of solid, static objects extended in space' but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but that life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are.<sup>36</sup>

This poem tells a story, grounded in 'things as they are', in a struggle against things as they might be; Brooks moves from a girl having a lie-in, to her mother's scold and a reminder of chores, to the man the girl hopes to marry as a means of escaping this life.

The narrative thread of the ballad stanza is present with its conventions respected, but, through this brief episode, Brooks is also able to lay the ground conditions of circumstances for this child and her mother, the very complications that require her virtually unattainable fantasy.<sup>37</sup> The pair embody the urban poor, particularly as women, and they represent opposite sides of the spectrum: naïve romance and weary realism. Perhaps in Annie's lifetime, she may be able to find a man with whom she may live leisurely, if she marries at all, and a middle-class escape from a life defined by labour, but her mother's lived experiences have shaped a woman intimate with the struggles of a black woman's existence in inter-War US culture. She knows there is work to do and sees Annie's only deliverance from it in the outlet of a hypothetical man. The immediacy of life's rules for this cross-generational pair of women is underscored by the accessible, familiar, and musically based ballad.

Formal properties are also significant in a poem in the same volume 'pygmies

---

<sup>36</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: NY: Random House, 1965), p. 25.

<sup>37</sup> 'Chief among its [the ballad's] virtues is a keen passion to tell you a story: it will grab you by the lapels, stare you in the eyes and plunge right in', Stephen Fry, *The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking the Poet Within* (New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2005), p. 192.

are pygmies still, though perchd on Alps' (1949), in which Brooks uses heroic quatrains, a verse form signifying elevation or grandeur. It is composed of four lines of iambic pentameter with the rhyme scheme *abcb*, like a ballad stanza. Here the use of iambic pentameter, however, gives weight to the poem, as part of a lengthy tradition of this metrical line being used for elevated subject matter. Edward Hirsch accounts for the iambic pentameter or 'heroic' line being used by poets from Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Yeats, to Frost.<sup>38</sup> 'It is the traditional formal line closest to the form of our speech', he says.<sup>39</sup> Stylistically, Brooks employs a rhythmic substitution in the first foot of most of the lines, so that six out of eight of them begin with a stressed syllable, or trochee, as though the words were booming out from the side a mountain. She writes:

But can see better there, and laughing there  
Pity the giants wallowing in the plain.  
Giants who bleat and chafe in their small grass,  
Seldom to spread the palm; to spit; come clean.

Pygmies expand in cold impossible air,  
Cry fie on giantshine, poor glory which  
Pounds breast-bone punily, screeches, and has  
Reached no Alps: or, knows no Alps to reach.<sup>40</sup>

The effect of this powerful voice on the hillside from the trochaic substitutions conveys that the pygmies, the small and meek, take on greater significance than the giants, who never had a need to aspire beyond the valley containing them; they failed to reach the mountains but are also unaware of any for which they should strive.

From their intrinsic need to overcome smallness, the pygmies adopt a sense of pride and greater integrity than the giants, who have never needed to or had the privilege to overcome an obstacle. This is all contained within the tight form of the

---

<sup>38</sup> 'It has been estimated that three-fourths of all English poetry from Chaucer to Frost has been written in rhymed or unrhymed iambic pentameter. It was the modal line in English for over three hundred years—the meter that Chaucer used for most of *Canterbury Tales*, Spenser employed for the *Fairie Queene*, Shakespeare used with great versatility through most of his plays, Milton needed for his epics, Pope used judiciously for nearly all his verse, Wordsworth used with great flexibility in *The Prelude*, Robert Browning carried through *The Ring and The Book*, Yeats, Frost, Stevens, and Crane re-created for many of their greatest poems'. Hirsch, p. 292.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 285.

<sup>40</sup> Brooks, 'pygmies are pygmies still', in *Annie Allen*, p. 14 (entire poem).

heroic quatrain, and this short, spare poem obtains greater integrity and meaning, like the pygmies in it. Because of the use of iambic pentameter, the reader is alerted to Brooks's engagement in a traditional form that signposts significance. The goats are an allegory for the racially oppressed, in Bronzeville and elsewhere in the US and the African diaspora. The poem becomes figuratively bigger than itself through the more meaningful associations with the fight against socioeconomic oppression, what Loïc Wacquant calls the desire to be a part of the 'individualistic and competitive tenor of American life, on the one hand, and the continued seclusion of African-Americans from it, on the other'.<sup>41</sup> The conclusion in favour of the goats is symbolic and pertinent for indigent Bronzeville citizens, who, like the pygmies, are faced with a social obstacle, constructed outside of their merit or control.

This poem provides the reader with a snapshot of Brooks's complex poetic identity. Traditional form is amalgamated with subtle, contemporary commentary; a spare, light-hearted poem in iambic pentameter signifies a broader population and significance. Margaret Walker said about this significance in 1982:

*A Street in Bronzeville* appeared in 1945. It was a very good book. I remember saying to Langston that the poetry was promising, technically and intellectually; the work had great potential. *Annie Allen* [1949] fulfilled that potential. I think *Annie Allen* is a superb book. Technically it is stunning. The subtleties come through it much better than they did in *A Street in Bronzeville*.<sup>42</sup>

Walker picks up on Brooks's facility to use the lyric to offer protest about racism and oppression without the forcefulness of blatant anger, a tonal quality that, I show, is in dialogue with the poetry of Walker and Nikki Giovanni in the next chapters. Brooks states in her second autobiography, *Report From Part Two* (1995), 'And I want the people of the world to anticipate unity of distinct proud pieces. Because each entity is lovely—amazing—exhilarating in unicity and boldness of clear distinction, good

---

<sup>41</sup> Wacquant, p. 55.

<sup>42</sup> Margaret Walker, in interview with Claudia Tate in 1982, reprinted in *Conversations with Margaret Walker*, edited by Maryemma Graham (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), p. 59.

design'.<sup>43</sup> This kind of philanthropy is in conjunction with social objection, or, as Adrienne Rich says, 'the dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self'.<sup>44</sup> Brooks occupies the space in between the language and the action, particularly when that rhetoric is constructed within the structure of tight poetic form.

### **Brooks and the Sonnet**

Brooks's use of the sonnet form can be best evaluated for this discussion with reference to poems from *A Street in Bronzeville*: 'my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell', the third poem in the sequence of twelve sonnets in the 'gay chaps at the bar' series, and the twelfth poem, 'the progress', although I will also examine sonnets from *Annie Allen* and *The Bean Eaters* (1960). D. H. Melham has analysed the 'gay chaps' sequence in *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice* (1987). Although thorough in many aspects of her inquiry into Brooks's poetry, she only casually addresses the sonnet, an oversight that under-represents its centrality for the poet. She briefly mentions Brooks's predecessors in the form, mainly with reference to the black sonneteers I cited, but she limits discussion of the rationale for the choice:

The sonnet form was not an eccentric choice for Brooks. It had already been favored by many Harlem Renaissance...poets such as Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes...The sonnets...probe subtleties of situation and psychology and test the meaning of black life and American ideals under fire.<sup>45</sup>

Melham suggests that the only reason Brooks selects this form is because the Harlem Renaissance poets had done so, as though the element of choice were carried out by her predecessors, and she was operating in the world of imitation.

---

<sup>43</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part Two* (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 1995), p. 131.

<sup>44</sup> Rich, 'Blood, Bread, and Poetry', in *Arts of the Possible*, p. 55.

<sup>45</sup> D. H. Melham, *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), p. 41.

Ellen Bryant Voigt contends that ‘form in a memorable poem is never passive, never simply a concrete mold into which the intermingling materials are poured’.<sup>46</sup> One might question why Brooks would use the form at all. Although Melham thoughtfully and accurately assesses the meanings and technical considerations of Brooks’s sonnets, she only hints at the tension that is created in the form itself. Because it is such a short and proscriptive poetic convention, a challenge exists for the poet. Michael Spiller suggests that it is to “‘make a point,” to go beyond merely declaring a feeling’.<sup>47</sup> Part of the dilemma of the sonnet is that the sonneteer ‘must work or struggle against confines; or...must learn delicacy, as if handling small and fragile things’.<sup>48</sup> It is these confines that she selects deliberately. She does not appropriate the sonnet simply because other black poets had already done so, but because of what the form enables her to do: through the volta/couplet, the sonnet intrinsically writes against itself, embodying a change of direction or mode of thinking, or at the very least a tension bristling beneath the surface. The ‘regulations’ of the form force the poet to think within their sphere and embody the external struggle conveyed in the subject matter. Brooks works within its tight framework to channel the stress of the topic. In terms of formal conventions, she innovates with choices of rhyme, diction, and meter. When she deviates from the conventions, it is usually to amplify the obstacles of the people she represents.

One tense arena that has been repeatedly the theme of sonneteers is war. Precedents have been set by William Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, W. H. Auden, and Seamus Heaney, to name but a few.<sup>49</sup> Brooks follows in this example although, unlike her male predecessors, her

---

<sup>46</sup> Ellen Bryant Voigt, *The Flexible Lyric* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999), p. 130.

<sup>47</sup> Spiller, p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>49</sup> The war sonnets of each of these poets is anthologised in *The Oxford Book of War Poetry*, edited by Jon Stallworthy (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 78, 147, 169, 178, 188, 302, and 331.

perspective is more grounded in the domestic experience rather than that of battle, not dissimilar from the contemporary poetry of Ellen Bryant Voigt, whose subject of a long sonnet sequence is the *home* front of World War I, notably the flu epidemic.<sup>50</sup> Brooks does, however, sometimes address the psychological concerns of the soldier. In ‘my dreams, my works...’ (1945), the soldier away at war realizes that everything for which he is hoping and fighting must be stored, like foodstuffs, until he returns from the terrible task at hand. This persona says longingly:

I hold my honey and store my bread	<i>a</i>
In little jars and cabinets of my will.	<i>b</i>
I label clearly, and each latch and lid	<i>a</i>
I bid, Be firm till I return from hell.	<i>b</i>
I am very hungry. I am incomplete.	<i>c</i>
And none can tell me when I may dine again.	<i>d</i>
No man can give me any word but Wait,	<i>c</i>
The puny light. I keep my eyes pointed in;	<i>d</i>
Hoping that, when the devil days of my hurt	<i>e</i>
Drag out to their last dregs and I resume	<i>f</i>
On such legs as are left me, in such heart	<i>e</i>
As I can manage, remember to go home,	<i>f</i>
My taste will not have turned insensitive	<i>g</i>
To honey and bread old purity could love. <sup>51</sup>	<i>g</i>

He hopes that he will be able to go home and recognize these stores—these dreams—and essentially resume his life trajectory. This is a Shakespearean sonnet in iambic pentameter, with Brooks’s customary metrical substitutions to allow natural cadence of speech and prevent inversions. Even with the regular rhyme scheme, however, every single rhyme in this sonnet is slant, a technique that reiterates the imperfection of the external situation. The form is given a compelling role here in that the fourteen lines and title are fraught with anxiety, a tenet that I identify at the centre of Margaret Walker’s sonnets in Chapter Two.

The poem concludes as dictated by formal regulation, but the reader is left with a sense of foreboding, especially in the final six lines. ‘On such legs as are left [him],

<sup>50</sup> Ellen Bryant Voigt, *Kyrie* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1995).

<sup>51</sup> Brooks, ‘my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell’, in *A Street in Bronzeville*, reprinted in *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*, p. 50 (entire poem).

and in such heart/ As [he] can manage', the soldier hopefully will be able to return to the life and aspirations left behind, assuming that *they* have not changed in the duration and that *he* has not been altered permanently by his experiences, suggesting the malleability of home and one's relationship to it (a theme I explore further in Chapter Four). Meanwhile, he faces the horrors of war. The persona here could likely continue for many more lines about what has been sacrificed and the experience of fear, but just these words are given, as though he had a moment of quiet on the front line and could only dash off these few lines, underscoring the drama that is possible within the form: fourteen lines of lyrical moment, including a likely volta. It allows for dynamic and intense emotions within a short space (like Wright's *short* space of historical time).

Brooks creates a tension between the form and content here, which is redoubled by her image choices of the jars, labelled clearly, to contain the speaker's life, both real and ideal. These cramped metaphors somehow contain the speaker, just as the form contains the content of the poem. Barbara Johnson sums up this restrictive paradox when she says, 'Because monuments are so often huge, there is a certain piquancy in their miniaturization in a sonnet'.<sup>52</sup> The monuments of war and life are in fact reduced in size to be held within the 'jars and cabinets' in Brooks's sonnet and the 'small and fragile things' of Spiller's definition of the form.

This tension between magnitude and diminution is ratcheted up by the reader's anxiety with regard to the truncation of the emotional moment and the imminent danger. Stress for the reader is an effective mechanism for Brooks to convey through the sonnet the disquiet of the speaker, a device that simultaneously allows the poet to communicate about the power of the form. In her hands, its nuance allows her to navigate the tightness of the verse and its counterbalance, the changing nature of home

---

<sup>52</sup> Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 2008), p. 36.

and self and the scale of human emotion, especially as she represents the anxieties of her subjects, in this case a war-worn soldier.

By the twelfth and final sonnet of this series, ‘the progress’ (1945), the anxiety level has been amplified, along with the sense of weariness. In conjunction with this intensity of negative emotions, Brooks modifies, or breaks down, the form as she goes:

And still we wear our uniforms, follow  
The cracked cry of the bugles, comb and brush  
Our pride and prejudice, doctor the sallow  
Initial ardor, wish to keep it fresh.  
Still we applaud the President’s voice and face.  
Still we remark on patriotism, sing,  
Salute the flag, thrill heavily, rejoice  
For death of men who too saluted, sang.  
But inward grows a soberness, an awe,  
A fear, a deepening hollow through the cold.  
For even if we come out standing up  
How shall we smile, congratulate: and how  
Settle in chairs? Listen, listen. The step  
Of iron feet again. And again—wild.<sup>53</sup>

She uses the Petrarchan form here with an octave and a sestet, but the traditions of the sonnet are increasingly fractured, mimetically symbolising the war-worn men in the poem; as the conventions of verse fray, so, too, does the emotional wellbeing of the soldiers.<sup>54</sup> The octave does not follow the usual Petrarchan rhyme scheme and here is *abab cdcd*. To that end, the slant rhymes are taken to the extreme and barely register with the same sounds. This adds to the sobriety of the poem. Rhyme can sometimes create the effect of playfulness, and that would undermine the serious tone of this piece.

The sestet then breaks from rhyme altogether, with none to be identified, not even slant. This time, the tension that is created in the sonnet form is reinforced in the way that the poem feels interrupted, incomplete. The men are losing their motivation, as inwardly grows ‘a soberness, an awe’. Their loyalty to the cause and their sense of

---

<sup>53</sup> Brooks, ‘the progress’, in *A Street in Bronzeville*, reprinted in *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*, p. 59 (entire poem).

<sup>54</sup> ‘The Petrarchan sonnet may have endured in large part because of the built-in satisfactions of its rhyme scheme: the octave’s matched, interlocked quatrains, then the sestet’s looser deployment of three new end sounds over six lines’, Voigt, *The Flexible Lyric*, p. 128.

self when surrounded by the ineffable tragedy of battle are diminished. This is compounded by the friction between, on the one hand, the need to maintain the war effort and, on the other, their waning belief in the cause and waxing fear. They worry that they may not live through it or could emerge as different people than they were when they started, despite the claim of continued allegiance. This might be considered a mirror to the poet's declining formal considerations, but rather she manipulates the form to articulate the attitude of these particular soldiers, a necessary strategy, according to Ellen Bryant Voigt, who says, 'But for genres to be useful they need to survive—transcend—any particular set of formal conventions, which the art continually outgrows'.<sup>55</sup> However, as in Brooks, 'neither does genius reinvent the wheel'.<sup>56</sup> She reworks the sonnet but also adheres to it to describe these soldiers. The realities of being separated from family, the intense physical demand on the body, and enduring the hazards and stress of battle all fatigue them, lending this poem a tone of exhaustion and sadness. Dan Jaffe suggests that 'these poems may tell us as much about the time of the Vietnam debacle as they do about World War II'.<sup>57</sup> Jaffe's observation is pertinent to a contemporary discussion of this poetry in that one might look at these poems and consider their application as war sonnets, as narratives of soldiers in battle, germane to the wars going on today. The tension that Brooks crafts, in subjects far larger than their tight containers, instils the same tension in a reader now as in the 1940s when they were written.

This relationship between subjects and vessels ('little jars') and the tension of physical and metaphorical space are deliberated on further in 'the rites for Cousin Vit' (1949). The eponymous character has too large a personality to fit into the confines of a

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 116.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 137.

<sup>57</sup> Dan Jaffe, 'Gwendolyn Brooks: An Appreciation from the White Suburbs', in *On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Contemplation*, p. 56.

casket, let alone those of death, emphasising the stresses inherent in the form. Through this piece, the reader is provided with a clear portrait of Vit, a lively and spirited woman whose zest cannot be stifled.<sup>58</sup> Her spirit pervades after her bodily departure, and her charisma carries on regardless of the funeral procession. Brooks writes:

Carried her unprotesting out the door	<i>a</i>
Kicked back the casket-stand. But it can't hold her,	<i>b</i>
That stuff and satin aiming to enfold her,	<i>b</i>
The lid's contrition nor the bolts before.	<i>a</i>
Oh oh. Too much. Too much. Even now, surmise,	<i>c</i>
She rises in sunshine. There she goes	<i>d</i>
Back to the bars she knew and the repose	<i>d</i>
In love-rooms and the things in people's eyes.	<i>c</i>
Too vital and too squeaking. Must emerge.	<i>e</i>
Even now, she does the snake-hips with a hiss,	<i>f</i>
Slaps the bad wine across her shantung, talks	<i>g</i>
Of pregnancy, guitars and bridgework, walks	<i>g</i>
In parks or alleys, comes haply on the verge	<i>e</i>
Of happiness, haply hysterics. Is. <sup>59</sup>	<i>f</i>

Brooks writes this sonnet *in medias res*, with the first line beginning without a subject. If the reader immediately questions the agent in the initial sentence, this has the effect of drawing him or her into the action of the poem, the activities of the funeral. The speaker recognizes that the deceased is not actually 'dead' and that she returns to the vitality she always possessed. She is not to be contained by the restrictions of death, a casket, or a sonnet for that matter. To underscore the lively tone, the poet uses *efggefe* as the rhyme scheme for the last six lines, creating a jovial and rhythmic couplet in the middle. At first glance, it seems that Brooks is employing a Petrarchan sonnet here. She starts with an *abba cddc* octave but then chooses a pattern of her own making for the sestet. However, in the Petrarchan tradition, the start of the sestet, or line 9, is usually the volta, but Brooks is totally innovative here in that she puts the turn of the poem in the second line. The final twelve lines are the change of direction: she is delimited by

<sup>58</sup> Gladys Margaret Williams writes of this sonnet, 'Readers who know the vigorous life of Chicago and Harlem streets and have seen the vital women resisting anyone's efforts to force their movements in directions they do not care to take...are cued to the kind of woman Cousin Vit must have been', 'Gwendolyn Brooks's Way with a Sonnet', *CLA Journal*, 26 (1982), p. 236.

<sup>59</sup> Brooks, 'rites of Cousin Vit', in *Annie Allen*, p. 45 (entire poem).

the coffin, yet she still carries on and is not eliminated by death, a motif that I examine further in Grace Nichols's work in Chapter Four. This, too, adds lightness to what is becoming an encomium rather than elegy. The use of the sonnet and the bending of the tradition to suit her content allow the poet to elegize the dead with an elevated form while also making a funereal sonnet rather light in tone.

Brooks continues her study of sonnets in the volume *The Bean Eaters* that contains the poem 'A Lovely Love' (1960), in which she writes:

Let it be alleys. Let it be a hall	<i>a</i>
Whose janitor javelins epithet and thought	<i>b</i>
To cheapen hyacinth darkness that we sought	<i>b</i>
And played we found, rot, make the petals fall.	<i>a</i>
Let it be stairways, and a splintery box	<i>c</i>
Where you have thrown me, scraped with your kiss,	<i>d</i>
Have honed me, have released me after this	<i>d</i>
Cavern kindness, smiled away our shocks.	<i>c</i>
That is the birthright of our lovely love	<i>e</i>
In swaddling clothes. Not like that Other one.	<i>f</i>
Not lit by any fondling star above.	<i>e</i>
Not found by any wise men, either. Run.	<i>f</i>
People are coming. They must not catch us here	<i>g</i>
Definitionless in this strict atmosphere. <sup>60</sup>	<i>g</i>

This poem starts off as a Petrarchan sonnet with the rhyme scheme *abba cddc*. However, line 9, the conventional start of the sestet, is actually Shakespearean with an additional quatrain (*efef*) in a different rhyming pattern from the first two quatrains, followed by a couplet (*gg*), in which the volta is located (that actually begins on line 12 with 'Run'). She literally blends the two styles, with an octave in Petrarchan and a sestet in Shakespearean or English. The changing rhyme scheme challenges the expectation of the reader and gives Brooks the room to create surprise and dissonance between the form and content. She employs internal stress in the sonnet with the disagreement between emotion and location. The anxiety present in this love narrative mirrors Roland Barthes's admission in 1978 that 'most often [he is] in the very

---

<sup>60</sup> Brooks, 'A Lovely Love', in *The Bean Eaters* (1960), reprinted in *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*, p. 347 (entire poem).

darkness of [his] desire; [he] know[s] not what it wants, good itself is an evil to [him]. Everything resounds. [He] lives between blows, [his] head ringing'.<sup>61</sup> The darkness of these lines is similar to the darkness within the poem, whether psychological or physical.

Rather than embody the sentimental foundation of a pastoral, instead Brooks plants two young lovers in a series of dark, secret, and even unsanitary locales. I would agree with Maria Mootry's comment that, 'setting is often discordant with situation, as when sexual encounters occur in urban hallways instead of romantic pastoral locations'.<sup>62</sup> However, Mootry only glosses over the complexity that is created by this juxtaposition. Like the uncomfortable feeling created by the surroundings, the *carpe diem* attitude and the purity of their love, as related to the Nativity, are interrupted by someone approaching. As a result of this friction of theme and setting, the emotion between the lovers is problematized. Is their love defiled by their actions in a dirty alleyway, or does their emotion supersede the environment? This tension corresponds with the religious implications also present in the text. The reference to the Nativity as 'that Other one' identifies a sense of 'ours' and 'theirs' when it comes to spirituality. There are for these subjects distinct feelings of being exiled from the dominant culture. The Nativity narrative is complicated by a sense of insider/outsider duality. Are these lovers entitled to the ownership of these religious mythologies? It would seem they feel they are not because they lack a star, the wise men, symbols associated with the worth of the 'that Other one'. Their access to the religious narrative becomes grittier, less refined. For them, spirituality works closer to home, as a domestication of the divine.

The romance, like their religion, feels separate from a cultural majority. Brooks

---

<sup>61</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 171.

<sup>62</sup> Maria Mootry, "'Tell It Slant': Disguise and Discovery as Revisionist Poetic Discourse in *The Bean Eaters*", in *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*, edited by Maria Mootry and Gary Smith (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 180.

closes the sonnet, not with an outpouring of affection, but with the word ‘[d]efinitionless’, implying that the lovers lack identity. This is again the poet’s subtle commentary on the status of the socially marginalised: their definition is somehow in the hands of the larger societal group, of which they are not included, nor could they be. Rather than being able to declare their own whole integrity, they (are taught to) perceive it through the lens of the hostile majority. Unlike the tradition of romance in which the lovers are defined by their very affection and their need for the other (even if the love is unrequited), these subjects are void of that definition, are anonymous. They are on display and must flee. Brooks’s commentary implies that this love comes secondary to the realities of a harsh environment and societal norms, like the ‘dream’ that must take a back seat to ‘rent’, ‘feeding a wife’, and ‘whish[ing] the door’. This is an example of Brooks as the subtle protest poet, a facet of her poetic identity. She allows the poetry to bring to light the conditions, rather than deploying explicit outcry. Mootry assesses the various critical responses to the volume when she says, ‘One reason *The Bean Eaters* aroused such a range of disparate critical assessments was the way Brooks yoked her “social” message to a variety of classic high modernist techniques’.<sup>63</sup> There is a sentiment of anger and repulsion about the existing condition and what people must endure, but it is shaded in complexity, like the form itself. Within Brooks’s poetics, this form is layered even further when she combines it with a contemporary and music-based mode of expression, as shown in the next section.

### **African American Vernacular: The Blues Sonnet**

Brooks’s engagement with poetic conventions and, particularly, her interpretations of them in light of contemporary politics are also evident in the way the

---

<sup>63</sup> Reprinted by Franklin, p. 361.

blues encounters the sonnet in her early work. This is a significant juxtaposition, which reinforces her mixture of traditional poetics and African American vernaculars, a combination that inspires Jackie Kay, when she says '[Brooks] is a fantastically exciting writer. I have been reading her for years. She is exciting with form, exciting with her interests'.<sup>64</sup> She is indeed exciting with form, but Brooks is by no means the first black poet to integrate a specifically black vernacular into her work. Cullen and McKay, for example, certainly used themes of black oppression/liberation and appealed to audiences familiar with the labours of both the agricultural economy of the South, as well as the industrialised cities of the North. Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Zora Neale Hurston employed certain dialects and the experience of the African American slaves; they were often criticized for these choices, even with the accusation of minstrelsy, the act of degrading oneself or even one's race in order to cater to a socially dominant audience.<sup>65</sup> Richard Wright declares of her work: 'Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the "white folks" laugh'.<sup>66</sup> Wright rejects the practice of minstrelsy, or so-called exoticism, as a source of entertainment for a majority, often prejudiced, audience in his text *Blueprint for Negro Writing* (1937).<sup>67</sup> For Brooks, the synthesis of the poetic form and certain types of vernacular, i.e. dialect, was uneven ground, upon which she learned to step lightly based on how previous poets and their critics had vexed the issue.

However, the importance of the vernacular is integral to the history of the

---

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Jackie Kay and K. E. Concannon, printed in its entirety as the Appendix.

<sup>65</sup> Joanne M. Braxton, introduction, *The Collected Poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar*, p. x. Minstrelsy often connotes a sense of exploitative practice, through both overexposing and selling oneself to the person with the money, who simultaneously dictates the parameters of the performance. As such, it proves uneven ground for black diasporic writers, who run the risk of being perceived as either inauthentic or capitalistic.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Wright, 'Between Laughter and Tears', in *New Masses*, 5 October (1937), p. 22.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', originally published in *New Challenge*, 11 (1937), reprinted in *Race and Class*, 21 (1980), pp. 403-419.

sonnet form. In earlier centuries, composition in Italian and then English, rather than Latin, made it a form of the people and opened it up to greater interpretation and representation.<sup>68</sup> Brooks's point of entry into the use of a black vernacular, which she textures with the sonnet form, is the blues. She is not the first black writer to imbue poetry or prose with the blues. Jean Toomer, among many examples, does it in his short story 'Blood-Burning Moon' within the collection *Cane* (1923).<sup>69</sup> In poetry, she is preceded by Hughes, Cullen, Robert Hayden, and Richard Wright, to name a few, and she would not be the last; Sonia Sanchez follows her example, along with Margaret Walker, Nikki Giovanni, Derek Walcott, Cornelius Eady, and Jackie Kay, as I examine in detail in subsequent chapters.<sup>70</sup> Her use of the vernacular is most effective when conjoined with the blues, which is striking when paired with the use of the sonnet, a technique employed by Claude McKay in 'The Harlem Dancer' (1917).<sup>71</sup> She uses the blues as a means of accessing a cultural heritage that originates uniquely with African Americans. Amiri Baraka says of the blues in 1984:

As young people we were blues people, it is and remains African American popular music. It was the most natural element in our lives, the sound of those lives, as they were lived. In the late 40's and 50's, the whole of the US was going through changes and we were going through changes with it. What the blues said and says is the flow of our blood and the flow of us through this world.<sup>72</sup>

Blues as the vehicle of expressing changing cultures and selves underscores the power of music to construct fluid identities, as I discussed in the Introduction.

Paul Gilroy says of black musical tradition that:

---

<sup>68</sup> Spiller, pp. 7-8.

<sup>69</sup> Jean Toomer, 'Blood-Burning Moon', in *Cane* (1923) (New York, NY: Liveright, 1975), pp. 28-35.

<sup>70</sup> Poems such as Hughes's 'Song for a Dark Girl' (1927), Cullen's 'Colored Blues Singer' (1924), Wright's 'Red Clay Blues' (1939), and Hayden's 'Homage to the Empress of the Blues' (1948) prefigure or parallel Brooks's integration of the two genres, anthologised in *Blues Poems*, edited by Kevin Young (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), pp. 23, 30, 50, and 232. After Brooks's example, Sonia Sanchez publishes *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1973); Margaret Walker and Nikki Giovanni examine the blues in 'Inflation Blues' (1980) and 'Master Charge Blues' (1970), Young, pp. 113, 115. Jackie Kay takes up the blues and poetry in her manifold homages to Bessie Smith, as I explore in Chapter Five.

<sup>71</sup> Anthologised by Young, p. 28.

<sup>72</sup> Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (1984) (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2012), p. 76.

its obstinate and consistent commitment to the idea of a better future is a puzzle to which the enforced separation of slaves from literacy and their compensatory refinement of musical art supplies less than half an answer. The power of music is in developing black struggles by communicating information, organising consciousness, and testing out or deploying the forms of subjectivity.<sup>73</sup>

For Gwendolyn Brooks, the ‘sound of those lives’ and the expression of ‘developing black struggles’ are amongst her most important cadences.

In *Annie Allen*, the poem ‘sonnet ballad’ (1949) is a song of mourning from the point of view of the woman left behind by war. Brooks writes in the ‘Appendix to the *Anniad*’:

Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?	<i>a</i>
They took my lover’s tallness off to war,	<i>b</i>
Left me lamenting. Now I cannot guess	<i>a</i>
What I can use an empty heart-cup for.	<i>b</i>
He won’t be coming back here any more.	<i>b</i>
Some day the war will end, but, oh, I knew	<i>c</i>
When he went walking grandly out that door	<i>b</i>
That my sweet love would have to be untrue.	<i>c</i>
Would have to be untrue. Would have to court	<i>d</i>
Coquettish death, whose impudent and strange	<i>e</i>
Possessive arms and beauty (of a sort)	<i>d</i>
Can make a hard man hesitate—and change.	<i>e</i>
And he will be the one to stammer, “Yes.”	<i>a</i>
Oh mother, mother, where is happiness? <sup>74</sup>	<i>a</i>

There are key aspects to this Spenserian sonnet.<sup>75</sup> A break in the form comes in the third quatrain, in that a new sound is introduced in the *d* rhyme, rather than the repetition of the *c* rhyme, eliminating the couplet that would be created between lines 8 and 9. This functions as a fissure of the form as the speaker’s song becomes even more forlorn. Additionally, the final couplet in lines 13 and 14 returns to the *a* rhyme, including the repetition of the first line, which operates as a refrain. With its several instances of repetition, especially the ‘bookends’ of the poem, its ‘refusal to offer solutions’, and its intimate address to the mother, this near-perfect iambic pentameter

<sup>73</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 36.

<sup>74</sup> Brooks, ‘Appendix to the *Anniad*’, in *Annie Allen*, p. 32 (entire poem).

<sup>75</sup> I would consider this a Spenserian sonnet rather than a Shakespearean sonnet because of the repeated *b* rhyme into the second quatrain and the couplet that is thereby created between lines 4 and 5.

sonnet is also a blues song.<sup>76</sup>

Ralph Ellison famously defines blues in 1945 as:

an impulse to keep the painful detail and episodes of a brutal existence alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.<sup>77</sup>

He supplements this definition of the blues when he explicates in 1964 that, 'Blues speak to us of the tragic and comic aspects of the human condition'. They:

express a profound sense of life shared by many Negro Americans precisely because their lives combined these modes...For the blues are not primarily concerned with civil rights or obvious political protest; they are an art form and thus a transcendence of those conditions created with the Negro community by the denial of social justice. As such they are one of the techniques through which Negroes have survived and kept their courage during that long period when many whites assumed, as some still assume, they were afraid.<sup>78</sup>

Certainly, this sonnet fits within the parameters of the blues as 'defined' by Ellison, in both the expression of the experiences of an individual's life and the ways in which those experiences can be symbolic for an entire group, in this case, the transcendence over the conditions created by 'the denial of social justice'. The reader of Brooks's poem is left with a sense that the speaker will find no consolation despite the closure of the fourteen lines. Elevated through the use of this traditional poetic form, there is a loftiness that functions in direct contrast to the gritty blues song, as well as a tension between the occasional high-diction choices and the use of the African American vernacular. The audience is likely to feel a discomfort and a simultaneous sense of awe at what is being technically accomplished. The poem positions Brooks between two

---

<sup>76</sup> Ralph Ellison, 'Richard Wright's Blues', originally published in *The Antioch Review* (1945), reprinted in *Shadow and Act* (New York, NY: Random House, 1964), p. 94; The call to the mother is an example of the dyad, in which the bond of two individuals is created, such as addressing someone as 'brother', a type of intimate or familial bond that is created as a result of language and serves to build connections based on common history, story, experience, or race. This linguistic construction, commonly used by black writers and orators, has been attributed by Richard Price and Sidney Mintz to the history of slavery, both transportation in bondage on the slave ship and life on the plantations of North America, with the resulting kinship born out of that common crisis. Richard Price and Sidney Mintz, *The Birth of African American Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 42-45.

<sup>77</sup> Ralph Ellison, 'Richard Wright's Blues', reprinted in *Shadow and Act*, p. 78.

<sup>78</sup> Ellison, 'Blues People', originally published in the *New York Review of Books* in 1964, reprinted in *Shadow and Act*, pp. 256-258.

poles of traditional and contemporary cultural productions.

In terms of Brooks's poetic identity, this poem speaks volumes. The juxtaposition of the sonnet and the blues matters because, as a poet, she participates in the high literary continuum of the former and the socio-political trajectory of the latter. There is a duality here felt in the poem and about the poet. She uses traditional poetic form and reincarnates it with the blues born out of the 'sorrow song', a term coined in 1903 by W. E. B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* as, 'the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways'.<sup>79</sup> Yet they all 'breathe a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence'.<sup>80</sup> In short, they 'stand today not simply as the sole American music, but as the *most beautiful expression of human experience* born this side of the seas'.<sup>81</sup> This significance of expression is joined with significance of form: 'The true father or shaping spirit of the poem is', according to Northrup Frye, 'the form of the poem itself, and this form [the sonnet] is a *manifestation of the spirit of poetry*'.<sup>82</sup> The legacy of the sonnet is so significant because it is:

a small vessel capable of plunging tremendous depths. It is one of the enabling forms of human inwardness. The form becomes a medium for the poet to explore his or her capacity to bring together feeling and thought, the lyrical, and the discursive.<sup>83</sup>

This combination of the sonnet and the blues in Brooks's aesthetics gives her access to two extraordinarily rich cultural heritages, capable of articulating the essence of human emotion in a form that encapsulates the essence of poetry.

The combination also allows her connections to two different histories: a

---

<sup>79</sup> Anthologised in Gates and McKay, ed. 1, p. 734.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 738.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p. 732, my emphasis added.

<sup>82</sup> Northrop Frye, quoted by Edward Hirsch, p. 311, my emphasis added.

<sup>83</sup> Hirsch, p. 309.

Eurocentric literary tradition and a distinctly African/African American oral musicality. The two intersect, however, in their inseparable grounding in the vernacular, or the language and experience of the individual. Brooks's poetic identity is based in this intersection, and her ability to participate in the legacy of both of these narratives is a hybridity that also encapsulates the poetics of Margaret Walker, Nikki Giovanni, and especially Grace Nichols, and Jackie Kay, who also inhabit liminal spaces in their poetic and personal landscapes.<sup>84</sup> The individual focus, according to LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), is a particular facet of the blues. He writes, '...the insistence of blues verse on the life of the individual and his individual trials and successes on the earth is a manifestation of the whole Western concept of man's life, and it is a development that could only be found in an American black man's music'.<sup>85</sup> When the poet accesses these diverse cultural productions and is able to synthesise them, such as Brooks does here, the resulting effect is, according to Adrienne Rich, one of intense simultaneous 'crossover between personal and political' that pushes 'at the limits of experience', a dual modality that transcends barriers and eliminates them as such and links the poets in this thesis, as explored in the next chapters.<sup>86</sup>

This 'crossover', then, is the space in which Brooks may position her verse. For example, in another sonnet in *Annie Allen*, the fourth poem in the 'children of the poor' (1949) sequence, Brooks agitates the sonnet form with the introduction of the blues, in the realm of the emotional and the public simultaneously:

First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string	<i>a</i>
With feathery sorcery; muzzle the note	<i>b</i>
With hurting love; the music that they wrote	<i>b</i>
Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing	<i>a</i>
Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing	<i>a</i>

<sup>84</sup> 'And it is not surprising that important events occur in the landscape of identity when race and gender compete for and combine in a single body', Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr, 'Multiplying Identities', in *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (1992), p. 628.

<sup>85</sup> Jones, *Blues People*, p. 66.

<sup>86</sup> Rich, 'Blood, Bread, and Poetry', in *Arts of the Possible*, p. 56.

For the dear instrument to bear. Devote	<i>b</i>
The bow to silks and honey. Be remote	<i>b</i>
A while from malice and from murdering.	<i>a</i>
But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate	<i>c</i>
In front of you and harmony behind.	<i>d</i>
Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.	<i>d</i>
Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late	<i>c</i>
For having first to civilize a space	<i>e</i>
Wherein to play your violin with grace. <sup>87</sup>	<i>e</i>

From a formal perspective, this Petrarchan sonnet accelerates from start to finish as the iambic pentameter becomes more regular. The syllabic substitutions found towards the beginning of the poem are gone by the conclusion. Additionally, the sestet follows a unique rhyme scheme, *cddcee*, creating two strong couplets, linked with another rhyme, rather than the expected two tercets. This deliberate variation in form on Brooks's part gives a real weightiness to this sonnet. The added couplets make it more imperative in the address to the musician.

There is considerable anger in this lyric, following Claude McKay's 1919 example, 'Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,/Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!'.<sup>88</sup> This anger is also enduring in the blues, as those who write it respond to the denial of social justice but still hope to overcome the weight of oppression. Richard Wright asserts in the introduction to *Black Metropolis*:

Negroes...still...believe in justice, liberty, the integrity of the individual. In the heart of industrial America is a surviving remnant, perchance a saving remnant of a passion for freedom, a passion fanned by their national humiliation.<sup>89</sup>

Wright's observations in 1946 are weary but hopeful, with reason for both. Post-War America still enforced the oppression of black people, eighty years after the abolition of slavery, and the advancements of the Civil Rights Movement had yet to unfold in the form of federal legislature. He is positioned at a precarious point in US history because Jim Crow dominated the South and Black Belt ghettos dominated the North. However,

<sup>87</sup> Brooks, *Annie Allen*, p. 38 (entire poem).

<sup>88</sup> McKay, 'If We Must Die', in *Selected Poems*, p. 36, ll. 13-14.

<sup>89</sup> Richard Wright, Introduction to Cayton and Drake's *Black Metropolis*, p. xxv.

he remains somewhat optimistic that African Americans will be able to forge a liberation for themselves. This integrity of the black spirit fuels Brooks in her pursuit of verse. It is the ‘passion for freedom’, brought on by the painful shared experiences of slavery and segregation, that this sonnet addresses and that lends the poem its bite. Aside from the tension created between this vast human experience confined within the ‘little jar’ of the sonnet, there is also the stress within the lines themselves, with one instruction to ‘Be remote/ A while from malice and from murdering’, followed shortly by, ‘Carry hate/ In front of you and harmony behind’. These lines advise the addressee in opposite directions, both linked by pride (racial and individual) and the prospect of social change, which results in a charged poem as it navigates this fourteen-line form.

This sonnet can also be interpreted as a blues song. Although the repetition seen in the first example is not recreated here, the motifs of anger, rejection of the status quo, and opposition to it are clearly presented. These are seen throughout the blues, especially in the oeuvre of blueswomen, who were precursors to the feminists and civil rights activists of later decades.<sup>90</sup> Angela Davis writes about the many aspects intrinsic to the blues and that of the blueswoman. She says that blues directly names the concerns afflicting its singer, including joblessness, poverty, domestic unrest, the desire for love, anger directed at a man—often with a sense that women are *not* powerless and can respond to oppression, *violently* if necessary. Davis predicates in 1999, ‘Naming issues that pose a threat to the physical or psychological wellbeing of the individual is a central function of the blues’.<sup>91</sup> She goes on to consider how this manifests itself for the blueswoman. She writes, ‘The independent women of blues lore do not think twice about wielding weapons against [those] who they feel have mistreated them’.<sup>92</sup> For

---

<sup>90</sup> Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies*, p. 41.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, p. 33.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, p. 34.

example, violence is threatened in Ida Cox's blues song, 'Georgia Hound Blues' (1925), in which she croons:

Like a hound, you chase all night and don't come home till morn.  
Like a hound, you chase all night and don't come home till morn.  
Pretty daddy, the undertaker has got your last [chase] on.<sup>93</sup>

Bessie Smith, too, sings of killing a mistreatin' man in 'Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair' (1927):

I cut him with my barlow  
I kicked him in his side,  
I stood there laughing over him  
While he wallowed round and died<sup>94</sup>

Daphne Duval Harrison elaborates on violence in the blues in 1988 when she says:

Bessie Smith's own life was peppered with incidents of a violent nature, so the conviction she brought to this blues is authentic. She was known not to take any foolishness from anybody, male or female...Mistreatment...is the source for many blues lyrics, and though actual violence to oneself or the perpetrator may result, it is more frequently threatened than carried out.<sup>95</sup>

This weapon wielding, or innate violence, does not have to be literal; it can easily be metaphorical, as with Brooks's lines: 'But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate/ In front of you and harmony behind./ Be deaf to music and to beauty blind./ Win war. Rise bloody...'. Here, Brooks, engaging directly with the spirit in Bessie Smith's songs, calls upon the musician to rebel against oppressors in order to carve out some integrity, or a sense of unimpaired wholeness, for herself or himself.

Ralph Ellison says about Smith in 1945 that she may have been a:

'blues Queen' to the society at large, but within the tighter Negro community where the blues were a total way of life, and major expression of an attitude toward life, she was a priestess, a celebrant who affirmed the values of the group and man's ability to deal with chaos.<sup>96</sup>

In light of this homage, Brooks is certainly participating in Smith's legacy, in that her persona is ordering the chaos around her in order to affirm the values of the group. All

---

<sup>93</sup> Reprinted by Harrison, p. 85.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>96</sup> Ellison, 'Richard Wright's Blues', reprinted in *Shadow and Act*, p. 78.

of this violence is also shrouded in sadness over the need for it. Langston Hughes said in 1925 that ‘Bessie’s blues were the essence of sadness...not softened with tears, but hardened with laughter, the absurd, incongruous laughter of a sadness without even a god to appeal to’.<sup>97</sup> Brooks, through her tone, is directly appropriating the blues textures established by blueswomen in earlier decades. The musical aspects of this sonnet do not adhere as strongly to the conventions of the blues, without repetition, call and response, or *aaa* rhymes, but the notion of spurring on social injustice, rejecting ‘any foolishness’, and particularly women overthrowing oppressive gender conventions could be as easily sung in a jook joint as recited at a poetry reading.

For Brooks to place her poetry within the footprint of blueswomen, she is shaping her work within the framework of early twentieth-century feminist thought. Harrison suggests that these women were early feminists, prefiguring the sexual revolution of the 1960s. She writes:

Although the blues women sang about the same topics that men did, they provided new slants. They dealt openly with the issues that were of particular concern to black women in the urban setting—freedom from social and religious constraints, sexual and economic independence, alcoholism, and drugs. Issues of sexuality and sex were addressed directly and indirectly in their lifestyles and blues.<sup>98</sup>

She argues that, in addition to the physicality of sex for women, the blueswomen addressed the daily lives of women they represented and argued in favour of their empowerment. She says the blues:

provides the reader with an opportunity to see these women as pivotal figures in the assertion of black women’s ideas and ideals from the standpoint of the working class and the poor. It reveals their dynamic role as spokespersons and interpreters of the dreams, harsh realities, and tragicomedies of the black experience in the first three decades of this century.<sup>99</sup>

Brooks, too, participates in this kind of spokesperson role, allowing her poetry to speak for black women suffering under the oppression of the dominant discourse.

---

<sup>97</sup> Langston Hughes, quoted by Carl Van Vechten in ‘The Black Blues’, *Vanity Fair*, 24 (August 1925), p. 86.

<sup>98</sup> Harrison, p. 13.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

## Women-Centred Poetry: Prefiguring Contemporary Feminism

Gwendolyn Brooks's blues poems make a political statement about women and lend her work an early feminist quality, before the women's liberation movement in the 1960s. Primarily, as it was for the blueswomen, her concern was with the women of the working class, especially black women. As seen in the poems discussed above, she harnessed subject matter from the people around her and their circumstances with their place in time and location as catalysts for the narrative; she stands as a spokesperson for those whose suffering might not otherwise be expressed, a characteristic that I contend is relevant across the Black Atlantic. Kadija Sesay celebrates this aspect of her work in 2007 when she writes:

As a poet, Gwendolyn Brooks was an idealist. She championed the poor, the alienated, and those on the fringe. The Black underclass, who many called outsiders, the street folks, the common...people, who all too often got left behind by a social movement which they acted in but did not reap the fruits of, were often the heroes of her poetry.<sup>100</sup>

Sesay's homage to the poet signposts her role as a representative of women, the poor, the racial minority, 'those on the fringe'; her poetic voice for the oppressed adds to her significance as a poet. For Brooks, engaging with race meant that she must also engage with gender. As Judith Butler asserts in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), race is 'lived in the modality of gender', and gender is always 'lived in the modality of race'.<sup>101</sup> The blues sonnets highlight Brooks's engagement in the intersection between race and gender, as articulated through women and the domestic arena, particularly in their assertiveness against traditional values and patriarchal patterns of family life; this is seen in free verse poems as well.

One poem that stands out, with Brooks as a representative of the 'underclass', is the poem, 'the mother' (1945), in *A Street in Bronzeville*. The poem begins:

<sup>100</sup> Kadija Sesay, editor, 'Gwendolyn Brooks in Celebration, *Sable*, 11 (2007), pp. 61-64.

<sup>101</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1993), p. 117.

Abortions will not let you forget.  
 You remember the children you got that you did not get.  
 The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,  
 The singers and workers that never handled the air.  
 You will never neglect or beat  
 Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.  
 You will never wind up the sucking-thumb  
 Or scuttle off ghosts that come.  
 You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,  
 Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children.<sup>102</sup>

Aside from the polemical topic, a mother reflecting on past abortions (even more so in its publication in 1945 than today), this poem accomplishes several things. Immediately, the reader can ascertain that the poet is using paired rhymes, *aabbccdd*, a highly regimented form for such a controversial subject, when abortions were still illegal in the US.<sup>103</sup> The use of the rhymed couplets—even as they appear in larger stanzas—is again part of the practice that Brooks employs to create a palpable tension for the reader. As Barbara Johnson says in 1987, ‘The poem’s structure is at odds with its apparent themes’.<sup>104</sup> This form often has the effect of coming across as light-hearted as a result of the musicality created by the close rhymes, such as, for example, a schoolyard rhyme, the kind of singing her unborn children might have done, the very same youths she also mourns. This juxtaposition of the persona’s implied guilt and a seemingly jovial form amplify the fraught nature of the poem and intensify the anxiety within these lines. The stress this mother continues to endure is conveyed as the form itself is stressed; as the emotional stakes get higher for the narrator, the poet abandons the couplets. The long line ‘I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my dim killed children’ is the first of the second stanza and is the first to deviate from the rhyme scheme. Not only is this line considerably longer than almost every other one,

<sup>102</sup> Brooks, ‘the mother’, in *A Street in Bronzeville*, reprinted in *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*, p. 5, ll. 1-11.

<sup>103</sup> Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003), p. 6.

<sup>104</sup> Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 186.

but it is also unpaired and unrhymed. It combines angst, shame, and regret. By jarring the rhyme scheme and lengthening this line, the pace is decelerated, and the reader lingers over every word, a rhetorical strategy that has the effect of enunciating the speaker's agony. At this point, Brooks leaves the realm of schoolyard rhyme and focuses instead on the drama of the situation. With some exception, from this point, the poem also deviates from the *aabbcc* couplets for several lines and moves mostly into *abab* quatrains; this allows the poet to operate within a framework of disjointedness that mirrors the internal thoughts of the persona.

In addition to variegated rhyme and lineage patterns, three lines after this transition, the relationship between 'I' and 'you' also changes. She says:

I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized  
Your luck  
And your lives from your unfinished reach,  
If I stole your births and your names,  
Your straight baby tears and your games,  
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages, aches, and your deaths,  
If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,  
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate.<sup>105</sup>

Previously in the poem, the speaker's address to the 'you' was actually an address to herself, obfuscating the lyric boundaries between 'I' and 'you'. The apostrophic voice was an address to the self as some other entity, allowing it to become lost in the actions and, perhaps, culpability implied by the narrative. Johnson says of this:

Brooks is representing the self as eternally addressed and possessed by the lost, anthropomorphized other. Yet the self that is possessed here is already a "you," not an "I." The "you" in the opening lines can be seen as an "I" that has become alienated, distanced from itself and combined with a generalized other, which includes and feminizes the reader of the poem. The grammatical I/thou starting point of traditional apostrophe has been replaced by a structure in which the speaker is simultaneously eclipsed, alienated, and confused with the addressee.<sup>106</sup>

Through this rearrangement of the second-person point of view into the first-person at the start of the poem, Brooks facilitates the speaker's simultaneous aloofness from the abortions as well as the formation of community with the reader, who is brought into

---

<sup>105</sup> Brooks, 'the mother', p. 5, ll. 14-21.

<sup>106</sup> Johnson, *A World of Difference*, p. 189.

the confessions of the poem through the address 'you'. Then she rhetorically disrupts the 'I/'you' dialogue by altering the antecedents of the pronouns. Now, at line 14, the 'you' becomes the aborted children themselves. Johnson suggests that this is an attempt to attenuate her own liability in the acts, by keeping the children alive, through language and image. She says:

If the fact that the speaker addresses the children at all makes them human, then she must pronounce herself guilty of murder—but only if she discontinues her apostrophe. As long as she addresses the children, she can keep them alive, can keep from finishing with the act of killing them. The speaker's attempt to absolve herself of guilt depends on never forgetting, never breaking the ventriloquism of an apostrophe through which she cannot define her identity otherwise than as the mother eaten alive by the children she has never fed.<sup>107</sup>

The reader of this discourse and this poem is left with the problem that the apostrophe attempts to resolve and clarify the exchange between 'I' and 'you', a pair of entities that are in flux, demonstrating the extent to which identities are mobile and lend themselves to reinterpretation in light of life-altering events.

With this evocative and provocative poem, the poet draws the reader into consideration of the role of the woman as a mother and nurturer. On one hand, there is potential shock created by the action and admission of this particular mother having had several abortions. To end the children's lives before they even had their 'games' and 'lovely loves' robs them of the experiences of humanity. However, on the other hand, humanity is inextricably linked with the human condition, to be acutely aware of one's own suffering. The persona attempts to shield her unborn children from pain, reduced linguistically to 'baby tears' and 'tumults'. The protagonist, the reader is led to understand, cares so much for her children that she wishes to prevent their eventual suffering. This poem prefigures and can be seen as a literary link into Toni Morrison's characters in *Beloved* (1987). In Morrison's text, Sethe, a former slave woman, commits infanticide when she takes the life of her daughter Beloved in order to prevent

---

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 192.

the possibility that the child will be enslaved.<sup>108</sup> The ghost of the dead baby as an older girl returns to Sethe and her daughter Denver, as she exists only partially in the worlds of the living and dead. The manner in which the mother in Brooks's poem continues to envision and anthropomorphise her children provides testimony to her maternal love—a theme, I demonstrate, that is intensely explored by Grace Nichols—even if the enactment of that love is actually the termination of the children's lives.

Brooks describes her persona as, 'a Mother not unfamiliar, who decides that *she* rather than her World will kill her children'.<sup>109</sup> This kind of poem is, of course, controversial in character. Legality aside, Brooks, through her portraiture of this character, interrogates whether this mother, or women in similarly marginalised situations whom she represents, is a character with whom society might empathise. Because Brooks adopts a detached attitude towards the subject matter, free from judgment, the emotional weight and community implications of this situation are ambiguous. Beverly Guy-Sheftall suggests that, 'Ironically, it [is] [the mother's] deep concern for them...which cause[s] her to have the abortions;...there is no question in my mind...where Brooks's sympathies lie'.<sup>110</sup> Ultimately, because of this lack of poetic commentary in the poem, particularly a lack of negative shading, Brooks pushes the audience from neutrality towards sympathy for the persona, dependent on her maternal love; this may remain nebulous and be an inclination rather than actual sympathy or empathy. The poet closes with the final lines: 'Believe me, I loved you all./ Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you/ All'.<sup>111</sup> As Roland Barthes posits in *Lover's Discourse* (1978), '*I-love-you* is active. It affirms itself as a force—against other forces. Which ones? The thousand forces of the world, which are, all of them,

---

<sup>108</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London, UK: Chatto and Windus, 1987), p. 5.

<sup>109</sup> Brooks, *Report From Part One*, p. 184.

<sup>110</sup> Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 'The Women of Bronzeville' In: *A Life Distilled*, p. 157.

<sup>111</sup> Brooks, 'the mother', p. 6, ll. 31-33.

disparaging forces...'.<sup>112</sup> By saying that she loves her children, the mother's words become a performative 'force against others', namely those of guilt, violence, and loss, and ground her behaviours in affection. In the same way, one could sympathize with Sethe in *Beloved*, whose motivations lie in delivering the child from the cruel external reality of slavery and its repercussions and poverty. These women writers interrogate whether or not, for the disenfranchised, the boundary between right and wrong needs to be redrawn and whether societal constraints are legitimate factors when evaluating the culpability of one's choices. Johnson suggests that the line 'Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate' opens up the possibilities of re-interpretation. She writes, 'believe that the agent is not entirely autonomous, believe that I can be subject and object of violence at the same time, believe that I have not chosen the conditions under which I must choose'.<sup>113</sup> The very fact that perspectives are challenged and re-negotiated in this writing, even if only for a moment, speaks powerfully about the ways in which socioeconomic discussions can be accessed through the provocation of the poetic microcosms of these two literary mothers.

This poem and others examine and explore questions of both racial and sexual identity, a discussion that Brooks freely engages in throughout her prose. She writes, 'Indeed, however, Blackness is what I know best. I want to talk about it, with definitive illustration, in this time when hostility between races intensifies and swirls...'.<sup>114</sup> With boldness and fearlessness, the poet's words demonstrate that being black is integral to her identity, an attitude reflected in her work both before and after the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements. Dan Jaffe professes, 'As a poet and novelist Gwen Brooks never seems to have wondered who she was. She announced herself to the world as a

---

<sup>112</sup> Barthes, p. 153, his emphasis.

<sup>113</sup> Johnson, *A World of Difference*, p. 191.

<sup>114</sup> Brooks, *Report From Part Two*, p. 127.

person, as a woman, as a poet, as a black'.<sup>115</sup> Even though Jaffe tends to address her contributions to the discussion of racial representations more than sexual politics, this poem engages sharply with both gender-specific and racialized identity, as it unsettles myths and stereotypes associated with and used to falsely identify black women.

In the piece, Brooks's persona (and how she may be perceived) paradoxically combines the simultaneous presence of two myopic, subjective, and odious myths about black women, namely those of the 'jezebel'—the oversexualized black woman—and the 'mammy' or Aunt Jemima—the overtly maternal (often asexual) black woman. These myths and others have been described in detail by many writers. Diane Roberts explores the origins of the 'jezebel' myth when she asserts:

The black female body often stands for sexuality, based on old understandings of African "lust" and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century racial physiognomy which held, among other things, that black women were lascivious because they had more highly developed sexual organs than whites.<sup>116</sup>

This is a simplified version of a myth that has led to centuries of discrimination and sexual exploitation based on the falsehood that black women are overly sexual and therefore sinful. The jezebel myth sustains and justifies prejudiced opinions that women of African descent are inherently sexually depraved and are therefore legitimate objects of sexual desire and advancement, e.g., in the rape of black house maids by white plantation owners. The mammy or Aunt Jemima myth, complete with its litany of social implications, is also figured into this poem. The mammy is a woman who is generally overweight or unattractive (represented with simplicity by the character of the same name in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, 1936), but she is associated with love and tenderness towards children. She is not a sexual figure like the jezebel and represents a safe haven for (white) youth. bell hooks explains the connotation of the mammy myth when she says, 'th[e] [whites] saw her as the embodiment of woman

---

<sup>115</sup> Jaffe, p. 53.

<sup>116</sup> Diane Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima* (London, UK: Routledge, 1994), p. 5.

as passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without expectation of return...'.<sup>117</sup> The myth is, arguably, convenient in that it poses no threat to Caucasian identity in its construction. The mammy figure is asexual and therefore does not create a potential object of desire or temptation (such as the jezebel) for white men, which would challenge the position of white women. She loves all children, even those of white mothers, as though they were her own. From the standpoint of Caucasian women, the mammy fits well into the family unit and does not represent a possible overturn of the status quo in a power struggle or in sexual competition. She is therefore immune to the white violence to which the jezebel is often subjected. As Sharon Monteith points out, 'It is difficult to effectively break open such icons as the messianic mammy or the lowly and self-effacing domestic. Breaking apart the images may serve only to set a...laconic spin on the character types'.<sup>118</sup> However, in Brooks's poem, in effect she dismantles this myth by combining it with that of the jezebel.

Brooks's poem 'the mother' integrates these two identities, those of the jezebel and the mammy, in the speaker of this poem. She is simultaneously a sexual woman who has had multiple love affairs resulting in the conception of children, as well as the intensely caring, protective figure. She is both the sexual representation and the asexual maternal symbol. Neither myth is brought to its extreme; the protagonist of the poem is not shown leading a 'lascivious' life, nor is she shown as 'passive nurturer' surrounded by children. However, the undertones of each stereotype are present and are intertwined. In the conjunction of these characteristics, the two myths actually *negate* each other and offer a more human portrait of the speaker in the poem. Brooks is not

---

<sup>117</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 1982), pp. 84-85.

<sup>118</sup> Sharon Monteith, *Advancing Sisterhood? Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000), p. 49. See also Monteith's discussion of the dynamic ways in which these paradigms continue to operate or are deconstructed through literature of the late twentieth century.

trying to deny the validity of these labels or argue for their elimination, but she does humanise them in such a way as to reduce their pejorative power. The woman's sexuality is mitigated by her raw love for her children, and her maternally asexual aspect is impassioned by the love affairs that resulted in the conceptions.

Ultimately, what resounds is a complex image of a woman whose duality limits the harshness with which she is judged. It would be incorrect to say, at this point in Brooks's career, that she was writing as a feminist or a civil rights activist, but these elements, even if shaded in nuance, are present in the work, as she resumes in 1960 with the pair of poems 'A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon' and 'The Lost Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till'.<sup>119</sup> In these poems, the boundaries between civil rights activist and feminist are blurred. The 'milk-white maid', Carolyn Bryant, the white woman for whose honour Emmett Till, a young black boy, was murdered in 1955, is seen as both complicit in the murder as well as a victim of her own husband, where the sympathies of the audience are far from black and white; the blame upon the white woman is complex, a point to which I will return momentarily. Brooks illuminates these difficult questions in these poems and in 'the mother'.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr proclaims, 'We black people tried to write ourselves out of slavery, a slavery more profound than mere physical bondage'.<sup>120</sup> The speaker in 'the mother' through her actions, although morally disputable, illustrates a means of 'writing' one's own freedom, as Gates suggests, through either Brooks's literary expression or the persona's actions motivated by love, thus liberating her children of what could be a life dominated by oppression. She safeguards them from misery, making them perhaps better off dead, mirroring Bessie Smith's blues lyrics in 1928,

---

<sup>119</sup> Brooks, in *The Bean Eaters* (1960), reprinted in *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*, pp. 317-324.

<sup>120</sup> Quoted by Diane Roberts, p. 6.

‘I’d rather be dead and buried in my grave, mean old grave/ Just soon to wallow in the mud as to be treated like a hog’.<sup>121</sup> The mother shields her unborn children from feeling like the speaker in this blues song and so evokes a sense of sympathy, despite ambiguous moral implications and problematic mythologized roles. In doing so, Brooks’s poem is an example of Adrienne Rich’s assertion that: ‘The myths and obsessions of gender, the myths and obsessions of race, the violent exercise of power in these relationships could be identified, their territories could be mapped’.<sup>122</sup>

This territory is mapped in another poem, ‘The Lovers of the Poor’, published in *The Bean Eaters* (1960). In this long piece, Brooks sharply contrasts middle-class white women who are doing ‘charitable’ work against the kitchenette building they are walking through. The women who are ‘full,/ Sleek, tender-clad, fit, fiftyish, a-glow’ decide that ‘Their guild is giving money to the poor./ The worthy poor. The very worthy/ And beautiful poor. Perhaps just not too swarthy?/Perhaps just not too dirty nor too dim’.<sup>123</sup> The physical description of the ladies is in accordance with what Richard Dyer suggests as the traditional representation of white women in an elevated, even angelic, presentation, surrounded by light. He says that artistic renderings of white women historically demonstrate that, ‘Idealised white women are bathed in and permeated by light. It streams through them and falls on to them from above. In short, they glow’.<sup>124</sup> This is in direct contrast to a shine, which Dyer says is ‘light bouncing back off the surface of the skin. It is the mirror effect of sweat, itself connoting physicality, the emissions of the body and unladylike labour, in the sense of both work and parturition,’ an image that is also represented in the poem. Ultimately, the ghastly

---

<sup>121</sup> Lyrics by P. Fuller, ‘I’d Rather Be Dead and Buried in My Grave,’ sung by Bessie Smith, quoted by Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies*, p. 293.

<sup>122</sup> Rich, ‘Blood, Bread, and Poetry’, in *Arts of the Possible*, p. 50.

<sup>123</sup> Brooks, ‘The Lovers of the Poor’, in *The Bean Eaters*, reprinted in *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks*, p. 333, ll. 14-15; p. 334, ll. 22-25.

<sup>124</sup> Richard Dyer, *White* (London, UK: Routledge, 1997), p. 122.

conditions these ladies are in, those of the black working class, in a kitchenette building on the South Side, conveyed through harsh realism and dynamic imagery scare them to the point that they flee the scene, hoping that ‘the money can be posted’.<sup>125</sup>

Brooks centres this work on two primary motifs: the hypocrisy of the middle class with regard to dilatory social change and the divergence of those seeking equality for women or for black people, particularly in 1960 before the Civil Rights Movement and the second-wave feminist movement had started to take root, e.g., in the manner with which the figures in ‘Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi’ and ‘The Last Quatrain in the Ballad of Emmett Till’ emphasise this hypocrisy. In these poems, the interests and characterizations of Carolyn Bryant, ‘the milk-white maid’, her husband, the ‘Fine Prince’, and Till himself, the ‘Dark Villain’ ironically resound to interrogate the motivations and subvert the representations of feminists and civil rights activists.<sup>126</sup> The murder of Emmett Till becomes the platform upon which Brooks questions the social positioning of white and black women. The laws of Reconstruction and Jim Crow Mississippi were designed to separate races, including interracial sexual contact, namely to ‘protect’ white women from black men. Within these poems, Brooks imaginatively creates Bryant as a mother, in which her children are subjected to violence at the hands of their father, just as Till was murdered by these same hands. The white and black mothers are subjected to very different experiences of violence towards their children, but this violence is perpetrated at the hands of white men, allowing a poetic space in which their causes might be alternately at odds or in union.

In ‘Lovers of the Poor’, Brooks demonstrates that the interests of one group deviate from, if not contradict, the interests of the other. She writes:

Cutting with knives served by their softest care,

---

<sup>125</sup> Brooks, ‘The Lovers of the Poor’, p. 336, l. 90.

<sup>126</sup> Brooks, ‘Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi’, p. 317.

Served by their love, so barbarously fair.  
 Whose mothers taught: You'd better not be cruel!  
 You had better not throw stones upon the wrens!  
 Herein they kiss and coddle and assault  
 Anew and dearly in the innocence  
 With which they baffle nature.<sup>127</sup>

These gentle women, who have a bit of money, respect, social standing, have decided that they should donate money to the 'very worthy and beautiful poor', e.g., the black underclass in the urban ghetto. In the beginning, it seems they are genuinely trying to be generous with money and time, at least in their intent. The improvement of the lower class is the improvement of all. However, almost immediately upon actually witnessing the conditions of this tenement building:

...it's all so bad! and entirely too much for them.  
 The stench; the urine, cabbage, and dead beans,  
 Dead porridges of assorted dusty grains,  
 The old smoke, *heavy* diapers, and, they're told  
 Something called chitterlings.<sup>128</sup>

Suddenly, they cannot stomach the reality of the situation. This is accompanied by general disgust at the conditions and also the denizens of the building.

They come face to face with 'a substantial citizeness/ Whose trains clank out across her swollen heart./ Who arms akimbo, almost fills a door./ All tumbling children, quilts dragged to the floor'.<sup>129</sup> This 'Aunt Jemima' figure is surrounded by children, except, in this poem, she lacks the maternal nurturing associated with the designation, as the children appear to be suffering from neglect. The hardness of this working-class black woman is a result of the oppressive conditions to which she is subjected, but the ladies of the Ladies' Betterment League cannot be sympathetic towards her or carry out the charity that brought them there.

As the women flee, making sure 'their lovely skirts...graze no wall', they are no

---

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, p. 333, ll. 8-14.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, p. 334, ll. 32-36.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, p. 335, ll. 56-59.

longer charitable, let alone advocates for the socially subjugated.<sup>130</sup> They can think only of themselves. Diane Roberts writes in 1994 of this social division:

The war over representations of race shapes the struggle for women's rights: feminism and abolition began as linked causes. Along the way they became divided and now, sometimes, discursive. Black feminists accuse white feminists of having parochial, white-centered views of women's struggle. White feminists have sometimes seen the fight against racism as a separate issue. But the very images of what a *woman* is in our culture have depended on how we think about race, and what representations govern our assumptions.<sup>131</sup>

Roberts's summary here is that black feminism is often a separate cause from white feminism; the advancement of white women, who 'buy the right books in the best bindings', fails to intersect with advocacy for mothers who replace 'newspaper rugs' or 'swaggering seeking youth and the puzzled wreckage/ Of the middle passage'.<sup>132</sup> The women in the poem exhibit the antithesis of each other. The ladies' 'flawless rose-nails' seem a distant image from the 'arms akimbo, almost fill[ing] a door'.<sup>133</sup> Although these figures are all women and should have the same aims of sexual equality, their goals for themselves cannot and do not align with those of the other on race and class lines.

Richard Dyer says that the division among races can sometimes stem from an ignorance of perception of which many white people may not even be aware. He says:

For those in power in the West, as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it...White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image; white people set standards of humanity by which they are bound to succeed and others bound to fail.<sup>134</sup>

The ladies of the Ladies' Betterment League cannot fathom anything outside their own lived experience, nor do they have awareness of their preconceived constructions of societal normalcy, ideals that are fashioned from their own realm of social practice. Brooks becomes a voice for the voiceless in this poem and opens up paths of awareness

---

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p. 336, l. 96.

<sup>131</sup> Roberts, p. 9.

<sup>132</sup> Brooks, 'The Lovers of the Poor', p. 335, l. 72; p. 335, l. 51; p. 336, ll. 79-80.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p. 335, l. 65.

<sup>134</sup> Dyer, p. 9.

(perhaps for a white audience), underlining what Dan Jaffe sees as an effect of artistic practice to ‘always to communicate to the uninitiated, to make contact across seemingly insurmountable barriers’.<sup>135</sup> Brooks relies on nuance and the poetic device *litotes* or understatement in order to reach across barriers, rather than explicit protest. Despite this mild approach, the women in the poem are rebuked rather harshly in the light in which they are presented; this judgment is ironic given the lack of judgment shown towards the speaker in ‘the mother’. The issue has been presented and preserved in verse, literally in text that is black and white; Brooks attempts to reveal social ills to a broad audience, including white publishers and readers who might not have come into contact with these images and realizations.

The tension experienced between the two groups of people in this poem embodies for the reader the tension between ‘democratic’ ideals and the realities of real people in the margins of society. This kind of activism on the part of Gwendolyn Brooks is delicate, a light-handedness issuing from poetic craft, rather than an oration at some podium, like Davis or hooks, who later articulated more anger and absolute requirement for change.

Brooks works within historically based conventional forms, from tercets, heroic quatrains, and ballads to the powerful sonnet, and employs them to embody contemporary themes, an approach that focusses on nonlinear temporalities. She extends the work of previous black poets as she integrates poetic tradition with socially charged subject matter. Her use of musicality, specifically blues, and her facility to communicate on behalf of women and the working class demonstrate her dedication to writing about the marginalised and oppressed. These are based in the anxieties she writes about in the dynamic and painful setting of Bronzeville, captured in the forms

---

<sup>135</sup> Jaffe, pp. 54-55.

she chooses to contain them, as the reader experiences the tension created therein. Within these containers, these 'little jars and cabinets', Brooks finds a way to break through the difficulty of expression to give the poems, and their subjects, their due, while simultaneously showing her mastery of language and poetic expression by engaging with multiple traditions, heritages, and legacies. Her aesthetics is grounded in formalism and innovation, protest and quiet observation. She establishes an engagement with multiple historical origins and cultural productions that are also seen in the historical consciousness of Margaret Walker, in the politics of Nikki Giovanni, in the domestically grounded lyrics of Grace Nichols, and the blues-dependent identity of Jackie Kay. Through such modalities, she prefigures and engages in dialogue with each of these poets, as they formulate and express their own poetics across the Atlantic.

**CHAPTER 2****MARGARET WALKER:  
COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND A  
SOUTHERN VOICE**

Discussion of Margaret Walker's poetry is a natural progression from that of Gwendolyn Brooks, who, as a slightly younger contemporary, was someone whom Walker admired, personally and poetically. Walker describes her peer in 1969 as a 'Dreamer and seer of tales/ She witnessed rebellion,/ struggle and sweat./ The people are her heartbeat—/ In their footsteps pulsate daily all her black words of fire and blood'.<sup>1</sup> Walker, too, as I demonstrate in this chapter, is a writer whose lifeblood comes from the 'love and experiences of her people'.<sup>2</sup> Her work, like that of Brooks, at once creates and conjures new African American subject positions, brooding on the intersection of location and historical consciousness.

This might seem unsurprising when one considers Walker's own biography. Born in 1915 in Birmingham, Alabama, she spent her early life in a city that had long been noted, even within the South, for its rigid segregationist practice, which would in time become associated with the career of its Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene 'Bull' Connor, among the most aggressive of all white Southern opponents of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>3</sup> Yet these formative experiences, as I show in this chapter, are not simply reflected in her poetry. Instead, her first-hand understanding of the vicious urban geography of the Jim Crow South gives rise to a poetry constantly concerned with the interactions and inequities between marginalisation and majoritarian rule.

---

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Walker, 'For Gwen, 1969', originally published in *October Journey* (1973), reprinted in *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 114, ll. 11-16.

<sup>2</sup> Joyce Pettis, 'Margaret Walker: Black Woman Writer of the South', in *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*, edited by Maryemma Graham (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> David R. Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 135-141.

Walker forges a poetics of fraught affiliation and collective resistance; the South occupies her nostalgic homeplace yet is paradoxically the site of long-rehearsed narratives of oppression. As she writes in ‘Southern Song’ in *For My People* (1942):

I want my body bathed again by southern suns, my soul  
reclaimed again from southern land. I want to rest  
again in southern fields, in grass and hay and clover  
bloom; to lay my hand upon the clay baked by a  
southern sun, to touch the rain-soaked earth and smell  
the smell of soil.[...]

I want no mobs to wrench me from my southern rest; no  
forms to take me in the night and burn my shack and  
make for me a nightmare full of oil and flame.<sup>4</sup>

In many ways, this tension of pastoral Southern landscape as the site of historic, often violent, social subjugation allows for the mythologised presentation of Southern identity within literature. Eugenia Collier suggests that it is within its spatio-temporal geographies that ‘the agony of chattel slavery created the history that is yet to be written. It is the South that has dispersed its culture into the cities of the North. The South is, in a sense, the mythic landscape of black America’.<sup>5</sup> Walker’s experience of growing up in this ‘mythic landscape’, then, is formative to the development of her aesthetic and duly furnishes her with the central and preminent locale of her work, even, according to Collier, when she is in Chicago. Here Walker links the present predicament of herself and her immediate community to a deeper history and a larger geography of racial subjugation. She articulates ‘identity’ drawn from current experience—from the brutal defence of segregation to the persistence of malnutrition and poverty—to the longer and historical ordeals of slavery, sharecropping, and lynching violence. Through this communal memory utilised by the other poets in this thesis, Walker develops new forms of identification, both for herself and those she

---

<sup>4</sup> Walker, in *For My People* (1942), reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 11, ll. 1-6, 11-13 (lineation and indentation is the author’s original format).

<sup>5</sup> Eugenia Collier, ‘Fields Watered with Blood: Myth and Ritual in the Poetry of Margaret Walker’, in *Fields Watered with Blood*, p. 101.

represents, offering a public poetic voice that increasingly seeks to speak for a collective experience, authentic on either side of the Atlantic. She describes this collectivity as a way of remaining faithful to the ‘living truth of the human spirit’. She goes to say in 1970 that, ‘In a constant search for freedom, peace, and human dignity the Black writer has continued to speak loudly against social injustice, human slavery, open oppression of mind and body, violent intimidation, and humiliating indignities’.<sup>6</sup> Thus, shared articulation of identity might originate in a consciousness of subjugation.

Walker’s efforts to use poetry to remodel black US subject positions are reminiscent of those powerful essays in which Stuart Hall urges people to dispense with absolute or fixed notions of identity and embrace an idea of constant and shifting identification. As Hall suggested, identities are:

constructed within, not outside, discourse, [and] we need to understand them as produced within specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices.<sup>7</sup>

I suggest in this chapter that Walker provides her version of multiply constructed identities, that are the result of ‘specific historical and institutional sites’, and her ‘discursive formations’ emerge principally by exploring and inhabiting a variety of different poetic forms. As I will show, Walker regularly shuttles between free and metrical verse. Throughout her career, she has produced sonnets, ballads, blank verse, and elegies, among other conventional forms. Each of these formal choices generates a new relationship between the content of individual poems and the ‘I’ and ‘we’ to whom they give voice, thereby in itself remodelling the mode of identification Walker offers. But I also hope to show that, within this formal variety and these shifting subject positions, with their divergent historical perspectives and immediate gestures of protest,

---

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Walker, ‘The Humanistic Tradition of Afro-American Literature’ (1970), in *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*, edited by Maryemma Graham (New York, NY: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990), p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, editors, ‘Who needs identity?’, in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 4.

a unifying thread emerges in the regular adoption of a public address, as she stands in the civic sphere.

These varied modes of poetic expression generate a sense of plurality and movement. Walker can shift from an erudite, almost academic, voice to one that is thick with biblical allusions, but she can also adopt the language of the street, mobilising and transforming the figures and patterns of speech that attended her childhood in Birmingham's segregated section. This complex and nuanced poetic catalogue, then, is far from binary. Walker's work inhabits multiple subject positions, articulating a poetics that collapses antinomies to embrace a rich complexity akin to that which Hall's theories envisage. Her hybridity of forms thus iterates multiple identifications: she harnesses ancestral memory, incorporating a long historical view as she anticipates the future for people in the African diaspora; she writes both in established Western literary forms and those that come to her from the vernacular tradition. In these settings, she celebrates both the quotidian and the extraordinary.

In this chapter, I demonstrate this continual attention to new forms of identifications via a series of close readings. I will offer an analysis of the cultural work of Walker's poetry, namely, its construction of new political identities in the face of racial terrorism in the segregated South. I do so within the intertextualities I draw with Brooks and Giovanni, poets whom critics associate with Walker peripherally, rather than in direct textual analysis.<sup>8</sup> I also demonstrate how Walker's adherence to musical textures, historicism, and location-dependent notions of home and self articulate a 'rich vein of black experiences...from despair to joy to triumph', which are read in dialogue

---

<sup>8</sup> Within the two dozen essays collected in *Fields Watered with Blood*, the critics tend to introduce links with Brooks and Giovanni from either social or publishing perspectives, where mentions of them are generally reduced to how they knew Walker, what awards were received, conversations they may have had with her, or generalized lists of black writers whose work is well known in American literary discourse. There are not, however, points of intersection drawn in which direct poetic influences and legacies are explored, such as I do throughout this chapter.

with Grace Nichols and Jackie Kay, a transatlantic framework that facilitates a multinational discourse.<sup>9</sup>

### **Sonnets of *For My People***

I begin with discussion of Walker's use of the sonnet form, which, as in the case of Brooks, creates a set of inherent tensions. Its traditionally rigid metrical structure and requirement of a volta together create a claustrophobic space that itself constantly imperils the poet's efforts at legible and fluent expression. Any poet working within this tight space must employ a delicate hand, as Michael Spiller has suggested, and in a sense outwit the formal requirements she has opted to impose upon herself.<sup>10</sup> Yet it is perhaps precisely because of these pressures that Margaret Walker, like her contemporary Gwendolyn Brooks, continually chooses to inhabit the sonnet form. Six conclude her first book, *For My People* (1942). Here, they work together so closely that they could be read as six instalments of one long poem. Walker's opening sonnets introduce motifs, by which I mean images and characters that resurface later; they also stage, only to leave unresolved, questions and problems to which the later sonnets return. She progresses from specific memories of people or locations to the larger themes that these memories inherently signify. She writes of miners observed during her childhood, prostitutes seen during her adulthood, an encounter with a Midwestern farmer, the urban people she recalls upon seeing Iowa farmland, the needs of the African American population, and the overall struggle embodied in the general and specific circumstances of the black experience. The intertextuality between them suggests a synoptic or panoramic vision that stands behind these sonnets, linking them

---

<sup>9</sup> Collier, p. 99.

<sup>10</sup> Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* (London, UK: Routledge, 1992), pp. 4, 9.

and creating the sense that, together, they might voice a collective memory of a people.

The first sonnet of the sequence, ‘Childhood’ (1942), embodies the motif of one’s youth and its formative role on the adult, a kind of close history also resumed by Grace Nichols’s poem ‘Child-Kingdom’ (1989) that I discuss in Chapter Four. The poet speaks of the Birmingham iron miners she recollects from childhood. She remembers witnessing their struggle as labourers and the toll it took on their bodies and spirits:

When I was a child I knew red miners	<i>a</i>
dressed raggedly and wearing carbide lamps.	<i>b</i>
I saw them come down red hills to their camps	<i>b</i>
dyed with red dust from old Ishkooda mines.	<i>a</i>
Night after night I met them on the roads,	<i>c</i>
or on the streets in town I caught their glance;	<i>d</i>
the swing of dinner buckets in their hands,	<i>d</i>
and grumbling undermining all their words.	<i>c</i>
I also lived in low cotton country	<i>e</i>
where moonlight hovered over ripe haystacks	<i>f</i>
or stumps of trees, and croppers’ rotting shacks	<i>f</i>
with famine, terror, flood, and plague near by;	<i>e</i>
where sentiment and hatred still held sway	<i>g</i>
and only bitter land was washed away. <sup>11</sup>	<i>g</i>

This is an adaptation of the Petrarchan form, with the octave following the customary pattern and the sestet modified slightly to read as an additional quatrain and a rhyming couplet. The accumulation of images in this sonnet makes it apparent that the red dust-covered men are a metonym for the toil of all labourers, underscored further by the transition in the volta from the miners to the landscape that becomes a metaphor of the long history of peonage. The fact that these childhood memories continue to seem so resonant for the adult, to the point where they claim the mythic title of ‘Childhood’ itself, confirms their symbolic capacity to represent the suffering of a people. The poem presents the miners as representatives of the exploited and overworked labourers in any Jim Crow town; it seems a meditation on nothing less than what Loïc Wacquant summarises as ‘an ensemble of social and legal codes that prescribed the complete

---

<sup>11</sup> Walker, in *For My People*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 46 (entire poem).

separation of the “races” and sharply circumscribed the life chances of African-Americans’.<sup>12</sup> He asserts that the schema bound them ‘to whites in a relation of suffusive submission backed by legal coercion and terroristic violence.’ This arrangement, ‘through continued white ownership of the land and the generalization of sharecropping and debt peonage’ left the plantation system virtually untouched, as labourers were locked in a destructive cycle of poverty, ignorance, and tenantry.<sup>13</sup> The physical reminders of agricultural labour and emotional humiliation are strong formative images in the mouldable mind of the child, which are interpreted anew in the focus of adulthood, in the mode adopted by Nikki Giovanni with her pair of poems ‘Adulthood’ (1968) and ‘Adulthood II’ (1978), which I examine in Chapter Three.

In the same way that the past memory of the labourers has left an impression on the contemporary speaker of the poem, so, too, does the past hardship of slaves and subsequent sharecroppers influence the lives of the working class in the present. Walker refers to the shacks that the croppers live in near her home in ‘low cotton country’, with ‘famine, terror, flood, and plague near by;/ where sentiment and hatred still held sway/ and only bitter land was washed away’. Even biblical floods and plague seem involved in the machinery of Jim Crow terror. A range of disasters, variously natural and political, seem, in the poem, to lie in wait for any individual black American who might dare to resist those ‘Black Codes’. As a part of the South’s rejection of Reconstruction, they ‘served to keep African-American labour in place following the demise of slavery, while...criminaliz[ing] civil rights protests in the

---

<sup>12</sup> Loïc Wacquant, ‘From Slavery to Mass Incarceration’, *New Left Review*, 13 (2002), p. 46. For detailed descriptions of the conditions for black people under the Jim Crow laws, see, for example, David R. Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002). These texts present historical analyses that are grounded in geographically grounded specificities.

<sup>13</sup> Wacquant, p. 47.

South'.<sup>14</sup> People under these circumstances, for Walker, seem to harbour the blues fear of a semi-natural, semi-biblical catastrophe that might, not only destroy black lives, but also do so in a way that would suggest everything, even the universe itself, belongs to the white supremacist conspiracy against the descendants of slaves.<sup>15</sup> Geographic location thus only breeds more 'sentiment and hatred'. In the final couplet, Walker employs a subtle play on words, where sentiment survives and land is washed away, allowing the resonance of sentiment and sediment to echo each other. The red dust covers the men and is the colour of the roads and the land that is washed away, yet emotions remain. The historical significance of the red dirt is as important to Walker as the red clay is for Grace Nichols and the red dust is for Jackie Kay, whom I discuss in Chapters Four and Five, in that the centrality of the image within the literary imagination is directly related to the construction of one's identity; the red earth becomes an image through which Walker, Nichols, and Kay engage in the shared tropes of a literary community. The story of the adult, then, is comprised, at least in part, by that of her past, namely these generations who live at once within and against racial oppression. Likewise, the identity of the men themselves is formed, at least in part, by the memory of their past and the history of their ancestors, all of whom have walked and been covered in the red dust of the earth.

Within the sparseness of the sonnet, these two halves mirror each other: the experiences of the youth directly inform the identity of the adulthood, whilst the long collective experiences of the ancestors contribute to the miners' weariness, disillusionment, and enmity. As the grown poet sees herself as a child, the black man in the South sees, as James Baldwin describes in 1959, 'his ancestors, who, in everything

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion about the prevalence of disasters in blues songs and their inherent subtexts, see Edward Komara's *Encyclopedia of Blues* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), pp. 995-1002.

they do and are, proclaim his inescapable identity'.<sup>16</sup> Both halves of this symmetrical pair speak to the formation of self as the derivative of the long historical arc of subjugation and poverty. Within the sonnet, Walker conjoins the close history of her childhood with the deep history of oppression for African descendants in the West. This temporal dialogue is inextricably linked, for her, with (re)interpretations of home and those who populate it.

The people around her form the subject of the next poem in the series, 'Whores' (1942). Walker continues the narrative pattern established in the first sonnet with the parallel opening line. Instead of 'When I was a child I knew red miners', the poet writes 'When I grew up I went away to work'. Together, the pair of first lines echo the syntactical phrasing of the biblical line, 'When I was a child, I spake as a child...When I became a man, I put away childish things', a subtle nod that grounds the sensibility of maturation between the two poems.<sup>17</sup> Although this piece directly echoes the first, the fluency of its nearly uninterrupted iambic pentameter also stands in contrast with the prior metrical substitutions, by which the latter signals its enhanced maturity:

When I grew up I went away to work	<i>a</i>
where painted whores were fascinating sights.	<i>b</i>
They came on like whole armies through the nights—	<i>b</i>
their sullen eyes on mine, their mouths a smirk,	<i>a</i>
and from their hands keys hung suggestively.	<i>c</i>
Old women working by an age-old plan	<i>d</i>
to make their bread in ways as best they can	<i>d</i>
would hobble past and beckon tirelessly.	<i>c</i>
Perhaps one day they'll all die in the streets	<i>e</i>
or be surprised by bombs in each wide bed;	<i>f</i>
learning too late in unaccustomed dread	<i>f</i>
that easy ways, like whores on special beats,	<i>e</i>
no longer have the gift to harbor pride	<i>g</i>
or bring men peace, or leave them satisfied. <sup>18</sup>	<i>g</i>

In this poem, the lives of these women, like those of the miners, involve a kind of

<sup>16</sup> James Baldwin, 'Nobody Knows My Name: A Letter From the South', *Partisan Review* (1959), reprinted in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 99.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:11, King James Bible. Cambridge Edition: 1769; King James Bible Online, accessed online at <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1-Corinthians-13-11/>.

<sup>18</sup> Walker, in *For My People*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 47 (entire poem).

bodily sacrifice. Degradation, resulting from racist conditions of exploitation and poverty, leads to a loss, not only of democratic rights or individual identity, but also of physical autonomy itself. Yet the women of this poem seem less haunted by the memory of past Jim Crow labours, salvaging an odd kind of affirmation, ‘working by an age-old plan/ to make their bread in ways as best they can’, in which a person does what needs to be done to survive. This mirrors Barbara Johnson’s sentiments regarding the mother in Brooks’s poem in Chapter One.<sup>19</sup> Here, the agent again has ‘not chosen the conditions under which [she] must choose’. Despite the bodily sacrifice, the women’s survival suggests a refusal to be utterly destroyed by abject living conditions; simply, they do their best to earn their bread.

References to bread and satisfaction in this poem are motifs which appear in the early sonnets and to which Walker returns later. The speaker speculates that, in the event of their untimely death, an anxiety exacerbated by the advancements of World War II, the women will realize with regret that ‘easy ways[...]/ no longer have the gift to harbor pride/ or bring men peace, or leave them satisfied’, thus anticipating Brooks’s poem ‘kitchenette building’ (1945), in which the would-be dreamer is preoccupied with the importance of satisfying a man, feeding a wife, paying the rent.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, and even illogically, the speaker seems to pass judgement on the women, but not in a conventional way. She does not pity them because of their sin or lasciviousness but because they have spent a lifetime choosing the ‘easy way’. But, if they are earning their bread as best they can, it seems they haven’t selected the easy path. What could possibly be easy about the life of the prostitute, with its physical and

---

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 191.

<sup>20</sup> This reference to the carnage caused by a bomb informs the reader of the increasing sense of anxiety and fear of violence, brought about by the advancement of World War II. Even before the US entered the war, there was an ever-present fear of attack on American soil.

mental implications? Their bodies, like the miners, are the means through which they earn their bread. Their wellbeing is sacrificed upon the altar of subjugation. They, too, must find a way of overcoming centuries of social marginalisation imposed upon them. The poem brings the prostitutes into a collective reverie about the commonality that is created from person to person, within the confines of oppressive social orders and poverty. As such, it forms a kind a community, bound together by shared experiences of suffering. James Baldwin speculates in 1962 that:

Perhaps, we were, all of us—pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children—bound together by the nature of our oppression, the specific and peculiar complex of risks we had to run; if so, within these limits we sometimes achieved with each other a freedom that was close to love.<sup>21</sup>

This oppression experienced by the miners and the prostitutes is linked, not just through labour and the sacrifice of one's body, but in the participation of the longer narrative of systemic racism and violence, one that must be jointly overcome with an insistent demand for freedom, even amid awful social constraints. This collective memory and a sense of shared struggle are integral to the poet's aesthetic.

The sonnet sequence operates in conjunction, each in a dialogue that articulates individual identity as constructed through the intervention of the past on one's present and a dependence on place to underscore this. In direct response to the previous poem, 'Iowa Farmer' (1942) embodies a man who works extremely hard but who takes great satisfaction in doing so. Walker writes:

I talked to a farmer one day in Iowa.  
We looked out far over acres of wheat.  
He spoke with pride and yet not boastfully;  
he had no need to fumble for his words.  
He knew his land and there was love for home  
within the soft serene eyes of his son.  
His ugly house was clean against the storm;  
there was no hunger deep within the heart  
nor burning riveted within the bone,  
but there they ate a satisfying bread.  
Yet in the Middle West where wheat was plentiful;

---

<sup>21</sup> James Baldwin, 'Letter from a Region in My Mind', in *The New Yorker* (1962), reprinted in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 1995), p. 40.

where grain grew golden under sunny skies  
 and cattle fattened through the summer heat  
 I could remember more familiar sights.<sup>22</sup>

In this sonnet in approximate blank verse with few substitutions, the farmer, in contrast to the previous subjects, has ‘no hunger deep within the heart/ nor burning riveted within the bone,/ but there they ate a satisfying bread’. He is not unlike the miners or the prostitutes in that his life is defined by difficult enterprise, recalling the lives of plantation slaves and the sharecroppers in the Jim Crow South. This farmer, however, is bequeathed the gift of pride, or perhaps something felt on a more emotional plane: satisfaction. This sense extends to what is from his land—his wheat, his work, his family, all exterior measurements of his identity, the thematic link conjoining these sonnets and the work of the poet. As the subjects’ identities are intrinsically connected to the geographic space around them—the violent, traumatic histories of racial marginalisation from times of slavery to sharecropping, lynchings, and legal codes that perpetuated segregation, to inform the present self—so too are those of the poet.

Both the poetic subjects and the poet glean self-identification from the land and its history. In the farmer’s house, they eat a satisfying bread. Unlike the miners and the prostitutes, he has a sense of ownership over his life, including even his son’s serenity. Over all the things in his world, he has agency, perhaps representing a (possibly white) foil for the black Southern underclass, for whom satisfaction and agency are elusive. This man’s simple joys grounded in his Midwest surroundings, his security despite the constant worries of a farmer, make the poet recall the contrary condition that she has witnessed in the South. Baldwin describes the longing agony in the eyes of Southern men, when he writes in 1959:

And this hell was, simply, that he had never in his life owned anything, not his wife,  
 not his house, not his child, which could not, at any instant, be taken from him by the

---

<sup>22</sup> Walker, in *For My People*, reprinted in *This is My Century*, p. 48 (entire poem).

power of white people. This is what paternalism means. And for the rest of the time that I was in the South I watched the eyes of old black men.<sup>23</sup>

In the final line, the speaker, despite the wheat and the cattle, is off in another place, informed by her own experiences of ‘paternalism’. By bringing the life of this farmer into verse, Walker reinforces her role as a humanitarian poet, firmly ensconced in the public sphere. The lives of the miners, the prostitutes, and the farmer are noble subject matter, and, in the inclusion of them in her sonnets, she speaks of the people, those for whom she composes ‘I Want to Write’ in 1934, in which she declares that she wants to ‘write the songs of [her] people. [She] want[s] to hear them singing melodies in the dark...frame their dreams into words; their souls into notes’.<sup>24</sup> Here, she allows the experiences of the present labourer or the past plantation slave to congregate in a collective pool. Her aesthetics is drawn upon this collectivity.

As she concludes the poem, she remembers ‘more familiar sights’, a vague phrase that is addressed in direct response in the subsequent poem, ‘Memory’ (1942).

She starts in an immediate echo of the previous piece:

I can remember wind-swept streets of cities	<i>a</i>
on cold and blustery nights, on rainy days;	<i>b</i>
heads under shabby felts and parasols	<i>c</i>
and shoulders hunched against a sharp concern;	<i>d</i>
seeing hurt bewilderment on poor faces	<i>e</i>
smelling a deep and sinister unrest	<i>f</i>
these brooding people cautiously caress;	<i>f</i>
hearing ghostly marching on pavement stones	<i>g</i>
and closing fast around their squares of hate.	<i>h</i>
I can remember seeing them alone,	<i>g</i>
at work, and in their tenements at home.	<i>g</i>
I can remember hearing all they said:	<i>i</i>
their muttering protests, their whispered oaths,	<i>g</i>
and all that spells their living distress. <sup>25</sup>	<i>f</i>

The needs of the oppressed in the urban environment in this poem are drawn directly from Walker’s own experiences from 1932-1939 in Chicago as a student at Northwestern and as a writer for the Federal Writers Project. She recalled in 1969,

<sup>23</sup> Baldwin, ‘A Letter From the South’, reprinted in *Nobody Knows My Name*, p. 110.

<sup>24</sup> Walker, in *October Journey*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 113, ll. 2, 3, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Walker, in *For My People*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 49 (entire poem).

‘Once in a Chicago slum I was startled while riding on the elevated train and looking over the very neighborhood where I lived to hear a woman say, “I wonder how in the world people live there!”’.<sup>26</sup> The experiences of the impoverished in this poem are derived from the same urban poor about whom Gwendolyn Brooks also writes, particularly in ‘kitchenette building’ from *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and ‘the ballad of late Annie’ from *Annie Allen* (1949), as I discussed in the previous chapter. It is conceivable that the speakers in those poems are very similar to the subjects of this poem ‘in their tenements at home’. Here the poet again employs blank verse, with surprising occasional rhymes, actual and slant. The irregular rhymes unsettle the sonnet form, perhaps as a result of their unexpected placements and aural quality. This formal change mirrors a shift in content away from the concerns of the previous three sonnets. The departure from formal conventions signifies the deep unrest of the urban poor in this recollection. In ‘Memory’, the subject matter transitions from individuals, or small groups—the farmer, the prostitutes, the miners—back to the many, the crowd or collective whole. Walker does not provide the reader with the metonymic few as representative archetypes of a downtrodden urban people; rather, the poet considers the masses, with a shift in location-centred thinking within the urban setting that forms the backdrop of their experiences. This is a democratic approach to the common person. The influence of Walt Whitman grows discernible as a result.

Despite the fact that Whitman’s poems for the masses, the voiceless of the city, are amongst the first American poems that claim to speak for the anonymous or the oppressed *en masse*, few scholars draw connections between Whitman and Walker.<sup>27</sup> R.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Walker, ‘Willing to Pay the Price’, originally published in *Many Shades of Black*, edited by Stanton L. Wormley and Lewis Fenderson, 1969, reprinted in *How I Wrote Jubilee*, p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Within *Fields Watered with Blood*, references to Whitman are generally passing. His name comes up only a few times in 300 pages of critical work. See, for example, R. Baxter Miller’s essay, ‘The “Etched Flame” of Margaret Walker’ (1981), pp. 81-97, and Ekaterini Georgoudaki’s essay ‘The South in Margaret Walker’s Poetry’ (1994), pp. 164-178. Both of these scholars only briefly note any influence by

Baxter Miller briefly nods to Whitman when he says, ‘Her debt extends no less to Walt Whitman and to Langston Hughes, for her predecessor is any poet who foresees a new paradise’.<sup>28</sup> However, Baxter doesn’t spend any time noting more specific poetic commonalities. Whitman’s influences, especially in his poems ‘A Song for Occupations’ (1855), ‘Salut au Monde’ (1856), ‘To A Common Prostitute’ (1860), ‘Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun’ (1865), and ‘I Hear America Singing’ (1867), all honour the unnamed poor, in various states of downtrodden and/or proud existence.<sup>29</sup> Walker’s image of the ‘shoulders hunched against a harsh concern’ with their ‘hurt bewilderment on poor faces’ echoes Whitman’s 1865 lines ‘Give me faces and streets—give me these phantoms incessant and endless along the trottoirs!’.<sup>30</sup> He continues, ‘Give me interminable eyes...faces and eyes forever for me’. David S. Reynolds describes Whitman’s socially conscious approach when he says:

Thematically, he had introduced a new democratic inclusiveness, absorbing images from virtually every aspect of social and cultural life. His expansiveness and inclusiveness had never been merely a literary exercise. “I think of art,” he declared, “as something to serve the people—the mass: when it fails to do that it’s false to its promises.”<sup>31</sup>

Walker, like Whitman, adopts an inclusive voice. She represents the poor of the cities, who fight against the weather, the poverty, the pain. For these denizens, there is no satisfaction, unlike the farmer, and their reality is one of squalor and intense privation.

This role as a representative of the masses within the experiences of poverty furthermore links Walker’s work to Richard Wright’s, who was also a close friend in

---

Walt Whitman on Walker, creating, perhaps unintentionally, a critical gap in which associations between Walker and Whitman must be drawn, as I do here.

<sup>28</sup> R. Baxter Miller, ‘The “Etched Flame” of Margaret Walker: Literary and Biblical Re-Creation in Southern History’, in *Fields Watered with Blood*, p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> Walt Whitman, in *Leaves of Grass: The “Death-bed” Edition* (1892) (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2001), pp. 264, 170, 482, 390, and 13. Parts of *Leaves of Grass* and other compositions were published starting in 1855. Whitman released several editions of *Leaves of Grass*, editing and adding to it. The final edition was released in 1892, just two months before his death.

<sup>30</sup> Whitman, ‘Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun’, in *Leaves of Grass*, pp. 391, 392, ll. 24-25, 40.

<sup>31</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 5.

Chicago and an advocate for the racially and socially oppressed, such as those he describes in his momentous work *12 Million Voices*. It locates Walker in a continuum of writers whose lifework takes up the problems of the underclasses and racial and social oppression, including early examples of Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen, as I discussed in the previous chapter, as well as those to follow her, such as Grace Nichols in her poems about Guyana, namely ‘Back-Home Contemplation’ (1984) and ‘Walking With My Brother in Georgetown’ (1989), as I discuss in Chapter Four. Each of these poets in some way is a protestor, rejecting the status quo. The intertextuality of these specific black women writers is at the interstice between their poetry and political objectives driving their verse, at the intersection between ‘creative vision and modes of resistance’.<sup>32</sup> For Walker, her ‘creative vision’ is enacted, in this poem, through the masses in the city. To ‘resist’ is sometimes to represent the various subjugated populations whose struggles might go otherwise unnoted. Rather than leading a protest march, her resistance is grounded in the subtleties of verse, wherein she becomes the voice to the voiceless.

I contend that the subjects of this poem articulate the ubiquity of social suffering. Through Walker’s Whitmanesque use of anaphora, the repetition of ‘I can remember’, the audience is drawn into the refrains and returns of their lives, the constancy of the inadequacies around them.<sup>33</sup> The historical consciousness of the people in this poem—namely with relation to the American narrative of enslavement, sharecropping, Jim Crow segregation, and the Great Migration to Northern cities in search of work and improved living conditions—shades their experiences, where the

---

<sup>32</sup> Minrose C. Gwin, ‘The “Intricate Design” of Margaret Walker’s “Humanism”’, in *Fields Watered with Blood*, p. 67.

<sup>33</sup> In addition to the use of anaphora to draw in the reader and hone the images presented in the poem, the poet also employs imagery that evokes the senses. By referring to the sights and sounds being remembered, the poet more vividly draws the recollection for the reader, namely because these senses are strongly associated with memory.

realities of the group become the narratives of the individual, a rhetorical strategy to which I will return.<sup>34</sup> The mentality of the miners in Alabama here, too, haunts the poor of this urban setting. One long historical narrative becomes the autobiography of generations. James Baldwin says in 1962, ‘It is only the “so-called American Negro” who remains trapped, disinherited, and despised, in a nation that has kept him in bondage for nearly four hundred years and is still unable to recognize him as a human being’.<sup>35</sup> The ‘ghostly marching on pavement stones’ and ‘living distress’ signify on the powerful texture of the past informing the present. For Baldwin and for Walker, this historical perspective is integral to the formation of identity, as it is for Nikki Giovanni, particularly in her poems ‘My Tower’ (1972) and ‘Africa’ (1975), which I examine in Chapter Three.

This process of identity formation, for Patricia Hill Collins, is inextricably linked with the histories, often pain, that inform the present, particularly for those who have been subject to marginalisation, such as black women. She posits:

For Black women the forms that oppression takes vary tremendously from one society to the next and from one historical period to the next. The specificities of identities or experiences may differ, yet the overarching experience of oppression is essential...Yet basic questions concerning freedom define Black women as a transnational Black population and forms of political action that Black women embrace and/or reject.<sup>36</sup>

In Collins’s interpretation, one’s identity becomes what it will be in the present and future in a fluid ideation of how the historical trajectory of oppression informs the changing self and representations of it, including the ‘forms of political action’ one chooses for expression. Margaret Walker develops an aesthetics that determines her future as a poet and as a representative of the masses when she interprets her

---

<sup>34</sup> Helpful to this discussion is Nicholas Lemann’s text, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> Baldwin, ‘Letter from a Region in My Mind’, in *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, ‘Still Brave? Black Feminism as a Social Justice Project’ (2010), rewritten for *On Intellectual Activism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012), p. 50.

*relationship* with the past, even if that past is borne out of oppression. In the process of continually becoming, Walker's writing testified to the identity-construction process attributable to synthesising historical moments and memories. She 'created by enacting meaning from memory and unifying the psychological and spiritual selves of history, in short, by becoming a living memory for her people'.<sup>37</sup> In so doing, she became the ancient mirror in which her readers might see themselves, see their ancestors. This unity may be seen, not only in the people Walker represents, but also in the literary community between herself and other poets, such as those in this thesis. Baldwin utters a similar understanding of the usefulness of one's historical mindfulness in 1962:

To accept one's past—one's history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressure of life like clay in a season of drought. How can the American Negro's past be used? The unprecedented price demanded—and at this embattled hour of the world's history—is the transcendence of the realities of color, of nations, and of altars.<sup>38</sup>

For the people in this poem, their past is not 'invented' but 'haunts' them as they walk down the street. The way that this poem feels incomplete, in its foreboding tone, indicates that the protagonists have a deep-seated need to figure out how to use this haunting to transcend the realities of colour, nations, and altars. This need, however, is taken up in the next sonnet in the sequence.

From the void embodied in the previous poem, the poet fittingly moves to a sonnet entitled 'Our Need' (1942). Walker concentrates more in abstraction in this sonnet, rather than concrete images. She writes:

If dead men died abruptly by a blow—	<i>a</i>
startled and trapped in today's immediacy,	<i>b</i>
having neither moments to speak dazedly	<i>b</i>
nor whimper wistfully—how can they know	<i>a</i>
or tell us now the way which we should go?	<i>a</i>
What price upon their wisdom can we stake	<i>c</i>
if ultimately we would live, not break	<i>c</i>
beneath a swift and dangerous undertow?	<i>a</i>

<sup>37</sup> Maryemma Graham, "I Want to Write, I Want to Write the Songs of My People": The Emergence of Margaret Walker', in *Fields Watered with Blood*, p. 26.

<sup>38</sup> Baldwin, 'Letter from a Region in My Mind', in *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 80-81.

We need a wholeness born of inner strength	<i>d</i>
sharp thinking running through our stream of days,	<i>e</i>
having certain courage flame with honest rays	<i>e</i>
like slaps of life along the body's length.	<i>d</i>
We need the friendly feel of human forms	<i>g</i>
and earth beneath our feet against the storms. <sup>39</sup>	<i>g</i>

This is a hybridisation of the Petrarchan and Spenserian sonnet. The repetition of the *a* rhyme in the second quatrain creates an unexpected couplet that is then mirrored by the one in the final two lines, a playfulness with rhyme that disrupts the expectations of the convention. The first stanza questions what one might be able to learn from the dead, if they could offer advice, and whether this wisdom would be of any use to someone who has had the luck, strength, and intelligence to survive the suppression of the soul that those in subjugation endure, perhaps even the culprit in the demise of the deceased.<sup>40</sup> The poet advises that 'we', assuredly African diasporic peoples, require 'inner strength', 'sharp thinking', 'courage', friendly human contact, and 'earth beneath our feet'. This litany of needs is fairly moderate in emotional intensity, particularly compared with the affective register called upon in the sonnet that follows it.

But what should one make of this didactic poem? It addresses basic emotional wellbeing as a means of defending oneself against the 'undertow' and the 'storms'. In the conceit of this poem, if a person is strong, intelligent, brave, surrounded by friends, and grounded, then one will survive against oppression. There must be 'earth beneath [one's] feet'. This line instructs the reader on the need for groundedness, a sense of maintaining one's sanity as well as an understanding of one's role in the natural world. On another level, this line subtly suggests that one should keep a mind towards history, towards those who have died and are metaphorically buried underfoot, exactly like the red dust road and the ancestors who have walked along it, as I describe in Jackie Kay's

<sup>39</sup> Walker, *For My People*, in *This Is Our Century*, p. 50 (entire poem).

<sup>40</sup> Even in two stanzas, there is no question that this poem, as well as others that defy the single-stanza convention, is a sonnet; the second stanza occurs at the volta and embodies the sestet concluding the poem, as I discuss in the parameters and purposes of the sonnet form in Chapter One.

poetry in Chapter Five. The ‘earth beneath our feet’ refers to both a solidity and solidarity. With this historical mindfulness and the companionship of friendly faces, one can also possess courage, inner strength, or mental acuity, traits that people must carve for themselves. This seems an antithesis to the dream of Brooks’s persona that pales in comparison to the daily realities of paying the rent, getting a warm bath when the other tenant is through in the bathroom: her dream that, when deferred, becomes a raisin in the sun.

Whereas the components listed in ‘Our Need’ are rather cerebral, those described in ‘The Struggle Staggers Us’ (1942) are far more accessible and visceral, a feature that is accompanied by force of language and meaning. Walker writes:

Our birth and death are easy hours, like sleep  
and food and drink. The struggle staggers us  
for bread, for pride, for simple dignity.  
And this is more than fighting to exist;  
more than revolt and war and human odds.  
There is a journey from the me to you.  
There is a journey from the you to me.  
A union of the two strange worlds must be.

Ours is a struggle from a too-warm bed;  
too cluttered with a patience full of sleep.  
Out of this blackness we must struggle forth;  
from want of bread, of pride, of dignity.  
Struggle between the morning and the night.  
This marks our years; this settles, too, our plight.<sup>41</sup>

This blank verse sonnet is unrhymed except for the notable couplets at the end of each stanza. Again Walker breaks the sonnet into two stanzas, yet the octave and sestet, with the break introduced at the clear volta, conform to the conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet. What the poet accomplishes through this interrupted form is a breath for the reader to digest the octave. The stanza break functions as a caesura, which is especially important after the rhymed couplet at the end of the octave, the first rhymes encountered in this poem. To this point, the poet’s subject matter is incongruous with

---

<sup>41</sup> Walker, in *For My People*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 51 (entire poem).

rhyme, but the few rhymes that do occur resonate for the reader, making the poem memorable and intensifying its intrinsic tension. By incorporating the use of anaphora in lines 6 and 7 and rhyme between lines 7 and 8, these three lines function almost as a tercet, a complete three-lined unit with its own meaning. The reader is compelled to question the antecedents of the pronouns *you* and *me*, opposites that must then be brought together in union. Of course, this can be on the primary level of the need for individuals to relate; however, it undoubtedly functions at the deeper meaning of racial differences. In a short space, the poem iterates the sense of ‘the other’, a distinct feeling of us and them, a duality of alienation and inclusion, also created in Brooks’s ‘A Lovely Love’ (1960) and Jackie Kay’s ‘Black Bottom’ (1991), discussed in Chapters One and Five. This versus that, us versus you, we versus them. However, these are the dualisms that must be integrated. Without listing what is different between the groups, the poet asks the reader to intuit the starkness of contrast, which is then followed by the command, if not warning, that this gulf must be bridged.

In the sestet that concludes this sonnet, the device of anaphora is used with the effect of creating a more severe address, with the sense that this public poet is at the podium. She repeats the word ‘struggle’ three times in six lines, repeats the word sleep, as well the combination of ‘bread’, ‘pride’, and ‘dignity’. By using this poetic device, and notably these strong words, the poet depicts needs that come across as sharper or more imperative than those chosen for the previous poem. Through the simplification of her diction in this piece, it reverberates with greater intensity. The needs are simpler, and one is likely to respond to their lack with amplified empathy and aggression. These simple needs are also intensified because the poet returns to the tropes of bread and satisfaction raised previously in this series. For want of food and/or money, one should engage in the struggle, rather than quietly witness it from the metaphorical ‘too-warm

bed'; one thus must emerge 'out of [their] blackness'. This potentially ambiguous term could be interpreted as the colour of their skin, a deep-felt sadness, a misplaced sense of uncleanness, a feeling of social withdrawal. Perhaps the poet intends each of these possible connotations. She concludes the sonnet with another heroic couplet, adding weight to the argument presented thus far. By partaking in this struggle, one honours the predecessors, who have also endured oppression, worked to overcome it, and evoked change. 'This marks our years; this settles, too, our plight'. 'Our' refers to a community: contemporaries and predecessors, joined by race and oppression, much like Kay's newfound ancestors in her poem 'Pride' (1998) in Chapter Five. This connection across time is what Karla F. C. Holloway describes as 'an enabling metaphor in [the] literary revisioning of cultural mythologies'.<sup>42</sup> Through Walker's use of this kind of myth-making, generations of people are connected across time, and one's forebears contribute to one's sense of self in the present.

Why should Walker select the sonnet here, over some other form, ballad or free verse, for example? As I discussed in the previous chapter, the sonnet is a form fraught with tension. The containedness of the form and its conventions provide a framework against which the narrative of the poem must be positioned. Like the poets who preceded her, such as Dunbar, Cullen, McKay, and Hughes, Walker takes it upon herself to recast and re-engage with traditional forms through the lens of current surroundings. Although the poet admits that, in her early career, sonnets were like exercises to be completed, to supply discipline and agility, much like the scales do for a musician, there is more to it than that in these sonnets.<sup>43</sup> Yes, they may be exercises,

---

<sup>42</sup> Karla F. C. Holloway, *Metaphors and Moorings: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> 'I had been trying to write sonnets since I was sixteen and seventeen. Professor Hungerford said poets have to write sonnets because sonnets furnish the same discipline for the poet as five-finger exercises for the musician. When I was in school in Iowa in the sixties I took my qualifying oral exam on sonnets, the history of that form, and sonnet sequences'. Introduction to *This Is My Century*, pp. xiv-xv.

but, in her handling of them, she chooses to reinvent them. She works in the traditional but also plies the contemporary to simultaneously construct identity based in historical and geographic grounding, formulate her own poetic identity situated at the intersection of these arcs, and speak as a representative for the oppressed in the fields of the South and the urban ghettos of the North.

The form itself must be overcome and leaves the reader with an anxiety. This stems from its sense of being incomplete, introducing conflict without necessarily resolving it. The formal difficulty answered or overcome, in this instance, only occurs after six sonnets work together in dialogue in the series, with each lyric asking some question or conveying some thread that must be taken up in the next. The progression from one poem to the next forms an eighty-four-line constellation, which is still open-ended at the conclusion, calling upon those in the African diaspora to take up their own cause. In her role as a political poet, her aims are very much directed towards the needs of her people, so that the lessons learned from the past write the possibility of the future. She reminisces in 1943:

When I went to school, I read the history books that glorify the white race and describe the Negro either as a clown and a fool or a beast capable of very hard work in excessive heat. I discovered the background of chattel slavery behind this madness of race prejudice. Once we were slaves and now we are not, and the South remains angry.<sup>44</sup>

Her aim was to use historical perspective to interrupt this pattern of oppression. She knew, even as a child, that she played a role in changing the future for oppressed black populations. 'It will not always be this way', she continues:

Someday, just as chattel slavery ended, this injustice will also end; this internal suffering will cease; this ache inside for understanding will exist no longer. Someday, I said, when I am fully grown, I will understand, and I will be able to do something about it. I will write books that will prove the history texts were distorted. I will write books about colored people who have colored faces, books that will not make me ashamed when I read them.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Walker, 'Growing Out of Shadow', in *Common Ground* (1943), reprinted in *How I Wrote Jubilee*, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

Her identity, through the use of these sonnets, is specifically dependent on both the past and the future and an intrinsic need to write the marginalised out of the periphery.

Walker, then, uses the sonnet form to construct and reflect on new forms of political identification. Her aesthetic commits her to democratic causes: gestures representing the marginal and oppressed in a public poetry. In this democratic verse, for and about the oppressed, she crafts complexity, which mirrors her identity, constructed discursively out of the relationship between the self and the 'other'. Zygmunt Bauman describes the process when he says:

One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence. 'Identity' is a name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty.<sup>46</sup>

The two halves of the binarism for Walker, as gleaned through her poetry, are the states of being oppressed and liberated, with the former contributing to anxiety at the dissatisfaction over one's social placement, dictated by segregationist practice. She is a spokesperson for the oppressed. She refers to the struggles of past workers and calls upon people now to reflect on them, to reject the oppression of centuries whilst simultaneously learning from it. Historical events and contemporary injustice juxtapose on a temporal continuum in the anxiety of the sonnet. The poetry inhabits a union of these points on the timeline, much like her identity as the child of former slaves and forebear of hopefully liberated black people, with a liberation that extends beyond the binary of slaves or free men. Of this kind of hybrid identity, Barbara Christian writes:

Afro-American women writers have necessarily had to confront the interaction between restrictions of racism, sexism, and class that characterize our existence, whatever our individual personalities, backgrounds, talents...And yet it is precisely because this literature reveals a basic truth of our society, of all societies, that it is central. In every society where there is the denigrated Other whether that is designated

---

<sup>46</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist—Or a Short History of Identity', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, p. 19.

by sex, race, class, or ethnic background.<sup>47</sup>

Walker is positioned between the poles of past and present, insider and outsider. Through her poetry, she works to reconcile the placement of the ‘denigrated Other’.

The sonnet form allows her the rigidity of containment to explore the power of personal geographies and racial iterations and ‘reveal a basic truth of our society’, as seen before, i.e., with Brooks’s interpretation of the sonnet and her use of it conjoined with the African American vernacular of the blues; she works against ‘her jars and cabinets of [her] will’. While focussing on the specificities of location-driven identity and historical consciousness, Walker also pronounces herself clearly as a humanitarian poet occupying the public space. This role is demonstrated with even greater clarity when she moves from the sonnet to the more distinctly public form of the elegy.

### **Elegy: Intersection Between Public and Private**

Perhaps due to the radicalism and violence of the post-War period, or her ability to keenly capture the emotional portrait of a personal loss, Walker’s oeuvre contains many elegies, written for close friends, civilian activists, and democratic figures, in which she ranges the gamut from deeply personal to the specifically political, with frequent points of intersection. The elegy as a form hails from ancient Greece and is traditional, ceremonial, and public.<sup>48</sup> For Walker, the act of writing an elegy insists on, as much as it reflects, the public importance of the fallen figure; it intervenes in cultural literary production, challenging it, rather than reflecting on its existing order of communal significance.

---

<sup>47</sup> Barbara Christian, ‘Creating a Universal Literature: Afro-American Women Writers’ (1983), in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (Exeter, UK: Wheaton Press, 1985), p. 160.

<sup>48</sup> Edward Hirsch thoughtfully discusses the history of the form and its various cultural iterations in *How to Read a Poem* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1999), pp. 277-279.

Jahan Ramazani explores modernisation of this form. He disambiguates the use of the elegy in its modern application as melancholic, rather than normative in its earlier uses.<sup>49</sup> By normative, he means that elegy has previously been written for the purpose of healing, as a point of recovering from the loss of a loved one or important figure. In contrast, melancholic elegies denote the more contemporary use in which there is no desire to come to terms with grief, but rather a statement that continues to be ‘unresolved, violent, and ambivalent’.<sup>50</sup> They neither officially say farewell to the dead, nor do they comfort the living. There is a shift from categorical or universal language to the more particular and intimate; poets relate personally to the dead, perhaps as a response to the growing privatisation of grief.<sup>51</sup> He asserts that it has always:

been evolving, hybridizing, self-subverting, so that its modern mutations constitute something less than a total departure from the generic past. Because the relation of the modern elegy to literary tradition is one neither of seamless continuity nor of complete rupture, genre analysis helps to focus both departures and inheritances.<sup>52</sup>

This is a useful premise for this discussion of Walker’s elegies, which embody a complex network of influences, styles, and characteristics of poetic identity. She elegises many people including Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr, Medgar Evers, Michael Schwerner, James Earl Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, Harriet Tubman, Phyllis Wheatley, Owen Dodson, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Robert Hayden, Mary McLeod Bethune, a professor from university, and her own father. This list of people demonstrates that the form, for Walker, is a means of navigating between the personal and the public, which allows greater freedom in it and intersection of the two spheres. Walker writes elegies that mourn those who die of natural causes (including both political activists and people in her own life), slain public figures, and participants in

---

<sup>49</sup> These phrases borrow from Freud’s psychological terminology for the purpose of assigning categories to the changing design and effects of elegy. Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy From Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

the civil rights movement who were killed in the course of their activism.

I distil this discussion into two poems for the purpose of analysis, both appearing in Walker's second volume *Prophets for a New Day* (1970). Walker writes about the death of a revolutionary and the birth of martyrs. In 'For Malcolm X':

All you violated ones with gentle hearts;  
 You violent dreamers whose cries shout heartbreak;  
 Whose voices echo clamors of our cool capers,  
 And whose black faces have hollowed pits for eyes.  
 All you gambling sons and hooked children and bowery bums  
 Hating white devils and black bourgeoisie,  
 Thumbing your noses at your burning red suns,  
 Gather round this coffin and mourn your dying swan.

Snow-white moslem head-dress around a dead black face!  
 Beautiful were your sand-papery words against our skins!  
 Our blood and water pour from your flowing wounds.  
 You have cut open our breasts and dug scalpels in our brains.  
 When and Where will another come to take your holy place?  
 Old man mumbling in his dotage, or crying child, unborn?<sup>53</sup>

This fractured sonnet is unrhymed and not in syllabic meter. The deterioration of the formal conventions here works in this elegy because it mirrors the disruption of lawfulness and Malcolm's lifework. The poet mourns the loss of a champion for equality on the day he was murdered, 21 February, 1965, and, as he is separated from earthly life, the strength of the sonnet as such breaks down. Here, through the use of apotheosis, the elegized figure is elevated to a divine status, as though this poem were about the death of a god. Walker uses Christian imagery to, not only compare Malcolm X to a deity, but also make the loss accessible for the common person to mourn. The reader is invited to 'mourn *your* dying swan'. By making the deceased 'your', she is indicating that there is some sense of religious ownership over this man, i.e., as in the common religious construction 'my Lord'. Additionally, by 'our' blood and water pouring forth from 'your' wounds, the religious tie is strengthened and is more apparent. The relationship established with this use of apostrophe creates a bond that is

---

<sup>53</sup> Walker, in *Prophets for A New Day* (1970), reprinted in *For My Century*, p. 70 (entire poem).

both physical and spiritual such that we, the mourners, are the ones haemorrhaging while the victim lies dying.<sup>54</sup> Walker is working within and against the conventions of Christianity, in that the blood of Christ becomes the salvation of the followers. At the conclusion of the poem, she alludes to Moses and the birth of Christ to interrogate who could possibly take this man's place, as though, the poem suggests, only the arrival of a new prophet could replace him. This beleaguers the reader at its seeming impossibility, both at the time of Malcolm's death (1965) and at the time of publication (1970). In terms of Ramazani's analysis of elegy, the piece falls under the category of melancholic in that it does not propose any closure or healing for the living, nor does it end the story of the deceased, whose presence, it is implied, will continue in a neo-religious way.

This poem is juxtaposed with the elegy 'For Andy Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney' (1970), who were murdered by white supremacists in Philadelphia, Mississippi while trying to help register black voters in 1964. Although many would undoubtedly know who these men are, their historical legacy is likely amplified as a result of their untimely and violent deaths. In this poem, too, Walker appropriates Christian language and imagery to elevate them to the status of deities. What is different is that nature mourns in this poem, too, as though the natural world deems their shocking deaths a reversal of order, whereas the death of Malcolm X, although also unnatural, may have been foreseen in the arc of his career. Perhaps what distinguishes the dead is the unlikelihood that they might perish at the hands of murderers. These three activists were minor figures in the broader Civil Rights Movement, whereas Malcolm X was a leader whose anger and protest placed him among the early agents of the Black Power Movement.

---

<sup>54</sup> See Barbara Johnson's analysis of apostrophe in *A World of Difference*, discussed in relation to Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry in the previous chapter.

The death of these three young men is encapsulated in the register of nature when Walker writes:

The burned blossoms of the dogwood tree  
tremble in the Mississippi morning  
The wild call of the cardinal bird  
troubles the Mississippi morning  
I hear the morning singing  
larks, robins, and the mockingbird  
while the mourning dove  
broods over the meadow  
Summer leaf falls never turning brown[...]  
Leaves of death floating in their watery grave[...]  
Mississippi bird of sorrow  
O mourning bird of death  
Sing their sorrow  
Mourn their pain  
And teach us death,  
To love and live with them again!<sup>55</sup>

Their deaths are so unnatural and outrageous that the natural world, through Walker's use of the pathetic fallacy, uproots its cadences in response, i.e., the summer leaves die before the autumn and the melodic song of the cardinal signifies trouble, a characteristic of traditional elegies that invoke a muse and employ a call to nature. Walker's use of natural imagery also speaks to the facts that, after being shot, the men were buried in an earthen dam, to be discovered in their 'watery grave' after it had rained heavily on muddy ground. Although there is not what one might consider consolation in this poem, there is also not a sense of scepticism either, an attribute associated with many modern elegies.<sup>56</sup> Instead, through her apotheosis and elevation of the deceased, the poet attempts to find some solace, if not in a way that offers healing. Ramazani suggests that this characteristic of divine diction and imagery over more negative painful choices may be a trait to be appropriately linked with elegies of black poets versus white poets.<sup>57</sup> In the avoidance of this lure of doubt, but rather an

---

<sup>55</sup> Walker, in *Prophets for a New Day*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 73, ll. 59-67, 71, 79-84.

<sup>56</sup> Ramazani, p. 174.

<sup>57</sup> Ramazani suggests that, as a result of the number of slain civil rights leaders and the historical link to spirituals, African American poets resort less to the scepticism that is prevalent in writers such as Plath, Lowell, Berryman, and Ginsberg; *Ibid*, pp. 173-175.

embrace of the grief process, Walker combines the influences of African spirituals with a Eurocentric convention and anti-convention, thereby crafting her own voice that resists strong categorisation.

Through these poems, Margaret Walker allows the expression of the singular mourner to represent the collective voice, a characteristic seen with her sonnets. In the elegies specifically, her suggestion that all the deaths have been for *her* sake, or for the sake of all black people, allows the mourners to take a sense of participation in their narratives. It is an appropriation of historical arcs for the use of the collective, through close or deep temporal lines. The deaths are preserved at this historical moment in a public form, but the sentiment within the elegies also builds on centuries of oppression and the present anger over the victims' murders. This allows for the performance of political identification, linked at the intersection of public and private, past and present. Writing these elegies allows her to strengthen the literary and social communities in which she participates. The experiences of the collective become those of the individual and vice versa. Within this historically minded and public space, the elegy, then, becomes a stage upon which loss and anger are juxtaposed; the dead are mourned whilst those left behind are called to take up their cause. The downtrodden will become the victorious, suggesting a type of poetic beatitude.

### **Poems Inspired By Beatitudes**

Within Walker's elegies, the deceased figures become elevated to the status of the divine. However, in her beatific poems, as I discuss here, the common person is given this same deification, and it is a status that is only possible in light of her role as a popular poet, speaking as a representative of the people, and one who depends on the presence of a collective memory. The experiences for the personae in these works are

drawn on the arc of oppression of those in the African diaspora for centuries. The use of the biblical paradigm of the beatitudes is a continued mode through which she demonstrates her historical consciousness and grounds much of her imagery in the geographic-specific location of the American South, having moved back to the region of her roots in 1940. Thus far, other biblical references have been shown, mostly in the transition between childhood and adulthood and the sacrifice of the one for the benefit of the multitudes. Because it allows her the ability to navigate in between past-present, us-them, oppressed-free dichotomies, it would seem, then, that biblical rhetoric, specifically that of the beatitudes, would be a natural choice for the poet, particularly when she cites the King James Bible as one of her literary influences. She writes in the introduction to *This Is My Century*:

The characteristics of my poetry that may superficially be considered reflective of Sandberg, Masters, Jeffers, and Whitman are not derived from these poets but rather from a lifetime of reading the Bible and wisdom literature of the East...that they too had read.<sup>58</sup>

By alluding to the Bible and emulating its style and content, Walker intervenes in an historical continuum that has had great significance for Eurocentric literature and has also become a hallmark for many African American writers. She has been influenced by African American and traditional black voices and by their intervention with biblical representation. As R. Baxter Miller explains, she looked up to her literary predecessors including James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen, heard Marian Anderson and Roland Hayes perform, and personally knew Zora Neale Hurston and W. E. B. Du Bois.<sup>59</sup> He asks, ‘What does this richness of culture give her? She finds the solemn nobility of religious utterance, the appreciation for the heroic spirit of black folk, and the deep respect for craft’.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Walker, *This Is My Century*, p. xvi.

<sup>59</sup> Miller, ‘The “Etched Flame” of Margaret Walker’, p. 81.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 81-82.

Within this influence, she, too, finds a biblical voice. The particular aesthetic of the beatitudes is that each statement gains its meaning through the juxtaposition of dualisms, with the demarcation between the realms of heaven and earth. As a point of reference, the relevant passage from the Sermon on the Mount, as it appears in the King James Bible, is as follows:

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.<sup>61</sup>

For many readers, this well-known New Testament passage functions as a source of comfort in that a positive existence emerges from the negative, made even more expressive by the fact that the rhetoric for both of these poles is extreme. One's suffering shall cease and be replaced with joy, even if that promise is fulfilled after one's earthly life is over. The implications of this in a strictly spiritual and/or religious context are beyond the scope of this chapter, but the passage does provide a grounding to many of Walker's poems that are based in and against the antinomies of sorrow and joy, pain and relief, tribulation and reward.

In the poem 'Delta' (1942), Walker uses images that coalesce the labour of slavery with the liberty of freedom. She writes:

[...]High above us and round about us stand high mountains  
 rise the towering snow-capped mountains  
 while we are beaten and broken and bowed  
 here in this dark valley.[...]  
 We with our blood have watered these fields  
 and they belong to us.  
 Valleys and dust of our bodies are blood brothers  
 and they belong to us:[...]  
 the music in the wind for us  
 the nights for loving

---

<sup>61</sup> Mathew 5: 3-12, King James Bible. Cambridge Edition: 1769; King James Bible Online.

the days for living  
 and the circling lines in the sky  
 for dreams[...]  
 Neither earth nor star nor water's host  
 can sever us from our life to be  
 for we are beyond your reach O mighty winnowing flail!  
 infinite and free!<sup>62</sup>

This passage from the longer poem stands out in that the people gain ownership of the land that has been toiled over, the fields they watered with their own blood. This addresses the historical and ever-present fact that slaves were prohibited from owning land and the promise that, with manumission, this would be attainable. With the inspiration of the beatitudes, the 'blood' and 'free' form two halves of the whole; out of the people's labouring, suffering, corporal anguish in the fields, they stand to inherit something far greater than land: freedom, whether physical or spiritual. Walker points up opposite ends of the spectrum, with powerful diction that is accessible to the reader but also likely triggers strong emotional responses, particularly from an audience who has endured any kind of oppression, anyone who has looked on the 'towering snow-capped mountains;' from 'this dark valley', from the 'danger and death' that 'stalk the valley'; 'if only from this valley, [one] might rise with song!'.<sup>63</sup> The poet indicates that the subjugated people will find their reward, a concept that is directly iterated in the beatitudes. There is 'a crystalline hope/ there is a new way to be worn and a path to be broken/ from the past'.<sup>64</sup> Within the beatific confines and biblical influence here, the agony is to be overcome with ultimate freedom in a paradox that conjoins the suffering of the past with the restfulness of the future.

The identity that is crafted out of the use of this duality rests between the poles of 'dust of our bodies' and 'life to be'. The interstitial space occupied by the poem's subjects is where the poet herself resides and where she creates a meaningful self-

---

<sup>62</sup> Walker, in *For My People*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, pp. 15-20, ll. 38-41, 116-119, 124-128, 136-139.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 18, ll. 41, 100, 32.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18, ll. 88-90.

definition. For Walker, this identity is formulated from the historical narrative of racial oppression and within the exchange of binaries: out of the past suffering, the future will deliver peace. It is intrinsically related to how Walker's aesthetics may be defined.

Homi Bhabha memorably writes of this kind of duality:

Those who have seen the nightmare of racism and oppression in the banal daylight of the everyday, [they] represent an idea of action and agency more complex than either the nihilism of despair or the Utopia of progress. They speak of the reality of survival and its salvation, but it is rarely spoken in the heroisms or the horrors of history.<sup>65</sup>

Read through the lens of Bhabha's suggestion, Walker's poem can be analysed as a work that positions itself between various dichotomies; the identity of a member of a minority is tangled between the worst and best, 'nihilism of despair' and 'Utopia of progress', with the memory of the former positioned against the hope for the latter.

Another poem that engages in this kind of beatitude-inspired duality is 'A Litany from the Dark People', which appears in *October Journey* (1970). This Whitmanesque and biblical anaphoric poem in fourteeners (iambic heptameter) alternates stanzas between what has been sacrificed and what stands to be gained. The first stanza sets up the initial condition:

From ignorance and darkness, stupidity, and fears;  
From chains of chattel slavery, and sullen evil years;  
From hopelessness, and helplessness, and the brokenhearted tears;  
From the desperate miasma of floundering under jeers;  
From stooping to the Sunday-folks and bending to the lash;  
From weeping over children lost, the desperate and the rash;  
From shuddering and shivering upon the auction stand;  
From walking in the shackled line and dying hand and hand;<sup>66</sup>

Through the use of the form, tightly metrical and in this case tightly rhymed, the poem reads like a ballad, with the sharp caesuras after four feet preceding the final three feet that comprise the rhyming couplets. If the lines were broken along these metrical guidelines, it would be a rhyme scheme of *abcb*, in alternating iambic tetrameter and

---

<sup>65</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London, UK: Routledge, 1994), pp. 254-255.

<sup>66</sup> Walker, in *October Journey*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 124, ll. 1-8.

trimeter, or ballad stanza. However, by using these long, mellifluous lines, the poem is slowed down considerably to be read with gravitas and the flow of narrative. Walker also inhabits the musicality within the rhythms of these lines, echoing the music of African drum beats. Its aural quality insists upon a percussive undertone that amplifies it as it tells the historically significant narrative of black people in the West fighting for freedom: from slavery, from poverty, from disenfranchisement, from oppression.

The initial conditions established in the poem echo that of the people addressed in the beatitudes; blessed are the poor in spirit, the ‘weeping’, ‘shuddering’, ‘shivering’, ‘dying’ poor in spirit. This lament is interrupted by a refrain in ballad stanza, an apostrophe to God, which is then followed by a return to the heptametrical line that espouses the glorious, opposite condition:

From wearing that long white robe with sandals on our feet;  
 From talking with our Jesus-King where peace and glory meet;  
 From climbing Jacob’s ladder and wrestling till the day;  
 From riding on a chariot up where angels play.<sup>67</sup>

This poem inhabits the musical tradition of spirituals in that one can take consolation from the fact that there will be deliverance, even if not on earth. The utterance of the song, or the poem, by its very sound, consoles those who hear it. The ballad stanza here also resonates with the musical intonations of hymns. The rhythm and rhyme give it a song-like quality, adding a musical aspect to Walker’s aesthetics. For the contemporary poet and audience, one must ask how this reads and functions. The black populations whom Walker is representing have struggled to reap the benefits of the Civil Rights Movement; they are neither slaves, nor completely free, as racial segregation and oppressive policies and practices of society continue to prevent them from achieving a lived freedom, as agents over their own lives. They are in the liminal space, no longer fighting against slave owners, but still struggling against a hateful prejudice; poetically,

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 124, ll. 17-20.

they are no longer chattel and not yet in the liberation of an afterlife.

The poem suggests that there must be some means of combination, the attainment of freedoms and goodness in an earthly, tangible way, much like Langston Hughes's 1949 commentary, 'I do not need my freedom when I'm dead/ I cannot live on tomorrow's bread'.<sup>68</sup> Walker and Hughes name a problem: there is a tension inherently laden in waiting for a heavenly reward whilst suffering in the distinctly earthly and, sadly, human misery. James Baldwin in 1962 also speaks of the stress that comes within this biblical paradigm. He says:

I realized that the Bible had been written by white men. I knew that, according to many Christians, I was a descendent of Ham, who had been cursed, and that I was therefore predestined to be a slave...If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.<sup>69</sup>

There must be some way, according to Baldwin and Walker, of resolving the tension created in these dogmas of the New Testament, where one is bound between the options of earthly suffering and heavenly reward; however, as Elaine Scarry, suggests, the Bible offers little in the way of solutions to this disparity. She writes, 'Between the extremes of the physical body and the voice of God, there is no transition. They remain separate bands of occurrence'. She continues, 'There remains an anxiety about the nature of crossing that is apparent in the search for models that periodically surfaces in the stories'.<sup>70</sup> Scarry's phrase 'the nature of crossing' is significant in that the transition between the earthly and heavenly conditions is named as the problem. One does not

---

<sup>68</sup> From the poem 'Democracy', published in *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York, NY: Vintage-Random House, 1974), p. 258. This poem (in its sharp attack on those who prefer to wait for egalitarian change, rather than claim freedom deserved right now, through force if necessary) is notably omitted from several authoritative anthologies, including the Norton anthologies on poetry and African-American literature and the Oxford anthology of African-American poetry, edited by Mary Jo Salter, Henry Louis Gates, Jr, and Arnold Rampersad (a well-known Hughes scholar), respectively. Although not considered one of Hughes's best poems, it is important as a result of its memorable sentiment and non-sense means of expressing it.

<sup>69</sup> Baldwin, 'Letter from a Region in My Mind', in *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 35, 46.

<sup>70</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body In Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 195.

know when or how, or even if, this crossing is possible and what the parameters of it may be, exacerbating the anxiety of enduring the present condition.

Walker's poem proposes a solution more immediate and perceptible than waiting for the freedom associated with the kingdom of heaven. She writes:

From building empires of our own with brain and brawn and prayers;  
From working to enlarge the gift of him who shares;  
From lifting fallen brothers and rising as we climb  
To build a race of leaders and a nation more sublime<sup>71</sup>

The stanza still operates from within the framework of the beatitudes in so far as one's ability to hope is not mitigated by one's lowly circumstance. There is a growing strength, however, in her tone, very similar to Nikki Giovanni's approach in her poem 'Africa' (1975), which I discuss in Chapter Three. It demonstrates that, through the creation of strong leaders, communities built on intelligence, strength, and faith, the people might be liberated while still on earth. Through this empowerment, Walker takes her cue from Hughes's poem and rejects the passive stance offered by the beatitudes. She is not rejecting any biblical passages; she is, however, arming her poetry with agency, so that the oppressed people for whom she speaks might be able to resolve the anxieties of waiting for a joyful afterlife while enduring marginalisation here on earth. This becomes the gateway to poems that offer an alternative and more aggressive solution. I contend that they are 'anti-beatitudes'.

### **Anti-Beatitudes?**

Despite her vast knowledge of and belief in the teachings of the Bible, Walker, in many poems, chooses to take a more proactive, rebellious role than in the poems discussed in the previous section, at various points in her oeuvre, both in 1942 and the 1970s. The effect of this modality, as this section will explore, is to position her work

---

<sup>71</sup> Walker, in *October Journey*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 125, ll. 45-48.

in the long continuum of protesters, from escaped slaves, abolitionists, suffragists, and civil rights activists; the tonal quality of anger turns the innate patience of the beatitudes on its axis. While still borrowing from the form of the beatitudes and using binary constructions to bolster her poetry, she writes poems that call upon her audience to try for the rewards of a spiritual life here on earth in a palpable way. She has said in an interview for *Black Nation* in 1982, ‘There are some of us whom all kinds of persecution and oppression cannot keep quiet, not unless we are dead itself’.<sup>72</sup> Walker is not one to keep quiet. She is not to be stifled, as a lifetime of her writing demonstrates. This stems, in part, from multiple sources, including the strength she gleans from the historical narrative of her people and her commitment to bear witness to that legacy. She said in a conversation with Nikki Giovanni in 1974, ‘I go back to what I consider the strength in that black woman way back before the Civil War when she was just a slave. And I go back to the strength of what I think was in that black soldier who fought in the Civil War and what he tried to do after the war’.<sup>73</sup> She is honouring the tradition of bravery in the face of adversity, the very tradition that led generations of black writers to ‘define the individual “black self” to a society that denied the existence of a black reality’, according to V. P. Franklin. He continues:

The literary artist was attracted to the possibility of using language to define the self in an autobiographical text. The artists were preoccupied with literary styles and forms out of the past that could provide models for those who wanted to participate in this intellectual tradition of ‘bearing witness’.<sup>74</sup>

The historical witnessing and reflection on courage converge in her anti-beatitudes.

In *For My People*, Walker writes one of her most famous poems, ‘We Have Been Believers’ (1942), in which her argument progresses through the free-verse

<sup>72</sup> Margaret Walker, in an interview with Michael Simanga, *Black Nation*, 2 (1982), p. 14, re-quoted in *Conversations With Margaret Walker*, edited by Maryemma Graham (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), p. ix.

<sup>73</sup> Margaret Walker and Nikki Giovanni, *Poetic Equation: Conversations Between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1974), p. 14.

<sup>74</sup> V. P. Franklin, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African-American Intellectual Tradition* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1995), p. 12.

stanzas of biblical optimism but transforms to conclude with a biting stanza:

We have been believers believing in the black gods of an old  
land, believing in the secrets of the seeress and the  
magic of the charmers and the power of the devil's evil ones.

And in the white gods of a new land we have been believers  
believing in the mercy of our masters and the beauty of  
our brothers, believing in the conjure of the humble  
and the faithful and the pure.[...]

We have been believers believing in our burdens and our  
demigods too long. Now the needy no longer weep and  
pray; the long-suffering arise, and our fists bleed  
against the bars with a strange insistency.<sup>75</sup>

What alerts the reader to the poem's approaching change in attitude is the linguistic use of the present perfect progressive tense: 'We have been believers'. This kind of construction indicates that something has started in the past and progresses into the present moment, with stress on the possible future continuance of it. Because of this verb construction, the reader gets, not only a sense of the history of this belief, but also the feeling that it is or should conclude, as though the next line of the dialogue will be, 'and now we will stop believing', which is achieved through the last stanza. It has been too long. The present perfect progressive needs to become the present perfect, indicating that the action has concluded at the moment of the utterance.

This sense of change is iterated in the language of the final stanza. 'Now the needy no longer weep' tells the reader that this has just been deemed a turning point. Suddenly, things are not as they were before. Although there is room for hope, there must also be action, carried out by those who would be most served by it, the living. This poem participates in the dialogue of revolutionary activists, but there is a subtlety here that could be overlooked. The complex motif of dissent is handled through the juxtaposed tonal choices of reservation and urgency. What has been will be no longer, and the impetus for that change is going to be angry, bleeding fists against the bars,

---

<sup>75</sup> Walker, in *For My People*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 10, ll. 1-8, 29-32.

those breaking free from bondage, mirroring the violent register of the blueswomen I discussed in Chapter One. Despite the aggressive final image, by anchoring the poem in the gospel of Matthew, the final presentation is imbued with layers and nuance.

The tonality of the anti-beatitude is continued in the following poem. In ‘The Ballad of the Free’ (1970), Walker returns to the ballad form but with the rhyme scheme *aabb* in the regular verses, in primarily iambic tetrameter, and she uses for the refrain an *aaa* tercet, in tetrameter that alternates between iambic and anapaestic rhythm. The triple repetition of this refrain derives its tonality directly from the blues. For the verses, she recalls historical events in which the rights and freedom of African Americans were fought for, including the events centring on the rebellions of Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Toussaint L’Ouverture, and John Brown.<sup>76</sup> In the refrains, she again refers to the Bible. She writes, ‘The serpent is loosed and the hour is come/ The last shall be first and first shall be none/ The serpent is loosed and the hour is come’.<sup>77</sup> In this poem, the poet writes a beatific combination of antimonies. The most important aspect of the poet’s selections for this piece is that, unlike the beatitudes in which the righteous hour will come in heaven, the poet implies, though the ominous image of the serpent, that the hour is now, in the manner of Hughes’s ‘Democracy’ (1949), in which the speaker ‘cannot live on tomorrow’s bread’. The implication that those with little will have much is to be actualised in the present, rather than in the distant future, and the mode into this redistribution of ‘wealth’, as it were, is via protest and action.

By citing revolutionaries as examples, Walker draws the reader into a world in

---

<sup>76</sup> For insightful historical synthesis of the eras of slavery and Reconstruction, see, for example, Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>77</sup> Paraphrase of Matthew 20:16. Walker, in *Prophets for a New Day*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 60, ll. 4-6.

which the attainment of goals comes through protest. 'Freedom is still for the strong', Walker writes with more aggression than her usual subtlety, echoing Hughes's line 'Freedom/ Is a strong seed'. Change must be instituted. Significantly, the changes that are to come since 'the hour is now' are dependent on the historical figures who have been instrumental in revolt. This forms the intersection of a compelling paradox: the future may only be seen when lit with the experiences of the past. James Baldwin advises in 1962, 'Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go'.<sup>78</sup> Baldwin's lines would seem to influence Walker's poetic approach. She devotes much of her poetry to this kind of re-envisioning. Walker's aesthetics is dependent on the relationship of this time continuum, as I will explore in the next section.

### **Future as Interpreted Through the Past**

Walker succinctly reflects in 1992 about a time-continuum perspective, 'I was born when the century was barely fifteen years old; a historical point of view is central to the development of black people'.<sup>79</sup> She is not the only person who feels that this is a specifically black lexicon. Richard Wright advises in 1937 that, for black writers, 'a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary; a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and moulds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today'.<sup>80</sup> This historical participation directly contributes to a kind of communal memory or literary community

---

<sup>78</sup> Baldwin, originally in 'Letter to My Nephew', in *The Progressive* (1962), reprinted in *The Fire Next Time*, p. 7.

<sup>79</sup> Walker, interview with Maryemma Graham, 'The Fusion of Ideas: An Interview with Margaret Walker Alexander', in *African American Review* (1993), reprinted in *Conversations with Margaret Walker*, p. 143.

<sup>80</sup> Richard Wright, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', originally published in *New Challenge*, 11 (1937), reprinted in *Race and Class*, 21 (1980), pp. 407-408.

among writers, in which ‘Negro writers spring from a family, a clan, a class, and a nation; and the social units in which they are bound have a story, a record’.<sup>81</sup> This sentiment rings authentically for writers across the Black Atlantic. Being a member of this family, clan, class, nation is seen in the poets in this thesis, where each one is in some way preoccupied with the role of ancestors, in the distant or recent past, with ‘a story, a record’. The poets and their ancestors’ series of struggles influence the articulation of selfhood and identity.

Walker’s identity can be seen in the poem, ‘Since 1619’ (1942), which appeared in *For My People*. She begins the poem with the vitriolic stanza:

How many years since 1619 have I been singing spirituals?  
 How long have I been praising God and shouting hallelujahs?  
 How long have I been hated and hating?  
 How long have I been living in hell for heaven?<sup>82</sup>

We see an echo (a loud one) of the resolve to rise up and fight against earthly suffering rather than waiting for a reward in the afterlife. The repetition of the lines also inhabits a bluesy tonality, grounding the mood of the poem. The use of the singular first-person point of view is what imbues this piece with a powerful strangeness. It is not the poet speaking in the mode of the collective, the ‘we’ of an entire race, but a single voice. More than three centuries are united in the speaker’s psyche and persona. J. Lee Greene describes this collapsing of temporal boundaries as ‘...shape-shifting [which] includes not only a being’s...ability to assume another form but also the ability to occupy simultaneously different spaces and times’.<sup>83</sup> Within this modality, Walker is able to mobilise time and her place within it, wherein rigid boundaries become more fluid, accessible, and the speaker may be transported to another century as easily as walking into the next room. The poetic space, then, becomes the site of this boundary crossing.

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p. 410.

<sup>82</sup> Walker, in *For My People*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 22, ll. 1-4.

<sup>83</sup> J. Lee Greene, *The Diasporan Self: Unbreaking the Circle in Western Black Novels* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008), p. 41.

This subtle poetics speaks volumes about identity, particularly through the trope that one person participates in the centuries of one's forebears and vice versa; another kind of 'shape-shifting'. By grounding this poem through the conceit of personal experience, rather than inspiration or knowledge of history, the reader understands that identity here is comprised of a very long historical consciousness, felt as personally and intimately as one who has lived through the years in question, a technique used later in the poetry of Nikki Giovanni and Grace Nichols in Chapters Three and Four. The speaker, not her ancestors, has been the recipient of the hatred, and the communicative strength of this emotion allows her to take ownership. Walker concludes this poem:

When will I understand the cheated and the cheaters;  
 Their paltry pittances and cold concessions to my pride?  
 When will I burst from my kennel an angry mongrel,  
 Lean and hungry and tired of my dry bones and years?<sup>84</sup>

The audience is brought around to the present moment, with the anger and volatility of these lines inflamed by the endurance over hundreds of years of horrible social and physical conditions. This racially specific past is described in 1962 by Baldwin as:

the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred, and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible—this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very beautiful.<sup>85</sup>

Baldwin addresses a good deal of what drives Walker's poetic narrative forward: the inseparable relationship between the long-lived experience of suffering, the present rage about it, and the search for identity within these vertices. In the poem, the speaker feels the pain of slavery since 1619 and wonders how and when she/he in the present will be an angry mongrel released from its kennel, which might, at any point, snap.

The interrogation of the narrative of conflict is, however, beautiful. In the

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 22, ll. 13-16.

<sup>85</sup> Baldwin, 'Letter from a Region in My Mind', in *The Fire Next Time*, p. 97.

progression of her poetry, several poems stand out as beacons of beauty, articulating identity as a result of collective memory. ‘Dark Blood’ (from *For My People*, 1942), ‘How Many Silent Centuries Sleep in my Sultry Veins’ (*Prophets for a New Day*, 1970), and ‘Africa’ (*This Is My Century*, 1989) all explore this extended interrogation of time, centring on geographic-specific formations of identity. In ‘Dark Blood’:

There were bizarre beginnings in old lands for the making  
of me. There were sugar sands and islands of fern and  
pearl, palm jungles and stretches of a never-ending sea.

There were the wooing nights of tropical lands and the cool  
discretion of flowering plains between two stalwart  
hills. They nurtured my coming with wanderlust. I  
sucked fevers of adventure through my veins with my  
mother’s milk.

Sometime I shall go to the tropical lands of my birth, to the  
coasts of continents and the tiny wharves of island  
shores. I shall roam the Balkans and the hot lanes of  
Africa and Asia. I shall stand on the mountain tops and  
gaze on fertile homes below.

And when I return to Mobile I shall go by the way of  
Panama and Bocas del Toro to the littered streets and  
the one-room shacks of my old poverty, and blazing suns  
of other lands may struggle then to reconcile the pride  
and pain in me.<sup>86</sup>

This poem, like ‘Since 1619’, embodies the singular first-person perspective, allowing the experiences of the collective to become those of the individual. It also deeply channels both the poetry of predecessors and successors, most notably Walt Whitman and Grace Nichols, scholarly associations not previously drawn. The languishing language absolutely echoes the rhetoric of Whitman in his ‘Starting From Paumanok’ and ‘Salut au Monde’ (both 1856); the ties to the Caribbean, its people, and the geography-informed identities that are shaped on its shores and in its waters are precursors for Nichols’s poems ‘Web of Kin’ (1983), ‘Emerald Heart’ (1983), ‘Child-Kingdom’ (1989), and ‘Deep’ (2005), all of which I discuss in Chapter Four.<sup>87</sup> The persona being ‘nurtured’, the ‘fertile homes below’, and the dual sense of ‘pride and

<sup>86</sup> Walker, in *For My People*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 8 (entire poem).

<sup>87</sup> Whitman, pp. 16-33, 170-183.

pain' are all extremely formative images, each of which comes from an experience that the poet appropriates; however, they echo the Caribbean and African origins of ancestors brought to the New World in servitude centuries before.

Passing time is echoed in 'How Many Silent Centuries Sleep in my Sultry Veins?' (1970). The poet writes:

How many silent centuries sleep in my sultry veins?  
 The cries of tribal dancers call from far-off plains;  
 The plaintive songs of India, the melodies of Spain;  
 The rhythms of their tom-tom drums;  
 Of Red men seeking southern lands,  
 Of Africans in chains.  
 They call me from their tombs and thrones;  
 From many distant climes;  
 They whisper old and sacred names:  
 Each intonation chimes  
 An ancient and familiar right  
 For primitive and erudite.  
 I hear them wail loud echoings.  
 Locked deep inside of me they cry—  
 And wild their clamblings!  
 Blood rituals of men and gods  
 Speak pitiless, and shriek.  
 And crashing barriers of time  
 These dark imprisoned sons  
 Of all my wild ancestral hosts  
 Break from their time-locked sea  
 To make these modern, sensate sons  
 Immortal men, and free.<sup>88</sup>

In this poem, rather than the persona having directly experienced the struggles of the ancestors, this speaker is instead informed by them. Rather than a collective 'I', the voices of the ancestors engage in a dialogue, which has the power to transcend temporal and geographic boundaries, again similar to the mode Nichols inhabits throughout much of her poetry. As a result, the identity of the speaker is formed by the wisdom, locations, and spirits of the race. Within the construct of the poem, time and space are transcended, and the 'imprisoned sons' make 'modern, sensate sons/ Immortal men, and free.' The timelessness of immortality, paired with the eventual freedom of the progeny are two resounding diction choices. That previous generations

---

<sup>88</sup> Walker, in *Prophets for a New Day*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 67 (entire poem).

live on and that the men will be finally free, whether from slavery or more general oppression, speak to the power that this historical consciousness holds in Walker's aesthetics. She also plays with musical textures here. The rhythmic lines and rhymes amplify the song-like nature of this piece, giving it an historical folk-music intonation.

A symbolic historicism is written into the tapestry of the next poem, 'Africa' (1989). She writes:

[...]ANCIENT mother of the worlds, the earth, of man;  
custodian of the missing link, the dawning Age of the  
Cyclops, cyclone, cockatoo, cricket, and cicada;

[...]THERE is something strange about Africa; something  
eternal, more than timeless and inexplicable; how a  
giant sleeps covering so much of the earth; fertile  
and rich and full of wondrous things; harboring life,  
understanding all mysteries of death and time and  
underworlds—how a giant sleeps.

[...]Wake him, Mother Africa!  
Wake your sleeping giant now.  
Call all your sons to destiny.  
The clarion call of yet another Age  
now standing in the wings<sup>89</sup>

Within the symbolic narrative of Africa as the mother and all those in the diaspora her children, it is a call to action—the need for her to wake the sleeping giant, those progeny spread throughout the world. Poetically, in joint ancestry comes a joint cause, which might unite diasporic peoples in the fight for freedom and self-identity, an escape from 'uncertainty'; it might encourage them to return to the countries of their roots to reclaim a heritage that has been stripped of them for generations, a right that is both 'primitive and erudite'. Such links to homeland and interpretations of land as the source are also seen in the poetry of Nikki Giovanni, Grace Nichols, and Jackie Kay in the subsequent chapters; Mother Africa provides direct connective tissue between Walker's work and Giovanni's poem of the same title, Nichols's poem 'Out of Africa' (1989), and Kay's 'Igbo Bath' (2011). This maternal trope, and a shared source,

---

<sup>89</sup> Walker, *This Is My Century*, pp. 182, 183, 184, ll. 5-7, 43-48, 78-82.

reinforces the idea that one is significantly formed by the lives of one's forebears. Identity is actually crafted by this. The geographies of origin, the generations of people, the shared narrative of oppression and freedom converge to inextricably forge who one is in the present and where that will lead in the future. As Toni Morrison posits in 1991, 'art [is] the fully realized presence of a haunting'.<sup>90</sup> Morrison's turn of phrase is fitting for Walker. She is truly haunted by the past in a way that propels her to respond in forward-thinking art.

Walker does not only rely on the deep past to inform the present; she engages with close history within her lifetime, rather than just the continuance of previous generations. She refers to her childhood and events that work to create a new story. In 'Dear Are the Names that Charmed Me in My Youth' (1973), the poet writes in this fractured sonnet:

DEAR are the names that charmed me in my youth:  
the dark bronze faces I rejoiced to see.

One taught me love, another taught me truth  
and one of them brought bitterness and ruth,  
But all of them inspired my life to be  
a charging promise ringed with rhapsody.

Now once again I lift my eyes to them:  
who now would make my life a purpose-tree  
on which I strive to climb from limb to limb  
up where my challenges may rise defiantly.

I cannot blame another for my fate  
nor cry a cropper full of tears and glee.  
Why should I burgeon memories with hate?  
I have no right, and no necessity.<sup>91</sup>

There is an intricacy to the poet's identity that is conjoined in both eras in this lifetime; in the challenges of her adulthood, she looks to those who taught both love and anger in her childhood. This is not an innovation, but rather a convention that is also explored by Giovanni, Nichols, and Kay, who each look to their childhoods to understand how

---

<sup>90</sup> Toni Morrison, quoted by Homi Bhabha in *Location of Culture*, p. 12.

<sup>91</sup> Walker, in *October Journey*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 112 (entire poem), author's lineation and indentation.

those experiences, collective or individual, forge the women they have become.<sup>92</sup> It is a strength to honour one's history, on the narrow or broad scale, whether as a member of a collective community or a singular 'I', while participating in a literary community.

In a similar fashion, Walker honours, not only history, but also those who work to write a new history, looking forward for solutions to age-old problems. In the poem 'Sit-Ins' (1970), she praises protestors at the lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960, who refused to be dictated by the regimen of the Jim Crow South and sit in the section for 'coloreds'. Theirs was a campaign of nonviolent resistance:

You were our first brave ones to defy their dissonance of hate  
 With your silence  
 With your willingness to suffer  
 Without violence  
 Those first bright young to fling your names across pages  
 Of new southern history  
 With courage and faith, convictions, and intelligence  
 The first to blaze a flaming path for justice  
 And awaken consciences  
 Of these stony ones.

*Come, Lord Jesus, Bold Yong Galilean  
 Sit Beside this Counter, Lord, with Me!*<sup>93</sup>

Here Walker's encomium is presented especially through the words, 'of new southern history' because these activists are the ones who are beginning to envision a different future, sparking the civil rights protests of the 1960s. The idea of a new history, a new set of rules, which will potentially contribute to the formation of identity for future generations, is significant, where a new history is based on the past, where freedom is written by a legacy of oppression. Patricia Hill Collins says:

freedom is meaningless without slavery, masculinity makes no sense without femininity, national citizenship rings hollow if it's given away freely to everyone...The view from the edge can be empowering. Replacing prevailing interpretations of how we are supposed to view ourselves with perspectives that reclaim our outsider-within locations as places of intellectual, political, and ethical strength feels like...fresh air.<sup>94</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> In this instance, I feel that it would be appropriate to use the word 'poet' rather than speaker because it is likely that this poem reads, at least to some extent, autobiographically.

<sup>93</sup> Walker, in *Prophets for a New Day*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 59 (entire poem).

<sup>94</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, 'Learning from the Outsider Within Revisited' (2004), updated for *On Intellectual Activism*, p. 68.

As this spokesperson, Walker's poetry allows her the entry point into multiple formal considerations and modalities of expression, to breathe this fresh air. She excels in the tension created by the sonnet form, with its inherent restrictions as a framework in which to examine the struggles of the oppressed. Her elegies conjoin both the public and private spheres as she speaks very personally in a public form on the deaths of political activists, both revolutionaries and accidental martyrs. Through the pain of these poems, the poet writes a kind of peace. This duality is much like her poems inspired by beatitudes in which corporeal suffering shall be undone by a heavenly reward. However, the anxiety that is created within that paradigm is then reconciled by her suggestion that one's long wait might be interrupted by taking action, perhaps even aggressively so, leading to her 'anti-beatitudes'. In these poems, the time is now when the first shall be last and the last shall be first, even if that is accompanied by a radical shift in the political status quo and the reversal of outdated dual syllogisms. They become the springboard for historical intervention in the present, in which the tribulations of generations directly inform the sense of oneself now. These poems establish a series of dualisms through an historical consciousness, where the experiences of the forebears construct the identity of the progeny. I demonstrate for the first time that Walker's usage of historically minded, location-specific, often musically textured constructions of identity transcend spatio-temporal boundaries. She is directly influenced by Whitman and Hughes; she responds to and creates a foundation for her near-contemporaries. Her significance then crosses the Atlantic, as Nichols and Kay look back to her. They each speak for change and transcend historical norms. Her interrogations of the narrative on this historical continuum and her willingness to construct identifications along this trajectory establish an antiphonal rhetoric to which Nikki Giovanni responds, as seen in the next chapter.

**CHAPTER 3****NIKKI GIOVANNI:  
HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS  
AND METAMORPHOSIS**

Suzanne Juhasz wonders, ‘How can the woman who sees herself as the sweet inspiration for her people and the woman who has been trained, not only to sit and await but also to need and to value interpersonal, private relationships, be the same poet?’<sup>1</sup> Nikki Giovanni, a widely popular yet controversial African American poet, employs a contentious creative aesthetic. It is based on her sense of an inherited African American legacy—an awareness of the significance of the history of her race and racial oppression—which then becomes the foundation upon which she explores political issues as polemics, such as civil rights and women’s changing roles. This chapter will show that the nature of the poet’s dynamic approach to these social issues and the historical sensibility informing that approach give rise to a protean creative identity. Historical association lends her poetics the depth to interweave seeming oppositions and to craft a multi-faceted voice that demonstrates a complex sophistication. It is the complexity of her work, often overlooked by critics (to which I will return momentarily), that enables her to articulate change as the very heart of her aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> The weight and knowledge of oppression work in balance with the protean and exploratory nature of her poetry. These kinds of complexities mirror those in the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker. In each of them, there is a dependence on historical consciousness, an engagement with a kind of black vernacular, and a sense of being a spokesperson for the marginalised. Giovanni should

---

<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Juhasz, “‘A Sweet Inspiration...of My People’: The Art of Nikki Giovanni”, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 1 (1975), p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Don L. Lee says about her that, ‘We eagerly await her new book, *Re:Creation*, and hope that the sister has slowed down and tightened up her lines’, *Dynamite Voices: Black Poets of the 1960’s* (Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1971), p. 74.

also be interpreted in light of such polemical and dialectical dualities. Her individuation and self-exploration exist despite, and perhaps because of, her historical consciousness and use of the black, often musical, vernacular; paradoxically, her sense of inherited racial narrative and cultural participation in a literary community account for her individual creativity in a modern world.

In this chapter, I show that the relationship of past and present in Giovanni's work is not one of problem and solution but of continuing conjunction, in which the past-present are on a continuum of deep time, to use Wai Chee Dimock's phrase, and nonlinear temporalities are in exchange, 'alert[ing] us to our long sojourn on this planet, a sojourn marked by layers of relations, weaving our history into our dwelling place, and making us what we are'.<sup>3</sup> The influence the African diasporic narrative of centuries of suffering informs Giovanni's poetry, both public protest and personal lyric, in fraught times of social change; it allows the reader an access point into the development of her poetic subjects of black experiences and the domestic sphere. Her revolutionary poetry in the 1960s and early 1970s is in direct response to the Civil Rights Movement and Black Nationalism era. To take a poetic role in those fraught times, she crafts work that is bold, sometimes violent, but this is often based in personally felt sorrow after generations of oppression of her race.

The conjunction of violence and melancholy places her work at the interstice of the political and personal, similar to the intersection seen in the work of Margaret Walker. It forms the key component of her poetic aesthetic as it develops. Her quiet lyrical poems that focus on the domestic situation, whether romantic, familial, or interrogative of traditional gender roles, extend her representation of the personal. However, even when she is contemplating this sphere, the realm of the political is in

---

<sup>3</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 6.

her periphery; likewise, when she is examining current events, she does not forget the influence of the historical. In 1987, Giovanni spoke of the changes and diversity in her poetics, with some defensiveness:

I am a forty-three-year-old woman, not a twenty-five-year-old, and I think that growth is endemic to the human condition. I think that nothing looks more foolish than someone who stays the same...One of the things that makes me so comfortable between *Black Feeling Black Talk/Black Judgement*, which was my first book, and my last book which was *Those Who Ride the Night Winds*—which are, not diametrically opposed, but totally different books—one reason I'm so comfortable with both of them is that they are both honestly me.<sup>4</sup>

Here the poet casually refers to these different aspects of her complex poetic identity when she mentions her early violent poetry and her later romantic poetry, but she says they are both representative of who she is. These aspects of her aesthetics syncretise and contribute to her complex voice, as this chapter will demonstrate, despite critical accusations of her inability to discipline herself in her writing, to its detriment.<sup>5</sup> Despite Don L. Lee's perspective that 'Sometimes Nikki oversimplifies and therefore sounds rather naïve politically', her work does not simply change over time, but also within the scope of individual poems.<sup>6</sup> Here, I explicate this intricacy in her oeuvre.

She embraces historical provenance in terms of the trajectory of oppression and vernacular musicality, namely through inspiration from field hollers and the spirituals, which were precursors for the blues, as LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) convincingly demonstrates in his 1963 text *Blues People*.<sup>7</sup> She then marries that with a

---

<sup>4</sup> *Black Feeling Black Talk* and *Black Judgement* were published separately in 1968 as Giovanni's first two books and were then published as a joint volume in 1970; John Seigenthaler, 'A Word on Words' (1987), reprinted in *Conversations With Nikki Giovanni*, edited by Virginia Fowler (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), pp. 175-177.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Harris says of her work in 1984, 'I am concerned about her development. I think it is time for her to stand back and take stock of herself, to take for herself the time for reflection...She has the talent... if only she has the will to discipline her craft', 'Sweet Soft Essence of Possibility: The Poetry of Nikki Giovanni', *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1984), p. 228.

<sup>6</sup> Don L. Lee's critical claim, discussed by Peter Bailey, 'I am Black, Female, Polite...', in *Ebony* (1972), reprinted in *Conversations With Nikki Giovanni*, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> 'The shout, as much as the African call-and-response singing dictated the form blues took. Blues issued directly out of the shout, and, of course, spiritual', LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York, NY: William Merrell, 1999), p. 62.

transformative vision of the future. She employs both bombast and reserve and writes, not only in these polarities, but also in the space between them. Opposites in Giovanni's poems exist as a result of each other, and this chapter demonstrates that interpretation of her protean poetic identity, based in historical provenance, grounded in black musical vernacular, and dependent on her temporal geographies, must be understood through an appreciation of these dualities. This also places her work firmly within the intertextualities of the Black Atlantic.

### **Deviating from the Black Arts Movement: Giovanni's Protean Aesthetic**

Some critics of Giovanni's work, such as Don L. Lee, Amiri Baraka, and Caryl Phillips (I return to them later in this section) have focussed narrowly on the political nature of her poetry, as well as the charged social climate of the 1960s and 1970s, meaning they have neglected to respond to the aesthetics of her work and the choices informing her craft. Whether the response to her outspoken politics has been positive or negative, by examining only her celebrated and disputed political points of view, they have failed to unpack the sub-layers of her poetics and the nature of her as a protean poet. As such, one area in which her critics have been short-sighted is how she is categorised (or not) as a member of the Black Arts Movement. She has received harsh criticism from poets within this school of thought for her changes in style and subject, as well as from literary critics. One anonymous critic, quoted by Peter Bailey, a journalist and associate of Malcolm X, says of her work: 'I thought that Nikki was going to be one of the stabilizers in the Black cultural scene, one who could be counted on to maintain her integrity. Unfortunately, she is off on an ego trip'.<sup>8</sup> This harsh

---

<sup>8</sup> The language used in this harsh criticism may, of course, be derived from one of Giovanni's most famous poems, 'Ego-Tripping', published in 1970; quoted by Peter Bailey, p. 36.

criticism implies an imposed set of criteria of the Black Arts Movement on Giovanni's work. However, this creates a false evaluation.

The critic expresses disappointment that Giovanni fails to live up to his expectations of her as a representative of the movement but neglects to consider that the poet deliberately distances herself from it, why this new direction was necessary for her work, and how it informs her protean poetics—the extent to which I return in this chapter. Giovanni, although certainly a member of the Black Arts Movement in her early career, subsequently chose not to adhere to the tenets of the movement, a deviation that is later described as ‘refusal to be controlled by either the Black Arts Movement or the black power movement...as a refusal to be controlled by the men to whom both these movements seemed to belong’.<sup>9</sup> Although Virginia Fowler's commentary puts a feminist perspective on Giovanni's poetic choices, one with which the poet may not align herself (a point of view that I discuss later in this chapter), this provides one possible explanation for the change in style as well as in critical opinion seen throughout the course of her work. However, Fowler does not consider other possible reasons why Giovanni distanced herself from the Black Arts Movement. The poet herself responds to this critical charge with a more general claim to freedom of expression: ‘We don't need somebody telling us what to think. We need somebody to encourage us to think. That was the problem with the black aesthetic’.<sup>10</sup> This captures the problematic nature of her involvement with and dissociation from the movement.

By focussing on the hybridity of Giovanni's aesthetics, it is possible to interrogate her place in the movement and her individual aesthetic accomplishments,

---

<sup>9</sup> Virginia Fowler, *Nikki Giovanni* (New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1992), p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Claudia Tate, ‘Conversations with Nikki Giovanni’ (1983), reprinted in Fowler, *Conversations with Nikki Giovanni*, p. 148. This individualism is in some ways derived from that espoused by Alain Locke when he wrote in 1925 ‘We wish our race pride to be a healthier, more positive achievement than a feeling based upon a realization of the shortcomings of others’, *The New Negro* (1925) (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 13.

rather than bluntly saying that, by diverging from it, she is ‘off on an ego trip’.<sup>11</sup> The Black Arts Movement is generally dated from around 1960 to ~1975. With Giovanni publishing her first work in 1968, she emerged as a poet towards the end. In the beginning of her career, I contend that she was a Black Arts Movement poet because she espoused the tenets of revolution, nationalism, and black identity. To this effect, she celebrated her race, employed African American vernacular, and articulated the importance of challenging the status quo for black people throughout the diaspora. However, as she evaluates her poetic role and the dynamic society in which she works, she diverges from the movement, into her own creative aesthetic.

There are several possible explanations. First, she was what some would consider a sell-out. Amiri Baraka, for example, suggests that the reason that she moved away from a violent and revolutionary tone and subject in her poetry is that she was trying to sell books and albums, perhaps to a white audience that might be offended by strong racial language and imagery. He refers to her as an ‘ugly American sell out’.<sup>12</sup> This argument implies that she valued sales and a broader audience over the mores of the movement, which may be a narrow-minded construction of the change in her work. A second explanation for Giovanni’s divergence from the movement is that it subsided. Towards the middle of the 1970s, the Black Arts Movement no longer held the sway and influence it once did, a renaissance that was ‘the most short lived of all’, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.<sup>13</sup> The collective movement was no longer the black intellectual stage that it started out to be. Thirdly, the movement was too sexist and homophobic for a woman poet to truly work within it. However, this explanation seems

---

<sup>11</sup> See note 8.

<sup>12</sup> Amiri Baraka, in ‘Niggy the Ho’, in *Hard Facts* (Newark, NJ: Congress of Afrikan People, 1975), p. 31. *Hard Facts* is now out of print. The review printed here is the most polite section of his critique.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr, ‘Black Creativity: On the Cutting Edge’, *Time Magazine*, 10 Oct 1994, accessed online at <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,981564,00.html>.

unlikely because there are several women poets who took part in the Black Arts Movement and contested the misogynistic writing of its earlier participants. Some of the most noteworthy of these were Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Mari Evans, Audre Lorde, and Carolyn Rogers. As James Edward Smethurst writes, ‘One would have to go back to the early New Negro Renaissance to find a major black cultural movement in which women played such leading roles prior to the 1970s’.<sup>14</sup> Fourthly, the work in the movement was considered as a whole to lack subtlety or sophistication, and Giovanni’s role in it forced her beneath this same critique. For example, Don L. Lee wrote of her, ‘What is perhaps *more* important [than Nikki’s approach] is that when the black poet chooses to serve as political seer, he must display a keen sophistication’.<sup>15</sup> A quarter of a century later, this critical opinion persists; Caryl Phillips has recently agreed that, ‘With very few exceptions, the “angry” political literature of the Sixties is chiefly characterised by its lack of subtlety or sophistication’.<sup>16</sup> A distance from this movement would allow her to escape this label and create for herself a more individual path forwards. Finally, Giovanni, through personal and poetic growth and maturation, developed an aesthetics that became more subtle than the movement’s constraints allowed for. This final explanation is the poet’s supplied answer to the interrogation of the changes in her work.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps Giovanni’s deviation from the Black Arts Movement was a combination of all five of these reasons. She enjoyed very high sales of books and albums; the movement came to its natural, if disappointing, conclusion; she had her own disagreements with some of the sexist male poets spearheading it such as Amiri

---

<sup>14</sup> James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 85.

<sup>15</sup> Don L. Lee, quoted by Peter Bailey, p. 36.

<sup>16</sup> Caryl Phillips, review of *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997), collected in *Colour Me English* (London, UK: Harvil Secker, 2011), p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> See Note 4.

Baraka, Don L. Lee, and Haki Madhubuti; the poetry of the movement was not always considered sophisticated; and she did, in fact, mature, through life experiences and finely developed poetic craft.<sup>18</sup> Where does this combination leave the reader? Was she a Black Arts poet? Yes. Her work, then, morphed beyond the tenets of the movement, perhaps to the chagrin of those still firmly ensconced within it. These factors may contribute to the diverse critical reception her work has received over the course of her career, from the ‘princess of black poetry’ to the ‘ugly American sell out’. Change is part of the contentious aesthetic of her work. She is a protean writer, both a Black Arts poet and an individualist.

Offering positive critique, Virginia Fowler begins to recognize Giovanni as a protean poet when she praises her ‘dynamicism [sic], her refusal to continue journeying down familiar poetic paths, her commitment to growth and change’.<sup>19</sup> This comes closer to an appreciation of Giovanni’s poetics but provides no analysis of her literary choices, how she crafted her aesthetics, and what these decisions say about her identity. Fowler’s praise is mostly content based, in that she celebrates Giovanni’s poetry of social change. I, too, appreciate her participation in public consciousness, but Fowler is actually praising her politics rather than dissecting her craft, whereas this chapter more sharply engages with Giovanni’s aesthetics in a literature-based modality to interrogate why her change is necessary and how it forms a composite, hybrid poetics.

In recent years, critical discussion of Giovanni’s work has fallen off. This includes both positive and negative commentary. That may be a result of the fact that social revolution for African Americans and women has been removed from the

---

<sup>18</sup> Baraka says of himself and others in the Black Arts Movement: ‘Not only did they [black women] stand shoulder to shoulder against black people’s enemies, they also had to go toe to toe with us, battling day after day against our insufferable male chauvinism’, quoted by Jerry Watts Gafio, in *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2001), p. 345.

<sup>19</sup> Virginia Fowler, reprinted in the Introduction to *Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni 1968-1998* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), p. xxvii.

primary public focus. It may also be a result of her early political poetry, which, in its blunt tone and sharp opinions, might not captivate audiences once the moment of historical tension has passed. However, this chapter shows that her poetry, including her protest poetry—when evaluated in light of her aesthetics, the vital role history plays for the poet, and her part in the articulation of a Black Atlantic voice—elucidates a complex poetic identity, one worthy of study in a present scholarly discussion.

### **Historical Consciousness Grounds Creative Articulation**

I am always lonely  
for things I've never had  
and people I've never been<sup>20</sup>

As in the poetry of Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks, a key part of Nikki Giovanni's aesthetics is the articulation of the need for protest and representation of the oppressed—grounded by and explored through a sense of identity that stems from hundreds of years of tradition. This historical consciousness is later echoed by Grace Nichols and Jackie Kay, who, like Giovanni, rely on it for the construction of self-identification. As Giovanni disrupts linear temporalities and is 'lonely/ for things [she's] never had and people [she's] never been' (1968), so too does Kay 'dream of places [she's] never/ been/ where [she] might see faces [she's] never seen' (1999) or step into her waiting footprints (2010).<sup>21</sup> Within the literary imagination of these poets lies a sense of collective memory and a conjunction of the past and present.

In Giovanni's work, historical importance is expressed less through engagement with traditional poetic forms, inhabited by Brooks and Walker, and more through the

---

<sup>20</sup> Giovanni, 'Personae Poem (For Sylvia Henderson)' in *Black Feeling Black Talk* (1968), reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 11, ll. 1-3.

<sup>21</sup> Jackie Kay, 'At Home, Abroad', first published in *The Frog Who Dreamed She Was an Opera Singer* (1999) and reprinted in *Darling* (Tarsset, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2007), p. 214, ll. 2-7; *Red Dust Road* (London, UK: Picador, 2010), p. 213.

sorrowful image and voice responding to centuries of black oppression in Africa, the Caribbean, and the US, engaging with the metaphoric continuum seen previously in Walker's 'How Many Silent Centuries Sleep in My Sultry Veins' (1970) and taken up by Grace Nichols's 'Out of Africa' (1989), which I discuss in the next chapter. In some poems, this temporal anchorage is manifested through her tribute to significant musical forms such as spirituals and the blues, which originate in and celebrate a black vernacular tradition. It can also be seen through the way in which, for her, progress is informed by acknowledgement of the past, a decisive aspect of Walker's poetics.

One life experience that proved inspirational for the expression of this duality between various temporalities was a trip the poet took to Africa with her son in 1971, leading to the poem 'Africa II' (1972), set in a tour of a prison fortress:

and there is one African buried  
 here we are proud of him he said  
 and i screamed NO there are thousands  
 but my voice was lost in the room  
 of the women with the secret passageway  
 leading to the governor's quarters<sup>22</sup>

In this poem, Giovanni recalls walking through a building on the west coast of Africa and experiencing first-hand the embarkation point for thousands of slaves to the Western world. The past and present collide in this poem; the tour guide is proud of the sacrifice of one particular person in history, but the poet cannot help but object that modern pride, for the tourists' sake, in the twentieth century is built on the loss of so many people. She is incensed by this juxtaposition because she feels the tour guide's sense of pride does a disservice to those he is trying to honour. The thousands of Africans who are buried there are real but also metaphorical in that the geographic location marks the end of their lives as they knew them, even if their physical bodies are not interred in that spot. This poem signifies the well-known African American

---

<sup>22</sup> Giovanni, in *My House* (1972), reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 177, ll. 18-23.

spiritual, ‘No More Auction Block For Me’, often called ‘Many Thousands Gone’:

No more auction block for me,  
 No more, no more,  
 No more auction block for me,  
 Many thousands gone[...]

No more mistress call for me,  
 No more, no more,  
 No more mistress call for me,  
 Many thousands gone.  
 Many thousands gone.<sup>23</sup>

This spiritual embodies the frustration over the condition of slavery and the deeply felt loss of generations of men, women, and children, discussed in further detail later in the chapter. By using this as a filter for the poem, Giovanni plants her modern-day travels in the historical condition. Simultaneously, she employs the voice of protest expressed in the spiritual to return full circle to the spirit of protest associated with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The denunciation of the auction block is ultimately the foundation for the rejection of social inequity more than a century later. Both modes are ensconced in, and exist as a result of, devastation and consequent anger.

Also at play in this poem is the juxtaposition of power and powerlessness, as well as concerns of racial and sexual oppression. In addition to the slaves being sent off in one direction of the passageway, the females exit through the opposite end, most likely towards sexual exploitation. The speaker is physically and then metaphorically positioned between the struggles of both. The poet stands in the middle of the passageway and feels a keen sense of history rather than the modern awe experienced by many of her fellow tourists. Giovanni feels the weight of centuries of oppression in this location. The poem expresses the pull between this profound history and an attempt to come to terms with it in a contemporary setting. The tension of this situation is exposed by the shout in the middle of the stanza and the poem’s unsettled nature,

---

<sup>23</sup> Anonymous. Reprinted by Ira Berlin in *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), p. xii.

ending with the enigmatic lines, ‘tell [africa] that he would never be/ clean until he can/ possess me’. Although the reader would expect for the speaker to possess Africa, by reversing this, it is understood that the modern power, anger, and freedoms the poet possesses are the key to the continent’s rebirth, thus creating a syncretism of time in which the present outrage over centuries-long oppression serves as the common link.

This shuttling between the past and present is central to Giovanni’s poetics. Her historical consciousness informs the ways in which she articulates subject matter located in the present. Another such poem that focuses on the significant interplay between past and present is ‘My Tower’ (1972). In this poem, the Whitmanesque device of anaphora pulls the reader along, such that the lines are iterated in a repetitive style, which make it read like several journal entries, narrating the story of a life:

i have built my tower on the wings of a spider  
 spinning slippery daydreams of paperdoll fantasies  
 i built my tower on the beak of a dove  
 pecking peace to a needing woman

i have built my dreams on the love of a man  
 holding a nation in his palm asking me the time of day

i built my castle by the shore thinking  
 i was an oyster clammed shut forever  
 when this tiny grain I hardly noticed  
 crept inside and i spit around  
 and spit around and spun a universe inside  
 with a black pearl of immeasurable worth  
 that only i could spin around

i have borne a nation on my heart  
 and my strength shall not be my undoing  
 cause this castle didn’t crumble  
 and losing my pearl made me gain  
 and the dove flew with the olive branch by harriet’s route  
 to my breast and nestled close and said “you are mine”  
 and i was full and complete while emptying my wombs  
 and the sea ebbed ohhhhhhhhh  
 what a pretty little baby<sup>24</sup>

I will begin by considering the power of the anaphora. I have built my tower, my dreams, my castle, on the wings of a spider, on the beak of a dove, on the love of a

---

<sup>24</sup> Giovanni, in *My House*, reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 174, ll. 1-22.

man; I have borne a nation on my heart. This repetition and parallel construction throughout the first four stanzas of the poem function like a refrain. But then, Giovanni inhabits in these repeated but variegated lines significant gravitas. First, the building of these things implies power and autonomy. The structures were not constructed for the speaker by someone else, nor is that implied through the passive voice. The active voice is used to lend strength and agency to the persona. Second, in these few lines, the reader is offered everything from a physical dwelling, to political and then geographic space, and referred to the infinitesimally small, which progresses, then, to the emotional sphere. All these arenas collide in the repeated lines, making the container of the poem the platform on which each of these is amalgamated by the speaker. The tower is a metonym for political power. This person has constructed her own metaphorical control, which is built on the spider and the dove, symbols of violence and peace, respectively. The love of the man, if emotionally important, is complicated as well because, although the sentiment is present, it is suggested as being somehow insufficient. The strength of the man depends on the will of the speaker, the man who holds a nation in *his* palm but asks *her* for the time, a bizarre dependence that distorts the demarcations of control. The castle is built as an impenetrable fortress, but, in the same manner that the tight shell of the oyster gets provoked by the presence of the grain of sand or foreign body, the intrusion penetrates the defences.

However, what starts out as difficulty or distress is transformed into wealth. She defiantly writes, ‘this tiny grain [she] hardly noticed/ crept inside’, but only she could ‘spin around’ it. The grain of sand becomes the pearl. In this way, the lyricism of the poet emerges. The obstacle becomes the source of pride, the source of ‘immeasurable wealth’. It is important to consider, then, whether that wealth can remain with the speaker or whether it will be pilfered to profit someone else, in the way that the work of

the oyster is taken for the purpose of its value. A few lines later, this pearl is, in fact, stolen and grows to signify the work of the people displaced from Africa taken by the slave traders and slave owners for the financial value they bring as a commodity and then as labourers. Although Giovanni never specifically refers to the slave trade in this poem, after having read the previous piece, the audience connotes the association between this tower and the fortress out of which slaves were transported. The shore is not specifically named as African, but I would contend that, for the reader, the association is so strong from her previous Afrocentric poems that it informs the comprehension of this particular work.

By using the image of the pearl being stolen from the oyster, Giovanni is crafting a metaphor for the slaves from Africa, as well as wealth from people of African descent, and linking the piece further to this narrative of slavery with the reference to 'harriet's route', referring to, of course, Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave who stealthily guided an estimated seventy fugitive slaves to freedom on the so-called Underground Railroad. By calling upon the association with African shores, the trope of the pearl, and an abolitionist known as 'Moses', Giovanni draws upon the resource of a broad historical consciousness to write a poem that, by never explicitly referencing the past, could arguably be set in the present, an intervention in how the reader perceives and separates different segments of time. As a result, the reader's tension helps illustrate that of the persona, centring on the loss of the pearl.

However, the speaker—despite the turmoil, the danger represented by the spider, the possibly questionable love of the other person, and despite the wealth being peculated—will not be toppled. This strength shall not be her undoing. The forfeiture of the pearl, which from its very creation feels inevitable, eventually leads to the peace of the olive branch carried by the dove, the same dove on whose beak the tower was

initially built. Ultimately, the speaker occupies such a strong sense of self and self-capacity that the pain and losses of the past are necessary and vital to the present strength of those in the African diaspora, in metaphor or actuality. Giovanni relies on the presence of past oppression to bolster the current and hopefully future self-autonomy and freedom to be experienced by black persons, mirrored by Margaret Walker's 'Africa' (1989), discussed in Chapter Two. The tower that crumbles still has a foundation on which another may be rebuilt. The paradox is biblical in that the repression results in the deification of the figure, channelling, like Walker's work, the beatitudes. As one source is depleted, another is replenished. As the wombs empty—which in this case represents generations of Africans and African descendants who have lived, suffered, and thrived since the beginning of the Middle Passage—the speaker is made whole. As one crosses the sea, whether the Atlantic, or a metaphorical creation, one bears new life, to which the sea responds. (Interestingly, this poem is recorded on Giovanni's first album, *Truth is on Its Way*, in 1971. Just as the sea responds to the speaker in the line of the poem, a sea of voices greets the listener, as the gospel choir in the background begin singing. The metaphor of the sea, through the power of song, becomes a sea of people.) As one empties, one becomes full. As one loses, one gains. As in Walker's beatific work, the meek shall inherit the earth.<sup>25</sup>

For generations of peoples, overcoming centuries of oppression allows them to return to the power and grandeur once known in Africa. This paradox enters the consciousness of the poet, and she is at pains to insist that she is mindful of this through her writing, in that her work is actually constructive of her identity rather than

---

<sup>25</sup> The literary example of the beatitudes is not always conducted with such peacefulness and praise of the humble. Giovanni writes early in her career, 'Blessed is he who kills/For he shall control the earth', from 'A Litany for Peppe' in *Black Judgement* (1968). This is quite a deviation from 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth' seen in Mathew 5:5 of the Bible. However, in 1968, this revolutionary tone was practically required in her poetry to convey her anger and engage with the social climate in a way that had staying power.

performative; it underscores poetry's role of self-formulation and self-preservation.

It is important to remember that, in this poem, the African diaspora is embodied as female. What the female endures results in the longevity and integrity of the individual and the community. The tribulations of racial and sexual injustice are intertwined, but continued strength provides the imperative to carry on. This is what Mae Gwendolyn Henderson refers to as 'the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of Black female subjectivity, in particular, the inner dialogue of gender identity and racial identity'.<sup>26</sup> Giovanni's status as a representative of change for both women and African diasporic peoples regularly unfolds in her poetry. The two aspects coalesce to help form her identity. This poem conjoins the two as she is a proponent of her race and her sex, as in the way that she conjoins the past and present, and binary oppositions lose their status as such and become integrated. She writes in 1972, 'we are all imprisoned in the castle of our skins', but 'despite the dead/ dream they saw a free future'.<sup>27</sup> The present is inseparable from the past; freedom, from captivity. What is liberty without having known bondage? Each possesses the other to gain its meaning.

'My Tower', even though written fairly early in Giovanni's career, has an aged weightiness to it, in the way that the folk tradition can lend an 'old-soul' voice to a work. She is aged by the nature of the tradition she is evoking. It also functions as an *ars poetica*. She is building more than a tower on the coast; she personally is establishing her reputation and creating a mythology to which she can return repeatedly throughout her career. Like the tower built on the shore, there is a precariousness to the crafting of one's poetic identity. She is reviewing herself and evaluating her young

---

<sup>26</sup> Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, quoted in *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Volume 8: Poetry and Criticism 1940-1995*, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 344.

<sup>27</sup> From 'Poem (for Nina)' and 'They Clapped', in *My House*, reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 175, ll. 1 and p. 179, ll. 34-35, respectively.

career while also offering commentary on the story of diasporic peoples, a story that is dependent on the arc of history. What is especially important about historicism, for Giovanni, is the way in which it directs one's interpretation of present circumstances and informs perceptions of the social landscape, especially when that history is shared by a particular group of people, such as, for example, countless populations among the Black Atlantic. The current experience is shaded and intensified by centuries of oppression. The situation is worse when considered in conjunction with previous pain.

One poem in which Giovanni directly calls on the narrative of oppression as a lens through which to interpret the present is 'Linkage (for Phillis Wheatley)' (1983). As the emotional foundation for this poem, Phillis Wheatley, to whom the piece is dedicated, was a slave ironically named for the ship that brought her to the New World. She was, however, taught to read and write by her master's children and composed the first book of poetry written by a black person in the Colonies and the second by an American woman. Despite her recognition and status now, Thomas Jefferson said:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, but no poetry. Religion indeed has produced a Phillis Whatley [sic] but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism.<sup>28</sup>

Jefferson's rejection of Wheatley's poetry despite her accomplishments provides the historical emotional dejection necessary to ground Giovanni's poem in a modern setting. Giovanni writes (with ellipses included by the poet):

You see them now...though they were always...there...the children of Hester Prynne...walking the streets...needing a place...to eat... sleep... Be...warm...loved... alone...together...complete...The block...that the little Black girls...stood upon...is the same block... they now walk...with little white boys and girls...selling themselves...to the adequate...bidder...<sup>29</sup>

Despite the passage of time past the Second-Wave Feminist Movement, on the basis of this representation, the situation for women, especially for young black women, is

<sup>28</sup> Quoted by Robert Bruce Slater, 'The Blacks Who First Entered the World of White Higher Education', *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 4 (1994), p. 47.

<sup>29</sup> Giovanni, in *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* (1983), reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 313, ll. 9-15.

worsening. They are actually being brought back to slavery in a cycle that is both poetically complete as well as emotionally disturbing. The city block (being walked by the young women) figuratively is linked to the auction block upon which they stood after being brought to America in bondage. This is a striking and communicative metaphor. Through this one image, Giovanni erases the lines between the past and present in a matrix of deep time; her understanding of historical atrocities provides a basis on which to evaluate the unacceptable social circumstance in front of her. The conditions that force a young woman to sell herself to survive in a modern, poverty-stricken society, in this poem, are not distinct from the conditions in which the child was hauled through the Middle Passage and sold as a slave to the highest bidder. Whether a slave in the 1800s or a young prostitute in the 1980s, the girl's worth is determined by the man with the money.

The starkness of this image, in conjunction with the poet's new experimental ellipsis-based form, creates a new mode of expression. Her metaphor is sharp, whilst simultaneously every line is enjambed; the ellipses become the new poetic line. The phrases exist in syntactical units, and the ellipses are inserted at natural breaks, much the way one thinks and speaks. For Giovanni, as the situation has worsened (or at least necessitated a stronger acknowledgement of the condition for women), the poetic form has fractured. Even though she is a free-verse poet and does not work within sonnets or other traditional poetic forms, the integrity of the poetic line has been diminished along with the integrity of the women in the poem, an aesthetic construction to which I will return in the next section. Here, then, the oppression of black people throughout the Western world is at the forefront of Giovanni's consciousness, as the title alludes, not only to the passage across the Atlantic on slave ships, but also to the linkage between the contemporary and the crisis of slavery. Again, as in 'My Tower' (1972), the issues

of race and sex are necessarily interlinked in this poem, like links of chain. Her poetic identity exists in the duality of both arenas, and one facet ceases to exist without the other. Likewise, the conjunction of different times, historical and contemporary, is essential to the understanding of Giovanni's poetics. The accretion of these two segments on the time continuum into one understanding of racial politics is important, as Giovanni feels the weight of the shared historical narrative of the African diaspora.

When this common historical arc is burdened with the pressure of suffering and oppression, the awareness of it shapes the experience of present traumatic social events, creating a communal and lasting bond, almost like living through the same catastrophe; this bond is mirrored by the literary community in which the poets in this thesis participate. This is demonstrated in some of Giovanni's early political poetry, in which the present social changes, especially that of fraught 1960s US culture, are interpreted and experienced in light of the unity of a mythologised racial history. Such is the case in 'Poem (No Name No. 3)' (1968), in which she writes:

The Black Revolution is passing you bye [sic]  
 negroes  
 Anne Frank didn't put cheese and bread away for you  
 Because she knew it would be different  
 The naziboots don't march this year  
 Won't march next year  
 Won't come to pick you up in a  
 honka honka VW bus  
 So don't wait for that  
 negroes  
 They already got Malcolm  
 They already got LeRoi  
 They already strapped a harness on Rap  
 They already pulled Stokely's teeth  
 They already here if you can hear properly  
 negroes<sup>30</sup>

This is the kind of revolutionary poetry that gave Giovanni a reputation and that both appealed to and repelled readers, such as it continues to do decades after the fact. Even in its blatant and angry tone (attracting and alienating diverse readerships), Giovanni is

---

<sup>30</sup> Giovanni, 'Poem (No Name No. 3)', in *Black Feeling Black Talk* (1968), reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 23, ll. 1-16.

relying on historical importance and the tragedies of the present situation to bring meaning and depth to this poem. One must attend to the power of this polemical piece, especially as it interacts with her other more subtle approaches. Her call to revolution for black people in 1968 is punctuated with an actual list of victims of racial violence, leaders of the revolution whose work must not be in vain, a bold tactic but one that also relies on years of anger over problematic racial relations.

However, with this poem, unlike the link to slavery seen in previous pieces, the poet relates the experiences of black people in the United States with the experiences of the Jews in the Holocaust, represented by the trauma of Anne Frank and her family. She compares those killed and injured in the violence of the Civil Rights Movement to the Jews persecuted in Nazi Germany, thereby comparing the perpetrators (whether civilian or those acting with authority) to the Nazis and the horrors they committed. The poem lists examples of the atrocities still faced by minorities in the post-War era. They are representative of African diasporic persecution at large in the way that Anne Frank is representative of the anti-Semitism of World War II. The revolutionary call to arms is significant (even figurative, such as in Brooks's lines 'First to arms, to armor, carry hate/ in front of you and harmony behind', which I discuss in Chapter One). It deliberately incites anger. Giovanni again interrogates the influence of the past in relation to interpretation of the present; anger over the situation for African diasporic peoples is true on either side of the spatio-temporal continuum.

In addition to this evocative historical linkage, the poet accomplishes another task here.<sup>31</sup> The refrain 'negroes' is a deliberate technique; it is a direct apostrophe to the group of people the poet considers to be less self-aware and less willing to go about

---

<sup>31</sup> Incidentally, it is a linkage that is revived in two important cultural moments of the 1980s US culture: Morrison's publication of *Beloved* and dissatisfaction with the lack of a slavery memorial in Washington, and Public Enemy's interview statements comparing the Holocaust with the Middle Passage.

changing their situation than those she calls black. She says that it is time for them, for ‘negroes’, to realize the need for personal and social change for the benefit of the race at large. For Giovanni, there is no longer a reason why any African American should not participate in the Revolution. Letting it pass them by would be a mistake to the detriment of individual lives and political advancement as a whole. She promises in the final lines of the poem, ‘If the Black Revolution passes you bye [sic] it’s for damned/ sure/ the whi-te reaction to it won’t’. These bold lines potentially influence Gil Scott-Heron, a revolutionary poet and musician, who just four years later in 1972 would write and rap, ‘The Jews and Hitler come to mind/ The thought of slavery far behind/...Wallowing in the echoes of Malcolm’s words/ There must be black unity, there must be black unity/ For in the end unity will be thrust upon us and we upon it and each other’.<sup>32</sup> Giovanni compels the black reader to take a participatory role in this cause because, according to her, he or she may likely be persecuted by the white population as a result of it, the persecution metaphorically represented by the association with the Holocaust.

From a craft standpoint, the aggression in this poem is almost a scare tactic. However, by using the language of war and tapping into the emotional reserve of recent atrocities, a kind of close history, Giovanni is able to incite rage, a useful tool to bring her poetry to the front of the critical discussion, whether via praise or objection. She is depending on the anger of this common tradition to develop a poetics that attracts a black audience. Referencing racial persecution is an invitation to demand change in the present situation, especially in light of a shared historical provenance. She also engages her audience through the use of the black vernacular, as the next section demonstrates.

---

<sup>32</sup> Gil Scott-Heron, ‘King Alfred Plan’, on *Free Will* (New York, NY: Flying Dutchman Records, 1972).

### **Vernacular Tradition, Spirituals, and Blues Songs**

As Nikki Giovanni writes about and for a primarily black audience, she continues to interrogate the interface between the recounted past and its significant contribution to the presentation of contemporary events. Tradition and African American vernacular intersect in her use of musicality, specifically influenced by the spirituals, like ‘Many Thousands Gone’, explored in the last section. Their provenance is attributed to the Middle Passage, and they influence musical modes such as jazz, blues, and soul. This aesthetic choice, like the new experimental ellipsis-based lineation, reflects the cadence of speech and cements much of her poetry within the oral tradition, whether spoken or sung. She ruminates, ‘But just imagine what a slave ship must have sounded like to a woman. The humming must have been deafening. It had to be there. The hum, the gospel, the call-and-response came over because it’s here...So what we’re hearing is the music of the women’.<sup>33</sup> This music is cited in her work and is then re-envisioned in modern terms with her embrace of gospel music, which is paired with her spoken poetry on her albums.

In one poem, this lengthy musical influence is directly addressed when she writes in 2003:

This is not a sonnet...though it will sing...Precious Lord...take my hand...Amazing Grace...how sweet the sounds...Go down, Moses...Way down to the past...Way up to the future...It will swell with the voice of Marian Anderson...lilt on the arias of Leontyne...dance on the trilling of Battle...do the dirty dirty with Bessie...No this is not a sonnet...but the truth of the beauty that the only authentic voice of Planet Earth comes from the black soil...tilled and mined...by the Daughters of the Diaspora<sup>34</sup>

The poet recognizes through this passage the influence of generations of suffering, the role of the spirituals, and iconic musical figures of the twentieth century, including blueswoman Bessie Smith, classical singer Marian Anderson, and opera singer

---

<sup>33</sup> Quoted by Tate, p. 150.

<sup>34</sup> Giovanni, ‘Stardate Number 18628.190’, anthologized in *Collected Poetry*, p. 358, ll. 11-21.

Leontyne Price; these all converge to celebrate the black female voice. Her ellipses are used for aural effect, and the result is that one could imagine this stanza being read at a vast public event because the caesuras created by the ellipses might aurally resemble the pauses one takes when speaking at a microphone in an auditorium. Because Giovanni is known for her performances, her embrace of a poetic style that lends itself to the stage seems fitting, allowing for the poet's own performative poetic voice (which enables her to praise her idols and include herself in the same category as these famous singers). According to her, the 'authentic' voice is from the black world and is then presented by women whose roots stem from Africa. By using the phrase 'Daughters of the Diaspora', the poet calls the reader into the political realm of postcolonialism, a choice that allows international contemporary politics to enter into her poetry, a collectivism that might be considered a brief poetic interpretation of Spivak's strategic essentialism, a temporary grouping of a minority under one identity for political gain.<sup>35</sup> However, she does not belabour the point. By using 'diaspora' in her lexicon, she engages in a postmodern discussion but does so from an oblique vantage point. All these factors are amalgamated in this stanza and in the identity it forms of Giovanni as a black woman poet—among other elite black women performers.

The new form that Giovanni adopts for this poem, as in 'Linkage (for Phyllis Wheatley)', is worth discussion. As I've shown in this chapter, by the time she has undergone changes in perspective after several decades as a poet, the form of her poetry needed to find a new direction, in a protean construction that corresponds with her changing poetics. Her new style dispenses with traditional lineation in favour of a prose-poem approach, except that the phrasing is carried out through the use of ellipses. The effect of this craft choice, aside from its surprising appearance on the page, is that

---

<sup>35</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside the Teaching Machine* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 1993), p. 12.

the ellipses are situated around syntactical units, and they create breath in the line in accord with the natural cadence of speech. Modifying her formal considerations to mirror the changes in her conceptual ideas is an indicator of the poet's complex aesthetic. Additionally, by creating a form for herself that emphasizes the patterns of spoken communication, she engages with the black vernacular tradition.

The use of the vernacular in her work is a significant means of creatively eliding the past and present. She interrogates oral traditions while also innovating with a new poetic form, perhaps a uniquely African American form. Giovanni specifically catering to a black audience, even while she simultaneously exposes black issues to white readers, is significant because, rather than alienating readers with elevated diction and archaic forms or pandering to a distinctly white audience through the use of Eurocentric tradition, she chooses instead to craft a catalogue that is both about her peers and for them. She celebrates black culture in her work and the racial audience she attracts, what Langston Hughes considers in 1926 bringing work 'to the attention of his own people'.<sup>36</sup> Hughes argued, 'unless the other race had noticed him beforehand, he was a prophet with little honor'. David Brion Davis writes about this distinctly African American vernacular, originating from the oral nature of slave songs and folk tales:

Oral communication allowed free play to the imagination, enabling African Americans to interpret and comment on the pathos, humor, absurdity, sorrow, and warmth of the scenes they experienced. Together with the ceremonial rituals...the oral traditions preserved a sanctuary of human dignity that enabled most...to survive humiliations, debasement, and self-contempt that were inseparable from human bondage.<sup>37</sup>

The poems in this form are couched in small phrases, but the reader flows from one to the next, creating a stream-of-consciousness rhetoric, which is the mode most dialogue in English inhabits. By mimetically recreating these patterns, the poet elevates the

---

<sup>36</sup> Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', in *The Nation* (1926), anthologised in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. 2, p 1313.

<sup>37</sup> David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 204.

importance of the spoken word, or, as she says in 1988, ‘...all we had was a human voice to guide us and a human voice to answer the call’.<sup>38</sup> She celebrates the storytellers and spiritual singers of the plantations while articulating new expression.

Musical influence for Nikki Giovanni is not solely that of the spirituals; she also turns to the blues as a means of participating in musical traditions and cultural signposts. Take, for example, the following blues-inspired love poem, a genre in which she excels that counterbalances her revolutionary style, allowing her the flexibility to shuttle between anger and sentimentality. She writes in ‘Resignation’ (1983):

I love you[...]
   
                  because you keep my feet warm
   
                  though my life a mess
   
I love you
   
                  because I don’t want it
   
                  any other way
   
I am helpless
   
                  in my love for you[...]
   
I love you
   
                  because it’s been so good
   
                  for so long
   
                  that if I didn’t love you
   
                  I’d have to be born again
   
                  and that is not a theological statement
   
I am pitiful in my love for you<sup>39</sup>

The influence of the blues in this passage is compelling. The speaker’s love is undeniable even though it results in personal consequences—I love you, but you complicate my life. ‘I am pitiful in my love for you’. It presents a need that seems non-existent before the mate, something new and irreversible. Unlike the popular blueswoman Bessie Smith, she is not singing that she’s ‘wild about that thing’ (1929).<sup>40</sup> She is, however, saying that her sense of wellbeing is dependent on the other, an honesty in which the romantic relationship is designated as problematic, a characteristic

---

<sup>38</sup> Giovanni, in ‘Sacred Cows and Other Edibles’ (1988), reprinted in the *Prosaic Soul of Nikki Giovanni* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 247.

<sup>39</sup> Giovanni, ‘Resignation’, in *Those Who Ride the Night Winds*, reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, pp. 334-335, ll. 15, 26-32, 40-46 (author’s indentation and lineation).

<sup>40</sup> Bessie Smith, ‘I’m Wild About That Thing’ (1929), reprinted by Angela Davis in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1999), pp. 296-297.

of the blues that Angela Davis calls in 1999, ‘naming issues that pose a threat to the...psychological wellbeing of the individual [as] a central function of the blues’.<sup>41</sup>

In this particular poem, unlike in some blues songs, the sexuality of the female speaker is somewhat muted, but the emotional stakes are intensified. If the man were lost, she would lose herself, would have to be born again. Sadness and joy are conjoined within the intricate realm of this personal emotion, such as when Smith sings about love in 1931, ‘I feel so funny, I feel so sad’.<sup>42</sup> There is an attraction to the other, expressed in this poem, that has surpassed one’s own control. Even given the joys of love, it can lead to helplessness. However, despite being helpless, the speaker acknowledges that she would not change it even if she could. The continuation of the present situation is embodied through the anaphora, which is also reminiscent of the blues in that the refrain is often repeated consecutively throughout the song. The reader feels the resignation and mixture of emotions associated with the fluxes of romance within this blues poem.

In a different take on the blues, the poet writes a prose poem in 1999, sixteen years after the previous blues piece, that reads like a rant. Through the use of the second-person perspective, she brings the reader into a world that is consumed by unachieved goals, more political than romantic. Giovanni writes in ‘This Poem Hates’:

so YES it does push you to an edge that as you peek over you know something is very wrong that no one listens to you no one ever knows you are standing there talking so the papers say the riot was rice or heat or a cop but the riot is all day everyday no one pays any attention to you and all you are asking for is a chance to present your side of the question it’s like you understand that you don’t matter and this poem whines because a moan is far too sophisticated and a scream is far too rational so this poem whines and whimpers and wishes things didn’t always have to be like this.

This poem Hates<sup>43</sup>

The poem undoubtedly signifies the blues. The anger and misery over the external

---

<sup>41</sup> Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies*, p. 33.

<sup>42</sup> Bessie Smith, ‘I Need a Little Sugar in My Bowl’ (1931), reprinted in Davis’s *Blues Legacies*, p. 319.

<sup>43</sup> Giovanni, ‘This Poem Hates’, in *Blues: For All the Changes* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Co., 1999), p. 20-21, ll. 42-52.

situation, over which one is powerless, cause boundless frustration. It is as though Giovanni were listening to Bessie Smith sing in 1923, ‘Nobody knows you when you’re down and out, I mean when you’re down and out’ while she was writing this poem, or that she could hear in her head, ‘I’m so disgusted, I’m so confused, I’ve got those downhearted blues. Trouble, I’ve had it all my days, it seems that trouble is going to follow me to my grave’.<sup>44</sup>

Although resilience is a characteristic of the blues, elucidating obstacles is also part of its composition. Giovanni is signposting an historical continuum in multiple ways. Not only does she follow the trajectory of the blues, she also laments the continued lack of change for minorities in the US, and more broadly within the African diaspora. This poem was written in 1999, and, from the poet’s perspective, there is just as much frustration as in the revolutionary poetry she wrote thirty years earlier, such as ‘Poem (No Name No. 3)’. Through this bluesy piece, she returns to the revolutionary style that made her (in)famous, but she now has more tools and greater maturity at her disposal, including the use of the prose poem.<sup>45</sup> She offers commentary on the distinct frustration and bitterness that ensue as a result of the social circumstances in a moment captured like a snapshot, in a lyrical contemplation. This bluesy prose poem, then, is another example of the poet participating in a musical tradition and then modernizing it for her own application. Giovanni personalizes such traditions through innovation with formal considerations and pairing spoken poetry with singing on her albums. She also

---

<sup>44</sup> ‘Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out’ and ‘Down Hearted Blues’ (both 1923), lyrics reprinted in Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies*, p. 295.

<sup>45</sup> From a formal perspective, some critics and scholars question what comprises a prose poem and whether this can be considered poetry. That is a question that is still being debated in the poetic community. If, for this discussion, one argues that the prose poem is in fact a poem as such, the superficial difference between a prose poem and flash fiction is that a prose poem is lyrical, suspending a moment in time, rather than crafting characters and plot development that unfold rapidly in a small textual space, as is the case in flash fiction. Although the people presented within this poem could be considered characters, and the fight for equality could be considered plot, these are not features that are crafted by the poet, such as that written by a flash fiction writer.

employs the persona poem in which the speaker is distinctly not Giovanni herself.

By using the device of the persona, she transcends geographies to specific locations that invoke the tradition of the blues. Not only does she say, as the voice of the Mississippi River in ‘Boiled Blues: For the Mississippi Delta’ (2009) that the Delta brings the blues, but in doing so she also honours generations of black Americans who lived in the Delta. They were slaves, share croppers, then migrants north to Chicago, Detroit, and Cincinnati in search of better opportunities, and then migrants back down south to the Delta after the urban promise resulted in overcrowding and poverty-stricken living conditions.<sup>46</sup> The associations she draws on are what Farah Jasmine Griffin describes as the presence of ‘the ancestor... in ritual, religion, music, food, and performance. His or her legacy is evident in discursive formations like the oral tradition’.<sup>47</sup> The existence of this ancestor is important in the following poem because, to praise the Mississippi, she praises her own childhood, as well as millions of African Americans, for she was raised between the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers (Cincinnati and Knoxville), river valleys born from and fed by the Mississippi. It is the source of the rivers that formed the landscape of her childhood, a geographic ancestor.

In her poetry, the present comes into conjunction with the past, here orchestrated through the provenance of history and location of rivers and generations nourished by them. She writes in ‘Boiled Blues: For the Mississippi Delta’:

I like my blues boiled with a few tears  
On the side  
I like my men a little crazy  
And my women to be good friends  
I like my sons bold  
And my daughters brave

---

<sup>46</sup> See Nicholas Lemann’s *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991) for detailed accounts of individuals who are representative of the experience of migration along the Mississippi River. Specifically, Lemann follows the lives of several people from Clarksville, MI, who move to Chicago in hopes of finding a better life, only to return after the conditions of joblessness and poverty become unbearable.

<sup>47</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, ‘Who Set You Frownin’?: *The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 5.

I am the Mississippi Delta  
 I like my people black[...]  
 I'm a river  
 Started because an ice field fell in love  
 With the sun  
 Started small  
 You can jump me  
 In Minnesota  
 But I ate well and grew  
 I am the Delta  
 I am black  
 And unafraid of the wind  
 I caress the Crescent City  
 I bring the blues<sup>48</sup>

The Mississippi is the vehicle for the tenor of an entire black Southern culture, and the blues is an external representation of it. The ability to signify on generations of people through the poetic trope of the river is also important to the literary imaginations of Grace Nichols and Jackie Kay, which I discuss in Chapters Four and Five. The migration along the river for people from Chicago to New Orleans is a presentation of the lives of twentieth-century African Americans.<sup>49</sup> Honouring it by writing a blues poem is a multi-faceted homage to her people. She celebrates culture, food, and a Southern way of life for millions, with specific geographies at the centre of this narrative. This poem compels the reader to consider this Southern world, not through a lens of pity despite ubiquitous poverty. The unique cultural characteristics embodied in this poem are presented through a tone of praise and strength. The result is a poem grounded in and celebratory of black life in US culture.

Through the musicality directly brought from tradition, Giovanni is able to continue her involvement in the conjunction of past and present. In her later, more contemplative writing, she considers how the past, comprised of either a few decades

---

<sup>48</sup> Giovanni, 'Boiled Blues (For the Mississippi Delta)', in *Bicycles: Love Poems* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2009), p. 83-85, ll. 1-8, 40-51.

<sup>49</sup> Just as Nicholas Lemann follows the lives of those affected by the journey from the Jim Crow South to the urban North and back, so too does Giovanni's poetry follow this historical arc.

or several centuries, comes to bear on her present life. She is able to comment on the power of the Revolution of the Sixties and what that means for her as a poet approaching the end of the twentieth century, while harnessing the influence of music as her central motif. She writes in 1999:

We were interested in how ideas were approached and attacked. We were shy and self-conscious. We were bold and bodacious. We were smart, though we largely led with our hearts. We were not three musketeers, we were not the gangs who couldn't shoot straight, and we were not Quixotic though some of us tilted at the windmills in our minds. We were one without being together because we all had the same goal: Freedom. We suffered the same neglect our ancestors suffered. No one wanted to give us credit for our assault upon the assumptions and language of this country. We were brave and we did not back down when the heat was heaped on us. We made it through the rain. And kept our point of view[...]

But I like my generation for trying to change the old system, for questioning everything and for having the faith of a mustard seed in the power of a poem.<sup>50</sup>

In this prose poem, Giovanni crafts an encomium for her generation of revolutionaries.

The repetition functions musically, even within a prosaic format. The rhythmic considerations of the poem can be heard, just as if it were in metrical verse. The iambs created by the repetition of the phrase 'we were' form a musical basis, like the drum beat or tapping foot of someone in the slave quarters. It propels the reader through the piece with the expected rhythms of an established form. She also acknowledges the tribulations of revolutionaries, who 'suffered the same neglect [their] ancestors suffered' (and the people for whom they revolted in the first place), which mirrors what was done in the work referencing the Middle Passage. She uses the space of the poem to rail against racism, sexism, and social class exploitation. She is a traditional humanist, as well as a unique modern black woman; she celebrates the group and the individual. Her generation had had enough of the racism of the Second-Wave Feminist Movement and the chauvinism of the Black Arts Movement. In this poem, she is proud of those revolutionaries who were able to provoke conversation about change, if not

---

<sup>50</sup> Giovanni, 'The Faith of a Mustard Seed (In the Power of a Poem)', in *Blues: For All the Changes*, p. 13-14, ll. 32-42, 56-58.

change itself. The work of the poets gave voice to the voiceless in a way that contributed significantly to the development of the literary and social landscapes in the United States, and beyond, in the second half of the twentieth century. As Giovanni praises them, and continues the narrative arc of racial historical tradition, to some extent, it can be argued that she constructs historical accounts in order to form the foundation of value judgements which, in turn, predicate the role of the modern black poet. She selects certain stories and images on which to focus to highlight racial trauma that give her the opportunity to articulate an especially racialized and bifurcated point of view. By crafting specifically polemical poems to engage with the contemporary, she is no longer just reflective on political reality, but actually the crafter of specific stories that give her the leeway to offer political statements. She goes beyond strict historical reporting to assign emotional values, and, in doing so, she espouses her own racial, political agenda, a technique that helps anchor her work in the African American vernacular in order to facilitate change, as I explore below.

### **Change as the Nature of Creativity: Paradoxes Overcome**

For Nikki Giovanni, historical consciousness works as a lens through which to interrogate and understand the unfolding of current social constructions, especially in the long fight for civil rights, underscoring how present politics are positioned on the shoulders of an historical and mythologised past. At stake in the nature of her creativity is what is to be gleaned from her aesthetics of change. This does not refer merely to revised perspectives and poetic presentations between her early and late work. Any writer with a decades-long career would experience necessary changes as time passes,

such as, for example, Bob Dylan.<sup>51</sup> These concerns are interrogated through her historical participation, both throughout the course of her oeuvre and in the vexed manner of individual poems. However, this contentious aesthetic manifests itself in her embodiment of changing issues through representations of dynamic social roles and presentations of intimate poetry that conjoins with political verse. She employs a multitude of influences and allows for different possible readings, drawing on the legacy of others but writing innovative contemporary poetry. She works dynamically to accomplish this; not only does her poetic subject change, but her tone changes, too, to match the shift between modes of expression. The complexity of this poet, despite Don L. Lee's claim that she is naive, is proven when she advocates for revolution through the conjunction of aggression and subtlety, simultaneously.

One poem in which the poet's dynamic aesthetic is elucidated is 'Africa' (1975), in which articulation of racial considerations that need not catalogue violence is presented in contrast with 'Poem (No Name No. 3)'. Here she directly addresses the needs of African Americans, accomplished through a very different voice for her, a change that results in some Black Arts Movement poets considering her a sell-out, such as the crude criticism of her by Amiri Baraka in *Hard Facts* in 1975. This assumption comes from the fact that she dispenses with direct and violent diction in favour of a softer and perhaps more sophisticated poetic attitude. The change of styles is noticeable between this contemplative poem and her more bombastic early protest poetry. From the point of view of Black Arts Movement poets, it was seen as a deviation from the movement's tenets to attract potential readers, which undermines the aesthetic value of the poem itself. Subtlety, however, is her *modus operandi* in the following protest

---

<sup>51</sup> Bob Dylan, having released more than 50 albums in 53 years, with his earliest in 1962 and most recent in 2015, certainly demonstrates an aesthetics of change throughout this lengthy career, much like Nikki Giovanni.

poem. In a passage from 'Africa', the poet writes of:

me accepting you and you accepting yourself  
will that stroke the tension  
between blacks and africans  
i dream of truth lubricating our words  
will that ease three hundred years  
and i dream of black men and women walking  
together side by side into a new world  
described by love and bounded by difference  
for nothing is the same except that oppression and shame  
    may i spin a poem around you  
come let's step into my web  
and dream of freedom together<sup>52</sup>

There is a startling change in attitude in this poem compared with the tone and presentation of 'Poem (No Name No. 3)'. She employs what might be considered an uncharacteristic reserve discovered through heightened poetic artifice and indirect tone.

Although both poems accomplish the task of interrogating race in dominant discourse, here, the poet addresses the issue through image and abstraction, rather than the devices of litany and bodacious diction used before. The list of those killed or victimized by opponents to the Black Power Movement is a powerful emotional tool, crafted to evoke a strong response from the reader. However, referring to three hundred years of oppression, since the time when Africans were first removed from the continent and brought to America in chains, evokes a different kind of response. She returns to a broader historical acknowledgment and how that translates into modern, politically conscious poetry. The centuries she refers to are the ground upon which she can explore the feverish tempo of contemporary politics.

Although there is an expected anger in response to the current racial climate and the history of subjugation, it is more controlled than in her previous work, a quiet seething that demonstrates the poet's deftness, a literary maturation. In doing so, she creates a poetics that seeks to appeal to a new public via its new aesthetic. Her mode of

---

<sup>52</sup> Giovanni, in *The Women and the Men* (1975), reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 216, ll. 36-47, poet's indentation.

address is softer in this poem, whilst it simultaneously addresses the oppression of African Americans. This piece is considerably peaceful in its image and language, and that docile tone could potentially carry a greater endurance than her previous aggressive work. Contrarily, could this mode of expression be less efficacious in presenting the importance of the fight for equality? Perhaps. But Giovanni then navigates a progression through the poem in which she envisages a real freedom.

She employs a subtle, and I would contend effective, celebration in this poem that really honours her cultural heritage. Virginia Fowler says of this:

Giovanni...grow[s] up celebrating the world she inhabited, which provided her the necessary armor as an adult to confront that world, and all the injustice in it, without succumbing to the racist ideology underpinning it.<sup>53</sup>

Fowler considers Giovanni's softer expression a demonstration of her humanist approach, in that she avoids succumbing to racism despite coming of age in racist environs; instead, she is able to appreciate with nostalgia what made her community uniquely hers and how that experience is representative of cultural norms for many African Americans. There is a muted hopefulness in the poem, despite persistent anxiety, and a resilience that is reminiscent of the blues. It channels what Ralph Ellison calls, 'the sheer toughness of spirit' through its willingness to overcome hardship. It is not truly optimistic, but an unbreakable will is clearly demonstrated. The reification of the image of walking together stands in for the abstraction of overcoming oppression and gives this later poem strength and legitimacy. The basis of historical awareness provides Giovanni with the entry point into the change discussed here. She writes, 'for nothing is the same except that oppression and shame'. The reader is left with the impact of the shifting ground. The only thing that remains constant is the legacy of this history, the oppression of African diasporic peoples, and the critical identity that is

---

<sup>53</sup> Virginia Fowler, 'And This Poem Recognizes That: Embracing Contrarities in the Poetry of Nikki Giovanni', in *Her Words: Diverse Voices in Contemporary Appalachian Women's Poetry*, edited by Felicia Mitchell (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), p. 132.

linked to it. The reader is left with a restlessness even as the dream of freedom is imagined. She has deftly progressed from blatant emotion to more mitigated expression. This particular poem provides an example of change as the central pillar of Giovanni's poetics. However, it is anchored in its relationship with the legacy of racial tension and oppression. A progression through her attitudes becomes evident, but her perspective remains grounded on historical footing and its conjunction with the present.

This progression is necessary to understand the creative articulation of the poet. By the time 'Africa' was published in 1975, the initial fervour of the Black Power Movement had diminished. Giovanni had already found success in the fields of publishing and recording and received critical acclaim. At this point in her poetic life, she was considered successful, from both commercial and literary perspectives. However, her critics argued that the softening of tone and change of theme, seen between these two poems, were a sign of her failing to maintain a strong allegiance to or representation of the Black Arts Movement. Others claim that she was so interested in selling books that she changed her style to adapt to what is popular and avoid alienation of potential readers, i.e., white readers, who might be turned off by the aggressive style of her early poetry.<sup>54</sup> In this argument, influence of public success attenuates the integrity and authenticity of her voice. However, I contend that this shift is necessary for the poet's longevity and is a natural response to her own growth. Her work is constituted of changing angles, like the colours that emerge from a prism in the sunlight. The appreciation of her loud, 'soapbox' poetry is more attainable when viewed in conjunction with her more contemplative self. Likewise, the softer mode is given strength when read paired with the fiery and passionate poetry which is also a vital component of Giovanni's catalogue. Each element in her oeuvre is bolstered by

---

<sup>54</sup> Peter Bailey, p. 37.

the presence of the other, working between the extremes of paradoxes, namely anger and constraint. Giovanni maintains that the changes in her approach do not result from her need to cater to the audiences that had assisted her fame and success. Rather, she attributes them to the evolution of the poet and the adult, learning more about poetry through writing and teaching, and developing as a person. Additionally, she identifies the need to change one's point of view and transform as life experiences broaden awareness. She was twenty-five years old when she published her first work, and the Black Power and Black Arts Movements were at fever pitch in 1968. After that time, both internal and external grounding shifted for the poet, as seen in her work.

There is a dichotomy that exists between her flagrant and reserved poetry. Both styles demonstrate racial loyalty, but personally she has changed. This difference is manifested in the need for an alternative mode of expression in her work, necessary components of her complexity, which contribute to her diverse aesthetic. The space of the poem allows seeming opposites to unavoidably conjoin to communicate continued angst, but also contemplation and taciturnity. The ground on which these two types of poems lie is complex and shifting. The common thread is the narrative of racialized experiences. Yet the foundation of subjugation and how that informs her consciousness to discuss political revolution locate the poet between different spheres. However, the nature of the social situation changes between their composition, along with the poet's mastery over the poetic space. They are components of the matrix that comprises her voice. This matrix contains the story that is articulated from both outrage and desolation, with a long historical awareness and the need for innovation. In this conjunction, however, she and her poetry are not resolved by the commingling of multiple facets. In the passage, 'i dream of truth lubricating our words/ will that ease three hundred years/ and i dream of black men and women walking/ together side by

side into a new world', her work is still fraught, and racial marginalisation is still a powerful source of tension. Her conscious choice to distance herself from the Black Arts Movement in favour of a mode of expression better suited to her changing attitude and craft choices does not solve the problem of racism in US culture. This deliberate change is rather the result of a sense of disenchantment with the Black Arts Movement in that, seven years after its founding, the freedom that the revolutionaries fought for, for which the clenched fist was raised in the air, had still not been achieved. Perhaps the disillusionment, as voiced poetically, is with her country's leaders less so than with the protesters themselves. She writes, 'step into my web/ and dream of freedom together' rather than 'come enjoy the freedom we've already gained'. The anxiety over societal limitations for minorities is still present, but there is a maturity in her articulation of it that allows the reader to experience a different kind of unease or stress than that associated with her early work.

The space of the poem allows the complex conjunction of this anxiety and hopefulness and allows Giovanni to communicate about how the cultural landscape is in constant flux. Her fluidity demonstrates the mutable nature of society and the apprehension necessarily comprised for a minority within it. These contrapositions are different sides of the poet's expression of the human condition and her literary response to it. She must articulate and discover her place within them. To that end, she writes:

one neither walks nor stands without  
 extensions  
 one is not black without white  
 nor male without female  
 what is true of the mass is no less  
 true of the individual<sup>55</sup>

These lines from 'Their Fathers' (1978) provide insight into how paradoxes coalesce to form a more complete picture, similar to the linguistic approach in Jackie Kay's

---

<sup>55</sup> Giovanni, 'Their Fathers', in *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day* (1978), reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 256, ll. 80-85.

‘Between the Dee and Don’ (2011), in Chapter Five. ‘What is true of the mass is no less/ true of the individual’. The construction of these antipodes is a direct result of Giovanni’s keen historical awareness interpreted in conjunction with the present; she demonstrates a shared consciousness of participation in the experiences of her ‘ancestors’ as though it comprises her personal history.

As an individual, she is a part of her group, her sex, her race. The deep-felt sorrow of the narrative of captivity forms part of her own identity, even if that experience is not hers. In this poem, lines between one generation and another, one person and the other, blur. But this erosion of borders is textured with a rhetoric of black pride expressed strongly in many of her poems, that reiterates the construction and maintenance of those demarcations. However, as this chapter has discussed, her contentious poetics is formulated from a mosaic of influences, and she as a poet creates literary boundaries and then, through different modes of narration, abrogates them, a paradox that is overcome in the matrix of her aesthetics. This is examined through changing attitudes towards women’s roles and the need for racial revolution. Pointedly, Giovanni says less than a decade into her career in 1975, ‘I’m oppressed as a black, certainly, and I think that probably women are oppressed, because I take their word for it. But I’m not particularly interested in banding with any group of women because the problems that I face, predominantly, are problems of racism in America’.<sup>56</sup> Yet, her poetry succeeds in addressing a composite of racial and sexual concerns. She very often presents herself as an advocate for women and as an opponent to their oppression whilst championing the advancement of civil rights. She even overcomes the boundaries of historical gender norms, as seen in the next section.

---

<sup>56</sup> Giovanni, in interview with Lynne Domash and Suzanne Juhasz, ‘A Talk with Nikki Giovanni’, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 1 (1975), p. 147.

### **Sexuality and Gender: Transcending and Expanding Historical Norms**

Whilst Giovanni continues to employ historical provenance as a device, she is simultaneously quite contemporary in her handling of traditional gender-specific roles and expectations. The reconfiguration of a woman's sexual role is exemplified in the poem 'Seduction' (1968), in which she writes:

and then you'll say "What we really need..."  
and i'll be licking your arm  
and "The way I see it we ought to..."  
and unbuckling your pants  
"And what about the situation..."  
and taking your shorts off  
then you'll notice your state of undress  
and knowing you you'll just say  
"Nikki,  
isn't this counterrevolutionary...?"<sup>57</sup>

The female empowerment within this poem follows the example of other poets, who played with literary sexual boundaries, such as Angelina Weld Grimke, famous during the Harlem Renaissance. Grimke writes 'Black Finger' in 1925, which through erotic lyrics clearly evokes and then praises a phallus. 'A straight cypress,/ Sensitive,/ Exquisite' is celebrated and elucidates a blatant sexuality, one only rarely discussed in verse by female poets at the time.<sup>58</sup> Giovanni, too, engages with this kind of poetic discourse by using her poetry as the mode of articulation of intimate and sexual motifs. Although her stylistic and dictional choices make 'Seduction' appear jovial and light-hearted, the playfulness and sexuality should not detract from her commentary on the limitations of racism and sexism. The poet presents a woman in charge of her own sexuality who exerts dominance over the male—a submissive player in this act of seduction, almost too preoccupied with revolution to realise the act taking place. The woman in the poem, the poet rather than a persona, is able to exert sexual power on a

---

<sup>57</sup> Giovanni, in *Black Feeling Black Talk*, reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 35, ll. 16-26.

<sup>58</sup> Angelina Weld Grimke, 'The Black Finger', collected in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. 2, p. 969.

personal level. From a poetic standpoint, her assertiveness and his political concerns are given equal space in the lines of the poem, presented in traditional lineation before her use of ellipses. The back-and-forth nature of the lines represents an antiphonic call-and-response, a musical device seen throughout the blues and spirituals. By using this technique, the poet asks the reader to consider the importance of both aspects of the dialectical discussion. This is handled with reservation and subtlety, as the reader is not meant to dwell on the woman's sexual initiation or the fact that the man's perspective is playfully subjugated.

Giovanni insinuates the problem of priorities, particularly in the politics of race and gender in 1960s US culture. In the conversational poem, the reader is shown both issues, a sophistication that might be overshadowed by the light-heartedness of the piece. The fact that the seduction is conducted by the woman suggests that she believes that the societally expected roles of both genders can be interrogated and broadened. Whereas she uses a playful tone in this poem, Giovanni's question of normative gender behaviours is not always handled so lightly. She explores sexuality often through the juxtaposition of exuberance and disappointment, presented in a serious tone when she addresses social constructions, both male and female. She examines these norms directly in this passage from the poem 'Crutches' (1978):

women aren't allowed to need  
 so they develop rituals  
 since we all know working hands idle  
 the devil  
 women aren't supposed to be strong  
 so they develop social smiles  
 and secret drinking problems  
 and female lovers whom they never touch  
 except in dreams

men are supposed to be strong  
 so they have heart attacks  
 and develop other women  
 who don't know their weaknesses  
 and hide their fears  
 behind male lovers

whom they religiously touch  
 each saturday morning on the basketball court  
 it's considered a sign of health doncha know  
 that they take such good care  
 of their bodies[...]

emotional falls always are  
 the worst  
 and there are no crutches  
 to swing back on<sup>59</sup>

It's a stark difference to go from a woman quietly seducing her lover, to this poem in which expectations are not met, yet, by reading these two pieces together, a more developed arc in Giovanni's exploration of sexual politics becomes evident. A decade after 'Seduction' was published, the poet is more articulate about the social constructions of strength and sexuality; however, the work is not grounded in the female assertiveness of the previous poem. Instead, assertion is positioned in contrast with increasingly obsolete social beliefs, which still seem at odds with dynamic gender positions. The roles are changing while the rules are not. In this example, through parallelism rather than antiphonic structure, etiquette is imposed upon people, and the personal consequences—both in mentality and behaviour—are demonstrated as a result of the stress between expectation and realistic attainability.

Women aren't allowed to need; women aren't supposed to be strong. Men are expected to exhibit emotional if not physical strength. The ways in which these mores are unattainable are framed in contrast to the outcomes of these missed conditions. Women and men turn to clandestine coping mechanisms to ease them through the struggle of living in the gulf between this set of engendered roles and the realities of feeling and doing something otherwise. Interestingly, one coping mechanism to deal with the societal impositions is by the adoption of other socially acceptable behaviours to disguise the unacceptable situation beneath the surface. The public smiles and

---

<sup>59</sup> Giovanni, in *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day*, reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, pp. 238-239, ll. 4-23, 40-43.

Saturday morning basketball games are merely masking the true condition, in which women can be strong and men sometimes are not. The poem is fraught with the tension between convention and authenticity.

This tension is ratcheted up when the sexuality in the poem must be confined to secrecy. The celebration, pride, and poetic ownership seen over the woman's act of seduction from the previous example has now deteriorated to secret homosexual fantasy, for both women and men. Of course, the suppression and furtiveness of such desires add to the level of anxiety; so does the diminution of the heterosexual fruition. The final stanza of the poem offers insight into the title in a way that perhaps the reader does not require. The crutches end up being reliance on what is socially acceptable to masquerade frustration; meanwhile, the real damage occurs as the injuries to the psyche are relegated to the internal process.

Ten years after her debut collection, one can interpret from the tone of this poem that she is questioning what has been gained on the individual level by the changes of the preceding decade. Because the pain is still so visceral, if not enacted through revolution, the reader can infer that the goal of wholeness or integrity has not been fully achieved, for either men or women. In this poem, the poet's temporal focus lies primarily within the present, rather than the past. However, the influence of the historical, in this particular poem, is more overbearing than liberating because potentially outdated social norms are still being imposed upon the figures in the poem. The men and women here have not yet found and/or made for themselves the space in which they can be genuine, with the rigidity of social expectation weighing heavily upon them. This weight suppresses the sexual liberation experienced by the speaker in 'Seduction'. Giovanni's poetics, however, elevates the status of women, and this poem serves to elucidate the poet's feelings towards the complex question of gender. When

the characters are at odds with cultural guidelines, they end up losing themselves in dissatisfaction. But the reader is meant to understand that the problem lies with society rather than with the individual, and that the image of the strong woman from ‘Seduction’ is still being championed poetically.

Giovanni’s progressive standpoint on gender and her challenge of social roles are articulated more straightforwardly in one of her most famous poems, ‘Ego Tripping’ (1970), in which she asserts:

My oldest daughter is neferititi  
 the tears from my birth pains  
 created the Nile  
 I am a beautiful woman

I gazed on the forest and burned  
 out the Sahara desert  
 with a packet of goat’s meat  
 and a change of clothes  
 I crossed it in two hours  
 I am a gazelle so swift  
 so swift you can’t catch me

For a birthday present when he was three  
 I gave my son Hannibal an elephant  
 He gave me Rome for Mother’s Day  
 My strength flows ever on

My son Noah built New Ark and  
 I stood proudly at the helm  
 as we sailed on a soft summer day

I turned myself into myself and was  
 Jesus  
 men intone my loving name  
 All praises All praises  
 I am the one who would save<sup>60</sup>

There is nothing subtle about this poem, which was recorded on her album *Truth Is On Its Way* accompanied by the New York Community Choir in 1971.<sup>61</sup> She celebrates many of the world’s treasures as being the result of this one woman, whose sons are also Hannibal and Noah (Old Testament), and whose gifts to the world include oil, gold, diamonds, precious jewels, and uranium. It is a fantasy poem, but it

<sup>60</sup> Giovanni, ‘Ego Tripping’, in *Re:Creation* (1970), reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 125, ll. 12-34, author’s indentation.

<sup>61</sup> Giovanni, *The Truth is On Its Way* (New York, NY: Right-On Records, 1971).

communicates, with some pomp, the strength that women possess. This is what the women in 'Crutches' might like to be, even as they sink beneath the weight of expectations they no longer wish to withstand. This legendary poem is also a fine example of Afrocentrism, defined as a 'rediscovering of African and African American achievement, restoring African place in history, establishing it on par with Europe in the importance of its history, culture, and accomplishments'.<sup>62</sup> By employing the idea of Afrocentrism, she affirms her use of a shared lineage and vernacular, in dialogue with the other poets in this thesis. This does not, in my opinion, estrange a white audience, particularly a female audience, in that the empowerment, even narcissism, presented here is pleasurable, and possibly enviable. The speaker embodies bold strength, a noteworthy antithesis to the line 'women aren't supposed to be strong' seen in 'Crutches'. This power, even when it is over the top, informs much of Giovanni's poetics of change as she seeks to create a new poetic norm for strong females.

The strength of the protagonist and praise of women's capabilities can be seen throughout Giovanni's career, such as in the following poem in which she writes:

WOMAN stood to free her hands...to hold her young...to embrace her sons and lovers...WOMAN stood to applaud and cheer a delicate mate who needs her approval...WOMAN stood to wipe the tears and sweat...to touch the eyes and lips...that woman stood to free the arms which hold the hands...which hold.<sup>63</sup>

This passage published in 1983 is critical to the investigation of how Giovanni handles the question of women and gendered roles and how her dynamic suppositions about them are worked into her poetry. In this poem, she asserts herself very strongly as an advocate for women. The unstated parenthetical to the affirmations about women is that it was not men learning to stand for these purposes. By selecting this list of reasons

---

<sup>62</sup> Robert Fay, 'Afrocentrism', in *Africana: The Encyclopaedia of African and American Experience*, edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr (New York, NY: BasicCivitas, 1999), p. 45.

<sup>63</sup> Giovanni, 'Hands: For Mother's Day', in *Those Who Ride the Night Winds*, reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 306, ll. 71-76.

why women stand, what they use their hands for, she makes ‘the WOMAN’ the hero of the poem, the one who nurtures in the way that man cannot. In fact, the woman nurtures, not only her child, but also her male mate. She is the one who soothes, which is not the same as propagating life. In this poem, however, it is comparable because the life in question is worth living only with the influence of this instinctive and affectionate woman. Through this encomium, she is not disqualifying men from having vital roles. However, she is defending those that women play, perhaps even to the extent of undermining the aims of feminists who might suggest that the roles presented in this poem are too traditional, almost biblical in tone. Karen Jackson Ford says, ‘Like many of her contemporaries, Giovanni rejected the excessive masculinity of the black liberation movement’.<sup>64</sup> She argues that, ‘[Giovanni] sought refuge in an excessive femininity that left the oppressive categories of gender securely in place’. However, although I can see why Ford would object to women seeming to be firmly ensconced in the position of the nurturer rather than the provider, Giovanni likely intends this poem as a praise of women and not a hindrance to progress. The role of female as nurturer and as the ‘fairer sex’ is a traditional norm that Ford considers a reductive categorisation of women. But the poet employs the construction to contrast a set of implied characteristics about men, while she elevates the subtleties of women’s lives.

In evaluating Giovanni’s formal choices, where again she employs her ellipsis-based line, one must also consider her application of language to convey meaning to her readers. Her use of the word ‘WOMAN’ rather than the expected ‘WOMEN’ makes this female a symbol, in the same manner perhaps as the biblical Eve might be said to constitute all women. By using the symbolic instead of empirical reality, this poem becomes an anthem, rather than lament, signifying the construction of gender. The

---

<sup>64</sup> Karen Jackson Ford, *Gender and the Poetics of Excess* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), p. 196.

woman in the poem is not an individual but the representation of all women, such as, for example, Aretha Franklin's 'A Natural Woman' (1967), in which the singular stands in for the collective.<sup>65</sup> The nomenclature here is important because Giovanni writes that WOMAN stood to free her hands in the same way that one might say MAN discovered fire. The discovery would be relevant to all men who benefit from the innovation, and likewise, the term here is meant to apply to all women, whether in the distant past, or merely the past of youth, a temporal intervention into close history.

**Political and Domestic:  
Reliance on Close History**

Sometimes we find we have nothing to give  
but love  
which is a poem  
which I give  
for the Black Revolution<sup>66</sup>

Nikki Giovanni's poetry exists in a space that is overtly political, as well as subdued and personal, and this dichotomy is performed within a strongly felt historical consciousness, of both deep time and close history, forming the foundation of her aesthetics. With volumes of early revolutionary work, i.e., the joint volume *Black Feeling Black Talk/Black Judgement* (1970), and work comprised of romantic poetry, i.e., *Bicycles* (2009), she occupies the space between these polar modes of expression. When they are positioned along the conjunction of past and present, whether with a long view of history or the evaluation of one's own stories, the personal and public are not seen as oppositions so much as vital paradoxes of each other and an important source of inspiration for the poet. These complexities of subject matter and historical discourse conjoin to form her multi-faceted aesthetic of change.

The political is closely linked to the historical for Giovanni, and the dependence

---

<sup>65</sup> Aretha Franklin, 'A Natural Woman', released by Atlantic Records, 1967.

<sup>66</sup> From title page of the original publication of *Black Judgement* (1968).

of the revolution on these long-established conditions is very important in her poetry. The fight for civil rights and an end of racial oppression has its provenance in the entire arc of African diasporic history in the Western world. As this public and long-fought struggle informs her own experiences and emotions, the political, then, is interwoven with the personal. Suzanne Juhasz asserts, 'Art has to be political, for when an artist identifies herself or himself with an oppressed group, his creations give a reality to that group, and hence to its oppression that its mere existence does not possesses'.<sup>67</sup> This claim is juxtaposed with Giovanni's own in 1975 that, 'Even [her] first book, a militant call to action for Black people, was a work of love'.<sup>68</sup> For the poet to conjoin militancy with love, a matrix of connections is drawn within her work, based on an ancestral link, whether generations removed or her own mother.

This dynamic between the revolutionary and intimate is exemplified especially in two poems of the same title written a decade apart, discussed here as an inextricable pair. Although the disillusionment of adulthood can be found in both poems, it is an emotion affected by very different circumstances and historical timelines, presented with contrasting attitudes. In 1968, Giovanni writes in 'Adulthood' that she:

began to believe that all good people could get  
together and win without bloodshed  
then  
hammarskjold was killed  
and lumumba was killed  
and diem was killed  
and kennedy was killed  
and malcolm was killed  
and evers was killed  
and schwerner, chaney and goodman were killed  
and liuzzo was killed  
and stokely fled the country  
and le roi was arrested  
and rap was arrested  
and pollard, thompson and cooper were killed  
and king was killed  
and kennedy was killed

---

<sup>67</sup> Suzanne Juhasz, 'A Sweet Inspiration...of My People', p. 131.

<sup>68</sup> From an interview with Lynne Domash and Suzanne Juhasz, 'A Talk With Nikki Giovanni', in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 1 (1975), p. 149.

and i sometimes wonder why i didn't become a  
debutante<sup>69</sup>

The public, political deaths listed in this poem are felt on a deeply personal level, much like Walker's elegies in Chapter Two, an experience as equally understood by contemporaries as by progeny. The fact that they are out of chronological order is a craft choice that amplifies the ways in which experiences and memories start to blur within the mind, that pain can be felt so strongly that one incident becomes mixed up with another. James Baldwin investigates this same pain, i.e. King's funeral (1968):

Since Martin's death, in Memphis, and that tremendous day in Atlanta, something has altered in me, something has gone away. Perhaps even more than the death itself, the manner of his death has forced me into a judgment concerning human life and human beings which I have always been reluctant to make.<sup>70</sup>

Baldwin espouses (here in 1972) a personal loss when King was assassinated, much in the same way Giovanni does in her litany of the dead and persecuted. For both writers, the weight and pain of slain figures are felt in conjunction with others in history; they don't bear the loss of one person, but a collective loss—the mass of seemingly countless losses that affect innumerable witnesses.

A decade later in 1978, after having processed these casualties of history, she presents a different interpretation of how the sadness and anger of adulthood can be interrogated, functioning as a coda to the former poem. In 'Adulthood II', she writes:

There is always something  
of a child  
in us that wants  
a strong hand to hold  
through the hungry season  
of growing up  
  
when she was a child  
summer lasted forever  
and christmas seemed never  
to come  
now her bills from easter  
usually are paid  
by the 4th of july  
in time to buy the ribs

<sup>69</sup> Giovanni, in *Black Judgement*, reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 63, ll. 33-51.

<sup>70</sup> James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (London, UK: Michael Joseph Press, 1972), p. 15.

and corn and extra bag of potatoes  
for salad[...]

she sits sometimes  
in her cubicled desk  
and recalls her mother  
did the same things  
what we have been given  
we are now expected to return  
and she smiles<sup>71</sup>

In the first poem, adulthood is initially signalled by the desire for social change and peace, but all that is hoped for personally is dashed by the exterior political violence. Adulthood comes with the pain of loss, catalysed by the tragedies of the public scene. The alternative to experiencing this sense of collectivity, to ‘feel and inflict/ pain’, is not to consider the political climate or suffer personal resentment, as though she would be better off to ignore current events or the historical foundation on which they are based. The maturation process into adulthood here is unnaturally expedited by the external carnage, to which the poet must respond. A similar litany was presented in ‘Poem (No Name No. 3)’. These victims of racial crime and persecution are significant, for both a poet once involved in the Black Arts Movement, and also for anyone seeking the end of inequity. The speaker becomes a full-fledged adult when a comprehensive level of awareness, anger, and personal loss about political violence are awakened.

Even though ‘Adulthood’ is a free-verse poem, like most of Giovanni’s poetry, its lineation is not haphazard. By giving each victim (or occasion) his or her own line, the weight of loss has greater impact. The breath that is naturally taken at the end of the line punctuates the litany, and the overall effect is a lengthy and exhausting list of victims. The use of the short line also expedites the rate at which the poem is read, adding energy to what is being communicated. It is not the loss of a few, but of a tragic number that continues to grow. By the end, the reader is left with a melopoeia where each victim is given his or her own measure, pushing the poem forward in a musicality

---

<sup>71</sup> Giovanni, in *Cotton Candy on Rainy Day*, reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, pp. 260-261, ll. 1-16, 38-44.

that honours the dead and deliberately startles the reader. The keening felt by the litany of victims evokes the minor chords of the blues. Each person listed is tragic individually and also contributes to the larger historical whole, like the dissonance created through musical chords. Each note is reduced in meaning without the conjunction of the others.

The history of the speaker's childhood and the deaths that occur during her lifetime have a way of impacting and laying the ground work for the present, even as she recalls and re-interprets memories of her mother. Both poems are concerned with a shorter perspective on history, mostly experienced during the poet's lifetime, but a necessary dependence on the past all the same. In the second poem, the reader must re-critique the central motif of what it is to be an adult, and that theme is elucidated with a modified tone. In this instance, adulthood is presented from the point of view of women's work and familial obligations, rather than the distinctly political tone seen with the first half of the pair. The poem shows the role of the child, experiencing the wonder of innocence, and the adult, experiencing the burdens of financial drain and stress. The adult's life 'looks occasionally/ as if it's owed to some/ machine'. In both poems, adulthood is synonymous with disillusionment, and the source of it is public trauma or personal drama.

The sense of sadness is catalysed by the political and then the familial, drawn upon the easel of memory. These are not distinct from each other. The link here is the assumed black person at the intersection of both narratives, who is compelled to revolt for the consequential cause and also suffers privately in the woes of marginalisation. Through the shared title, the socioeconomic problems of the second poem are associated with the loss of lives in a tradition of violence and exploitation, perhaps as a direct result of the deterioration of the exterior situation. The home problems then

become the vehicle to remind a reader of the tenor of political upheaval. The scholar Aida Hurtado says the distinction between public and private is:

relevant only for the white middle and upper classes since historically the American state has intervened constantly in the private lives and domestic arrangements of the working class. Women of Color have not had the benefit of the economic conditions that underlie the public/private distinction. Instead the political consciousness of Women of Color stems from an awareness that the public is *personally* political.<sup>72</sup>

One can see that the speaker of both poems is laden with decades of anxieties, which are not solely attributable to the domestic or civic situation, in line with Hurtado's claim that distinction between the two arenas is blurred, that 'the public is personally political'. What changes, somewhat surprisingly, again as a result of the changing perspectives of the poet and a shorter view of history, is that she ends on an upbeat note despite the continuing disquiet. The final image of the second poem is the speaker smiling because she realizes that the debts she pays, both financial and behavioural, are a means of repaying what was once done by the speaker's mother. 'What we have been given/ we are now expected to return.' There is an acceptance that comes with this realization demonstrated through the smile, a perseverance that mirrors the influence of the blues. The woman in the poem will be able to endure the difficulty, but the reader is left with the events of the political sphere directly influencing the minutia of daily life. Through the joint title, Giovanni presents a duality, that each of these aspects correlates and adds up to a more complete adult, disillusioned as that person may be. In each poem, she operates within close history. Rather than interrogating the legacy of slavery, she expresses the historical importance of the Civil Rights era and the formative memories of childhood on an adult, but this close history rings with as much conviction as the centuries before.

By looking at a broad spectrum of Giovanni's work, which changes over time

---

<sup>72</sup> Aida Hurtado, 'Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Color', *Signs: A Journal of Women and Culture in Society*, 4 (1989), p. 14.

and also presents multiple social interrogations, the reader sees that paradoxes intertwine to create a complex poetics, based firmly in the poet's adherence to spatio-temporal geographies and musical influence to articulate a social consciousness and self-identity. Within this framework, she advocates for both the advancement of black communities and the renegotiation of women's roles in society. Ultimately, these components form a matrix that comprises her complex poetic identity. She draws extensively from African American historical consciousness to extrapolate meaning from current situations, both political and domestic. Despite critical reception that denounces her simplicity, the nature of change reveals a complex poet in whose work multiple aspects constantly conjoin. The timeline of history no longer seems simply linear, and attributes of her poetic voice cannot be contained neatly in simple halves of dualities. Nikki Giovanni explores the importance of trans-generational awareness, much like Nichols and Kay in the subsequent chapters, who depend on this examination of history in the present to interrogate their own identities. As she is engaged in dialogue with the other poets, Giovanni demonstrates that Black Atlantic identity has the capacity to be private loves and losses, as well as centuries of oppression; powerful and willing, but metaphorically in chains awaiting the journey to a captive life.

**CHAPTER 4****GRACE NICHOLS:  
JOURNEYING AND  
AMERICAN INFLUENCES**

At this point, after examining the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, and Nikki Giovanni, the thesis crosses the Atlantic, mirroring the poetry and life journeys of Grace Nichols. As a Guyanese immigrant in the United Kingdom, Nichols's Afro-Caribbean and Black British compositions span the Atlantic. They centre on the transformative nature of journeying: the psychological and mythopoeic power of origins, the disillusionment of marginalisation, and figurative and physical returns as reclamation or reconstruction of identity. 'Not surprisingly', she has said, 'a sense of place has always been important to me as a writer'.<sup>1</sup> I explore in this chapter the significance of geographic and imaginative homeplaces, including the historicism and musicality to which they grant her access. I also evaluate her metamorphic journeys towards and away from home, specifically through the lens of American influence.

**Atlantic Crossing: Significance  
of American Precedents**

Although the links to Caribbean poets Derek Walcott and Kamau Braithwaite are regularly noted and can be seen throughout Nichols's body of work, this chapter will demonstrate that her aesthetics owes an equally important debt to the work of US poets, including Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks.<sup>2</sup> Sarah Lawson Welsh, among leading Nichols scholars, tends to cite these

---

<sup>1</sup> Grace Nichols, quoted in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, edited by W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Tarsey, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), p. 211.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Lawson Welsh, *Grace Nichols* (Horndon, UK: Northcote House Publishers, 2007), among others, has claimed that Nichols is linked to 'the kind of visionary creativity most famously espoused by Derek Walcott', p. 58. She has also claimed that Nichols's 'ability to see anew and to give dignity to the

Caribbean influences but omits consideration of the dialogue between Nichols and her US predecessors. Seemingly, this is not unconnected to her observation that:

the absence of a full-length study of black women's writing in Britain and the continuing problem of it frequently being read alongside African-American women's writing, or through creative and critical paradigms derived from it, [is] an essentializing, universalizing move which implies that black women's writing is a homogenous category.<sup>3</sup>

In this critique, Welsh erroneously suggests that placing African American and Black British writing in the same volume would homogenise the contributions of the latter geography, a defence which may explain her specific approach in her study of Nichols. This chapter, however, demonstrates that examining Nichols's metaphors of journeying homeward, her musical influences, and historical consciousness in relation to US examples creates a comprehensive analysis that pluralises and diversifies Black Atlantic identities for women, borne from transatlantic intertextuality. As suggested by Wai Chee Dimock, 'Nonadjacency is the unexpected ground for kinship. Cross-fertilizing takes place when far-flung arcs meet at distal points'.<sup>4</sup> To read Nichols in conjunction with her American predecessors, then, naturally interrogates a 'legacy of the diasporic: a synthesis of the verbal and nonverbal, giving rise to many overlapping semantic fields on both sides of the Atlantic'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, this work seeks to map new points of intersection and exchange that transcend nation-state boundaries.

Nichols's literary representation of the displacements and discontinuities of diasporic experience also establishes a continued dialogue of historical consciousness

---

specific, the local, as a thing of beauty and grace (rather than the general, the European) is also a recurrent concern of Caribbean poets, most notably that of Derek Walcott', p. 61. Furthermore, she considers Nichols's poetry 'reminiscent of Walcott's poetry in its valuing of the local, the people, their language and culture, and its ultimate recognition of, and reverence for, the spirituality of everyday', p. 80. Nichols has said of these associations: 'Some of the publishers who rejected [my work], including Oxford University Press; one of the reasons they gave...was that this area or this journey, was covered by the poet Edward [Kamau] Brathwaite already...I was coming from a very female perspective, and...exploring the whole female psyche, so I couldn't see their rationale at all'. Reprinted by Welsh, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Welsh, pp. 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 145.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

with US poets Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes, as well as Brooks, Walker, and Giovanni, who each demonstrate a debt to the enabling identity of Whitman's declarative voice and Hughes's pioneering racial advocacy. She employs an accessible tone, working as a popular poet, a characteristic regularly attributed to Hughes. She is a humanitarian and, like Whitman, constructs a vast poetic identity. Her political interrogation examines the social situation for the people of Guyana, as well as race and gender more broadly. With understanding that Nichols is known for 'valuing...the local, the people, their language and culture, and its ultimate recognition of, and reverence for, the spirituality of everyday', a link between her poetics with Whitman's declarative voice and Hughes's social consciousness may be drawn.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Nichols's strong female, or woman-centred, perspective takes its cues from Brooks, Walker, and Giovanni, who celebrated the woman's role as the nucleus of daily life and also acknowledged Nichols's ability to write from a female perspective with grounded honesty, spare language, and musicality.<sup>7</sup>

Especially in response to distinctly American feminist and civil rights advancements, Nichols's poetics draws and expounds upon the democratic, and perhaps revolutionary, poetry of her US predecessors. As Nichols told Kwame Dawes in interview in 2000, 'And to create, you need that whole climate around you in which you can feel empowered and kind of a sense of freedom which women haven't had in the Caribbean...So you needed a feminist movement...for this emergence of women'.<sup>8</sup> Here, Nichols suggests that the precursor to being able to write as an Afro-Caribbean woman, at least in own personal experience, is an understanding of the pioneers who

---

<sup>6</sup> Welsh, p. 60.

<sup>7</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks praises the work of the younger poet when she writes that her work is 'not only rich in music, an easy lyricism, but also grit and earthy honesty, a willingness to be vulnerable and clean'. Review on the cover of *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (London, UK: Virago Press, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Grace Nichols, interview with Kwame Dawes, *Talk Yuh Talk: Interviews with Anglophone Caribbean Poets* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2001), p. 143.

navigated through sexist and racist struggles in the US. Publishing her first book in 1983, she was indebted to the precedence established by African American success in the field. The 1970s and 1980s in Britain followed US literary example, resulting in the emergence of several women's publishers, including Virago Press, who published five of Nichols's first six books.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes feminist in approach, she has her own distinctive aesthetic and style hybridised with Caribbean, American, African, and European cultures. Her identity is constructed from her personal set of lived and mythologized experiences based in the common influences of historical consciousness, musicality, location-specific poetry, gender concerns, and political and democratic postures taken by the poets in this thesis. Gwendolyn Brooks is known for her musicality; Margaret Walker historicises her identity; Nikki Giovanni regularly adopts a political tone in her poetry. Nichols, through her own transformative journeys, echoes these American examples while in dialogue with Jackie Kay in her poetic search for home across the Atlantic.

### **Return to Africa: Journeying With Whitman, Hughes, and Walker**

In Nichols's oeuvre, Atlantic crossing and its associated tropes become translational and transformative journeys. She attributes Caribbean identity to the traditions and cultures originally established in Africa and carried westward by displaced peoples, a heritage she relies on for the crafting of metaphor, imagery, and

---

<sup>9</sup> Notably, Virago Press says of their work, 'Now, Virago can look back with pride on over thirty years of success—in both tempting and changing the world—and, with confidence look forward to a new era of publishing books that speak volumes about the lives of girls and women. One of the most vigorous, stylish and successful British publishing imprints, Virago is the outstanding international publisher of women's literature. It is the largest women's imprint in the world and has made commercial success of publishing books of quality and originality.' Founded in 1973, they are responsible for publishing many women and minority writers of international origins. After the changes in feminist thought in the US, Virago saw the need to continue this important work in Britain, allowing a place for Nichols's early success after her first volume won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1983.

allusion. Celebrating this cultural inheritance from the African continent and overcoming the borders of the Atlantic, she metaphorically voyages through time and location, a likeness to Jackie Kay's work that I identify in Chapter Five. In Nichols's first book of poetry, *I Is A Long Memoried Woman* (1983), she embodies the persona of an African slave woman who is uprooted to Guyana. From this Caribbean location, the speaker is presented as imaginatively re-crossing the ocean to the memory, family, and significance of her homeland until she is able to forge for herself a re-galvanised strength that takes its shape from the experiences and landscape of the New World. Through this mythological journeying to a constructed homeplace, a connection is generated with place itself, as well as generations of ancestors. I suggested in the previous chapters that Nikki Giovanni conveys a sense of affinity towards Africa and its peoples, particularly women, and that Margaret Walker's poetic tendency was to embody the experiences of her ancestors as though lived by her personally, through the use of the autobiographical 'I' and mythopoeic voice. Nichols's aesthetic emulates the work of both poets in that she draws on the literary resource of Africa to signify on the oppression of its descendants throughout the diaspora.

She also inhabits the genre of Whitman and Hughes's socio-political poetry, in which they become spokesmen for democracy and racial equality. David S. Reynolds has written of Whitman's lasting influence on revolutionary verse:

This [being the spokesperson of brotherhood and equality] was the aspect of Whitman that would later impress on the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, who wrote that Whitman's "all-embracing words lock arms with workers and farmers, Negroes and whites. Asiatics and Europeans, serfs, and free men, beaming democracy to us all." More recently, the black poet June Jordan has identified Whitman as the one "white father" of a line of antiracist, antisexist writers including Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, Margaret Walker, and Edward Brathwaite. Just as Lincoln's highest message, especially at Gettysburg was human equality, so Whitman's, in several key poems, was the dignity and togetherness of all races.<sup>10</sup>

The democratic characteristic that Reynolds ascribes to Whitman and his successor

---

<sup>10</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 469.

Hughes plays a significant role in Nichols's aesthetics. She, not only speaks for, but also celebrates her people, spanning a deep time from her own adulthood back through the centuries. In speaking as a popular poet, Nichols gives voice to the struggles of common people whilst praising their strength. She writes in 'Web of Kin' (1983):

I come from the Season-of-Locusts  
and from scorch of sun  
and days of endless raining

from the sea that washes the Ivory Coast  
I come from coral reefs  
from distant tum-tum pounding[...]

I come from a country of strong women  
Black Oak women who bleed slowly at  
the alters of their children  
because mother is supreme  
burden<sup>11</sup>

In this poem, Nichols problematizes Africa as a poetic trope by praising even its difficult and sometimes destructive natural phenomena, a complex approach seen also with regards to her Caribbean-centred poetry. Here, her Whitmanesque anaphora of the phrase 'I come' centres the poem on the motif and sometimes (re)creative power of origins, regardless of one's spatio-temporal geography. Nichols's use of the device is twofold. Firstly, it links her to US poets (echoed by Giovanni and Walker), including Whitman's 'Salut au Monde' (1856), in which he writes:

I see the savage types, the bow and arrow, the poison'd splint, the fetich, and the obi.  
I see African and Asiatic towns  
I see Algiers, Tripoli, Derne, Mogodore, Timbuctoo, Monrovia.<sup>12</sup>

'I see, I see, I see', is translated in Nichols's work as, 'I come, I come, I come' in which her phrasing, even in short lines, echoes the mellifluous aural effect established by Whitman. Secondly, the repeated phrase in both poems mimetically and musically recalls the drumbeats. It creates the aural quality of the 'tum-tum pounding' imagery in

<sup>11</sup> Nichols, *I Is A Long Memored Woman* (London, UK: Karnak House: 1983), p. 8, ll. 1-6, 11-15.

<sup>12</sup> Despite what would be considered 'politically incorrect' in Whitman's archaic use of the term 'savage', at the time of his writing in the nineteenth century, this poem is actually intended as an encomium. Perhaps it does not withstand the test of time because of his dated and potentially offensive language to a twenty-first century sensibility, but it does in fact resonate as a poem of praise. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: The "Death-bed" Edition* (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2001), p. 178.

Nichols's poem, with the musical sounds and traditions of Africa having accompanied the speaker to the Caribbean.

Nichols's poem is actually more compelling than Whitman's example because she speaks of the constructive power of origins rather than the sight of the locations, perhaps taking her cue from the origins interrogated by the American poet Countee Cullen, whose poem 'Heritage' (1925) begins:

What is Africa to me:  
Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
Jungle star or jungle track,  
Strong bronzed men, or regal black  
Women from whose loins I sprang  
When the birds of Eden sang?  
One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved,  
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?<sup>13</sup>

The musicality in Cullen's poem, like Nichols's, is definitely reminiscent of the aural quality of the drum beats, and Nichols associates herself with this concentration on African origins, where 'regal black women' and 'Black Oak women' birth generations. Whitman, Nichols, and Cullen celebrate Africa from the vantage point of the New World. However, whereas Whitman and Cullen tend to idealise the continent, Nichols's approach is grounded paradoxically in a mythical realism. The locusts, drought, and monsoons are deified because they, too, are part of the homeland, the source of the people and the music, the 'tum-tum pounding'. This musicality is celebrated by Nikki Giovanni (also in 1983) when she refers to the women's 'humming that must have been deafening' on the slave ships.<sup>14</sup> Giovanni and Nichols both appreciate the fraught history in which music is borne out of pain, like the birth of the spirituals in the New World. It is, despite the misery, to be celebrated. Paul Gilroy summarises the idea:

---

<sup>13</sup> Countee Cullen, 'Heritage' first printed in *Color* (1925), anthologised in Alain Locke's *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (1925), reprinted and edited by Arnold Rampersad (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1997), pp. 250-253, ll. 1-10.

<sup>14</sup> 'Conversations with Nikki Giovanni', by Claudia Tate (1983) reprinted in *Conversations with Nikki Giovanni*, edited by Virginia Fowler (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), p. 150.

But this music and its broken rhythm of life are important for another reason. The love stories they enclose are a place where the black vernacular has been able to preserve and cultivate both the distinctive rapport with the presence of death which derives from slavery and a related ontological state...being in pain.<sup>15</sup>

Gilroy points out that the music, a tenet of Nichols, Giovanni, and especially Jackie Kay's aesthetics, is where the struggles of life and death are encapsulated, yet those difficult enterprises in Nichols's poem also paradoxically bear the Black Oak women. The persona embodies suffering and strength, and Nichols's poetics hybridises the pair.

She also collapses the binarisms of present and past, through her use of personae. She claims the lived experiences of the Middle Passage and slavery as her own. With this device, she participates in the historical consciousness also explored in the previous chapters, in, for example, Walker's poem 'A Litany from the Dark People' (1970) or Giovanni's works 'Africa II' and 'My Tower' (both 1972). Each of these women poets engages in the same literary community by following the examples of Whitman and Hughes, whose mythopoeic tendencies allow for the stories of ancestors to form the mythologies of the self. For example, in 'One Continent/To Another' (1983), the first poem in Nichols's first book, she writes:

From the darkness within her  
 from the dimness of previous incarnations  
                   the Congo surfaced  
 so did Sierra Leone and the  
 Gold Coast which she used to tread  
 searching the horizons for lost  
 moon  
 her jigida guarding the crevice  
 of her soft wet forest  
 between her thighs<sup>16</sup>

In this segment of the poem, the reader can ascertain through the persona of the Afro-Caribbean slave woman that, even though the physicality of her location has been changed, the origin of Africa remains deeply seated within. The Congo, Sierra Leone, and the Gold Coast comprise her and facilitate the construction of self in the New

<sup>15</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 203.

<sup>16</sup> Grace Nichols, *I Is A Long Memored Woman*, p. 5, ll. 32-41.

World. As she navigates these environs, the imaginative return to her homeland functions as a protective device, in the way that her jigida, or waist beads, protect her body from the intrusion of an errant male. The symbol of the jigida is important because the beads are traditionally worn by West African women as signs of their femininity, sexuality, and fecundity. They are to be seen only by the woman's partner and are a representation of her personal feminine identity. For Nichols to incorporate this particular image into the poem, the persona is evoking their significance, and the poet is thusly able to transcend time and place limitations to mobilise the power of the image. Of course, in actuality, the jigida would do little to protect this woman from an assault, but, by placing her physical wellbeing and sense of womanhood into the traditions of the West Coast of Africa, she promotes a sense of self-preservation, both in heritage and in femininity. The speaker and the poet, by extension, become linked with the continent and the ancestors through the use of this association.

The connections the poetry creates can seem to flirt with a kind of 'racial essentialism' from which, as seen earlier, Welsh seems determined to protect Nichols's work. This seeming essentialism, however, is deemed unproblematic by many critics (as shown below), who tend to either explain this characteristic as deliberate, political, and a means of overcoming oppressive discourse, or discount its presence by referencing the plurality of her identity. Some critics suggest that her essentialism is a strategy, a concept favoured by Mara Scanlon, when she says, 'What Nichols seeks to transcend...is not only the absence of a woman's mythology but also the absence of much stability and respect in the lives of contemporary Caribbean women'. She cites Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who promotes the 'acceptable "strategic use of positivist

essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest”<sup>17</sup>. Scanlon, is able to easily reconcile a perceived presence of essentialism in Nichols’s work because she feels the ‘political interest’ is the driving motivator. James Procter also adopts this sensibility when he suggests that Grace Nichols’s poetry is:

very much part of this rhetorical and political shift in the 1970s. Although ‘black’ tended to be (necessarily) adopted as an essentialist identity formation in this period (‘it’s a black thing’), what the process of rearticulation...reveals is that ‘black’...was a culturally constructed label that emerges at a particular historical junction...Of course it would be wrong to disavow the formation of essentialist black subjectivities in this period: they were crucial in presenting a coherent, politicised, united front against the very real threats of racism at that time.<sup>18</sup>

For Procter, Nichols’s choice to speak for the collective is a temporally specific means of writing oneself, and others, out of the periphery.

Other critics, however, suggest that the diversity of Nichols’s aesthetics resists essentialist tendencies. For example, C. L. Innes says that the poet’s plural voice sidesteps any possibility of essentialism, when she asserts that Nichols ‘often with subversive wit and humor’, challenges ‘essentialist concepts of women and race, or monolithic views of culture, and insist[s] upon the interplay of multiple heritages and voices in a Britain where they “have arrived”<sup>19</sup>. Maite Escudero agrees, when she states, ‘Through artifice and performance, [Nichols] creates a variety of personas and thereby aligns herself with the pluralistic stance of postmodernism that questions the nature of an essentialist female identity’. She asserts that, ‘Nichols’s poems do not pigeonhole femininity but endow it with different meanings and interpretations’.<sup>20</sup> In light of these various influences, I contend that Nichols chooses to construct her

---

<sup>17</sup> Mara Scanlon, ‘The Divine Body in Grace Nichols’s “The Fat Black Woman’s Poems”’, *World Literature Today*, 72 (1998), p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> James Procter, editor, *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> C. L. Innes, ‘Accent and Identity: Women Poets of Many Parts’, in *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, edited by James Acheson and Romana Huk (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 339.

<sup>20</sup> Maite Escudero, ‘Race, Gender, and Performance in Grace Nichols’s *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*’, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 1 (2000), p. 14.

identity in conjunction with and through those of her race more broadly, emphasising the importance of an ancestral narrative. In mapping these social and historical geographies, Nichols is not narrowing the parameters of selfhood, but broadening them, enriching them through access to plural narratives and mythologies she might otherwise obstruct from view.

Such seemingly essential gestures are also part of Nichols's inheritance from Hughes, when he links himself to every member of his race. In 'Proem', the first poem in his first book, *The Weary Blues* (1926) he writes:

I am a Negro:  
Black as the night is black,  
Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:  
Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.  
I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:  
Under my hand the pyramids arose.  
I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I've been a singer:  
All the way from Africa to Georgia  
I carried my sorrow songs.  
I made ragtime.

I've been a victim:  
The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.  
They lynch me now in Texas.

I am a Negro:  
Black as the night is black,  
Black like the depths of my Africa.<sup>21</sup>

Hughes is responding to what he called in 1926 the 'racial mountain', representing himself to an audience implied to be white, a point from which the Black Arts Movement deviates when it later celebrates creating black literatures for black audiences.<sup>22</sup> Hughes is using the mythopoeic 'I', a device he borrows from Whitman, as

<sup>21</sup> Langston Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volume 1: The Poems: 1921-1940*, edited by Arnold Rampersad (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), p. 22 (entire poem).

<sup>22</sup> The 'racial mountain' is 'this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible'. Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', in *The Nation* (1926),

Nichols often does later, to allow the experiences of the race to speak for him, as a means of contributing to this literary community. Through the use of this technique, he attributes much of his own identity to Africa and to those who have been displaced from it, as seen with Walker and Giovanni. He is able to imaginatively transcend time and place, paving the way for Nichols, who, from a Caribbean locale, journeys across time and geography to claim mythologised narratives. The experiences of the Congo and elsewhere are shared by the speaker in the Hughes poem, in the way that the Congo and the Gold Coast emanate from the speaker in the Nichols poem. Perhaps Nichols's persona had originated from those locations. Perhaps she had been a daughter born in the New World or many generations removed. Either way, when Nichols associates her personae with the African diaspora, it becomes the platform upon which she is the spokesperson for a group, a tactic that does not belie her individualism. It, instead, brings her poetry into the political and the public, as she crosses the Atlantic to embrace Africa and accesses historical narratives that articulate her poetic identity.

Through the trope of the Atlantic crossing, Nichols discusses the state of being in exile. She writes in 'But there were other ships' (2005):

Their indentured mud-  
stained feet, soon embroidered  
like the slave's instep to the fields.

Their songs of exile  
their drums of loss  
all caught in a weaving odyssey  
of no return.  
No waiting Penelope  
unpicking all her work.<sup>23</sup>

Displaced peoples of all nations are likened to slaves in this poem, whether or not in an actual condition of servitude. The poem allows for the experience of one group to become the anchor to which others may ground their identity. For example, American

---

anthologised by Henry Louis Gates, Jr and Nellie McKay, editors, in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. 2 (New York, NY: Norton, 2004), pp. 1311-1314.

<sup>23</sup> Nichols, *Startling the Flying Fish* (London, UK: Virago Press, 2005), p. 13-14, ll. 14-22.

author Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) demonstrates how the narratives of suffering come to be associated with each character in the story. Likewise, Nichols uses the metaphor of feet and then changes it to liken these groups of people to Odysseus, the difference being that, in the fulfilment of *The Odyssey* (800 BC), Odysseus is able to return home to his loyal wife, staving off the suitors in Ithaca. Whereas, for him, the journey homeward to a home that can be reclaimed as such *is* a possibility, for those on the ships heading to the Caribbean, there would not ever be a voyage home, thus the necessity to craft it as a place attainable perhaps only in the realm of the imagination.

Within this imaginary domain, how the exiled consider and re-consider 'home', in light of both one's origins and present location, becomes a significant component of identity in Nichols's poetry, and it is taken up by Jackie Kay, as I demonstrate in the next chapter. John Figueroa speculates that:

"Where is home?" is not necessarily an easy question for everyone...Once one allows the possibility of choice in these matters...then the question can be difficult. Even the very meaning of "home" is likely to change, particularly for one who is from that part for the "New World" known as the Caribbean...<sup>24</sup>

Nichols, too, asks this difficult question as she interrogates the changing meanings of home and homeplace in 'Wings' (1996), about the relationship of places:

Consigned to the earth  
we thought it fitting  
to worship only  
the sustenance of our roots,  
so that when uprootment came  
in its many guises  
we moved around like  
bereaving trees, constantly touching  
our sawn-off places.<sup>25</sup>

In this passage, she refers to the power of roots, but, even after the migration away from them, they always remain. The sawn-off branches are associated with ghost limbs of amputees that can still be felt, even after having been severed. By using the tree

<sup>24</sup> John Figueroa, 'Some Subtleties of the Isle: A Commentary on Certain Aspects of Derek Walcott's Sonnet Sequence "Tales of the Islands"', in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, edited by Robert D. Hamner (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), p. 147.

<sup>25</sup> Nichols, *Sunris* (London, UK: Virago, 1996), p. 77, ll. 1-9.

simile, Nichols links the speaker to the imagery of the earth. Human and naturalistic metaphors collide, and the speaker ultimately becomes a citizen of the world, linking two continents; each continent is a member of the planet in the same way each branch is part of the same tree and each limb part of the same body. Separation does not equal elimination for the speaker in this poem, and the call of origins is an ever-present force. The roots of the tree are its lifeblood; without them, it does not exist. In the same way, people depend on their roots to supply them with (metaphorical) nourishment. To use these metaphors, Nichols speaks to varied perspectives on history and how one's personal heritage and experience determine present identity.

One's historical arc is continuous but not always linear. It connects between places, but transcends temporalities, as people journey away from their homeland. This is examined further in 'Still Our Cassandra Continues' (2005):

Her sea-resounding voice  
picked up by the ears

Of my own middle passage.  
My own ships bowing  
in prayer across the Atlantic  
Her see-far eyes, like mine

Discerning everything—  
from those suicidal Carib leaps  
down to the soft massacre at Jonestown—  
all the bloody reincarnation of history.<sup>26</sup>

As this poem adopts a long view of history, specifically Caribbean, so its speaker becomes increasingly omniscient. In time, the Middle Passage seems to belong to her personally, rather than to her ancestors, creating a sense of trans-generational memory.

Karla F. C. Holloway describes this process in black women's literature:

Events that link memories and that are metaphorically rendered in the text as "time" also connect history to the idea of ancestry...The vitality inserted into language by the mythologies in black women's writing becomes their especially distinct means of allowing the presence of historical, mythic, and contemporary figures to exist simultaneously in the text. Their insistence on making the worlds of the past and present collide creates a literary history that indicates a different world view

---

<sup>26</sup> Nichols, *Startling the Flying Fish*, pp. 28-29, ll. 11-20.

operation—one that both denies the primacy of Western historiography and that challenges standards external to the text as a means, a frame of understanding.<sup>27</sup>

This modality of myth-making and transcending spatio-temporal boundaries in Nichols's poetry is reminiscent of the work of Margaret Walker and Nikki Giovanni. Nichols is using these US paradigms of collective history and mythopoeic origins to articulate her own poetics. She employs them to transmigrate across the Atlantic. They function as tools that allow her to write her own identity, poetic or personal, to construct a 'different world view'.

The US example is integral in her transformations and constructions of self as she undertakes this journeying and transcends barriers. A long Atlantic history thus stands behind that phenomenon which Welsh identifies as a hallmark of Nichols when she says, 'Although physically confined on the plantation, the long memoried woman is able to transcend her situation, "moving beyond all boundaries"'.<sup>28</sup> These borders are crossed in the epic figure of Cassandra, a woman who had the gift of prophecy but the fate of an incredulous audience, an ironic juxtaposition of awareness and powerlessness, representative in this poem of the condition for slaves in the Caribbean. Nichols indicates that Cassandra predicts all the violence and marginalisation for Africans in the New World, perhaps leading one to believe that the slaves, too, predicted this but were unable to disrupt their fate. The eyes discern everything as the ship crosses the Atlantic, but the speaker is not the captain of the vessel. The ocean crossing marks the early stages of powerlessness, imposed on the ancestors and also the speaker herself through the use of an historical persona. This is a perspective that is predicated by 'I Will Enter' (1983), in which Nichols writes, 'your tongue is silent/ your eyes speak of an/ ancient weariness/ I too have known/ memory is written/ in each

---

<sup>27</sup> Karla F. C. Holloway, *Metaphors and Moorings: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 105.

<sup>28</sup> Welsh, p. 54.

crumpled fold'.<sup>29</sup> This ancient weariness emphasises her US examples of historical consciousness for the poet, a facet of her poetic identity that is hybridised with her contemporary migrant perspective.

These influences are addressed in the long poem sequence *Sunris* in the volume of the same name (1996). Although there are several historical personae employed in *Sunris*, which often celebrate Carnival and the island lifestyle, they are roughly autobiographical in nature, much like the character of Gem in Nichols's work of fiction *Whole of a Morning Sky* (1986) and Maud in Brooks's novel *Maud Martha* (1953). In these passages from *Sunris*, boundaries are blurred where the Caribbean and Africa are conjoined. She writes:

I'm a hybrid-dreamer  
An ancestral-believer  
A blood-reveller  
Who worship at the house of love[...]

Africa? How to begin  
after all this time and water?  
I must begin by telling you  
that your presence have endured  
despite all the dark-despising  
and death-dooming spread about you[...]

'History is a river  
That flows to the sea  
Laced with the bone of memory  
Ride high her choreography  
Pay homage in ceremony'

Yes, I rippling to the music,  
I slipping past the old ships,  
watching symbol of ship  
turn symbol of flowering tree  
as if imagination  
if the only hope for reality.<sup>30</sup>

The rhythms and bright tonalities of this poem honour the calypso music Nichols heard throughout her childhood, the musicality that inspires her. She says in 2000:

In the act of writing a poem you're working to satisfy a lot of deep things, you want your idea and feelings to come out but in a way that's memorable and pleasurable to

<sup>29</sup> Nichols, *I Is A Long Memored Woman*, p. 62, ll. 27-32.

<sup>30</sup> Nichols, *Sunris*, p. 53, ll. 32-35; p. 65, ll. 221-226; p. 67, ll. 253-263.

you, so all your feelers are out, musical and otherwise, as ideas leap across and link in a process that's intuitive. Your inner ear is attuned to the underlying rhythm and the actual sounds of words and in a way you're like a musical composer also, creating almost unconsciously your own harmony.<sup>31</sup>

Nichols encapsulates the musicality of her youth in Guyana in these repetitive beats, and one can feel the debt she owes to this environment. This poem also owes a debt to Derek Walcott's 'The Sea is History' (1980), especially its opening lines: 'Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?/ Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,/ in that grey vault. The sea. The sea/ has locked them up. The sea is History'.<sup>32</sup> But just as powerful are the poem's echoes of post-World War II African American poetry, and not least by Margaret Walker. For example, the speaker in this poem links the past to the present until they are indecipherable, forming one identity in which the experiences and locations of the ancestors may be applied to the individual in the present. As seen in Chapter Two, some of Walker's poems that accomplish this duality include 'Since 1619' (*For My People*, 1942), 'Dark Blood' (*For My People*, 1942), 'How Many Silent Centuries Sleep in my Sultry Veins' (*Prophets for a New Day*, 1970), and 'Africa' (*This Is My Century*, 1989), all of which negotiate identity as a result of time and location. Nikki Giovanni employs a similar strategy in 'Stardate Number 18628.190' (*The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni*, 2003).

In all of these poems, these traces do not undercut the individuality of the poet; instead, they are placed in close proximity with images of diversity and plurality within diasporic experience, articulating a political and democratic point of view. Grace Nichols, her personae imaginatively journeying from the Caribbean to Africa and across several centuries, engages in dialogue with the African American poets who undertook the same approach, articulating a poetic identity hybridised by international

---

<sup>31</sup> Nichols, *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, p. 211.

<sup>32</sup> Derek Walcott, 'The Sea is History', in *Collected Poems: 1948-1984* (New York, NY: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1986), p. 364, ll. 1-4.

and spatio-temporal influences across the barrier of the Atlantic. A longing for Africa is simultaneously a connection with history, in which the ancestors of diasporic peoples lived in freedom, as well as an intensely felt connectivity to one's origin or source.

### **The River As Origin: An Historically American Trope**

Origins, for Nichols, are often linked figuratively to the image of the river, as in 'We New World Blacks' (1983), 'To Which' (1989), and 'To the Running of My River' (1996), in which the poet writes: 'and in spite of/ ourselves/ we know the way/ back to/ the river stone'; 'To which river/ do my veins owe their tributaries/ To which ancient earth/ do my toes owe their feel'; and 'Swell in/ prosperity even as she moves/ in full knowledge of the hard/ Ships of her immigrant history'.<sup>33</sup> In each poem, the river is the central image. The river as a metaphor for Africa and Africa as a metaphor for origins are significant tropes throughout Nichols's poetics. Just as the tree is dependent on its roots, so the land and its people are dependent on the rivers. However, the use of this symbol is not unique to Nichols. It has a lengthy American tradition from which she takes her cue, echoing Walker, Whitman, and Hughes. Writing with some years of overlap with Walker, Nichols also inspires her older predecessor, or rather they are in dialogue through their literary community. In Walker's poem 'Africa' (1989):

BEFORE the Garden of Eden and Allah near the Nile and the Tigris and  
Euphrates in the land between the rivers...

[...]Africa[...]was teeming with Life[...]hot and wonderful life...<sup>34</sup>

Walker uses the trope of the river as the hub for humanity. It is between these rivers that life is, not only born, but flourishes. Within this poem, the rivers embrace the land

---

<sup>33</sup> Nichols, 'We New World Blacks', in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, p. 30, ll. 13-17. Nichols, 'To Which', in *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (London, UK: Virago Press, 1989), p. 20, ll. 1-4. Nichols, 'To The Running of My River', in *Sunris*, p. 48, ll. 13-15.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Walker, *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 182, ll. 12-14, 17-19.

and feed it as its source. When Nichols asks to which river her veins owe their tributaries, within this paradigm, she is responding to and possibly inspiring Walker's river encomium, as though the two were sitting at a table together in conversation. Walker celebrates rivers as her personal, rather than mythic, origins in her poetry, specifically in praise of the Mississippi Delta, as examined in Chapter Two.

This discussion of river imagery would be remiss to overlook two significant and well-known American poems, Hughes's 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' (1921) and a passage from Whitman's 'Salut au Monde' (1856). In the former, Hughes writes:

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in  
human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans,  
and I've seen its muddy busom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.<sup>35</sup>

This poem is a twentieth-century interpretation of Whitman's nineteenth-century lines:

I see the long river-stripes of the earth,  
I see the Amazon and the Paraguay, I see the four great rivers of China, the Amour, the  
Yellow River, the Yiang-tse, and the Pearl,  
I see where the Seine flows, and where the Danube, the Loire, the Rhone, and the  
Guadalqiver flow,  
I see the windings of the Volga, the Dnieper, the Oder,  
I see the Tuscan going down the Arno, and the Venetian along the Po,  
I see the Greek seaman sailing out of Egina bay.<sup>36</sup>

These two poems are exemplars of rivers as origins and also employ the mythopoeic voice, in which the speaker transcends the limitation of space and time in order to mythologise one's own life as the experiences lived by centuries of ancestors. Nichols instinctively knows the 'way back to the river' in order to participate in this US literary

<sup>35</sup> Hughes, *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, p. 36 (entire poem).

<sup>36</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, section 5, p. 175, ll. 6-12.

tradition. Although the journey is more active in Hughes's poem, demonstrated through multiple senses, as well as hands-on experiences and greater intensity than Whitman's imaginative sight of the rivers, for both poets, the waters are not part of the landscape but part of the humanscape, an example which Walker and Nichols are free to follow.

The rivers lead to the unfolding of life, as the experiences of people and civilizations develop, a motif that Jackie Kay also appropriates for her own work, as seen in the next chapter and her interview with me in the Appendix. Whitman employs the device of the catalogue poem, encompassing many rivers and the people who live along them. Hughes, on the other hand, engages with the rivers, and the result is the deepening of the consciousness. The source of life becomes the source of the soul, an example that Nichols surely follows when she muses to which rivers her veins owe their tributaries, a metaphor for the source of one's being. The speakers in her poetry are continually searching for a homeland and an identity that is associated with it, as they live and suffer throughout the diaspora. There is a need to return to the place of one's birth, even if on a metaphysical level, to appropriate one's heritage and the role it plays on the present self. The river provides, for Nichols, a means through which she can stage these questions of origins and selfhood. The waters of them become the metaphorical site of one's lived, imagined, and spiritual beginnings. The ways in which this image inhabits her psyche allow her the grounding to ask such meaningful questions. One cannot begin to formulate a present identity without the foundation of one's origins, where deep time is in exchange with close time. The journey to the source is often conveyed through the journey back to the mother. Images of maternity, actual or spiritual, embody the exploration of a different kind of source or origin. They play a central role in Nichols's identity formation and the articulation of her aesthetics and offer an additional lens through which one can interpret her US influences.

**Return to Maternal ‘Source’:  
Brooks, Walker, Hughes, and Ellison**

For Nichols, maternal imagery and direct encomium of the mother, whether Mother Africa, a mythological figure, or one’s biological parent, are integral to poetic identity. Imaginative journeying and agonizing for the maternal figure are an extension of the trope in which the present self is dictated by a sense of and search for one’s homeplace or source, whether a continent, a river, or a group of people. Her mother is an extremely strong influence on her development as a person and poet, and Nichols deifies maternity more generally, including the importance of maternal sacrifice. Homeland also takes on sympathetic characteristics in these poems, and the mother and motherland represent strength, nostalgia, and the agent of the speaker’s positive attributes, part of Nichols’s participation in the example of her US predecessors.

One of the most powerful figures of the maternal in Nichols’s poetry is Africa as the original mother. The need to relate to a place as a source and embrace the heritage attributed to it is integral to her poetic identity. As Gabrielle Griffin writes:

The connections she thus seeks to maintain stem from a recognition that she comes “from a country of strong women”—it is the strength of the African female community which the Black woman conjures up in her mind for support, especially the strength of the mother.<sup>37</sup>

Africa, in Nichols’s poetics, is the first mother, and the powerful provenance it provides for her and her ancestry is demonstrated in this passage from ‘Out of Africa’ (1989):

Out of Africa of the suckling  
Out of Africa of the tired woman in earrings  
Out of Africa of the black-foot leap  
Out of Africa of the baobab, the suck-teeth  
Out of Africa of the dry maw of hunger  
Out of Africa of the first rains, the first mother.<sup>38</sup>

This poem insists on a musicality that it understands as being African and Caribbean in quality, which is then conjoined with American, Whitmanesque anaphora.

---

<sup>37</sup> Gabrielle Griffin, “‘Writing the Body’: Reading Joan Riley, Grace Nichols and Ntozake Shange”, in *Black Women’s Writing*, edited by Gina Wisker (Basingstoke, UK: The Macmillan Press, 1993), p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Nichols, *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*, p. 30, ll. 1-6.

This hybridised influence seems indicative overall of Nichols's poetic identity. She writes of this musical characteristic, 'Your inner ear is attuned to the underlying rhythm and the actual sounds of words and in a way you're like a musical composer also, creating almost unconsciously your own harmony'.<sup>39</sup> The rhythms are inherent to the lines and are underscored by the repetition. Within the musicality, the reader first hears an echo of Whitman's 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' (1859):

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,  
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,  
Out of the Ninth-month midnight,<sup>40</sup>

This response, if not debt, to American poetry is bold and demonstrates her willingness to associate her own literary choices with those of US poets. The reader next notices the link between Africa and initial motherhood—the ancestor, the source. Despite the devotion to one's origins, in a complex perspective that interlocks emotional responses, not every feature of this mother is positive. It is a mechanism through which Nichols complicates this nostalgic journey towards origins and the centrality of the mother, a complexity that is revisited when she writes of voyaging back to the Caribbean. However, despite nuanced perceptions of the motherland, the mother remains a figurative font to which one returns for wellbeing, even healing, such as in Margaret Walker's 'Africa' (1989) in which she writes:

O Mother Earth  
Dark Africa I come  
to touch your sacred soul  
My ancient motherland,  
Cradle of all our human lives,  
Now tend these sacred fires.<sup>41</sup>

Walker, too, claims Mother Africa as her origin, and it becomes an agent of protection, as a human parent. Simultaneously, for Walker and Nichols, the mother cleanses, sometimes intercedes, with the powers of a deity not too dissimilar from Catholic

<sup>39</sup> Nichols, *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, p. 212.

<sup>40</sup> Walt Whitman, 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking', in *Leaves of Grass*, p. 310, ll. 1-3.

<sup>41</sup> Margaret Walker, 'Africa', in *This Is My Century*, p. 183, ll. 49-54.

notions of the Holy Mother.

Throughout her maternal poetry, Nichols invokes healing and cleanliness through the regular use of the trope of the womb. It is a means through which the persona may rid herself of the oppression, weariness, and woefulness of the present. Nichols beseeches a spiritual mother in the prayerful exclamation in 1983, 'I will enter into you/ I will enter into you/ woman'.<sup>42</sup> In this apostrophe to an unspecified woman, the reader automatically hears the inflection of a plea, or a spiritual intention. The 'entering in' signifies on the return to the womb, a reiteration of the river metaphor as a source in which both river and womb represent cleansing waters, the foundation of health, and, in some cases, absolution, as well as a freedom and/or protection from the burdens of the present life. In the poem 'Ala' (1983), an African female deity:

O Ala

Uzo is due to join you  
to return to the pocket  
of your womb

O Ala

Mother who gives and receives  
again in death  
Gracious one  
have sympathy  
let her enter  
let her rest<sup>43</sup>

In this poem, the textures of the plea echo hymns to the Holy Mother, in which the musically declarative voice both honours the mother figure and underscores the needs of the speaker, who is referring to Uzo, a female slave being put to death for the act of infanticide. Uzo kills her child to allow her to escape the suffering of the earthly world.

The use of this narrative is in direct dialogue with African American women writers, including Toni Morrison and Gwendolyn Brooks, who both addressed maternal love by which the mother ends her child's life of known misery. This narrative thread is

---

<sup>42</sup> Nichols, 'I Will Enter', in *I Is A Long Memored Woman*, p. 61, ll. 11-13.

<sup>43</sup> Nichols, *I Is A Long Memored Woman*, p. 23, ll. 26-29, 33-39.

an echo of Chapter One and Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Brooks's poem 'the mother' (1945). From the chronology, Nichols may take her cue from Brooks and help inspire Morrison, as the writers take up these complex notions of maternal love. Neither Brooks nor Morrison's female protagonist operates without consequence; they are subject to punishment and/or lifelong grief. In Nichols's poem, however, the women on the plantation hope that Uzo may, after her corporeal punishment, return to the safety of motherly love in the afterlife, the spiritual womb in which the merciful Ala will not judge her for her sin but bestow upon her compassion and long-awaited rest, a condition in tension with the torture being imposed upon her by the plantation owner. As in Brooks's poem, the reader here is left with a sense that the culpability of the agent is mitigated by her circumstances. As Nichols is in dialogue with Brooks, the audience must decide whether her persona is to be absolved for her sins, in that she committed them out of love for her child. That figure, here, turns to her spiritual mother, Ala, for redemption. Nichols asks for compassion for the mother in the poem and makes the plea her own by interweaving the appeal to the African mythic figure of Ala, who provides the cleansing and restorative waters of her womb.

Nichols continues the motif of the mother's womb as the location of forgiveness and cleansing in the poem, '....Your Blessing' (1983). Again, the speaker is a pregnant slave woman, impregnated by a white man. Nichols writes:

Cover me with the leaves of your  
blackness Mother

shed tears  
for I'm tainted with guilt and  
exile

I'm burden with child and maim

Heal me with the power of your blackness  
Mother

shed tears

for I'm severed by ocean and  
longing[...]

Mother I hear your voice  
I hear it far away  
breaking the wildness of my  
thoughts  
calming me to childhood presence  
once again<sup>44</sup>

The mother's womb is represented through the leaves of blackness—a subtle yet effective association with the humble human origins espoused by Whitman's metaphor and book of the same name, 'leaves of grass'. For Whitman, grass is a symbol of people's beginnings from the earth. When Nichols uses the echoing phrase, she is responding to the power of the image as representative of the simplicity of human life and, like Whitman, uses it to operate on a racial platform. The womb, or these leaves of blackness, is again the source of expurgation and helps the poet dramatize a reversal of colour and racial connotations. It is the mother's blackness, along with her love, that provides the cleanliness. This deviates from the historical detrimental Western point of view that whiteness represents a purity and blackness a dirtiness, as Americanist scholar Doris Witt says, 'dirt might be defined as a nonontological function of (lower) class status that is mistakenly attributed to and ontologized as (black) racial identity'.<sup>45</sup>

Of course, dirt is not merely literal but often representative of social or spiritual subjugation. In Nichols's poem, because of the *white* man's implicit sin or 'dirt', the impregnation of the young woman, the speaker requires absolution, which can only be obtained through her *black* mother and her ability to remove from her daughter the sin

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 53, ll. 26-36; p. 54, ll. 48-53.

<sup>45</sup> Doris Witt, in her book *Black Hunger: Soul Food in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), addresses the association between race and cleanliness. She writes, 'Structural anthropologists argue, of course, that "filth" is a relational category, one that has no absolute existence, no universal definition; filth is simply that which remains outside a given system of order, matter (or actions) out of place', p. 85. She goes on later to say, '[Vertamae] Grosvenor understands "dirt" to be the cultural justification of her forebears' oppression. In her view, dirt might be defined as a nonontological function of (lower) class status that is mistakenly attributed to and ontologized as (black) racial identity...In a sense, dirt is for Grosvenor that which structures the relationship between white and black women. The former generate it; the latter clean it up', pp. 165, 166.

of her oppressor. Maternal love is a source of forgiveness and renewed life, echoing the calls to Africa and its rivers as the earthly source. The speaker journeys to this origin through the sound of the mother's voice, allowing her to transcend limitations of time and place and travel towards the days of halcyon childhood. This may exist only in the imagination, or it may be the invocation for forgiveness and a plea of closeness before the speaker commits suicide or infanticide or both, allowing the purification to be carried out in the afterlife. The mother figure functions as a vehicle through which the persona may no longer be oppressed and is instead transported to unconditional love and peace, thereby finally overcoming the exile in which she is trapped.

Sarah Lawson Welsh writes of this phenomenon:

‘Torn from their mothers and [African] mother culture’ [quoting C. L. Innes] the long memoried women, like Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, can only reconnect with the nurturing, healing figure of the mother imaginatively and spiritually. Invocations to the female deities..., calls to mother figures... and the acknowledgement of the centrality of female community to women’s lives...recur throughout Nichols’s poetry and are characteristic of the women-centeredness of Caribbean women’s writing more widely.<sup>46</sup>

This ‘women-centeredness’, as Welsh phrases it, is integral to the poets in this thesis, in which, through their writing, they acknowledge the ‘centrality of female community’. It is also a significant aspect of the way in which Grace Nichols follows the example of black US poets in contrast to her associations with male Caribbean poets. In his review of *I Is A Long Memoried Woman*, Peter Fraser writes that, ‘Grace Nichols covers much the same ground as Edward K. Braithwaite’s *The Arrivants* [1973] but focuses on those rather shadowy figures who appear in that work, women’.<sup>47</sup> The centrality of women for Nichols is a means through which she demonstrates symmetries with black US poets and writers, apparent throughout her work, particularly in her exaltations of maternity and its associated healing powers. We can see a precedence of motherhood

---

<sup>46</sup> Welsh, pp. 69-70.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Fraser, review reprinted in *Let It Be Told: Essays by Black Woman in Britain*, edited by Laurretta Ngcobo (London, UK: Pluto Press, 1987), p. 104.

and healing in the poetry of Langston Hughes. However, rather than a child returning to the mother, he imagines a mother might be healed, freed even, through her children. In ‘The Negro Mother’ (1931):

I am the child they stole from the sand  
 Three hundred years ago in Africa’s land.  
 I am the dark girl who crossed the wide sea  
 Carrying in my body the seed of the free,  
 I am the woman who worked in the field  
 Bringing cotton and the corn to yield.  
 I am the one who labored as a slave,  
 Beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave—  
 Children sold away from me, husband sold, too.  
 No safety, no love, no respect was due.  
 Three hundred years in the deepest South:  
 But God put a song and a prayer in my mouth.  
 God put a dream like steel in my soul.  
 Now, through my children, I’m reaching the goal.  
 Now, through my children, young and free,  
 I realize the blessings denied to me.<sup>48</sup>

The mother in this poem is in need of cleansing, healing freedom. She is able to transcend spatio-temporal boundaries, like her children, in that their freedom becomes hers. Their wellbeing repays her for a life of servitude. The use of the persona and the mythopoeic ‘I’ here is striking, and this poem could be easily mistaken for one by Nichols or Walker. Nichols embodies Hughes’s literary example in her tone and invocations, an association not previously made by Nichols scholars. Welsh, despite her insights, never draws reference to Hughes in her analysis of Nichols, who, not only crosses the Atlantic, but also responds to many aspects of African American poetics, one of which being the poetic weight of nostalgia, as I shall examine.

For Nichols, the mother is a figure to whom one journeys for cleansing and a symbol of the nostalgia for childhood. The speaker imaginatively travels back to youth but more specifically to the mother as the central agent within these memories, as in ‘Drum Spell’ (1983) and ‘Like a Beacon’ (1984), poems about which Sarah Lawson Welsh writes only briefly. Because of their ability to transport the speaker (and

---

<sup>48</sup> Hughes, *Collected Work*, Vol. 1, p. 221, ll. 7-22.

audience), their significance in Nichols's oeuvre should not be overlooked. Nichols carries her personae back to childhood (perhaps her own) with the power of maternally linked memories and specific imagery to evoke these recollections.

[...]Now I'm child  
 again walking small  
 and careful among the  
 mounds of my mother's yams  
 .....the shoots of her hope-  
 fullness.....the roots of  
 her despair

Now I see my father  
 nimble, catlike crouching  
 with his spear[...]

Mother behold  
 your wilful daughter

Yes the one who ventured  
 beyond our village is back<sup>49</sup>

This is a voyage to both the mother and the childhood over which she has dominance, similar to the ways in which bell hooks describes the responsibility of black women to 'construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination'.<sup>50</sup> By this reckoning, hooks associates the nostalgia of the mother and the homeplace with the formation of her sense of politics, the beginnings of her cultural resistance.

The daughter in the poem is in one moment transported to the instance of both her mother's hopes and despairs, symbolizing the mixed feelings associated with nostalgia—both hopeful longing and painful loss. The paradoxical connotations of this emotion are made into metaphor through the representation of the yams as positive and negative for the mother. The power of this memory and longing for the metaphorical journey towards her instantaneously allow the speaker to step through the yams, evoking the imagery of touch and taste, calling to the prodigal daughter. Walking

<sup>49</sup> Nichols, 'Drum Spell', in *I Is A Long Memored Woman*, pp. 28-29, 30, ll. 17-26, 66-69.

<sup>50</sup> bell hooks, 'Homeplace (a site of resistance)', in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), p. 42.

through the rows mirrors the image of the southern clay in Margaret Walker's poetry, specifically 'Southern Song' (1942), in which she wants to 'lay [her] hand again upon the clay baked by a southern sun,/ to touch the rain-soaked earth/ and smell the smell of soil'.<sup>51</sup> Both poets embody a simultaneous hope and despair, which for Nichols is represented by the yams and the cultivation of them drawing the daughter home, from beyond the village back to the safe environment for which she pines so fervently.

The yams as her central image represent the paradox of nostalgia that is evocative in writings of Ralph Ellison, in *Invisible Man* (1952). Ellison writes:

The odor of baking yams [came] slowly to me, bring[ing] a stab of swift nostalgia. I stopped as though struck by a shot, deeply inhaling, remembering, my mind surging back, back...Yams and years ago. More yams than years ago, though the time seemed endlessly expanded, stretched as thin as the spiraling smoke beyond all recall...I took a bite, finding it as sweet and hot as any I'd ever had, and was overcome with such a surge of homesickness that I turned away to keep my control...overcome by an intense feeling of freedom—simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper. To hell with all that, and as sweet as the yam actually was, it became like nectar with the thought...I had no problem concerning [yams] and I would eat them whenever and where I took the notion. Continue on the yam level and life would be sweet—though somewhat yellowish. Yet the freedom to eat my yams on the street was far less than I had expected upon coming to the city. An unpleasant taste bloomed in my mouth as I bit the end of the yam and threw it in the street; it'd been frost-bitten.<sup>52</sup>

For Ellison, the yams brought about an intensely felt series of emotions. It is at the centre of his childhood, and the smell fills him with happy memories and the forlorn knowledge of a time out of his grasp. The taste of yam makes him so elated that he celebrates his freedom to walk along the city street eating the object of his desire; but it sours in his mouth as he realizes that he had envisioned greater liberties than the simplicity of eating this treat. It is simultaneously liberating and restrictive. The image is made more complex as the negative associations of nostalgia flood the speaker and cloud the joy once experienced. For both Nichols and Ellison, this image is one of jubilation and agony, and her ability to respond to his example gives her access to a

---

<sup>51</sup> Walker, in *For My People*, reprinted in *This Is My Century*, p. 11, ll. 4-6.

<sup>52</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952) (New York, NY: Second Vintage, 1995), pp. 263, 264, 267.

world of disrupted complacencies.

These mixed emotions are, in several poems, strongly associated with tastes, not just of yams, but of any foods with which the mother dominates the landscape of childhood memory. Nichols writes in ‘Like a Beacon’ (1984):

In London  
every now and then  
I get this craving  
for my mother’s food  
I leave art galleries  
in search of plantains  
saltfish/sweet potatoes<sup>53</sup>

This poem is significant because the tastes of the Caribbean and of childhood are associated with the daily activities of the loving woman. It is a craving for person and place as well as for food, and by extension the enjoyment of the mother’s gift to her children. However, the speaker, seemingly autobiographical in this piece, is leaving the art galleries of London, filled with treasures unique to their location. This is also a subtle celebration of Nichols’s journey to London, perhaps the first step in the reclaiming of an identity on the eastern side of the Atlantic, a point that I will revisit. Through the beautiful art in the galleries and the continued desire for the food of childhood despite the surroundings, Nichols demonstrates the power of reminiscence. Memories of the mother’s cooking are intense enough that they supersede the surrounding beauty and importance of the galleries, and the imagery of taste brings about the nostalgia of childhood and place. In the poetry of both Nichols and her US exemplars, place-specific sentimentality is exacerbated by journeys away from origins and then returns to find the place and the self transformed, as I will analyse in the following section.

---

<sup>53</sup> Nichols, *Fat Black Woman’s Poems*, p. 27, ll. 1-7.

### **American Echoes of Transforming Self and Home**

When the poet crosses the Atlantic to immigrate to Britain, it metaphorically functions as the homeward leg of a journey and a reversal of the slave ship traversing the ocean westward. However, the changing personae in Nichols's work, rather than reclaiming a homeland, find themselves situated on the periphery, subject to the continued marginalization of racism, sexism, and classism of a postcolonial London. As John McLeod points out, 'The linking of "old and new worlds"...which Nichols imaginatively forges is facilitated against by the city at large, creating a tension between text and city'.<sup>54</sup> In this new grey environment in which people, practices, and landscapes alienate Nichols's persona from her surroundings, severing her from a sense of inclusion, the Caribbean might be said to become the new Africa, the new nucleus of origins. Its nostalgia thus informs the yearnings of several voices. The journey eastward, this time, becomes another mythic voyage away from the homeland, resulting in the disenchantment and disillusionment of the speaker. After years, an affinity with place may again be forged, originating from imaginative and experiential changes.

From Britain, then, journeys to her Guyana 'home', if it still can be considered as such, bring their own achieved and missed expectations because Nichols and her poetics, as the result of expatriate life, have become more nuanced. This is an important aspect of the identity-construction process. The trope of journey or voyage offers the poet the opportunity to discuss, not only her own autobiographical travelling, but also the metaphorical voyage through time, generations, and tradition, allowing an intervention of spatial, temporal, and cultural factors to reconstruct her identity.

The time in England and return visits to Guyana brought about a more political

---

<sup>54</sup> John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London, UK: Routledge, 2004), p. 121.

and democratic tone in Nichols's poetics. Like the black US poets who rose to prominence during the 1960s, she harnesses protest and questions the status quo of diasporan subject positions. Sometimes this examination is subtle and intermixes the personal and political, such as in Giovanni's work. In the following poem, the persona of the fat black woman is disenchanted by the way that the British conduct funerals, a minor mode of disappointment but one that shades differences from her homeland in stark contrast. The poem is less about death rites and more about the lack of vibrancy and intensity she strongly associates with the Caribbean. In 'Tropical Death' (1983):

The fat black woman want  
a brilliant tropical death  
not a cold sojourn  
in some North Europe far/forlorn

The fat black woman want  
some heat/hibiscus at her feet  
blue sea dress  
to wrap her neat

The fat black woman want  
some bawl  
no quiet jerk tear wiping  
a polite hearse withdrawal<sup>55</sup>

Everything from the weather to the cultural practices strikes the speaker as insufficient and perhaps even disrespectful to the life that has passed. The 'cold sojourn' does not measure up to hibiscus flowers and a warm climate, a seemingly loving response from the natural world out of respect for the deceased, mirroring the tradition of elegy discussed in Chapter Two. The polite reserve with which funerals are carried out in England is insufficient, according to the speaker, when compared to open weeping, keening even, as experienced in her homeland. For her, the mourners' vivacious displays in Guyana confront the power of death; they greet it with emotion strong enough to defeat its loss, sensibilities at odds with each other, such as those in Brooks's poem 'rites for Cousin Vit' (1949), in which the casket that contains the deceased is in

---

<sup>55</sup> Nichols, *Fat Black Woman's Poems*, p. 19, ll. 1-12.

tension with her capacious personality. For Nichols's speaker, this underwhelming response to death underscores her position on the periphery in her new environment. It also testifies to the power of origins, that the culture and location from which one hails are integral to the formation of a concrete sense of identity. The differences in practice exist beyond the simple cultural handling of a funeral, but this example is representative of the contrasts at large and simultaneously bolsters her national pride and alienation; with a growing sense of 'otherness', one longs for inclusive possibility. Rosemary Margangoly George describes this process when she writes:

The subject status of the immigrant, especially that of the non-white immigrant to the west, forces another literary reinscription of the self and home...[its] associations...with the themes of loss, painful homelessness, and the "less-than-whole" subject who longs for assimilation into a national culture.<sup>56</sup>

As Nichols struggles to find her own place within her new environment, even small cultural details can make her feel 'less-than-whole', a feeling she works to overcome.

This poem echoes Langston Hughes's 'Our Land' (1926):

We should have a land of trees,  
Of tall thick trees  
Bowed down with chattering parrots  
Brilliant as the day,  
And not this land where the birds are grey.

Ah, we should have a land of joy,  
Of love and joy and wine and song,  
And not this land where joy is wrong.<sup>57</sup>

This poem also, by commenting on the disappointments of the surroundings, demonstrates the constructive and creative nature of one's origins within a literary framework. Although he was American, Hughes sought to identify himself with an alternative African ancestry from which he could then critique, in this instance, American Puritanism. The disillusionment between actual environment and the poets' mythopoeic constructions of origins, and therefore self, allows Nichols to engage with

---

<sup>56</sup> Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 8.

<sup>57</sup> Hughes, *Collected Work*, Vol. 1, p. 56, ll. 8-15.

the creative nature of homeplaces that Hughes also demonstrates.

That love of what is known (or perceived as known) makes any deviation from it more dramatic, widening the gap between ‘there’ and ‘here’, and making it more difficult for an immigrant to assimilate into another culture. Estrangement functions to intensify a strong home-pride in Nichols, as demonstrated in ‘Deep’ (2005):

Deep  
I Cariwoma  
have always  
carried deep  
these islands,  
this piece of Atlantic coastland  
inside me.<sup>58</sup>

Rather than nostalgia and the pain of loss seen in the imagery-laden poems previously discussed, the intention of this gorgeous tribute to her homeland insists on a deeply felt pride, perhaps for an ideological construction of home, rather than the physical place or personal experience. As Carol Boyce Davies suggests:

Caribbean identities then are products of numerous processes of migration. As a result, many conclude that the Caribbean is not so much a geographical location but a cultural construction based on a series of mixtures, languages, and communities of people.<sup>59</sup>

This ‘cultural construction’ for Nichols pervades her perceptions of her homeland and problematizes the implications of ‘home’ being reinterpreted. She linguistically associates the Atlantic coastline—the western side of it, that is—with the composition and transformation of who she is. The poem suggests that she literally carries it inside her, in the same way that the African slave personae carried their home continent within them when they were removed to the Caribbean, an homage to homeland that has reversed directions across the Atlantic. This home comprises her identity, at least poetically. In these metaphoric lines, the saltwater figuratively runs through her veins. With these kinds of mythologised origins, it is perhaps expected that experiences in Britain might leave her speakers feeling disenfranchised and alone.

---

<sup>58</sup> Nichols, *Startling the Flying Fish*, p. 9, ll. 1-8.

<sup>59</sup> Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (London, UK: Routledge, 1994), p. 13.

Comparisons of location are inescapable for the immigrant exploring and trying to negotiate her new surroundings. In a stanza of 'Out of Africa' (1989), which is also discussed in the previous section, Nichols writes:

Into England of the frost and the tea  
 Into England of the budgie and the strawberry  
 Into England of the trampled autumn tongues  
 Into England of the meagre funerals  
 Into England of the hand of the old woman  
 And the gent running behind someone  
 who's forgotten their umbrella, crying out,  
 'I say...I say-ay.'<sup>60</sup>

Here, too, Nichols's Whitmanesque influence can be seen through the anaphora as well as the close observation and celebration of people, a philanthropy for which he was famous. Although there is a sense of disappointment in this poem, the emotion is nuanced in the manner that Nichols adopts in many of her poems, as she employs Whitman's democratic love of people. The willingness of the man trying to return the forgotten umbrella is a minor gesture and really not integral to the living experience of the immigrant, but to the woman representing marginalised peoples outside the mainstream, as she adjusts to the weather and funereal practices, it is a small notion of human kindness, a gesture that allows the speaker for a moment to feel a sense of connection and perhaps inclusion with the people around her and British culture.

This cultural acceptance occurs only after some time through Nichols's adaptations to the new environment, even if slowly. One of her most famous poems interrogates the ways her identity begins to become more hybridised as she commences her acclimatisation to British life. She writes in 'Hurricane Hits England' (1996):

[...]Like some dark ancestral spectre,  
 Fearful and reassuring:[...]  
  
 Ah sweet mystery,  
 Come to break the frozen lake in me,  
 Shaking the foundations of the very trees  
 within me,  
 Come to let me know

---

<sup>60</sup> Nichols, *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*, p. 30, ll. 13-20.

That the earth is the earth is the earth.<sup>61</sup>

This poem epitomises the characteristics of Nichols's hybrid poetic identity. It is Afro-Caribbean as well as Black British. In these passages, she embodies the mythological and spiritual intonations that I here explicate, and she simultaneously attributes these forces to the transformative power of her malleable perspective on England. Suddenly, there is less a sense of 'here' and 'there', but of one cohesive Earth. Boundaries are a lot more nebulous. In this seminal moment in her poetry, the weather accompanies her on this physical crossing of the Atlantic, figuratively collapsing the binary of here and there. The forces, however, that make her appreciate an established sense of unity across the Atlantic are destructive. She abstains from blind praise for the Caribbean and the nostalgia of youth. Rather, what makes her appreciate her new environment, what 'breaks the frozen lake' within her, are the calamitous tropical winds that arrive in England, another instance in which approaching her subject matter from transformative, even paradoxical, perspectives reveals a more contemplative and therefore layered interpretation of homeplace and selfhood. She realises that the two shores have collided, thus upsetting and reinventing her identity in the process. She has been shaken to her 'very foundation', and the remaining version of herself is one that has been altered, affected, such as the conversion moment explored in the next chapter in Jackie Kay's poem 'Pride' (1998). After living through this experience and the poetic epiphany that follows, she is no longer only Caribbean but is not merely Black British either. She, like Brooks, Walker, Giovanni, and, Kay, has a hybridised poetic identity, which, for Nichols, is dependent on the transmigration between one's origins and one's developed geographies.

Nichols's changing attitude towards England functions in the same way as

---

<sup>61</sup> Nichols, *Sunris*, pp. 34, 35, ll. 6-7, 32-37.

Giovanni's changing or softening tone towards political or revolutionary poetry. The varied approaches within the same poets demonstrate the nature with which they both have multifaceted poetics and the importance of place for Nichols, who, despite the unsettled ground on which her alienation begins, does reconcile with a sometimes hostile Britain. After decades in England, she writes in 2009:

Now after thirty years in a coastal Sussex town  
I freely admit to loving you, luminous white cliffs.  
As much as miners love the coal that kills them.<sup>62</sup>

These humorous lines admit a tension in perspective as well as a morphing identity. However, the fact that the white cliffs of the southeast coast, representational of England and a national pride at large, are likened unto the coal that infiltrates the lungs and causes the deaths of miners makes the reader question what is at stake here. Depending on the coal for their very livelihood, the men succumb to its harmful effects, presenting a paradox about their affection towards it. This dilemma is then extended to England. The speaker claims to have come to love it despite, or perhaps because of, dependence on it and the possible harm it causes to one's sense of self. For Nichols, this results in a shifting paradigm of geography-based articulation—she relies on England and comes to love it whilst enduring its disruptive effects on her national identity, in which she is no longer Afro-Caribbean but becomes Black British.

The speaker's relationship with Guyana becomes equally complex despite the absolute love of her (perceived) homeland. Although the powers of origins are an undeniable force in Nichols's poetics, her view of home is not always a narrowly positive one. In the same way that a place where it is difficult to assimilate can eventually become a source of affection, a location one has always loved can later reveal its own shortcomings, exacerbated by Nichols's developing intensity as a

---

<sup>62</sup> Nichols, 'Chalk', in *Picasso, I Want My Face Back* (Tarsset, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2009), p. 34, ll. 11-13.

political poet, thereby altering her perspective of the condition in her homeland. These differences in homeplaces may have as much to do with the observer as the location. At play are the complex ways in which one can be both insider and outsider and also the effects of time and politics on both individual and geography. 'Home' comes to take on new meanings, and, as a person gains new experiences and insight, the personal definition of it can change, where one's feet are on either side of a divide, as I evaluate in the next chapter on Kay's experiences. These complexities surface when Nichols writes 'Back-Home Contemplation' (1984):

There is more to heaven  
 than meets the eye  
 there is more to sea  
 than watch the sky  
 there is more to earth  
 than dream the mind

O my eye

The heavens are blue  
 but the sun is murderous  
 the sea is calm  
 but the waves reap havoc  
 the earth is firm  
 but trees dance shadows  
 and bush eyes turn<sup>63</sup>

This fourteen-line poem may be interpreted as a fractured sonnet. The rhythm, rhyme, and volta are there to signpost the reader towards the tradition, yet this would clearly be a modern interpretation. In Chapters One and Two, I examined how Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker innovate with the form to stretch its boundaries and intensify the tension held within it. This poem, too, as a fragmented sonnet mirrors the contentious nature of the content. The sun is murderous, and the waves wreak havoc, whilst one notices the striking beauty. As the poet claims, there is more than meets the eye. Some darker or deleterious aspect exists below the surface, some eye beneath the bush, and this is juxtaposed with the splendour the viewer sees first.

---

<sup>63</sup> Nichols, *Fat Black Woman's Poems*, p. 41 (entire poem).

The paradoxes within the poem as well as her language choices link this political sonnet with Walker's 'The Struggle Staggers Us' (1942) and Brooks's 'the progress' (1945). In the former, Walker writes:

And this is more than fighting to exist;  
 more than revolt and war and human odds.  
 There is a journey from the me to you.  
 There is a journey from the you to me.  
 A union of the two strange worlds must be.

Brooks writes in the latter:

Still we remark on patriotism, sing,  
 Salute the flag, thrill heavily, rejoice  
 For death of men who too saluted, sang.  
 But inward grows a soberness, an awe,  
 A fear, a deepening hollow through the cold.

All three poems reveal a necessary paradox to represent the impending social change, an additional stage upon which Nichols rehearses an American narrative. 'Two strange worlds' must be united, and, for Nichols, the destructive properties of Guyana's natural features very well might cause damage to the citizens as well. Just like the coal that kills the miners, the source of origins might be the agent of demise in a biblical cycle of genesis and Armageddon. The waves and sun, the benefactors of beauty and peace, are also the agents of wreckage. Likewise, the people living quietly, perhaps even within the bounds of subversion, are those who will ultimately revolt. The fact that the title of Nichols's poem suggests contemplation and a sense of quiet fondness, whilst the subject matter is precariously situated on a precipice, introduces an irony that problematizes the poem. This is not simply a reverie about the powers of origins such as 'Deep', but it instead suggests that those same powers can be both generative and consumptive. The people in the poem are brimming with tension just beneath the surface, an observation that demonstrates the perceptiveness of an insider and the objectivity of an outsider.

For Nichols, returning to the place of her youth produces its own set of

emotions, which are complicated by manifold perspectives. Although her personal place of origins floods her with sentimentality, such as in ‘Child-Kingdom’ (1989), she is also overcome by the troubling socioeconomic conditions, as when she writes ‘Walking With My Brother in Georgetown’ (1989). Analysing these poems in tandem reveals a poetics that is both celebratory and critical of her homeland. In the former:

Now I return to my child-kingdom  
To my brownwater house of many mansions  
To my green and sunbaked pasturelands

How I crouched on the small of my days then  
Framing the plasmic eye of a patwa  
The constant O-ing of the little fish mouth  
The groggy fish-eye taking me out

How I bit into green guavas then  
Belly-binding  
Dress strap hanging, a little like  
A beggar-maid princess

And cows sang for me  
Donkeys heralded me  
Sheep parted at my coming

And I was God-child  
To all the brown waters  
I surveyed.<sup>64</sup>

In this particular poem, journeying home involves a deified return.<sup>65</sup> From a craft standpoint, Nichols’s use of imagery allows the memories to sing for the reader. Like the adult reminiscing, one can clearly see the child playing in the water, eating the fruit, and the biblical feeling that the livestock respond to her very presence.

Nichols channels biblical imagery, and she becomes the Christ-Child, with a wave of a small hand ordering the world around her. This overly simplified and egocentric version (to place it firmly within the imaginative properties of a child) of

---

<sup>64</sup> Nichols, *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*, p. 42 (entire poem).

<sup>65</sup> This deified return positions itself against Elizabeth Bishop’s adaptation of the biblical story, in her version of ‘The Prodigal’ in which she writes: ‘Carrying a bucket along a slimy board/ he felt the bats’ uncertain staggering flight,/ his shuddering insights, beyond his control,/ touching him. But it took him a long time/ finally to make up his mind to go home’, anthologised in *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century, Volume 2*, edited by Robert Hass and John Hollander (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the US, 2000), p. 736.

journeying homeward echoes Walt Whitman's own poetic myth-making, such as when he first writes in 1855:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,  
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,  
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.<sup>66</sup>

For Nichols and Whitman, the speaker's identity is formed through the liberating power of the declarative voice. Nichols elevates the persona and constructs home through this heightened transformation.

This encomium is directly contrasted with the images presented in the following poem in which the political circumstances jar the sensibility of the speaker, even as she walks through familiar streets. She writes in the latter piece:

Dih city dying  
dih trenches seem smaller  
dih street  
dih houses  
an everyting an everybody  
look suh rundown  
an stamp wid dih dry ah hunger

You been away too long girl  
smile mih brudder

Dih city dying  
we need a purging  
new fires burning  
some incense  
dih sun too indifferent

You been away too long girl  
smile mih brudder

An ah hearing dub-music blaring  
An ah seeing dih man-youths rocking  
Hypnosis on dih streets  
Rocking to dih rhythm of dere own deaths  
Locked in a shop-front beat

You been away too long girl  
smile mih brudder

Dih city dying  
we need new blooding  
an boning  
too many deaths unmourning  
Jonestown, Walter

---

<sup>66</sup> Whitman, 'Song of Myself', in *Leaves of Grass*, section 21, p. 60, ll. 1-3.

time like ground still

Hibiscus blooming  
 People grooving  
 Girl, why yuh sehing dih city dying  
 Seh me brudder sighing

Maybe I lying  
 Maybe I dying.<sup>67</sup>

This poem is an example of the familiar dictum that you can't go home. Of course, one can always *go* home, but, in the confines of this sentiment, it is impossible for the person and the place to remain unchanged. There will never again be the same person returning to the same location, as each half experiences time passing. With the disillusionment present in this poem, the sense of identity and the ability to remember places with a childlike innocence have diminished. The fact that the speaker, likely Nichols herself rather than a persona, is in disagreement with her brother illustrates that, through the act of emigrating and returning, her identity has undergone a radical conversion. The way she remembers Guyana—the glow of her memories—has been transformed by seeing it afresh. Her awareness has changed, along with her political sensibility. Her brother indicates that the city is not in fact dying and insinuates that her vision has morphed as a result of being away so long.

The reader can ascertain that both speakers might be right here. There is, in actuality, life all around her, with people living their daily lives with joy—grooving next to the blooming hibiscus despite the indifferent sun. However, she looks around Georgetown and remembers the social upheaval, the Jonestown massacre of 1978, political violence, and in the same tone used by Hughes in 'Negro Ghetto' (1931) or 'Air Raid Over Harlem' (1936), conveys the idea that the faces of the diasporan peoples communicate louder than the neighbourhood itself and the history it houses.<sup>68</sup>

The suggestion that the citizens around her are rocking to the rhythms of their

---

<sup>67</sup> Nichols, *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*, pp. 39-40 (entire poem).

<sup>68</sup> Hughes, *Collected Work*, Vol. 1, pp. 149, 243.

own deaths is a biting criticism. The fact that she makes the observation in the first place would indicate that she is no longer an insider, despite the magnetic forces of Guyana that cause her to remember wading in the water and eating guavas, as in 'Child-Kingdom'. By emigrating across the Atlantic, she has changed her identity and the lens through which she sees her homeland. There is still a sense of home-pride in the place of her origins, but her point of view has altered. The speaker ends the poem with a line that waivers in its resolve; maybe she is the one dying or lying rather than the location she has criticised. The reader is left to infer that she is unsure which opinion of her origin is correct. This conversation with her brother does, however, reveal the complicated relationship with her homeland, in which the insider and outsider aspects for Nichols must be considered simultaneously, just as what she experiences while living a marginalised life in England.

In some poems, Nichols approaches her homeland with deep knowledge and devotion. However, this comes with quite a striking sense of awareness, a realisation that the beauty must be kept in balance with the people's realities. In the following two poems, Nichols achieves this balance between praise and caution when she writes 'Of Golden Gods' (1983) and 'Emerald Heart' (1989). Both pieces encapsulate the power of her homeplace to evoke intense emotions. In the former:

[...]deepening  
 from azure  
 to indigo darkness  
 circling slowly the  
 archipelago  
 of burnished green

moving from land to sea  
 from swamp to Southern  
 vastness  
 where the rains have been  
 falling hardest  
 in the pit of the serpent jungle<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> Nichols, *I Is A Long Memored Woman*, p. 59, ll. 7-18.

In this bird's-eye view of her homeland, the scenery is really breathtaking. However, by her concluding on the serpent, the audience is reminded of danger, fear, and foreboding, as well as some potential sinfulness. There is almost a tone of acceptance that does not object to the presence of the snake in the jungle; the speaker must acknowledge the evil that is potentially lying beneath the surface. Nichols writes:

But I have journeyed deep  
into the emerald heart  
of my country

Slept at mountaintop  
with that curled knowledge  
that Kanaima could devour my sleep

I ate labba  
drank creek water  
waded up to my knees  
through all the vast harshness  
the irredeemable beauty

Like a simple peasant woman  
I weep  
for all the harvests  
that could have been.<sup>70</sup>

This profound poem embraces the unity of positive and negative attributes more widely and again mirrors the figurative language and musicality established in 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' (1921). Journeying into the heart of the country and sleeping at the mountaintop echoes 'I've known rivers:/ Ancient, dusky rivers./ My soul has grown deep like the rivers'. She employs the autobiographical 'I' and is changed as a result of this journey, actual or metaphorical, in the profound way that Hughes has changed, has 'grown deep'. She evokes the Amerindian figure of Kanaima, who is the 'figure of death and spirit of vengeance'.<sup>71</sup> The danger this mythological figure represents is known, and she continues resolutely, regardless of the depth of the rivers, so to speak. She claims that she ate labba and drank creek water, referencing the proverb in Guyana

<sup>70</sup> Nichols, *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*, p. 41 (entire poem).

<sup>71</sup> Glossary in the back of Nichols's *I Have Crossed An Ocean* (Northumberland, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2010), p. 187.

that, if one does these things, her or she is destined to return; she does indeed return.

Yet in this encomium, the terms ‘harshness’ and ‘irredeemable’ indicate that the beauty of her country exists inseparably from darker forces. The solemn tone of the speaker even amidst the natural beauty is paradoxically intensified through feelings of loss, particularly a sense of missed potential. She weeps for the harvests that ‘could have been’, draping a forlorn tone upon the poem. It is impossible to know what could have been, but to wonder, in some way, rejects what has actually transpired. This brings the poem into the realm of the political, renouncing the present situation, the poverty of the people, and the conditions that many Guyanians are living in. This protest still remains quiet and contemplative, however, indicating that the journey homeward and the poet’s feelings about it are extremely complex. This poem also mirrors Walker’s ‘Dark Blood’ (1942).<sup>72</sup> In both compositions, the poets anguish over the disparity between deeply felt pride and pain. Their literary task is to elevate this tension as the speaker attempts to reconcile these halves. The difficulty in doing so is emblazoned upon the reader in that one is left with a perplexing image of home and how the self relates to it. Ultimately, there may not be a reconciliation but a complicated dialectic.

In the final pair of poems in the chapter, the people’s poverty and disparaging living situations are acknowledged but with a strong sense of honour rather than sadness. The speaker finds them to be beautiful, like the familiar surroundings. Nichols writes in ‘Bathing in the Misty Cauldron of Sea’ (2005):

Bathing in the misty cauldron of Sea  
with the plain sky above my head  
and the grit of smooth sand under my feet—  
I face up to blue exultant waters  
and the little houses clinging  
to the hillside in the distance—  
the hutches of the poor whose ancestors  
including mine—worked the hot labourious fields—

---

<sup>72</sup> Walker, *This Is My Century*, p. 8, ll. 9-18.

For them I bask  
a kind of ancestral back-pay.<sup>73</sup>

The poet again takes an ownership of the experiences of her ancestors, but now she is an agent upon them as well. Revelling in the island and her successful life are the means of overcoming the labour forced upon her forebears, as though her pleasure and success are dedicated to their suffering, as though her ability to savour her location and life in some way compensates her ancestors for their historical struggles. This mirrors the notion in Hughes's poem 'The Negro Mother' (1931) in that the freedom of the progeny make up for the enslavement of the ancestors. Rather than the historical figure journeying forwards to the speaker, she journeys backwards to the past, with her life affecting theirs. In 'As If I'd Eaten Labba' (2005), she writes:

As if I'd eaten labba  
and drunk the proverbial creek water

As if I'd been seduced  
by the lure of the Cascadura

As if I'd made a covenant  
something keeps me to these shores—

Here where trade winds breathe islands  
and scarlet ibises sear the horizon  
and faces startle with their sudden  
cheek-bones of survival.<sup>74</sup>

She is drawn to Guyana through forces out of her control, attesting to the power of origins. No matter where she may travel, something keeps her returning to those shores, and, through the final image of the poem, the reader is led to believe that it is, in fact, the people and their perseverance. Their characteristics are as important as the natural beauty, but it is their survival that is most distinctive. Their faces startle the onlooker, a lifetime or more of struggle upon them, as the ancestry informs the present being.

Nichols's poetics is comprised of translations and transformative journeys

---

<sup>73</sup> Nichols, *Startling the Flying Fish*, p. 75 (entire poem).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p. 86 (entire poem).

across the Atlantic. ‘Literature isn’t a static thing’, as the poet reckons.<sup>75</sup> Her travels become physical and metaphysical voyages towards self-identity and poetics, with the alienation and inclusion comprised therein. Whether through the use of an historical persona or from a more contemporary perspective, Nichols transcends the boundaries of centuries of history and thousands of miles, balancing the power of origins and the changing forces of one’s life experiences and locations, often with varying musical tonalities and resounding images. This aesthetic is demonstrated by an undeniable link of US influences in her work, a connection that has been critically overlooked until now.<sup>76</sup> Her indebtedness to Whitman, Hughes, and several black US female poets, especially Margaret Walker, is significant in her poetics and its construction and re-creation of homeplaces and selfhood, her ‘leaves of blackness’. Like the oeuvre of Jackie Kay to follow, Nichols’s work has been forged from the human need to journey, going towards one’s source and then again, as her mother said, ‘to [her] wide futures’.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Nichols, *Let It Be Told*, p. 102.

<sup>76</sup> See Note 2 regarding the oversights by Sarah Lawson Welsh, the most prominent Nichols scholar, omitting a link between Nichols’s poetry and her American influences.

<sup>77</sup> Nichols, ‘Praise Song For My Mother’, in *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*, p. 44, ll. 15.

**CHAPTER 5****JACKIE KAY:  
TRANSFORMATIONS AND  
COMPLEX DUALISMS**

Jackie Kay, born in Edinburgh of Scottish and Nigerian descent and adopted by white parents, engages in a poetics of transformation. Like Grace Nichols, throughout her career, these changes are often the result of journeying, actual or imaginative, through temporal, cultural, spatial, historic, and personal transitions, resulting in shifted perspectives, altered awareness, and a sense of doubleness—the state of being two heritages at once, as well as being ‘in between’. This chapter will examine how Kay’s poetry negotiates a set of metamorphoses. Her central poetic metaphor, I would argue, it is the trope of adoption or appropriation. Within the framework of her literary imagination, she adopts her Nigerian ancestry in her adult life and designates its cultural productions and traditions as her own; she also appropriates the fraught racial history of the American blues as a personal narrative that enables her to transcend the racism and marginalisation she experiences in Scotland. This combination allows her to establish an identity borne out of prejudice that is translated into a state of inclusion and liberation. Kay’s poetic mode in some ways *creates*, rather than simply describes, the doubleness of her identity, a dualism resulting from the significance, tension, and exchange of cultural polarities.

Fundamental to my discussion will be Kay’s role as a transatlantic poet. From Scotland, she links herself to the influence of US culture, geography, and history. This originates in her love of the blues, especially the oeuvre and life of the blueswoman Bessie Smith. She writes specifically about Smith in both poetry and prose, and she adopts and *adapts* her blues style in the crafting of her own variations of blues songs, poems that employ a bluesy tone, persona, subject, or address. Her affinity towards

Smith is more than a simple influence. The link with the blueswoman provides a kind of freedom from racial marginalisation and further substantiates her identification with her African heritage, as I demonstrate in this chapter.

By linking her poetry with the blues and other African American cultural productions, she conjoins herself historically, geographically, and culturally to the history of racism in the US as a way of accessing a dialogue about racial issues. To do this, she employs historical *dramatis personae*, the autobiographical 'I', and adoption of subjectivities as her own, rather in the manner apparent in my analysis of the other poets in the thesis. Poetry's capacity, for Kay, is that it can be a space in which histories and cultures encounter and perhaps transform each other, forming a dynamic interchange across the Atlantic.

Kay's transatlantic role is not limited to her association with US culture. While living in Scotland, she demonstrates a strong sense of national pride, instilled in her by the example of her parents, but this coexists and is undercut by the racism and social subjugation she experienced as a child and throughout much of her adult life. This sense of 'otherness' informs her literary imagination and subsequently contributes to the connection and appreciation of her African heritage, even while motivating her choice to create distance from the culture with which she first associated herself. Eventually, journeys to Africa become life-altering actuality, as she travels to meet her biological father and other paternal relatives. The exploration of these roots takes on its own significance in the development of her identity and poetics.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout these voyages, she discovers in herself a love of her inherited homeland and an intuition and understanding of its people and their traditions, which then problematizes her understanding of and identification with her Scottish heritage.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kay says of her visit, 'I'm thinking about when I'll be back before I've even left, and that Nigeria has started to steal a little piece of my heart', *Red Dust Road* (London, UK: Picador, 2010), pp. 206-207.

This tension is what Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr have described as a process in which ‘Ethnic and national identities operate in the lives of individuals by connecting them with some people, dividing them from others. Such identities are often deeply integral to a person’s sense of self, defining an “I” by placing it against a background of “we”’.<sup>2</sup> The poetry and prose that I explore in this chapter interrogate the dialectic of both ‘connecting’ and ‘dividing’ these heritages and what that process means for her changing identity, against the backdrop of a community. After the discovery of her African background, Kay is *both* Scottish and Nigerian. She is aware that this is a critical moment in her own racial and national awareness, forcing her to examine how these complexities can and cannot coexist.

Through these links, Kay is able to transcend spatial and temporal limitations to claim as her own multiple national identities and sets of cultural norms. Simultaneously, she experiences transitions of self through the fluctuations of personal relationships and uses metaphor to encapsulate these changes. For example, as a symbol for transition and subsequent transformation, the image of the river recurs repeatedly in her poetry. The motif represents a path towards roots or origins, as well as a blurring of boundaries, allowing the poet to articulate a sense of being in between two metaphorical shores, intensifying the constructed dualisms of her identity. This imagery further links her to Margaret Walker and Grace Nichols, who were, in turn, inspired by the influential river metaphors of Walt Whitman and Langston Hughes. Even beyond the river motif, Kay explores a doubleness and an identity located in liminal space. This chapter will show that her literal and figurative journeys through place and imaginative axes of time, as well as her transitions through various poetic modes of expression and

---

<sup>2</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr, ‘Multiplying Identities’, in *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (1992), p. 627.

musicality, catalyse her radical transformations of attitude, self-awareness, and nationalism, replete with intertextuality that crosses the Atlantic.

**Empathy and Identity:  
The Lasting Impact of the Queen of Blues**

The blues might be said to originate from a folk legacy that evolves through successive metamorphoses from work songs, field hollers, and sorrow songs. As Adam Gussow, suggests, a study of the blues:

begins in the South in the 1890s because blues music, too, began to emerge as a folk form during that decade, coalescing out of a welter of extant black musics—field hollers, work songs, ragtime ditties, folk ballads, and spirituals—but extending them all the direction of pained, restless, sometimes euphoric subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

The blues carries with it a long racially specific narrative, here attributed to the provenance provided by a post-slavery South, sharecropping, and other laborious obstacles, as well as various forms of folk art born naturally out of cultural experience and expression. The origins of the blues, according to the music historian Paul Oliver, also originate from the musical traditions of the peoples of Western Africa, where the majority of American slavery traumatically begins.<sup>4</sup>

As a child, Jackie Kay first heard the blues in her parents' home in Glasgow, and this was a springboard for the development of her sense of selfhood and role as a transatlantic poet. Hearing her Scottish father's praise of an African American blues singer is a microcosm of her triangulation between the United States, Africa, and Scotland. This seemingly inconsequential cultural edification establishes the imaginative space in which many cultures are suddenly linked in the formation of her

---

<sup>3</sup> Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (1970), reprinted in *Yonder Come the Blues* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 90-105. Oliver's study relies on the technical aspects of tonality and chord structure, as well as common use of instrumentation, to link the tribal music of the savannah with what is later seen in African American music, a foray into the technicality of music that, due to space restriction, will not be undertaken in this chapter. He also points to the parallels in attitudes towards and functions of music in African *griots* and American blues artists.

own personal identity. She writes of this experience in 1997:

So the first time I saw Bessie Smith, it really was like finding a friend. I saw her before I heard her. My father—a Scottish communist who loved the blues—bought me my first double album. I was twelve...I remember taking the album off him and pouring over it, examining it for every detail. Her image on the cover captivated me. She looked so familiar. She looked like somebody I already knew in my heart of hearts. ...I put her down and picked her up. I stroked her proud, defiant cheeks. I ran my fingers across her angry eyebrows...The album cover was like a strange two-sided coin. The two faces of Bessie Smith. I knew from that first album that I had made a friend for life.<sup>5</sup>

This specific encounter with Smith was formative for Kay as a child. Hearing Smith's voice and seeing her face on the album cover gave Kay an ally in a world in which she was a racial minority. The impressionable young girl, through the realization that this powerhouse figure was a black woman, had suddenly created a type of alter ego, a figure with whom she could bond over race, gender, and a seeming set of shared problems. Her writing suggests that this was catalysed by the simple gesture of placing her own black hand on the photo of Smith's black face, seeing this shared visualisation of race. Out of the blue (or blues), she had found a partner in her racial tribulations, someone, as her writing has demonstrated, whose skin tone resembled her own, and an avenue towards a higher sense of freedom that emerges from overcoming racial prejudice. As she suggested in my recent interview, 'There wasn't a means of talking about racism in Scotland or even acknowledging it. So when I had to look to role models of that, it was an American role model I looked to. The same with writers'.<sup>6</sup> Kay's return to African American activists, writers, poets, and musicians is a source of inspiration and aids her own articulation of racial and poetic identity.

In the poem, 'The Red Graveyard' (1993), Kay writes of the seminal moment this transatlantic bond begins, when she laid her hand on Smith's face on the album cover; then, with the same intensity as this visual link, the pervasiveness with which

---

<sup>5</sup> Jackie Kay, *Bessie Smith* (Bath, UK: Absolute Press, 1997), pp. 9, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Jackie Kay in interview with K. E. Concannon, 18 April, 2013, Newcastle, UK, printed in entirety as the Appendix to this thesis.

Smith's voice carried through the house colours many of her childhood memories. The nature of this interception is explored when she writes:

There are some stones that open in the night like flowers.  
Down in the red graveyard where Bessie haunts her lovers.  
There are stones that shake and weep in the heart of night  
Down in the red graveyard where Bessie haunts her lovers.

Why do I remember the blues?  
I am five or six or seven in the back garden;  
the window is wide open;  
her voice is slow motion through the heavy summer air.  
Jelly roll. Kitchen man. Sausage roll. Frying pan.

Inside the house where I used to be myself,  
her voice claims the rooms. In the best room even  
something has changed the shape of my silence.  
Why do I remember her voice and not my own mother's?  
Why do I remember the blues?

My mother's voice. What was it like?  
A flat stone for skitting. An old rock.  
Long long grass. Asphalt. Wind. Hail.  
Cotton. Linen. Salt. Treacle.  
I think it was a peach.  
I hear it down to the ribbed stone.

I am coming down the stairs in my father's house.  
I am five or six or seven. There is fat thick wallpaper  
I always caress, bumping flower into flower.  
She is singing. (Did they play anyone else ever?)  
My father's feet tap a shiny beat on the floor.

Christ, my father says, that's some voice she's got.  
I pick up the record cover. And now. This is slow motion.  
My hand swoops, glides, swoops again.  
I pick up the cover and my fingers are all over her face.  
Her black face. Her magnificent black face.  
That's some voice. His shoes dancing on the floor.

There are some stones that open in the night like flowers  
Down in the red graveyard where Bessie haunts her lovers.  
There are stones that shake and weep in the heart of night  
Down in the red graveyard where Bessie haunts her lovers.<sup>7</sup>

In Kay's memory, hearing Smith and seeing her exist in slow motion, her voice floating to the back garden, her face looking back at her from the album cover. This slowed movement is an intervention with temporality and is suggestive of the power that the memories have over Kay's realistic time continuum. In the altered temporal quality of

---

<sup>7</sup> Kay, in *Other Lovers* (1993), reprinted in *Darling* (Tarsset, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2007), p. 73 (entire poem).

this memory, the focus is on the movement between ignorance and awareness, from isolation to inclusion, the kind of movement that will be seen in other poems discussed in this chapter. Kay transitions between where she used to be herself, changing the ‘shape of [her] silence’ into a new kind of articulation, setting up the trajectory of her cultural identity in which her later adoption of her African half forces her to change the shape of, or re-evaluate, her Scottish self. This also implies for the reader that she was no longer silent after hearing Smith, perhaps alluding to the development of her identity or her poetic voice. The reader likely understands from the poem that the record was played all the time, mirroring how the phenomenon of recorded blues affected its wide cultural reception throughout black populations in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Hearing Smith’s voice caused an awakening, underscored by the act of seeing Smith’s face on the album cover, a truly transformative experience.

She transitions between being an outsider or ‘other’ in her community to having some new kind of camaraderie, recognising the likeness between herself and Bessie. It functions to counterpoise the exclusion she faces, such as when she recalls in 2010:

Eventually, perhaps, over the course of your own lifetime, when you think back to different experiences of racism, all your grievances start to congregate, huddled together in dark overcoats as if they were related. The person who says, ‘No, we support them,’ becomes linked in your head to the person who shouts Wog and Nigger, and they gather together, like clusters or cancerous cells.<sup>9</sup>

The memory of Smith’s influence provides an avenue away from the feelings of ‘otherness’. Three senses are combined in this one seminal moment; she hears the voice, sees the face, and touches the photograph. From this point, Smith is appropriated to the purpose of an imaginary friend. This is not meant as critically as it sounds; rather it is a functional term to describe the importance with which Kay attributed Smith’s

---

<sup>8</sup> ‘Through the blues record,...[one] was able to hear the voice of his counterpart from a thousand miles away; hear him and feel a bond of sympathy which no other medium could impart at such a personal level...Their direct impact on the senses made a positive impression and they could be played again and again, repeating their message in every playing’, Paul Oliver, *Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (New York, NY: Oak Publications, 1968), pp. 2, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Kay, *Red Dust Road*, p. 192.

presence, as important as a friend in the flesh. The centrality of this figure for the young, impressionable girl takes the place of the imaginary friend written about in the poem 'Brendon Gallacher' (1992), in which the eponymous boy's character is developed so fully that the persona speaks of the death of him when her mother makes it known that he isn't real.<sup>10</sup> She confirmed my suggestion of this role when she said:

It's a nice idea. Yeah, I think it's a lovely idea because Brendon Gallacher is completely imaginary, and Bessie Smith was a real person. The relationship that I had with her was kind of partly imaginary because it was partly fantasy and partly I imagined her in my life the way that you do with an imaginary friend, you know. And she's very, very vivid to me in the same way that an imaginary friend is vivid. And she was present and absent in the same way as a person that's made up in your head.<sup>11</sup>

The role of an imaginary friend or alter ego demonstrably exists within Kay's literary frame of reference. Smith taking on this same significance, as a kind of double self for Kay, is grounded in the possibility that the creative poet constructs a companion as a means of overcoming a difficult lived experience.

Beginning from this moment in the text, the life of Smith became a lens through which the young Kay could imagine her own life and her own development. It creates a doubleness between her reality and her imagination, allowing her to locate her identity between her actual life in Glasgow and the one she adopted from this central figure in her consciousness. It is a kind of metaphoric transatlantic passage. She writes in 1997:

I did not think that Bessie Smith only belonged to African Americans or that Nelson Mandela belonged to South Africans. I could not think like that because I knew then of no black Scottish heroes that I could claim for my own. I reached out and claimed Bessie. When I was a young girl, Bessie Smith comforted me, told me I was not alone, kept me company. I could imagine her life as I invented my own; I would not have grown up in the same way without her.<sup>12</sup>

Kay began to idolise Smith, especially in her delicate and difficult formative years. She celebrated her voice, her music, and especially the power she ascribed to her. She says, '[Smith's] a strong woman. She didn't take any rubbish from anybody. And what you

---

<sup>10</sup> Kay, in *Two's Company* (1992), reprinted in *Darling*, p. 201.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Appendix.

<sup>12</sup> Kay, *Bessie Smith*, p. 15.

*can* survive will just make you stronger. And it made me think about survival as a response to racism...She used her singing voice to fight against the Ku Klux Klan'.<sup>13</sup> In Kay's mind, Smith had the autonomy through her songs to control the exterior world to the desires of her own will, thereby giving her an almost godlike power over the natural sphere and those around her.

Kay could construct her idol through this encomium 'The Same Note' (1991):

Every note she sang, she bent her voice to her will;	<i>a</i>
her voice was a wood instrument or a wind one,	<i>b</i>
her voice had the power to turn the sails of a windmill,	<i>a</i>
or knock down a tree with the force of a hurricane.	<i>b</i>
[...]She could tell every story she wanted to tell;	<i>a</i>
and pass on through the new towns, across the mountain.	<i>b</i>
Her voice could bring people running, like the church bell	<i>a</i>
[...]could tell them she'd been in their heaven or hell.	<i>a</i>
Every note she sang, she bent her voice to her will. <sup>14</sup>	<i>a</i>

In this account, Smith's voice has the capability to transform the world around her as well as the consciousness of the listener; Kay identifies one of the double aspects of the blues: its capacity to represent the singer's heaven or hell, and by extension the listener's as well. This power is mirrored, according to Angela Davis's interpretation, by Smith's ability to transform or at least impress upon—in addition to the listener's emotions—the musical, cultural, and political world around her, such as when Smith sings in 1928: 'Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today/ He would do anything you ask him in the name of the U.S.A./ Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you'.<sup>15</sup> Davis says of this socially transformative song:

According to the prevailing notions of protest music, "Poor Man's Blues" can be seen as a venerable but forgotten ancestor of the social protest genre in black popular music. Its impassioned denunciation of injustice would be repeated time and time again across the rich continuum of black music—in blues, in jazz, in rhythm and blues, in funk, and in rap. This pioneering song established social protest themes as legitimate content for African-American music.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Interview, Appendix.

<sup>14</sup> Kay, in *The Adoption Papers* (1991), reprinted in *Darling*, p. 72, ll. 1-4, 10-12, 18-19.

<sup>15</sup> Bessie Smith, 'Poor Man's Blues' (1928), lyrics reprinted by Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1999), p. 96.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 97.

Through Davis's prose, Smith is transformative politically and culturally; through Kay's verse, emotionally—both with equal weight on the audience, 'telling every story she wanted to tell'.

Here, one can see that the rhythm and rhyme of this poem might be viewed through the lens of the blues, with its two approximate rhyming sounds through slant rhyme, three lines of rhyme at the end of the stanza, and the strong iambic cadence, echoing the natural pattern of speech. This allows the poet the space in which to adapt the blues to her own mode of expression. She says of this adaptation in her own work:

[Blues] has informed me, my work, in lots of different ways. One: it made me think that I could be bold with subject matter. Because in the blues, there is no subject too shocking...and any theme can be dealt with in that form. And two: it made me think about narrative forms in poetry and being able to tell a story at the same time as writing a poem.<sup>17</sup>

Often, the stories that Kay tells through her bluesy poems are those of racism and the racial narrative in which the genre is anchored, as I shall examine further.

Whilst Kay imaginatively journeys with Smith through the American South, her identity becomes more solidified as she attaches her racial perspective to Smith's. She associates herself with the racism of a Jim Crow-dominated South, as she experiences the racial oppression around her in Scotland, an additional level on which Kay and Smith are associated, as she writes in the poem, 'In the Pullman' (1993):

Bessie and I are in her Pullman heading for Tennessee.  
 Bessie and I are in her Pullman heading for Tennessee.  
 We got so much heartbreak, we can't divide it easily.  
 I take one piece, she takes another, we both drive  
 And our sadness drives further,  
 It's way up ahead, ahead of Bessie and me,

And even in the springtime it's hanging from the pawpaw tree.  
 The road is long and flat, the fields are repeating the cotton.  
 The road is so long and flat. Life is like that.  
 We drive without moving. We try and carry on, but  
 There's this big sadness hanging from the pawpaw tree.  
 It's way up ahead, ahead of Bessie and me.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Interview, Appendix.

<sup>18</sup> Kay, in *Other Lovers*, reprinted in *Darling*, p. 71 (entire poem).

Formally, this poem employs the blues rhyme scheme of *aaba* and is heavy in blues-like repetition and themes, including the blues tropes of travel, the centrality of agriculture, and, of course, heartbreak. It accomplishes several things simultaneously. She links with Smith, not only her identity, but also her heartache. As Kay (or the speaker in the poem) struggles, she imaginatively forges a figure who can empathize with her troubles, and vice versa.<sup>19</sup> Through this imaginative journeying, she is in two places at once, two times at once, and has crafted two halves of a partnership in turmoil and triumph. Kay need not experience her own woes and joys alone because she and Bessie are riding together for Tennessee.

By travelling across the Atlantic in this way, the poem also comes to signify the narrative of racism in the American South. The jointly felt weariness is not just of life experience, but a long and painful history of hatred; the sadness hanging from the pawpaw tree is not merely representative of their emotions but is a metaphor for the lynchings of black people throughout the United States. It directly signifies and responds to the song ‘Strange Fruit’ (1939) sung by Billie Holiday, written by Lewis Allen, the nom de plume for Abel Meeropol. This song, which Holiday calls her ‘personal protest’, includes the following lines:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,  
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
 Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,  
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.  
 Pastoral scene of the gallant south,  
 The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
 Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,  
 Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.  
 Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,  
 For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
 For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,

---

<sup>19</sup> Within the blues convention, there is a tendency to use the dyadic address, that is, of presenting the song to a single important other. Lead Belly’s ‘Where Did You Sleep Last Night?’ is a good example of this. There is a theory in Sidney Mintz and Richard Price’s *Birth of African American Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992) that the Middle Passage created a fixation on dyadic bonds in diasporic culture, pp. 42-45. This is epitomized by the use of ‘Brother’ as an address in a lot of black US speech, as I discuss in Chapter One. In light of this familial association, Kay’s transformation of Smith into another kind of imaginary friend functions on an even deeper, and more historical, level.

Here is a strange and bitter crop.<sup>20</sup>

This song was significant in its outraged protest to the practice of lynching—a physical act of violence that represented the larger culture of hatred and racism in the US.<sup>21</sup>

Allen's willingness to write it and Holiday's to sing it opposed the tendency to avoid such strong racial themes in a country dominated and intimidated by Jim Crow codes.

Angela Davis argues that this song:

put the elements of protest and resistance back at the center of contemporary black musical culture. The felt impact of Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit" is as powerful today as it was in the 1940s. By placing this song at the center of her repertoire, Holiday firmly established the place of protest in the black popular musical tradition.<sup>22</sup>

The 'place of protest', as Davis says, is carried throughout Kay's poetry as well. By signifying on the song's images within 'In the Pullman', Kay facilitates her poem as one of both abjection and protest. She also elevates its importance because it responds to such a strong cultural representation of dissent, as her work encounters the identical figurative strain. It both commiserates with and objects to the problematic racial circumstances dominant in US culture in the mid-twentieth century.

The specific image of the sadness hanging, or the men hanging, is metonymic of the entire US narrative of prejudice, racism, and animosity. Smith and Kay, forged as a partnership through the poetic space, experience it together as they travel through the South, past the cotton fields, an enduring representation of both plantation culture and the sharecropping that followed it. Even in the springtime, the literary season of joyfulness and rebirth, this anguish weighs on them, and they can never really escape

---

<sup>20</sup> Lyrics reprinted in Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies*, p. 181.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the recent report in which lynchings between the end of the Civil War and World War II are estimated to have occurred approximately 4,000 times, most of which were unprosecuted and would be deemed in modern parlance as 'hate crimes'. Bryan Stevenson, executive director, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* (Montgomery, AL: Equal Justice Initiative, 2015).

<sup>22</sup> Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies*, p. 184.

the deeply felt pain of the Jim Crow South in the 1930s.<sup>23</sup> Davis goes on to suggest that, within the song that provokes Kay's response:

Holiday was following in the footsteps of a host of black artists who preceded her, including Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, who to varying degrees—and against the social conventions and expectations of the dominant culture, including the music industry itself—incorporated into their music their own brand of critical social consciousness. Holiday hardly forged this tradition—indeed, its roots lie in the early days of slavery—but she most decidedly stands as a bridge between the past and the present, with her career as a galvanizing tradition between her musical ancestors and descendants.<sup>24</sup>

If Holiday is following in Smith's footsteps as Davis suggests here, then Kay's engagement with Holiday's protest is simultaneously in dialogue with the precedent established by Smith. In this literary construction, Kay writes a poem in which her poetic persona and Bessie Smith travel through the South together, reflecting on a symbol that mirrors Holiday's use of the same image in a song that was prefigured by Smith's example of protest. The metaphoric link allows Kay the power to associate her poem with both the racism signified through the image and also the tradition of black women protesters in the US, which both become lenses through which to view her poem, where she and Smith navigate this turbulent and unpredictable passage together.

Kay's journey through temporal and geographic boundaries allows her to construct an ally in an otherwise tumultuous exterior lived experience, a person in whom she might find a freedom from racism. It is significant that the oppression experienced in the inter-War US culture of Bessie Smith is adopted by Kay, such that the prejudices she lives through in Scotland are likened unto that across the Atlantic. She says of this transatlantic link:

But [American racism] was at least something that was out in the open. People knew that there was such a thing as it, there were terms for it, racism in America. And then there were responses to racism in America. There was the Black Power Movement. Black is beautiful. There were people like Angela Davis...When I was teenager in

---

<sup>23</sup> As Bessie Smith died in 1937, in the space of Kay's imagination, the pair would likely be travelling together on the train car in the 1930s. This is an example of poetry enabling a kind of myth-making in which spatio-temporal boundaries are easily transcended and collapsed.

<sup>24</sup> Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies*, p. 197.

Scotland...there wasn't an exact equivalent right then and there.<sup>25</sup>

For Kay, using American racism was a vehicle through which she could address the experiences in her own life, a necessary construction given the relatively unpopulated topic in Scottish literary precedence.

In one poetic representation of Scottish racism, 'My Grandmother' (2007), Kay imagines her Highland grandmother rejecting her on the basis of her colour.<sup>26</sup> Esther Breitenbach and her colleagues write:

The image Kay creates of her grandmother is that of the strong Highland woman who fought the clearances, who understands the oppression of an alien culture as a Gaelic speaker, speaking English only if she has to, and yet who is herself racist—'There'll be no Darkie baby in this house'. The poem does make a significant point about one of the ironies of history—that those who suffer oppression are nonetheless capable of becoming oppressors themselves. It also underlines the presence of racism in contemporary Scotland.<sup>27</sup>

Kay spends her childhood facing the reality of racism in Scotland, even by members of her adoptive family. This may be significant in understanding her need for the 'friendship' she finds in Smith. By associating with the blueswoman, and by extension the racial subjectivities of twentieth-century US culture, Kay creates a partner with whom the pain of racial subjugation may be overcome jointly, regardless of decade or country, thereby suggesting an essentialist memory, wherein the racial commonalities of two different people might connote a connectivity between them. It is, however, to construct inclusion for herself rather than categorise all members of a race in a community. Through the filter of Smith's blues, Kay's experience of subjugation is related to Smith's experience of it in the US, even as the narrative stretches across centuries to times of slavery. It is important that she adopts this historical arc, at least partially, as her own because it becomes a central motif throughout much of her poetry. Likewise, the experience of persecution, its lingering oppression, and the need to

---

<sup>25</sup> Interview, Appendix.

<sup>26</sup> Kay, *Darling*, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Esther Breitenbach, Alice Brown, and Fiona Myers, 'Understanding Women in Scotland', *Feminist Review*, 58 (1998), p. 56.

transcend these contribute to the blues aesthetic and its wider cultural implications.<sup>28</sup>

The link to those marginalised temporalities and blues contributes to the formation of her own identity. As Kay writes in 1997:

Somehow being down and out in America seemed to be inextricably linked with her colour. I could not separate them. I could not separate myself. I am the same colour as she is, I thought to myself, electrified. I am the same colour as Bessie Smith. I am not the same colour as my mother, my father... The shock of not being like everyone else; the shock of my own reflection came with the blues. My own face in the mirror was not like the face I had in my head.<sup>29</sup>

Kay's youthful realization that she is the same colour as Smith, the colour that is linked with her being 'down and out in America', is a transformative moment for the poet. If their colour is linked, then perhaps their problematic experiences of racism might also be joined, a problem that might be potentially overcome by the blues, with Smith at the helm. Kay's realization that Smith had the same racial obstacles associates their narratives psychologically. Her perceptions of herself become linked with Smith's demonstrative blues, as this describes American racial problems, leading Kay to write poems that are thematically linked to Smith's blues songs, centring on the experience of racism. The following pair of poems demonstrates this thematic relationship. In the first poem, 'The Right Season' (1993), Kay writes:

They followed the tobacco crops in the spring,  
the cotton crops in the fall, all along the flat plains.  
It had to be the right time, the right town,  
where for the blues, people had enough money to spend.

Call it a blues trail. A trail that led to a big tent.  
Town after town, people packed in like rice in a bowl.  
In she would come, the Empress, the Voodoo Queen.  
Blast the blues into them so people remembered who they'd been.

Took them to the sad place. The place they were scared to go.  
Took them to the mean place where they knew they'd been low.  
Somebody was waiting. And it might have felt like home.  
Somebody knew them; somebody could see right into their soul.[...]

---

<sup>28</sup> 'In a period of tension and in conditions of some oppression, such [cultural] devices strengthen the group and the individual's sense of identity within it. In this way, the blues has become an important medium which has the potential to shape opinion, colour ideas, and mould attitudes within the Negro community', Oliver, *Aspects of the Blues Tradition*, p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Kay, *Bessie Smith*, p. 13.

Travelling on the underground railroad,  
 out of the tent, a voice faster than the wind.  
 Where to meet. Which house was safe. Which church.  
 Carrying the blues from Chattanooga to Chicago.

The tobacco crops in the spring; the cotton in the fall.<sup>30</sup>

This poem reads simply but generates energy from its historical and cultural allusions, as well as its tight quatrains. At the tent shows where Bessie would sometimes sing, her music, voice, energy, and stories would symbolise the audience's own tragic narratives, experienced personally and collectively. Her songs had the power to remind them of individual misery as well as the trauma of racial subjugation. Even if they wanted to forget, she would be there like a horn 'blast[ing] the blues into them'.

However, something important and subtle is happening here: she might have led them back to the pain, but she paradoxically was also an escape for that pain. Adam Gussow suggests that the power of blues as a genre is 'a way of bringing pleasure to black southern audiences'.<sup>31</sup> She reminded them of the difficult times, but having music that is representative of experiences and heritage is a step towards articulation of identity and black nationalism, prefiguring the tenets of the Black Arts and Black Power movements. Smith's ability to direct her songs towards a black audience through black subject matter, theme, and cultural expression escorts the audience to a metaphorical arena that mitigates the pain of racial discrimination.

In this regard, the blues are like poetry, and one must consider what the art form is capable of accomplishing. For Smith and Kay alike, it becomes the ground upon which an identity can unfold, whether autobiographical or otherwise. It is the platform upon which questions may be asked and a rehearsed narrative may be staged. A

---

<sup>30</sup> Kay, in *Other Lovers*, reprinted in *Darling*, pp. 71-72, ll. 1-12, 17-21.

<sup>31</sup> 'Blues song was lyricized complaint as countervailing representation, a way of contesting both violence-enforced silence and the compliant Sambo-grin that black men were expected to present in public. It was also, and not incidentally, a way of bringing pleasure to black southern audiences; it offered a kind of healing that could come only from engaging and transforming the collective nightmare that dared not speak its name elsewhere in the region's popular culture', Gussow, p 30.

dualism comes to exist between the real and imaginary, between past and present. In the following poem, the connectivity of these poles is explored even further, and the function of poetry is questioned yet again by the poet. In the second poem of the pair, 'Even the Trees' (1993), Kay writes:

Even the trees outside feel it, their fine branches  
their sixth sense of mercy,

they bend into the wind and ask for forgiveness  
to come in a storm,

and join the congregation of silence; that tall witness.  
One man, tied to a tree and whipped

never worked again in the cotton fields. In the early  
light, the delicate bone-light

that broke hearts, a song swept from field to field,  
a woman's memory paced centuries,

down and down, a blue song in the beat of her heart,  
in an old car that crossed

a railroad track; the scream of a warning—  
is that why we remember certain things and not others;

the sound of the bass, the sound of the whip, the strange  
strangled wind, bruises floating through light air

like leaves and landing, landing here; this place.  
Everything that's happened once could happen again.<sup>32</sup>

Here, Kay anthropomorphises the trees. They bend into the wind to ask for forgiveness to come in a storm, for the absolution of a cleansing rain to release them from their silent witness to atrocity and their accessory to the whipping, hanging, and lynching of black people in the United States, as though, in this metaphor, they have blood on their hands for their complicit involvement in the subjugation and torture of a people. Meanwhile, a song sweeps from field to field. A woman's memories pace centuries, transcending once more temporal and geographic restrictions. The woman's song becomes representative of all the women's songs, grouping the memories and historical experience of the people within a race, an historical linkage as a craft choice seen with

---

<sup>32</sup> Kay, in *Other Lovers*, reprinted in *Darling*, p. 70 (entire poem).

other poets in this thesis, including Nikki Giovanni's 'Hands: For Mother's Day' (1983), as I discussed in Chapter Three, in which WOMAN's hands become the hands of all women, continuing in both directions along the time continuum, from Eve to the speaker herself.<sup>33</sup>

As it travels along the axis of time and surpasses barriers, Kay's poem, like Giovanni's piece, stages a doubleness, accentuated by her use of couplets. The blues song paces centuries, attributing its creation to the songs and stories of the slaves. The sounds of the bass in the blues are linked in this poem to the sound of the whip that beat the enslaved. The present cultural expression is an amalgamation of both old and new, a twentieth-century representation of a narrative that began in the seventeenth century. In the final line, the audience is reminded of the cyclical nature of time with the caveat that what has happened before can happen again. With this cautionary line, the events of the future that have yet to unfold can be linked with the past. Additionally, this serves to express concern that these racial atrocities are not a thing solely of days gone by: future generations will be connected to the pain of history, in the US and elsewhere. For Jackie Kay, poetry functions to encounter historical stories and ancestors across the Atlantic, as strongly from the US as Africa, as seen in the following section.

**A Link to Africa:  
A Heritage Inherited**

Jackie Kay comes to adopt Nigeria as a source of heritage, with its practices, histories, and people appropriated as her own. This is paired with her pre-existing sense of nationalism towards her Scottish heritage, and the two aspects intermingle or remain at odds to create a more complex, and sometimes problematic, cultural and poetic

---

<sup>33</sup> Nikki Giovanni, from 'Hands: For Mother's Day', in *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* (1983), reprinted in *Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni 1968-1998* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2003), p. 306, ll. 71-76.

identity. Largely through her adopted parents' Scottish pride, Kay takes great joy in her home country despite its racism. She writes in her memoir *Red Dust Road* (2010):

Dramatic, my dad says, Christ Almighty, what a country! Stunning, my mum says, nothing like it, our ain wee country. God, it's beautiful. So many trips and journeys around Scotland involve paying it effusive compliments as if we believe the country has a large listening ear, cocked to the one side. Sometimes I imagine I can see the land blush with recognition.<sup>34</sup>

She considers herself Scottish, but throughout her poetry and prose, there is always a part of her identity that originates elsewhere. Kay is reminded of this both in the racism she experiences throughout her life and the regular feeling of being an outsider, even perhaps to herself. She writes:

Part of me came from Africa, part of me was foreign to myself, strange to myself since I had never been to the *dark continent* and could only really have it burning away, hot and dusty, in my mind. It is not so much that being black in a white country means that people don't accept you as, say, Scottish; it is that being black in a white country makes you a stranger to yourself. It is not the foreigner without; it is the foreigner within.<sup>35</sup>

Her national pride becomes fragmented when juxtaposed with the routine experience of being made to feel like an outsider or other by people in her community, even when that 'otherness' is not necessarily the result of malicious intent. She recalls:

I remember being about to climb the stairs to my English class when my friend Sandra said that she agreed that black people should all be sent home. She saw me looking very uneasy, and said, 'But not you, of course, Jackie. You're one of us.' It was one of those uncomfortable remarks when you really are at a loss for words.<sup>36</sup>

In this recollection, Kay iterates how even a friend can make her feel marginalised. Her friend Sandra demonstrated a certain 'unconsciousness' free from hateful intent, in which 'people can be carrying a kind of a racism within them that is from our society. And they wouldn't describe themselves as racist; they wouldn't think of themselves as racist, but they can make casually...or unthinking racist remarks'.<sup>37</sup> This example reminds her of her own dual identity, which rather than dual inclusion, manifests as a

---

<sup>34</sup> Kay, *Red Dust Road*, p. 124.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, Appendix.

sense of pervasive exclusion. She could only be truly Scottish if the emotional characteristics of her Nigerian heritage were subdued, as though Scottish inclusion could only occur at the price of Nigerian exclusion, where one half of her identity compromises the other. For her, poetry functions as the space in which she interrogates the experience of having different cultural and racial heritages, as these two halves integrate with or diverge from each other, as in the following poem, 'Pride' (1998).

In the narrative of the poem, Kay has an interaction with a stranger on a train, who identifies in her face the physical characteristics of the Nigerian Igbo people. It covers vast ground and is an important intersection between life and poetry, between Scotland and Nigeria. Kay writes in this significant poem:

When I looked up, the black man was there,  
staring into my face,  
as if he had always been there,  
as if he and I went a long way back.  
He looked into the dark pool of my eyes  
as the train slid out of Euston.  
For a long time this went on  
the stranger and I looking at each other,  
a look that was like something being given  
from one to the other.

My whole childhood, I'm quite sure,  
passed before him, the worst things  
I've ever done, the biggest lies I've ever told.  
And he was a little boy on a red dust road.  
He stared into the dark depth of me,

and then he spoke:  
'Ibo,' he said. 'Ibo, definitely.'  
Our train rushed through the dark.  
'You are an Ibo!' he said, thumping the table,  
My coffee jumped and spilled.  
Several sleeping people woke.  
The night train boasted and whistled  
through the English countryside  
past unwritten stops in the blackness.[...]

There was a moment when  
my whole face changed into a map,  
and the stranger on the train  
located even the name  
of my village in Nigeria  
in the lower part of my jaw.[...]

Tell me, I asked the black man on the train  
who was himself transforming,

at roughly the same speed as the train,  
and could have been  
at any stop, my brother, my father as a young man,  
or any member of my large clan,  
Tell me about the Ibos.

His face had a look  
I've seen on a MacLachlin, a MacDonnell, a MacLeod,  
a quality of being certain.[...]

'If you went back,' he said brightening,  
'The whole village would come out for you.  
Massive celebrations. Definitely.  
Definitely,' he opened his arms wide.  
'The eldest grandchild—fantastic welcome.  
If the grandparents are alive.'

I saw myself arriving  
the hot dust, the red road,  
the trees heavy with other fruits,  
the bright things, the flowers.  
I saw myself watching  
the old people dance towards me  
dressed up for me in happy prints.  
And I found my feet.  
I started to dance.  
I danced a dance I never knew I knew.  
Words and sounds fell out of my mouth like seeds.  
I astonished myself.  
My grandmother was like me exactly, only darker.  
When I looked up, the black man had gone.  
Only my own face startled me in the dark train window.<sup>38</sup>

I contend that this poem is a watershed moment in Kay's poetic career, a point with which she agrees, when she refers to it as a 'turning point' that 'opened another road for [her] to go on'.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, the memory being described and the realizations that resulted subsequently are of utmost importance in her own interpretation (and re-interpretation) of national and cultural identity. Bruce King writes of this poem, "'Pride" imagines a healthy African world in which Kay will be welcomed and will dance as part of a community. It is a fantasy of Eden, in contrast to the dark world outside her train window'.<sup>40</sup> King appreciates that the construction of the poem establishes two worlds, and Kay can imagine one, while zooming past the other. In that

<sup>38</sup> Kay, in *Off Colour* (1998), reprinted in *Darling*, p. 160-162, ll. 1-24, 34-39, 44-54, 70-90.

<sup>39</sup> Interview, Appendix.

<sup>40</sup> Bruce King, 'Review: Off Colour by Jackie Kay', *World Literature Today*, 73 (1999), p. 743.

framework, she is temporarily included and removed from both worlds, similar perhaps to Derek Walcott's 1969 poem 'The Train', in which he, too, is on a train zipping together two worlds, where he is 'half-home'.<sup>41</sup>

Everything about this poem, and Walcott's example, embodies a transformation—of place, roots, identity—and a transition over time and location. The speaker comes literally face to face with her African roots when she least expects it. The man on the train identifies her heritage simply from her facial features, and, from this recognition, an entire narrative unfolds in the speaker's imagination, which, in this instance, is Kay autobiographically. She says, 'It was a fascinating thing because the man said to me that he thought I was Igbo. And that turned out to be true! I found that out years later'.<sup>42</sup> The way he looks at her as though he has always been present, always known her, signifies a temporal shift, when the instant suddenly takes on the significance of time past. This awareness also smudges the boundaries between an intimate and a stranger when the latter somehow, as if unconsciously, adopts a closeness to the speaker. It is as though he omnisciently knows the memories she carries of herself, as though the two of them have always been connected like family members; he knows her secrets, her indiscretions, like her own brother would. He then transforms before her very eyes into her brother or her father as a young man, as Kay comes to believe the things he is saying and accept his role as a member of her clan. The omniscience, then, is mutual because *she* suddenly sees *him* as a small boy, standing on the dirt road in Nigeria. They transmigrate geographically as well because she imagines where he comes from, as though she were from the same village, mapped across her face. As the poem develops, the actual memory takes on a new kind of life,

---

<sup>41</sup> Derek Walcott, 'The Train', in *The Gulf* (1969), anthologised in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013*, edited by Glyn Maxwell (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014), p. 96.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, Appendix.

becomes transformative. Poetry, being adoptive in nature, enables the inhabiting of a double self. The imaginary that is launched from the memory and is detailed in the piece is where Kay can explore her identity, specifically with regard to its Scottish and Nigerian halves, a point I shall consider further.

Even as Kay realises the commonalities she has with this man and her newfound interest in and association with her Nigerian descent, she identifies that his Igbo pride is just like Scottish pride. She imagines several men from Scotland having the same kind of ownership over their clans, proudly wearing their tartans, their versions of ‘happy prints’. This obfuscates the boundaries between Kay’s Scottish and Nigerian heritages. Two vastly different cultures then reveal a commonality of cultural productions. Also, in the reverie, she imagines her grandmother, a link between her two worlds and a leap across generations. She envisions her Nigerian grandmother looking just like her, only darker, whereas, previously in her poetry, she has speculated about her white Scottish grandmothers, such as when she writes in 1991:

It is the well, the womb, the fucking seed.  
Here, I am far enough away to wonder—  
what were their faces like  
who were my grandmothers  
what were the days like  
passed in Scotland  
the land I come from  
the soil in my blood.<sup>43</sup>

The Scottish soil is in her blood, but now, she has the image of Nigerian soil to intermingle with it, of the red dust road, and her black grandmother along it, two halves of the same visual image: a grandmother working over the land. However, now, the grandmothers in her imagination are as different as the soil that (within the space of the poem) ‘inhabits’ the speaker’s blood, insinuating a potentially essentialist approach to her identity but one that manifests her own inclusion.

---

<sup>43</sup> Kay, ‘Chapter 8: Generations’, in *The Adoption Papers*, reprinted in *Darling*, p 34, ll. 51-58.

Her ability to dance is also linked to Scotland, in so far as it recalls when she was prejudiced against as a girl for her inability to dance in a school show, such as when she writes: ‘my teacher shouts from the bottom/ of the class Come on, show/ us what you can do I thought/ you people had it in your blood’.<sup>44</sup> The imaginary ability to dance a dance she never knew she knew accomplishes two things. It subverts the social subjugation of this particular childhood experience. Through the power of this memory, she is no longer an outsider struggling to find the rhythm of the dance while being humiliated; she is part of the crowd, talented, included. Also, by suggesting that she never knew that she knew the dance, Kay insinuates that it is somehow part of her makeup, but that it had never been fully realized. The knowledge of it had been in her all the time but had never been brought to fruition. If a dance is innately in one’s consciousness, then Kay suggests that, within poetry, one can cross over between geographic and temporal constrictions and participate in a kind of essentialist memory, in which the experiences of the group are transferred onto the individual. In this imaginary realm, all she needed was to be brought to her ancestral village for the traditional steps to come to life, implying that returning to that source allows the speaker to intuitively know what locals know through their participation with tradition.

From the declaration by this stranger on the train, she suddenly has a link that she can actually imagine, rather than incompletely formed images she might have had from a lifetime of speculation, ‘burning away, hot and dusty, in [her] mind’.<sup>45</sup> The capability to perform this dance brings into question the ability for one to inherit and instinctively know the traditions of the ancestors. To what extent do people learn traditions, and to what extent are they already part of their intuition? These questions may be unanswerable, but the capacity of this poem is to allow the possibility that

---

<sup>44</sup> Kay, ‘Chapter 7: Black Bottom’, in *The Adoption Papers*, reprinted in *Darling*, p. 30, ll. 53-56.

<sup>45</sup> Kay, *Red Dust Road*, p. 38.

tradition can be known essentially in each individual, vitally shifting her from outsider to insider.

Kay uses essentialist thinking to fantasise about transitioning to the broader group, wherein she might have a sense of inclusion, in the same way Nichols employs the strategy, as I discussed in Chapter Four. If she is an insider in Nigeria now, however, she has perhaps reinforced her position as an outsider in Scotland. It is arguable that her willingness to quickly adopt this Nigerian heritage as her own demonstrates a sort of complicity in the status of being an 'other' in Scotland. This moment in her adulthood might respond to times in her youth when she needed an escape, a way forwards from her marginalised state, perhaps where Bessie Smith embodied a higher freedom and simultaneously connected her to the diaspora, a feasible possibility in light of Oliver's suggestion that the blues is in direct response to African musical tradition.<sup>46</sup> Her imaginative association with Smith allowed a figure or an outlet in which she might straddle African heritage, her Scottish childhood, and the racial freedom associated with Smith's legacy in the US. The readiness to appropriate the culture of another corner of the diaspora is perhaps a moment of inclusive possibility, where the musical voice she idolised as a child is now also partly the motivation to claim this new heritage, to associate herself with a black national identity.

Throughout this poem, there is also a transition or shift in sensibility, from Scottish to Igbo, from a white country to a black one, occurring simultaneously as the train moves through the British countryside. From a craft standpoint, this is handled through her diction choices. Throughout the poem, Kay refers to blackness or darkness nine times. 'Dark' and 'black' function like refrains or chimes throughout the poem, re-centring the focus back to the issue of colour. Darkness also signifies an association

---

<sup>46</sup> See Note 4.

with ignorance, of not knowing her Igbo past. Now, through the intervention of this stranger, she understands the mysterious part of her cultural heritage better than she had before. Adrian Rice says of this:

Although you could read the poem [Pride] as a triumphant celebration of black-ness (and who could blame her!), I think that Kay (as the title alerts us) refuses such feelings, knowing full well that pride in one's tribal identity can quickly turn to a sinful separation from, and persecution, of the 'other'.<sup>47</sup>

Here, Rice ambiguously but rightly forces the reader to question whether he means a separation from one's other identity or whether the individual is separated from the status as being an outsider. Perhaps both interpretations are correct with regard to Kay's identities. Rice does reveal an apprehension towards Kay's celebration of blackness, saying that she knew full well that celebrating one heritage would lead to a separation from her other one. Although Kay admits to the fraught relationship of her two cultures with her identity at their intersection, in the moments of meeting this man on the train and writing the poem, she leaps fully into what he says and categorises herself with her Igbo people in Nigeria despite the consequences it creates for Kay the Scotsman. As she takes pride in her Nigerian inheritance, she withdraws herself from both Scottishness and the alienation she experienced therein, in which this type of essentialist attitude allows a clouding of previously known boundaries.

The poem, too, disrupts these borders; the reader can see that the constant movement of the train mirrors Kay's changing and mixing perceptions, as she moves between her two cultural inheritances. The final line of the poem, 'Only [her] own face startled [her] in the black train window', reconstructs the speaker's face. She interprets it differently, with the map the stranger had seen spread across it, with an intuitive and racial awareness in direct tension with the British countryside she passes by.

Now, with greater intensity and clarity than before in her life and her work, Kay

---

<sup>47</sup> Adrian Rice, 'Stars in Their Eyes: Review: Off Colour by Jackie Kay', *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 61 (1999), p. 66.

has a literary link established with Nigeria. As her poetry articulates her cultural appreciation, her Nigerian background takes shape, and what her ancestors knew, she intuitively knows. Thus, in the following poem, 'Igbo Bath' (2011), when staying at a hotel in Nigeria, she participates in traditions that are paradoxically novel and familiar. She realizes that the bucket and the bowl provided are for bathing. Although at first she wonders whether there is a leak in the ceiling, she then adopts the bathing technique with pleasure, as she imagines herself like her own Igbo grandmother, knowing what to do just like the steps of the dance she never knew she knew. She writes:

I took to the Igbo style of bathing  
 very quickly, splashing my bowl  
 of water under my arms, between my breasts,  
 down my legs and onto my feet,  
 building up a rhythm that felt  
 ancient, mythic, until I was  
 down by the river where the Odene bathed  
 daily, bent over, pouring the water over me,  
 years back, inside the body  
 of my grandmother; bathing the Igbo way  
 I am a split second, a spit and a jump away.<sup>48</sup>

In this poem, Kay associates herself with her tribal heritage, as though she were bathing next to the Odene, the oldest person in the village. The rhythm of the bathing is likened to the rhythm of the dance, and it comes to adopt ritual or spiritual significance. She again transcends the limitations of time because, in one moment, she is years back inside the body of her grandmother, and she is also a split second. The motions of bathing in this manner connect her immediately with her ancestors. She never knew she knew this either, but this is intuitive, as though she knows it just by being her father's daughter, or as though she is able to participate in a collective memory, with the memories of the clan also inhabiting her own psyche. Again, this functions, not as a potentially reductive racial perspective, but instead as a way of establishing inclusion in Kay's literary imagination. The ancient and mythic qualities and this feeling of heritage

---

<sup>48</sup> Kay, *Fiere* (London, UK: Picador, 2011), p. 5, ll. 13-23.

enchant her while she performs a mundane task like bathing. A transformation has occurred, realigning her identity with that of her Nigerian past.

As a result of the poetic space and her life experiences, Kay now has a more concrete link with Africa than in her earlier work. Her adoption of Nigeria as her own rings with new conviction, especially in the following poem that winds on the page, ‘Road to Amaudo’ (2011), in which Amaudo is the Igbo word for ‘village of peace’:

The road to Amaudo  
 like the road to Nzagha  
 like roads all over Nigeria  
 all over Africa  
 is a winding and long  
 red dust road  
 stretching  
 perhaps into infinity  
 to a foreseeable future  
 and back to  
 lost time:  
 the road to Amaudo  
 is at times impassable:  
 but pass people do,  
 men and women and children,  
 hefting the load  
 of hope on their backs  
 the frail weight of peace  
 on their shoulders,  
 round one corner  
 and then another,  
 round one bend, then the next:  
 a father, a daughter,  
 a mother, a son—  
 the good green of the elephant grasses  
 beside the deep red  
 like a constant companion,  
 a compadre, a fiere.  
 Come, let us go  
 down the road to [Amaudo]  
 and shake hands  
 with our old selves,  
 the ones whose names  
 we have forgotten,  
 who once were fragile,  
*those* people; *you, me,*  
 who have felt the cracks, the crevices,  
 who were lost to their families  
 or lost to themselves.  
 I want to walk on the road to [Amaudo],  
 the road to my heart,  
 like a road I once walked down,

like the road to Nzagha,  
*ka udo di, ka ndu di.*<sup>49</sup>

In this poem celebrating Nigeria, Jackie Kay expresses her emotional connection to her African heritage. Amaudo is an imaginary place, the village of peace, but the poem establishes the conceit of its existence in reality, and the road to it, like so many other roads in Africa, winds and is traversed by all people struggling to get there, just like the mimetic winding lines of the poem on the page.

The metaphor of the road implies transport from one place to another as its purpose, echoing the road to selfhood. In this piece, Kay elevates her African country, its people, and their traditions. She also relates herself back to Bessie Smith in the way that she reminds the audience of their forgotten selves, those who have ‘felt the cracks, the crevices/ who were lost to their families/ or lost to themselves’, much as Smith ‘took them to the mean place where they knew they’d been low’. Kay’s seemingly essentialist association with Africa problematizes her Scottish heritage, but Smith again possesses qualities of freedom for the speaker, allowing her to identify with the diaspora irrespective of her location, whether Scotland or elsewhere. A strong woman like Smith to whom she can attach her inherited identification becomes a means of achieving her own kind of blended identity and cultural freedom. Kay’s adoptive past involving a lack of detail about a nonetheless quite specific genealogy creates a space for imaginative play, in which she is free to fill in the details, in which ‘one of the most liberating things about being adopted is that you invent part—you are already part invention’.<sup>50</sup> She continues, ‘You are your own story. And you come, and instead of just coming in your Moses basket, you come in your Moses basket with a story’. In this narrative, the Nigerian locale and traditions become integral to Kay’s psyche.

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, pp. 52-53 (entire poem).

<sup>50</sup> Interview, Appendix.

Nigeria has become such a strong part of her identity, it as though she has always known it, as though it has been waiting for her. She writes in her memoir:

I take off my shoes so the red earth can touch my bare soles. It's as if my footprints were already on the road before I even got there. I walk into them, my waiting footprints. The earth is so copper warm and beautiful and the green of the long elephant grasses so lushly green they make me want to weep. I feel such a strong sense of affinity with the colours and the landscape, a strong sense of recognition. There's a feeling of liberation, and exhilaration, that at last, at last, at last I'm here. It feels a million miles away from Glasgow, from my lovely Fintry Hills, but, surprisingly, it also feels like home. I feel shy with the landscape too, like I might be meeting a new blood relation.<sup>51</sup>

Kay, in this memory, recalls that the land brought about a 'strong sense of recognition', yet it was a place she had never before visited. She recognises it, suggesting that it had previously inhabited her consciousness, like the places Giovanni is 'lonely' for despite having never been there, that I discussed in Chapter Three. Kay says, 'The imaginary red dust road became a real one, and I was able to put my bare feet on it...So to put your bare feet in the waiting footprints allows you then to be able to dip your pen in ink'.<sup>52</sup> Derek Walcott has spoken (in 1996) of the importance of what he calls being 'barefoot in spirit. [He] think[s] the poet goes unshod, and that's for the whole feel of the thing. To walk about barefoot, as Whitman said, really is the first need'.<sup>53</sup> Being barefooted on this road in Nigeria to get a 'feel of the thing' is presented in contrast to her Scottish origins, yet the two locations intersect with her new interrogations of 'home' and, by extension, 'self'. With the powerful connotations of 'home', Kay must examine how her Scottish and Nigerian homes may coexist, intersect, or perhaps rewrite the other, mirroring the notion of a changing home and one's relationship to it, echoing Grace Nichols's interpretations of the construction of homeplaces in Chapter Four.

'Road to Amaudo', in addition to these deep questions of home, also establishes

---

<sup>51</sup> Kay, *Red Dust Road*, p. 213. In this description of the red dust road, for which the book gets its title, Kay's life, both past and present, is mapped and tracked along this road, perhaps paying homage to Zora Neale Hurston's 1942 autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

<sup>52</sup> Interview, Appendix.

<sup>53</sup> Derek Walcott, in an interview with David Montenegro, reprinted in *Conversations with Derek Walcott*, edited by William Baer (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p. 142.

a linguistic intersection between Kay's Scottish and Nigerian heritage that supplements the links of her grandmothers, her cultures, and the reverse association with dancing. She deliberately intermingles Scots English and Igbo to describe the place. By using the Scots word *fiere*, a companion or a friend, to articulate her attitude towards Nigeria, she sets up for herself a unique aesthetic in which her two heritages may be juxtaposed and even overlapped. She creates a splicing, or an integrated doubleness, between the two places. The final line in Igbo translates to 'let there be peace, let there be life', which, when interpreted with the life-giving nature of the term *fiere*, creates a complex binding of two languages and cultures, meaning that, with the use of this poetic space and the power of language, the two homes—and the heritages they represent—might be able to form two halves of the same self, rather than a necessary alienation of one by the other.

Kay describes the crafting of *Fiere* and the relationship between dual identities as a liberating process. She says:

It's a bringing-together book...We're often looking for a way of bringing together seemingly separate or disparate forces, even within ourselves. To find...a rich imaginative legacy, to be able to use Igbo dialects, to be able to use a Scots dialect, to use it all in the same book felt quite liberating.<sup>54</sup>

This poem and *Fiere* as a whole are the literary representation of her cognitive awareness that Scottish and Nigerian backgrounds could both exist simultaneously without deleterious effects on the other, a transformative moment in Kay's awareness.

She writes of this amalgamation in her memoir:

I felt strong, that I'd arrived at a place where I could properly acknowledge my African heritage and be proud. The problem was that I went too far the other way, didn't dwell on or even like being Scottish until I met the African-American poet Audre Lorde, in 1984, who told me that I could be proudly African *and* Scottish and that I should embrace both. One need not exclude the other, she said in her decisive drawl. *Uh huh*. That was startling advice to receive at the age of twenty-three, and I took it. It was a relief; I didn't need to choose.<sup>55</sup>

This moment of epiphany for Kay, as she confronts her Nigerian ancestry, then, re-

---

<sup>54</sup> Interview, Appendix.

<sup>55</sup> Kay, *Red Dust Road*, p. 201.

establishes or rewrites an identification with her Scottish home, too; in doing so, Smith might be seen to take on enabling significance, as the figure who conjoins these seemingly exclusive locations. She shows Kay how she might hold them together, how her Scottish and Nigerian halves need not be divergent or mutually exclusive. By identifying with a black woman while in Scotland, she can now identify with another corner of the diaspora while remaining true to her Scottish heritage.

This epiphany is also facilitated by the African American poet Audre Lorde, whose own cultural identity helps Kay consciously link Africa with the US while these diasporic influences mingle with her Scottishness, a complexity that heightens her sense of racial awareness.<sup>56</sup> It is as though, in the 'Road to Amaudo', she is even more Scottish for knowing her African self because her Nigerian half forces her to re-interrogate her Scottish components, a complexity referred to when she tells Susannah Rustin, 'So I stopped feeling like a sore thumb and realised that complexity could bring something, that there are advantages as well as disadvantages'.<sup>57</sup> However, whether she is able to claim both heritages with the same ease is debatable. In actuality, as Kay more strongly associated herself with one cultural heritage, doesn't she simultaneously alienate her other self? Can the two really be intertwined, or does this create a problematized space in which her two cultures are actually at odds with each other? In her adherence to Smith to thematically elevate her above racial problems to poetic freedom, perhaps Kay *does* overcome the resulting problematic cultural identities with the navigation between her two heritages. She collapses these polarities, allowing herself as a poet and person to exist in both halves as well as in the space in between.

---

<sup>56</sup> 'I remember the excitement of coming across writers like Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison. All of those writers changed my racial awareness; reading them changed my life', Ibid, p. 41.

<sup>57</sup> Susanna Rustin, 'A Life in Writing: Jackie Kay', *The Guardian*, 28 April, 2012, accessed online at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/27/life-writing-jackie-kay>.

### **Blurring of Boundaries: Rivers, Transitions, and Transformations**

For Jackie Kay, like Grace Nichols, the river is an abiding metaphor. It is itself an image of narratives, origins, and destinations. In common with the poets discussed in the previous chapters, for Kay, too, the river is both the source of one's being as well as the means of becoming another self. It allows for an awareness of one's roots and also becomes the route to transformation, resulting in a doubleness of identity. Kay's association with this symbol additionally triangulates her between the US, Africa, and Scotland, as she uses the river to continue her link with the blues and interrogate the dual connection between her origins and her future. She writes in 1997:

Poor black people living in shacks. A river. A long, long river that passes through practically every town in Tennessee. The Tennessee River. I traced it with my finger. The shape of a U. Parsons, Savannah, Decatur, Guntersville, Jasper, Chattanooga, Cleveland, Charleston, right up to Oakridge...It was a bigger river than I could imagine. It was a dangerous river that could cause huge floods. A picture of people floating with furniture in the water rose up in my mind. A giant of a river.<sup>58</sup>

Using the river as a central allegory allows her to enter once more into a dialogue with the American blues. The river was literally and figuratively important in the genre, but it was just as significant for thousands of people in the United States. Harnessing this symbol allows her access to that narrative. In the following poem, 'Black Ann' (1999), Kay adopts the dramatis personae of a black slave cook on a Mississippi steamboat:

They call me Black Ann all the way up the Mississippi.  
They call me Black Ann all the way up the Mississippi.  
I cook on the Mississippi steamboat, everyone knows me.  
I been many big places, but my heart's in Missouri.[...]

When I think of Missouri, I think of my son Billy.  
My son Billy in Missouri without his own Mammy.  
Is he sleeping at night, no mammy singing sweetly?  
He's working for the bossman even tho' he's just a pickney. [...]

Five hundred dollars to buy me back my own son Billy.  
Well every meal I make is a meal for my sweet Billy.  
Every mouthful they take is a mouthful for my boy.  
One day I'll buy my Billy way down in that Missouri.

It's been three long years since I set eyes on my Billy.

---

<sup>58</sup> Kay, *Bessie Smith*, pp. 17-18.

I'm praying Billy's not forgotten his good old mammy.  
 I'm going to be a big surprise one day in Missouri.  
 I'm going to havta say, 'Billy son, I'm your own Mammy'

They call me Black Ann all the way up the Mississippi.<sup>59</sup>

Here, Kay is writing her own modern adaptation of a blues song, perhaps responding to Paul Laurence Dunbar's poems 'River of Ruin' and 'He Had His Dream' (both 1913), in which the protagonist toils through adversity with hopes of emerging happily, or at least wholly, on the other side.<sup>60</sup> The adopted persona of Black Ann sings of her misery of separation from her son as a result of the slavery and the prohibitive cost of reunion, as they work for wealthy white businessmen, perpetuating their anxiety.

At the spine of the poem is the Mississippi, which functions for Ann paradoxically as both the problem and solution; she has to work on the river, causing her to be removed from her son, but it allows her to maintain hope, even if falsely, that the river might also be the means to getting him back. Angela Davis suggests that this double aspect of the river links the blues with the example established by the spirituals. She writes, 'Thus images of rivers and oceans as sites of passage as well as "troubling" and cleansing can be found in spirituals such as "Wade in the Water," which contains the line "God's gonna trouble the water"'.<sup>61</sup> Kay links the autobiographical 'I' with the Mississippi, just as Bessie Smith does when she sings 'Muddy Water (A Mississippi Moan)' and 'Backwater Blues' (both 1927).<sup>62</sup> These two blues songs both praise and denigrate the Mississippi, a source of the singer's nostalgia as well as suffering,

---

<sup>59</sup> Kay, in *The Frog Who Dreamed She Was an Opera Singer* (1999), reprinted in *Darling*, pp. 213-214, ll. 1-8, 17-25.

<sup>60</sup> 'For once in the river of ruin,/ What boots it, to do or to dare,/ For down we must go/ In the turbulent flow,/ To the sea of Despair', from 'River of Ruin'. In the latter, Dunbar writes, 'He had his dream, and all through life,/ Worked up to it through toil and strife./ Afloat fore'er before his eyes,/ It colored for him all his skies:/ The storm-cloud dark/ Above his bark,/ The calm and listless vault of blue/ Took on its hopeful hue,/ It tintured every passing beam—/ He had his dream', from 'He Had His Dream', Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, edited by Joanne M. Braxton (London, UK: University Press of Virginia, 1993), pp. 265, 61, respectively.

<sup>61</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p. 328 and 263-4, respectively.

particularly in times of flood. The river itself embodies duality and is both the avenue to another place as well as the obstacle to overcome. Kay writes in 'Blues' (1993):

[...]She tried to be completely still.  
As if she were committing a murder.  
*A clown. An aunt jemima.* She has a smile  
that could cross a river. And she had a laugh  
that could build a raft. And that was all she had.<sup>63</sup>

In this poem, the river is something to be transcended, or crossed over, which her protagonist (whether Bessie Smith, an unnamed 'Jemima' figure, or the soul behind the speaker) is able to do through the power of her smile and laugh.<sup>64</sup> The river is a symbol of transition or doubleness, in that one needs to find a way to get from one fate to another, in the same way that Black Ann transitions imaginatively between conditions of servitude and freedom.

In musing about rivers, Kay said to me in interview:

Rivers often divide or separate cities, they often run right bang through the middle of cities, so you've automatically got an image of a half and a half. You've got the river running through, and you've got what's on one side and what's on the other. And then you've got the idea of crossing a river, crossing over from one side to another, and whether or not there's any transformation involved in that.<sup>65</sup>

The transformation for Black Ann would be achieved by the unlikely occasion of a reunion with her son; in 'Blues', it is the smile that does the river crossing, edging closer to the changes of the poet grounded in human emotions and perceptions. According to Davis, the importance of traversing the river in the blues and the spirituals is just as important as travelling along it in that it is metaphorically a crossing to freedom. She writes, 'The imagery reminiscent of the religious slave songs is that of flight—...crossing rivers "deep and wide," on whose opposite shore freedom awaits'.<sup>66</sup> For Kay, the smile and laugh possessed by this woman are transformative, like the blues was for Bessie Smith, and like poetry is for Kay herself. In all three instances, the

<sup>63</sup> Kay, in *Other Lovers*, reprinted in *Darling*, p. 74, ll. 23-27.

<sup>64</sup> Diane Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima* (London, UK: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>65</sup> Interview, Appendix.

<sup>66</sup> Davis, *Blues Legacies*, p. 86.

art becomes the vehicle through which subjugation and uncertainty are overcome.

The river also functions metaphorically, and even romantically, as the source of the origin, particularly with respect to African origins and how, when used in this context, the body of water has the power to transport the speaker across different axes of time. Kay writes in 'Black River' (2011):

We took a boat down the Black River,  
the water darker than the darkest mirror,  
the mangrove roots trailing the river bed—  
as if searching for the dead down there.[...]

We passed crocodiles masquerading as logs  
under the mangroves, and snow egrets  
fluttering like blossom in the branches,  
and the river carried us as if carrying us home—

wherever we were, wherever we came from:  
a black river running through our arteries,  
a black river putting our hearts at ease,  
a black river touching our skin like a lover,

a black river to remind us of our ancestors,  
running through the swamps and secret marshes  
when freedom was a belief the river rushes  
passed along the dark water like a breeze.

Then, later, when the river ran to meet the sea,  
and the colours changed—black, to brown, to blue—  
there was my son at the helm of the boat  
as the boat lifted and crashed and smashed on the waves,

and there were the jack-fish leaping,  
the dolphins' diasporic dive, and those strange birds  
—whose name I have forgotten—  
carrying an old song home.<sup>67</sup>

Going down this river for Kay represents a journey from present to past and back again.

The river carries them, as if taking them home, to the dead, the ancestors, to the source, again complicating the speaker's notion of 'home'. The river, and its extended implications of the ancestry, runs through the passengers' arteries like blood, like inherited genes, like a life source, nourishing them along the way. Meanwhile, Kay's son, her future, is literally driving the boat; he is the force pushing them down the river to their past.

---

<sup>67</sup> Kay, *Fiere*, pp. 11-12, ll. 1-4, 9-28.

Through this generational and temporal shift, the paradoxical and multiple characteristics of the river emerge once more. Even in a contemporary setting, Kay views it as a link to the past. In her prose, she refers to axes of time that the Niger River transcends when she writes:

The road up to the Niger is smooth and lovely and when we turn the corner and see the metal structure that is the Niger Bridge, something in me lifts. I feel so full of excitement just to be crossing the Niger. It's a bigger bridge than I imagined, not as big as the Forth Bridge in Scotland or the Golden Gate in California, but still impressive ...Everyone's desperate to cross over into a new life entirely. It's thrilling because the Niger River is just something I learnt about and now it has suddenly leapt into life, and is running underneath me, like it would still have been running when I was doing my geography lessons at school years ago...It strikes me how timeless rivers are, how placid they can be, until sometimes their banks swell and flood as if that is their only way of expressing rage or grief.<sup>68</sup>

The river embodies a tension between its liveliness and sadness, mirroring those of the poet. In Kay's consciousness, she is excited about meeting this river of her imagination, but then it also represents generations of 'rage and grief'. She likens the bridge over it, or the transition or transcendence over it, to its counterparts in Scotland and the US, crossing over the Firth of Forth and San Francisco Bay, further strengthening the image of Smith as a symbol of transcendence through the problematized nature of her African and Scottish heritages, between her white and black selves, and a figure through whom the complexity of her identity can be navigated. Smith is a bridge between these inheritances. She helps Kay exist on both shores, just as this river is both present and past, joyful and sorrowful.

As written in the text, Kay is linked with her black inheritance, when the Black River becomes, in the course of the poem, the Whitmanesque anaphora black river (lowercase). She is no longer referring to the specific body of water but transitions to the metonymy of the African diaspora. This journey carries her home, with the use of the concluding word 'home' in the second and final stanzas. The capacity of this poem, like others in this chapter, is to re-examine just what comprises the homeplace. In this

---

<sup>68</sup> Kay, *Red Dust Road*, p. 209.

particular piece, home has come to adopt a connection through the transcendence of time and place to the speaker's African ancestry, as signified through the journey down the river, the same, perhaps, to which the speaker imaginatively transports in 'Igbo Bath' when she instinctively or intuitively knows the rhythm of the bathing and the spiritual and ancestral importance of it.

Ancestral significance is not isolated to Africa, of course, as Kay's heritage is equally Scottish, and this Scottishness is also romanticised through the use of the river metaphor. Aberdeen, the city where Kay knows her birth parents met and where she was conceived, is situated between the River Dee and the River Don.<sup>69</sup> She feels that the city itself adopts a duality in the liminal space between these two rivers. She writes:

The Granite City, the city where my birth parents met, is a city people either love or hate. The granite is either the colour of sparkling silver or the drab colour of porridge or fog, depending on your way of seeing it. Aberdeen is depressingly dull and grey or majestic and magical...I like Aberdeen. Its name means between the Dee and the Don, the two rivers...In my imagination, I was conceived between the Dee and the Don, a confluence of rivers, the mouth of two rivers.<sup>70</sup>

When considering the influence of these rivers and what she inherits from them, Kay adopts a doubleness, which, like her cultural inheritances, proves problematic and complex. Her conception in this liminal space between two rivers provides a figurative construction for exploring her identity. The fact that Aberdeen is between the pair allows her to conveniently build on them metaphorically to articulate her self-attitude as a set of dual syllogisms and her state of being both, neither, and in between various characteristics. This is ensconced in a complexity of paradoxes and contradictions, such as Giovanni uses in 'Their Fathers' (1978), discussed in Chapter Three.<sup>71</sup> Kay writes in 'Between the Dee and the Don' (2011):

I will stand not in the past or the future  
not in the foreground or the background;

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 132.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, pp. 132-133.

<sup>71</sup> Giovanni, 'Their Fathers', in *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day* (1978), reprinted in *Collected Poetry*, p. 256.

not as the first child or the last child.  
I will stand along in the middle ground.

I was conceived between the Dee and the Don.  
I was born in the city of crag and stone.  
I am not a daughter to one father.  
I am not a sister to one brother.  
I am light and dark.  
I am father and mother.

I was conceived between the Dee and the Don.  
I was born in the city of crag and stone.  
I am not forgiving and I am not cruel.  
I will not go against one side  
I am not wise or a fool.  
I was not born yesterday.

I was conceived between the Dee and the Don.  
I was born in the city of crag and stone.

I can say *tomorrow is another day* tomorrow.  
I come from the old world and the new.  
I live between laughter and sorrow.  
I love between the land and the sea.

I was conceived between the Dee and the Don.  
I was born in the city of crag and stone.<sup>72</sup>

Excluding the refrains, Kay primarily operates in the combination of litotes, working through the negation of converse notions, and affirmations, insisting on the truth of certain axioms. The conclusion of most stanzas allows for pairs where she is both things and she is in the liminal space between them. In Giovanni's example, she writes 'one neither walks nor stands without/ extensions/ one is not black without white/ nor male without female/ what is true of the mass is no less/ true of the individual'.<sup>73</sup> Kay, like Giovanni, is engaging with parallel structures. She too, is 'light and dark, father and mother'. This poem additionally follows Walt Whitman's example, specifically 'Song of Myself' (1855), especially with its musical anaphora and the extensive construction of self-identity.<sup>74</sup> She examines emotion, mental capacity, geography, and time. As a result, she exists between these two rivers, these various sets of binary

<sup>72</sup> Kay, 'Between the Dee and the Don', in *Fiere*, pp. 23-24 (entire poem).

<sup>73</sup> Giovanni, p. 256, ll. 80-85.

<sup>74</sup> Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', in *Leaves of Grass: The "Death-bed" Edition* (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), pp. 33-115.

constructions, resulting in a multifaceted and perhaps problematic declaration of self. Focussing on doubleness in this way is especially important when reading this poem in conjunction with ‘The Black River’ because, through this pair of poetic autobiographies, the reader comes to understand her navigation of the difficulty, or the rehearsed problem, of being both African and Scottish and the complexity that is innate with that dual identity.

Duality associated with the river metaphor is also used to articulate feelings about personal relationships, where there is the doubleness of the two parties, as well as the choppy waters of shifting emotions. Kay writes in ‘The Crossing’ (1993):

I  
That evening, walking across the bridge,  
the light drowning in the river,  
the dark water wringing its hands,  
till the bridge moved too, that evening.

And you, my love, were not there.  
We did not walk together to the small room  
where your hands floated across sheets;  
daylight behind the curtains.

Suddenly, in that dark place, I felt myself  
go to you; as if I were two and one of me  
went to you.

The bed, a boat on a dangerous crossing.  
Neither of us knew where we were going.

II  
The river is drowning its hands.  
You are not here this evening.  
I am crossing the same bridge alone.  
Underneath it is dark and fast, the river.

I can't see myself. Lights hang on trees  
by the banks—glowing and forbidden,  
Dropping like fruit into the dark water,  
only to rise again.

No matter how many times we try to sink  
our past—old bundles of clothes in the river—  
the body surfaces

suddenly, covered in wreaths. You are not there.  
Someday you might go back. Love is light and dark.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Kay, in *Other Lovers*, reprinted in *Darling*, pp. 91-92 (entire poem).

In this poem, the river represents the past and future of the speaker and the lover. The bed is a bridge or a crossing point over what has become implied emotional chaos, the dark, fast water; it is the space in which the couple can navigate safely over these treacherous points, yet the speaker is alone, thereby altering the nature of the waters crossed and the role of the bed as a safe passage.

In the first segment, she refers to a time in the past, with the use of the past tense where the two are somehow undertaking the crossing together, even if neither knows where they are going. In the second segment, the sometime condition of isolation has become the norm, with the use of the present tense, and the water is more tumultuous below. Despite efforts to try to forget the past and sink it out of sight, the river continues to bring the baggage back to the surface. The water itself creates the space in which past and present are indecipherable. The stanzas on the page articulate the changing from one thing to another in that, through each of the two parts, they diminish in size, signifying the dwindling self and trust in the relationship. The speaker travels from a known and safe environment to the foreign and frightening. In the final line, the audience is reminded of the contradiction that love is both light and dark, mirroring her claim in 'Between the Dee and Don' that she, too, is 'light and dark', a doubleness that goes past the physical mixture of her two races and becomes the vessel in which the reader can navigate Kay's poetics down the river and beyond the scope of this poem, as will be discussed in the following section.

### **An Enduring Identity of Doubleness and Fusion**

The influence of American blues, with special attention paid to Bessie Smith, on her dual African and Scottish heritages is significant for the reader to interpret Kay's

identity, and the conceit of the river is vital figuratively for its articulation. However, her enduring and complex duality is expressed through additional tonal stances in her adoptive poetry. It enables the inhabiting of a double self and an interrogation of the relationship between these two components. Even a piece written for children, such as ‘At Home, Abroad’ (1999), explores the problematic nature of pluralistic identities:

All summer  
 I dream of  
 places I’ve never  
 been  
 where I might  
 see faces  
 I’ve never seen,  
 like the dark  
 face of my father in Nigeria  
 or the pale  
 face of my  
 mother in  
 the Highlands  
 or the bright  
 faces of my  
 cousins at  
 Land’s End.[...]

Who will meet me?[...]

and myself,  
 cap-peaked,  
 wondering if I am  
 ‘home’.<sup>76</sup>

This is a children’s poem, but it nonetheless reflects a connection to heritage, as the childlike speaker articulates awareness of that notion. Of course, the poet knows well the difficulty of inhabiting quite different cultural inheritances. However, the simple diction choices do not belie what is at stake, namely the interrogation of a complex identity. Margaret Elphinstone explores this complexity when she writes:

Her poems for children tackle the same issues as her adult poetry, being rooted in the same refusal to accept constricted definitions of selfhood, in terms of nationality, language, race, or—a key word in Kay’s work—adoption...Identity is located precisely at the point of painful contradiction: recognition of and alienation from one’s own place.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Kay, in *The Frog Who Dreamed She Was an Opera Singer*, reprinted in *Darling*, pp. 214-215, ll. 1-17, 27, 37-40.

<sup>77</sup> Margaret Elphinstone, ‘Contemporary Scottish Women’s Poetry’, *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 63 (1999), pp. 68, 69.

In this poem, Kay maintains her examinations of place and generation, with the unique ability to transition over such restrictions, such ‘painful contradictions’, with refusal to accept ‘constricted definitions’. The integral nature of these components to the speaker’s identity and wellbeing is contained in the final word; again ‘home’ is the conclusion of a poem. However, the term becomes an altered version of home, or self, despite the speaker’s youthful and possibly naïve perspective.<sup>78</sup> Kay says of this changing home:

Just as you shift, so the notions of home and what home is shift and become more complex as you get older. It becomes layered with nostalgia, along with some other things. Your original versions of what you thought home was, they mix in with what actually turns out to be home...Home is my imagination, probably...So home, or feeling at home, or feeling at ease, is I think something that we all strive for. I like that. I like the idea of life being a search, really, to feel at home.<sup>79</sup>

Despite the necessary process of one’s homeplace and one’s perceptions of it being in flux, when the notion of home is no longer clear, such as in this poem, it functions in parallel with the anxiety raised by the question at the poem’s centre: ‘Who will meet me?’. The speaker is not sure who she will find and what that person may signify with regard to her own identity, whether familial, racial, or personal.

There is also the enigma of feeling homesick for a place never before seen. Is that possible? Is it a romantic notion of origins? Within the realm of poetry, the created imaginary allows this doubleness to be staged between knowing and feeling a location, perhaps mirroring the duality of literal and figurative constructions for the poet. The seemingly impossible homesickness for a place one has never been is, in fact, driven by emotion, propelling the narrative forwards. This engages with the way she recognises a place she has never been before. The negotiation of identity is just as important in this poem as it is in any of the other poems discussed in this chapter written for an adult

---

<sup>78</sup> For discussion on the changing nature of home, see Rosemary Marangoly George’s book, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>79</sup> Interview, Appendix.

reader, and the inclusion of this examination of self and identity in a work for children underscores its pervasiveness throughout her poetics. As Elphinstone points out, even a poem for children encompasses the persistent problem of being both included and excluded, of having simultaneous feelings of ‘recognition’ and ‘alienation’, a paradox that questions the fraught relationship between community and marginalisation.

In the following poem, even in the heat of Kano, Nigeria, where the poet sees a group who *might* be her people, she is reminded of her neighbourhood in Glasgow, reiterating the relationship between her Scottish-Nigerian roots. In ‘Kano’ (2005):

I step back in time, old love,  
along the hot dust, red road.  
People—are they my people?—  
drag their bare feet like camels

in this humped Sahara heat.  
The air shoves its long hand  
down my throat and pulls out  
my back garden in Brackenbrae.

It puts its hands over my mouth,  
whispers sweet new words in my ear.  
My face is a bright mask now;  
vivid stripes and streaks of colour.

I take Rabi Isma’s cool, dark hand;  
she leads me through the narrow alleys  
of the oldest market, old love.  
I am lost in time without you.<sup>80</sup>

This dream-like poem highlights the transition between being half of a pair and then being alone, as in ‘The Crossing’. However, it’s also about a sense of being in between places and times, between a set of binaries. As the speaker experiences the heat of Nigeria, the hot air draws from within her a memory of Scotland. Both locations are vivid and seem to coexist within this poem, yet they simultaneously remain divergent.

Her dual identities are flagged in Margaret McCulloch’s observation:

Kay’s own background lies behind the experiences documented, and it is perhaps this unusual upbringing that has developed in her as a poet her preoccupation with identity: not the search for a national identity which preoccupied the male writers of the inter-War Scottish Renaissance period, nor the specifically female identity explored by

---

<sup>80</sup> Kay, in *Life Mask* (2005), reprinted in *Darling*, p. 180 (entire poem).

Lochhead and the poets of the 1980s, but an awareness of identity as multiple as well as marginalized and a celebration of what one might call this *positive* lack of specificity in relation to identity...In an interview with Rebecca E. Wilson, Kay confesses her irritation 'that people can't contain both things, being Black and being Scottish, without thinking there is an inherent contradiction there'.<sup>81</sup>

Although Kay may express 'irritation' at the suggestion that containing both cultures is problematic, as stated in the quotation above, her poetry suggests that the staged doubleness of her shared cultures is indeed a source of concern, if not tension. The crossover of being in the Nigerian landscape and being reminded of her Scottish home enacts this dual identity, with alliance towards and alienation from both. Likewise, she states that her face has become a mask, suggesting a sense of doubleness because the audience is left to question whether the mask is a new face or simply a covering of an old one. The very notion of wearing a mask, in its nature, subverts the hidden or private face or identity that is worn beneath it. The boundary of where one face stops and another begins is obfuscated, in the same manner that time's boundaries have become unclear. She bookends the poem with references to time; she steps back in time and then is lost in it. One interpretation of this is that the lost 'other' (meaning either the other person in a relationship or the self as an alienated figure) was the anchor that kept the speaker firmly rooted in time, but now, without it, temporal demarcations are hazy.

Blurred boundaries of all sorts recur frequently in Kay's poetry, just as they do in the next poem, 'Pencil, Knife' (2005). She writes:

The light fails in the room in Edinburgh.  
You draw an old map of life on my face.  
You sharpen your pencil with a square blade.  
Your white hair falls on your face.

You will draw me till the day I die, you say.  
You will draw the face I had before I was born.  
I slide down the armchair. I feel myself shift, change.  
I am lost and found; my face is a fossil, a rock.

Light falls across your face; your heart is crushed.  
Your pencil, gentle now, smudges, traces, creates.

---

<sup>81</sup> Margaret Palmer McCulloch, 'Women and Scottish Poetry, 1972-1999', *The Irish Review*, 28 (2001), p. 68.

I am taking shape before your eyes.  
 You draw the person inside me out. She says, *hush, hush*.<sup>82</sup>

This spare poem is extremely elegant in its ability to capture so strongly the themes of identity, doubleness, and transformation. In the hands of the artist, Kay's own face is both copied and re-created. She (the artist) draws a map of life across it, linking it with the map the stranger on the train noticed in her in 'Pride'. This idea of mapping her face indicates that the artist represents Kay's present place as well as where she comes from, the face she had before she was born, until the day she dies. In this construction, time continues in both directions, and what is knowable suddenly becomes unknowable and mysterious. Kay shifts before her very eyes, as she is paradoxically lost and found (perhaps another way of naming the combination of light and dark). The transition between past and present and familiar and foreign occurs as the lines on the canvas are blurred, as the artist smudges her actual image into another representation. She is imitating Kay and creative of her simultaneously, just as Kay is when she crafts her poetry. The artist reproduces what she sees in front of her, yet Kay also takes shape before her eyes. Her inside is drawn out, in a double entendre, meaning to draw on the page, as well as to bring or pull from one place to another. This may be an *ars poetica*, as it echoes so closely what Kay does as a poet. She brings her inside out and transforms as a result. It is autobiographical and fictional, where the new makes one re-envision and re-interpret the old. Kay says of this in interview in 2002:

Our own pasts constantly rejuvenate themselves. It's not something that has happened and that was it. It's open to reinterpretation. I find it fascinating that we can't even say we've lived what we've lived.<sup>83</sup>

On the stage of her poetry, Kay is cutting across differences and re-inhabiting imaginary territories. Doubleness is not only described but constructed, especially as new perceptions of identity must be reconciled with previous ones.

---

<sup>82</sup> Kay, in *Life Mask*, reprinted in *Darling*, pp. 177-178 (entire poem).

<sup>83</sup> Libby Brooks, 'Don't Tell Me Who I Am: Jackie Kay', *The Guardian*, 12 January, 2002, p. 34.

Doubleness or dualism is fundamental to Kay's poetics. Occupying this kind of double self is at times beautifully complex and at others anxiously fraught. The poet herself has journeyed across continents, and her associations with cultural traditions, narratives, and meanings have walked their own kind of journey. Her personal and poetic senses of identity have been both fearful and confident, excluded and included, dark and light. A reader situates her in between these various polarities, where they are collapsed as such or remain at odds. Through the trajectory of her writing, Kay inhabits an historically minded, place-driven musicality, where she creates her own mid-Atlantic: Scotland, Nigeria, and the US. Her poetic identity adopts this space in between, where she can now 'feel at home in [her]self'.

## CONCLUSIONS

‘Do you think of poetry? I think I certainly do see it as another kind of, another form of sacred language’, pondered US Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey. As her term in office neared its conclusion in 2014, she went on to say, ‘The necessity for...poetry in general...is for a kind of recording of our cultural moment and to record the history of a people’.<sup>1</sup> Trethewey is only the third African American poet laureate and the second African American woman, following in the pioneering footsteps of Gwendolyn Brooks. As she takes a 100-mile journey from Mississippi to Alabama, she retraces some of the sites, regularly marked by violence, of the Civil Rights Movement. On this fraught, or perhaps hallowed, ground, she reflects on the power of poetry to transform the expression of the marginalised into the cognizance of dominant discourses. The authoritative potential of poetry, then, provides commentary on the politics of the contemporary and often does so within the framework of an historically anchored sensibility. The task, the necessity, of verse is to vocalise, even in nonlinear temporalities, the identity of a people and, at times, to inhabit the diction of the divine.

The discussion here comes at a timely moment, in that it resumes Trethewey’s trajectory as she represents the advancing prevalence, within the American literary mainstream, of the minority voice. The staging of racially and sexually specific narratives, however, need not be confined to one side of the Atlantic. Just as the voicing of the ‘cultural moment and history of a people’ has the capacity to transcend borders to encompass the African diaspora in the West, my research traverses spatio-temporal geographies to examine the intersection and interplay of Black Atlantic women poets, whose poetics assert identity as constructed through historically minded, location-

---

<sup>1</sup> Natasha Trethewey, ‘Remembering Civil Rights history: When “words meant everything”’, in interview with Jeffrey Brown, *Where Poetry Lives* (Jackson, MI: PBS NewsHour), 11 April, 2014. Accessed online at <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/poetry-lives/>.

dependent tropes that facilitate the articulation of a transforming sense of self borne out of the foundation of subject positions.

This thesis brings together a new grouping of transnational poets linked by common motifs of musical influence, historical consciousness, and fluid ideations of home and its emotional grounding. As Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Nikki Giovanni, Grace Nichols, and Jackie Kay adopt these figurative modalities in their work, they re-interpret subject positions for minority women to re-instate the autonomy of the disempowered, giving voice to the underrepresented, often the poverty-stricken and oppressed. Through these literary choices, they interrogate how personal and poetic identity is crafted between various dichotomies of the past and present, here and there, insider and outsider, tradition and innovation. In so doing, they re-negotiate boundaries to occupy the interstices and relative geographies on either side of the line.

Musicality is one device through which these poets cross borders, and it figures into the collective voice of each of them. I have demonstrated that this influence is pervasive. Brooks relies on inspiration from the early blues in writing her sonnets and employs traditional rhythmic drum beats in her metrical choices. Walker intones the thematic salvation and Christian praise from spirituals and hymns to voice the spirituality of people in her community. Giovanni references the slave songs, whose composition can be traced to musical patterns in Western Africa, as she adopts a tone of centuries-long survival. Nichols recollects the calypso and Africanist musical forms of her childhood that intonate longing, loss, and nostalgia. Meanwhile, Kay associates her own sense of 'becoming' with the American blues and blueswoman Bessie Smith as a means of overcoming a lifetime of racism. Music, then, comes full circle for this group of poets, as its influences crisscross the Atlantic. Its tonalities and repetitions, and even minor chords, are resonant throughout the poetry and prose of these writers, and it often

becomes the vehicle through which they signify their notions of selfhood.

Constructions of the self, for the poets here, routinely rely on the derivative of the contemporary from the past, whether that historical perspective takes its shape from a long ancestral narrative or whether it is inextricably linked with personal memories. Brooks engages with an historical framework both in her interrogation of post-War racial prejudice and with the traditional sonnet form. Following others, including, Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Claude McKay, she deploys it to vocalise collectivity for African Americans. Walker relies on the experiences of generations of African descendants in the West, since the crisis of slavery, to stage poetic political protest in the twentieth century. Giovanni regularly considers both the ancestral pull of the African continent and the close history of the unrest of the 1960s and 1970s to integrate the past and present in her poetics. Nichols mythologises the Middle Passage as she interprets her own childhood experiences housed within Afro-Caribbean specificities, that are, throughout her work, reminiscent of examples of American poetics. Jackie Kay, in youth, relies on the history of American blues to articulate her identity and then deifies the role of her grandparents and extended families as she travels through Scotland and Nigeria. Being able to employ a sense of historical consciousness or collective memory often contextualises the present moment and provides for these poets the space in which identity might be declared as well as explored. It allows for connections to be drawn that ultimately unite, not only contemporaries with their predecessors, but also those engaging in and constructing a literary community as an extensive type of identity.

Musical influences and historical reflections, for these poets, tend to owe their provenance to a location-specific or geographically defined construction of home, whether imaginary or actual, where place and individual are subject to the malleability

of time. The poets' changing notions of home and self provide a context for representing identity. Brooks positions herself as a representative of the people fighting to transform the living conditions of poor families in Bronzeville on the South Side of Chicago. Walker constructs her identity as a specifically Southern poet, which tends to develop out of the experiences of plantation slavery, sharecropping, segregation, the struggle for civil rights, and political marginality for black citizens, to offer insight into how place pervades one's consciousness. Giovanni derives much of her aesthetics from both Ohio, where her parents raised her, and Tennessee, where she spent time with her grandparents, along with a social deification of Africa as the mother continent, in order to formulate a transatlantic approach to contemporary identity. Nichols expresses a deeply developed sense of geographic influence, whether attributable to the Africa of her ancestors, the Caribbean of her childhood, or Britain in her adulthood, to articulate her relationship with originary and ancestral places even as she is removed from them. Jackie Kay, too, inhabits the significant realm of home and homeland to craft self-identity, as she is comforted by American cultural productions, traverses the Scottish countryside, and later travels to Nigeria to meet her paternal relatives, to triangulate the Atlantic in several rich cultural traditions. For each, a sense of home, even as its definitions and borders change, is a central mode of formulating a poetics that interrogates both the nature of homeplaces and one's personal and often transformative relationship with them, often as a site of politicisation. As bell hooks says, 'Working to create a homeplace that affirmed our beings, our blackness, our love for one another was necessary resistance'.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst crafting aesthetics that are personal and individual, the writers here also contribute to a multinational discussion of identity for Black Atlantic women poets. I

---

<sup>2</sup> bell hooks, 'Homeplace (a site of resistance)', in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), p. 45.

have shown that they engage with expansive poetics and politics that question the status quo for women. They operate within an ontology that systematically crosses over borders, both geographic and political. I have demonstrated that their feminist or woman-centred voice is typically some form of a specifically black female intervention upon contemporaneous politics. This can take shape through undertaking polemical gender-specific subject matter, such as the abortions that form the subject of Brooks's 'the mother' (1945), or gendered constructions of sexuality, such as in Giovanni's 'Seduction' (1968) or 'Crutches' (1978). It can be about the strength of women to manage the household and nurture the children, such as in Nichols's poem 'Drum Spell' (1983). Engaging in a feminine discourse might be enacted through the exchange with one's female ancestors, such as in Kay's 'Pride' (1998) or 'My Grandmother' (2007). This can even take the shape of feminising Africa itself, as in Walker's poem 'Africa' (1989). Sometimes black female identity is articulated through the conjunction of the domestic and the political. The poets may question and rewrite their role within society, such as in Brooks's 'First fight. Then fiddle' (1949) or Grace Nichols's 'Hurricane Hits England' (1996). Sometimes it's the specifically female voice railing against the outcomes of societal violence, whether it's Margaret Walker fighting the restrictive codes of Jim Crow segregation and centuries of subjugation in 'Since 1619' (1942), or Nikki Giovanni recounting the murders and persecutions of civil rights figures in 'Adulthood' (1968). Perhaps it's Jackie Kay's internalisation of Angela Davis's incarceration that she recalls in *Red Dust Road* (2010). In each of these manifold responses to womanhood and politics, I have demonstrated that these poets are in dialogue with each other and that their individual oeuvres contribute to a transnational voicing of the oppressed.

In this thesis, I have mapped the exchange of poetic voices on each side of the

Atlantic. Their identities are mobile, and discussion of them in conjunction advances the continuing fluidity of nation-state geographies. Reading these poets together for the first time opens pathways to negotiate a growing transatlantic literary community in which their voices become the sites to examine black female identity throughout the diaspora and mitigate the exclusive readings that focus solely on the confines of national identity. Within this framework, a collaboration is developed in which each voice sings of both the individual and the collective. As Natasha Trethewey phrases it, ‘Poetry gives us a way to look at our past unflinchingly, to see it clearly. It is also transformative as it gives us a way to imagine our future, the just and humane society we continue to build—our more perfect union’.<sup>3</sup> This thesis has demonstrated that the clarity to be gained from interrogation of past oppression provides the stage upon which future articulations of a transforming self might be declared, such as what Trethewey undertook as poet laureate, or the work done by Claudia Rankine in *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), in which the continuing problems, both individual and collective, of racial subjectivity in the African diaspora are interrogated.<sup>4</sup> Poetry and the poetic voice both enable and define the conviction with which social changes are pursued, where poets celebrate common humanity on a temporal continuum that extends into deep time and engages with the present moment. Within their dialogue with one another, each poet here from either side of the Atlantic speaks to, not only the didactic presence of the past, but also the boundless possibility of the future.

---

<sup>3</sup> Natasha Trethewey, ‘Poet’s Notebook: Pilgrimage, Revisited’, *Where Poetry Lives* (Jackson, MI: PBS NewsHour), 11 April, 2014. Accessed online at <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/poetry/poets-notebook-pilgrimage-revisited/>.

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY****Primary Sources**

- Baldwin, James**, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993)
- Baldwin, James**, *The Fire Next Time* (1963) (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 1995)
- Baldwin, James**, *No Name in the Street* (London, UK: Michael Joseph Press, 1972)
- Baraka, Amiri**, *Hard Facts* (Newark, NJ: Congress of Afrikan People, 1975)
- Baraka, Amiri**, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (1984) (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2012)
- Barthes, Roland**, *A Lover's Discourse* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1978)
- Bishop, Elizabeth**, 'The Prodigal', anthologised in *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century*, edited by Robert Hass and John Hollander (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the US, 2000), p. 736
- Brooks, Gwendolyn**, *Annie Allen* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1949)
- Brooks, Gwendolyn**, *The World of Gwendolyn Brooks* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1971)
- Brooks, Gwendolyn**, *Report From Part One* (Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1972)
- Brooks, Gwendolyn**, *Report From Part Two* (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 1995)
- Cullen, Countee**, 'Heritage', anthologised by Alain Locke, *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, reprinted and edited by Arnold Rampersad (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1997), pp. 250-253
- Dunbar, Paul Lawrence**, *The Collected Poetry of Paul Lawrence Dunbar*, edited by Joanne M. Braxton (London, UK: University Press of Virginia, 1993)
- Ellison, Ralph**, *Invisible Man* (1952) (New York, NY: Second Vintage, 1995)
- Ellison, Ralph**, *Shadow and Act* (New York, NY: Random House, 1964)
- Ellison, Ralph**, *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, edited by John F. Callahan (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 1995)
- Franklin, Aretha**, 'A Natural Woman', Released by Atlantic Records, 1967
- Friedan, Betty**, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) (New York, NY: Norton, 2001)
- Giovanni, Nikki**, *The Truth is On Its Way* (New York, NY: Right-On Records, 1971)
- Giovanni, Nikki and Margaret Walker**, *Poetic Equation: Conversations Between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1974)
- Giovanni, Nikki**, *Love Poems* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Co., 1997)
- Giovanni, Nikki**, *Blues: For All the Changes* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Co., 1999)
- Giovanni, Nikki**, *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2002)
- Giovanni, Nikki**, *The Prosaic Soul of Nikki Giovanni* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2003)
- Giovanni, Nikki**, *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni 1968-1998* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003)
- Giovanni, Nikki**, *On My Journey Now: Looking at African-American History Through the Spirituals* (Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2007)
- Giovanni, Nikki**, *Bicycles: Love Poems* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2009)
- Hayden, Robert**, 'Those Winter Sundays', anthologized in *The Oxford Anthology of African American Poetry*, edited by Arnold Rampersad (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 262
- The Holy Bible*, King James Version. Cambridge Edition: 1769; King James Bible Online, 2014, <<http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org>>

- Hughes, Langston**, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York, NY: Vintage-Random House, 1974)
- Hughes, Langston**, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes, Volumes 1-3: The Poems: 1921-1967*, edited by Arnold Rampersad (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001)
- Hughes, Langston**, 'The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain', in *The Nation* (1926), anthologized by Henry Louis Gates, Jr and Nellie McKay, editors, in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. 2 (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2004), pp. 1311-1314
- Hurston, Zora Neale**, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1996)
- Johnson, Barbara**, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987)
- Johnson, Barbara**, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 2008)
- Jones, LeRoi**, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963) (New York, NY: Quill Publishing, 1999)
- Jones, LeRoi**, *Black Art* (Newark, NJ, 1966), reprinted in his text *Black Magic: Poems, 1961-1967* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969)
- Karenga, Ron**, 'Black Cultural Nationalism', *Negro Digest*, 17 (1968), 5-9
- Kay, Jackie**, *The Adoption Papers* (Tarsset, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 1991)
- Kay, Jackie**, *Bessie Smith* (Bath, UK: Absolute Press, 1997)
- Kay, Jackie**, *Off Colour* (Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 1998)
- Kay, Jackie**, *Trumpet* (London, UK: Picador, 1998)
- Kay, Jackie**, *Darling* (Tarsset, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2007)
- Kay, Jackie**, *Red Dust Road* (London, UK: Picador, 2010)
- Kay, Jackie**, 'Memories, Dreams and Reflections: Wasafiri Tales from Around the World', *Wasafiri*, 24 (2009), p. 87
- Kay, Jackie**, *Fiere* (London, UK: Picador, 2011)
- Kay, Jackie**, 'Poetry...A Beautiful Renaissance', *The Guardian*, 29 January, 2011, Online, 2014, <<http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2011/jan/29/poets-poetry-stage-roar-renaissance>>
- Kay, Jackie**, in interview with Karen E. Concannon, 18 April, 2013, Newcastle, UK, Appendix
- Locke, Alain**, *The New Negro* (1925) (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997)
- Lorde, Audre**, 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury', *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture*, 3 (1977), reprinted in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984) (New York, NY: Ten Speed Press, 2007), pp. 36-39
- McKay, Claude**, *Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (New York, NY: Bookman Associates, 1953)
- Morrison, Toni**, *Beloved* (London, UK: Chatto & Windus, 1987)
- Morrison, Toni**, *A Mercy* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2008)
- Nichols, Grace**, *I Is a Long Memored Woman* (London, UK: Karnak House: 1983)
- Nichols, Grace**, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (London, UK: Virago Press, 1984)
- Nichols, Grace**, *Whole of a Morning Sky* (London, UK: Virago Press, 1986)
- Nichols, Grace**, *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (London, UK: Virago Press, 1989)
- Nichols, Grace**, *Sunris* (London, UK: Virago Press, 1996)
- Nichols, Grace**, *Startling the Flying Fish* (London, UK: Virago Press, 2005)
- Nichols, Grace**, *Picasso, I Want My Face Back* (Tarsset, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2009)
- Nichols, Grace**, *I Have Crossed an Ocean: Selected Poems* (Tarsset, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2010)
- Nichols, Grace**, 'Grace Nichols', in *Let It Be Told: Essays by Black Women in Britain*, edited by Loretta Ngcobo (London, UK: Pluto Press, 1987), pp. 95-105

- Nichols, Grace**, 'The Poetry I Feel Closest To', in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, edited by W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Tarsset, UK: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), pp. 211-212
- Rankine, Claudia**, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2014)
- Rich, Adrienne**, *Arts of the Possible* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2001)
- Sanchez, Sonia**, *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1973)
- Scott-Heron, Gil**, 'King Alfred Plan', on *Free Will* (New York, NY: Flying Dutchman Records, 1972)
- Smith, Bessie**, *Bessie Smith Songbook* (Milwaukee, WI: Frank Music Corporation, 1994)
- Toomer, Jean**, 'Blood-Burning Moon', in *Cane* (New York, NY: Liveright, 1975), pp. 28-35
- Trethewey, Natasha**, 'Remembering Civil Rights history: When "words meant everything"', in interview with Jeffrey Brown, *Where Poetry Lives* (Jackson, MI: PBS NewsHour), 11 April, 2014, Online, 2014, <<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/poetry-lives/>>
- Trethewey, Natasha**, 'Poet's Notebook: Pilgrimage, Revisited', *Where Poetry Lives* (Jackson, MI: PBS NewsHour), 11 April, 2014, Online, 2014, <<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/poetry/poets-notebook-pilgrimage-revisited/>>
- Voigt, Ellen Bryant**, *Kyrie* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1995)
- Voigt, Ellen Bryant**, *The Flexible Lyric* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999)
- Walcott, Derek**, 'The Train', in *The Gulf* (1969), anthologised in *The Poetry of Derek Walcott: 1948-2013*, edited by Glyn Maxwell (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014), p. 96
- Walcott, Derek**, *Collected Poems: 1948-1984* (New York, NY: Noonday Press, 1986)
- Walcott, Derek**, *Omeros* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990)
- Walcott, Derek**, *The Odyssey: A Play* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993)
- Walker, Margaret**, *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius: A Portrait of the Man, A Critical Look at His Work* (New York, NY: Armistad Press, 1988)
- Walker, Margaret**, *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989)
- Walker, Margaret**, *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature*, edited by Maryemma Graham (New York, NY: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1990)
- Walker, Margaret**, *On Being Female, Black, and Free*, edited by Maryemma Graham (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1997)
- Walker, Margaret**, *Jubilee* (1966) (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1999)
- Whitman, Walt**, *Leaves of Grass: The "Death-bed" Edition* (1892) (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2001)
- Wilson, August**, Interview with Miles Marshall Lewis, *The Believer* (November, 2004), Online, 2014, <[http://www.believermag.com/issues/200411/?read=interview\\_wilson](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200411/?read=interview_wilson)>
- Woolf, Virginia**, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1989)
- Wordsworth, William**, *The Poems*, volumes I and II, edited by John O. Hayden (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1977)
- Wright, Richard**, 'Between Laughter and Tears', *New Masses*, 5 October (1937), 22-24
- Wright, Richard**, 'Blueprint for Negro Writing', *New Challenge*, 11 (1937), reprinted in *Race and Class*, 21 (1980), 403-419

**Wright, Richard**, *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) (Philadelphia, PA: Basic Books, 2008)

### Secondary Sources

- Abel, Elizabeth**, 'Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation', *Critical Inquiry*, 19 (1993), 470-498
- Abrams, M. H. and Stephen Goldenblatt**, editors, *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. 7, vol. 2 (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2000)
- Anthony, Edgar Waterman**, *A History of Mosaics* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargeant Press, 1935)
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony and Henry Louis Gates, Jr**, 'Multiplying Identities', *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (1992), 625-629
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony and Henry Louis Gates, Jr**, editors, *Identities* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995)
- Arnez, Nancy L.**, 'Black Poetry: A Necessary Ingredient for Survival and Liberation', *Journal of Black Studies*, 11 (1980), 3-22
- Baer, William**, editor, *Conversations with Derek Walcott* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1996)
- Bailey, Peter**, 'I am Black, Female, Polite...' (1972), reprinted in *Conversations With Nikki Giovanni*, edited by Virginia Fowler (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), pp. 31-38
- Baker, Houston A., Jr**, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984)
- Bambara, Toni Cade**, *Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Interviews* (New York, NY: Random House, 1996)
- Barksdale, Richard K.**, 'Margaret Walker: Folk Orature and Historical Prophecy', in *Black American Poets Between Worlds: 1940-1960*, edited by R. Baxter Miller (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), pp. 104-117
- Bauman, Zygmunt**, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist—Or a Short History of Identity', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London, UK: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 18-36
- Bercovitch, Sacvan**, editor, *The Cambridge History of American Literature: Volume 8: Poetry and Criticism 1940-1995* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- Berlin, Ira**, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998)
- Bertram, Vicki**, editor, *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-Century Women Poets* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1997)
- Bertram, Vicki**, 'Editorial: Contemporary Women Poets', *Feminist Review* 62 (1999), 1-5
- Bhabha, Homi**, 'Culture's In-Between', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London, UK: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 53-60
- Bhabha, Homi**, *Location of Culture* (London, UK: Routledge, 1994)
- Bloom, Harold**, editor, *Black American Women Poets and Dramatists* (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 1996)
- Bolton, Gillie**, "'Every Poem Breaks a Silence That Had to Be Overcome": The Therapeutic Power of Poetry Writing', *Feminist Review*, 62 (1999), 118-133
- Bonetti, Kay, Greg Michaelson, Speer Morgan, Jo Sapp, and Sam Stowers**, editors, *Conversations with American Novelists: The Best Interviews from The Missouri Review and the American Audio Prose Library* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997)
- Bonner, Carrington**, 'An Interview with Nikki Giovanni', *Black American Literature Forum*, 18 (1984), 29-30

- Bower, Anne L.**, 'Reading Lessons', in *The Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern*, edited by Cheryl B. Torsney and Judy Elsley (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1994)
- Bowersock, G. W.**, *Mosaics as History* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006)
- Breitenbach, Esther, Alice Brown, and Fiona Myers**, 'Understanding Women in Scotland', *Feminist Review*, 58 (1998), 44-65
- Briggs, Laura, Gladys McCormick, and J. T. Way**, 'Transnationalism: A Category of Analysis', *American Quarterly*, 60 (2008), 625-648
- Brooks, Libby**, 'Don't Tell Me Who I Am: Jackie Kay', *The Guardian*, 12 January, 2002, Online, 2014, < <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/jan/12/fiction.features>>
- Busia, Abena P. A.**, 'Long Memory and Survival: Dramatizing the Arrivants Trilogy', *World Literature Today*, 68 (1994), 741-746
- Busia, Abena P. A. and Alison Saar**, 'Fashioning a Self in the Contemporary World: Notes Towards a Personal Meditation on Memory, History, and the Aesthetics of Origin', *African Arts*, 37 (2004), 54-63
- Butler, Judith**, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990)
- Butler, Judith**, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1993)
- Butler, Judith and Vasu Reddy**, 'Troubling Genders, Subverting Identities: Interview with Judith Butler', *Agenda*, 62 (2004), 115-123
- Callahan, Monique-Adelle**, *Between the Lines: Literary Transnationalism and African American Poetics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011)
- Cayton, Horace and St Clair Drake**, *Black Metropolis* (London, UK: Jonathan Cape, 1946), pp. 379-397, 564-599
- Charters, Samuel**, *Walking a Blues Road: A Selection of Blues Writing 1956-2004* (London, UK: Marion Boyers, 2004)
- Christian, Barbara**, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (Exeter, UK: Wheaton Press, 1985)
- Chude-sokei, Louis**, 'The Black Atlantic Paradigm: Paul Gilroy and the Fractured Landscape of "Race"', *American Quarterly*, 48 (1996), 740-745
- Collier, Eugenia**, 'Fields Watered with Blood: Myth and Ritual in the Poetry of Margaret Walker', in *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*, edited by Maryemma Graham (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), pp. 98-109
- Collins, Patricia Hill**, 'Feminism in the United States', in *Africana: The Encyclopaedia of the African and American Experience*, edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr (New York: BasicCivitas Books, 1999), pp. 741-745
- Collins, Patricia Hill**, *On Intellectual Activism* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012)
- Cote, Margaret M.**, 'Now That We Have a Room of Our Own, Are We Throwing Away the Key?', *College English*, 44 (1983), 606-611
- Davies, Carole Boyce**, *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (London, UK: Routledge, 1994)
- Davis, Amanda J.**, 'To Build A Nation: Black Women Writers, Black Nationalism, and the Violent Reduction of Wholeness', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 26 (2005), 24-53
- Davis, Angela**, *Women, Race and Class* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1983)
- Davis, Angela**, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999)

- Davis, David Brion**, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006)
- Dawes, Kwame**, editor, 'Grace Nichols', in *Talk Yuh Talk: Interviews with Anglophone Caribbean Poets* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp. 135-147
- Dawes, Kwame**, 'Black British Poetry: Some Considerations', in *Write Black, Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature*, edited by Kadija Sesay (Hertford, UK: Hansib Publications, 2005), pp. 282-299
- Dawes, Kwame**, editor, *Red: Contemporary Black British Poetry* (Leeds, UK: Peeples Tree Press, 2010)
- Dimock, Wai Chee**, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006)
- Domash, Lynne and Suzanne Juhasz**, 'A Talk with Nikki Giovanni', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 1 (1975), 147-150
- Duran-Almarza, Emila Maria, and Esther Alvarez-Lopez**, *Diasporic Women's Writing of the Black Atlantic: (En)Gendering Literature and Performance* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2014)
- Dyer, Richard**, *White* (London, UK: Routledge, 1997)
- Elliott, Emory**, 'Diversity in the United States and Abroad: What Does It Mean When American Studies Is Transnational?', *American Quarterly*, 59 (2007), 1-22
- Elphinstone, Margaret**, 'Contemporary Scottish Women's Poetry', *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 63 (1999), 65-72
- Elsley, Judy**, 'Nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent: Fragmentation in the Quilt and *The Color Purple*', *Weber Studies*, 9.2 (1992)
- Early, Gerald**, editor, *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 1993)
- Escudero, Maite**, 'Race, Gender, and Performance in Grace Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 1 (2000), 12-26
- Farrell, Susan**, 'It Was the "Wimin" That Did It', *Fortnight*, 453 (2007), 2-3
- Fay, Robert**, 'Afrocentrism', in *Africana: The Encyclopaedia of African and American Experience*, edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr (New York: BasicCivitas, 1999), p. 45
- Ferguson, Margaret, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy**, editors, *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. 5 (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2005)
- Fido, Elaine Savory**, 'Textures of Third World Reality in the Poetry of Four African-Caribbean Women', in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, edited by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), pp. 29-44
- Figueroa, John**, 'Some Subtleties of the Isle: A Commentary on Certain Aspects of Derek Walcott's Sonnet Sequence "Tales of the Islands"', in *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*, edited by Robert D. Hamner (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), pp. 139-167
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher**, 'Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004', *American Quarterly*, 57 (2005), 17-57
- Fowler, Virginia**, 'And This Poem Recognizes That: Embracing Contrarities in the Poetry of Nikki Giovanni', in *Her Words: Diverse Voices in Contemporary Appalachian Women's Poetry*, edited by Felicia Mitchell (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), pp. 112-135
- Fowler, Virginia**, *Conversations with Nikki Giovanni* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1992)
- Fowler, Virginia**, *Nikki Giovanni* (New York, NY: Twayne, 1992)

- Franklin, V. P.**, *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African-American Intellectual Tradition* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1995)
- Frith, Simon**, 'Music and Identity', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London, UK: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 108-127
- Fry, Stephen**, *The Ode Less Travelled: Unlocking the Poet Within* (New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2005)
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr**, editor, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology* (New York, NY: Meridian, 1990)
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr**, *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia, PA: Perseus Books, 2010)
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr**, 'Black Creativity: On the Cutting Edge', *Time Magazine*, Monday, 10 Oct 1994, Online, 2014, <<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,981564,00.html>>
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr and Cornel West**, *The Future of the Race* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1996)
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr and Nellie McKay**, editors, *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. 1 (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1997)
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr and Nellie McKay**, editors, *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. 2 (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2004)
- Gee, Maggie**, 'Stories and Survival', *Wasafiri*, 25 (2010), 19-22
- George, Rosemary Marangoly**, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996)
- Gerschel, Liz**, 'Caribbean Childhoods', *Third World Quarterly*, 10 (1988), 995-998
- Gilroy, Paul**, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993)
- Goldfield, David R.**, *Black, White, and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990)
- Graham, Maryemma**, "'I Want to Write, I Want to Write the Songs of My People": The Emergence of Margaret Walker', in *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*, edited by Maryemma Graham (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), pp. 11-27
- Graham, Maryemma**, editor, *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001)
- Graham, Maryemma**, editor, *Conversations With Margaret Walker* (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 2002)
- Gray, Janet**, *Race and Time: African American Women's Poetics* (Iowa City, IA: Iowa University Press, 2004)
- Greene, J. Lee**, *The Diasporan Self: Unbreaking the Circle in Western Black Novels* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008)
- Griffin, Farah Jasmine**, 'Who Set You Frownin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative' (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995)
- Griffin, Gabriele**, "'Writing the Body": Reading Joan Riley, Grace Nichols and Ntozake Shange', in *Black Women's Writing*, edited by Gina Wisker (Basingstoke, UK: The Macmillan Press, 1993), pp. 19-42
- Grimstad, Kirsten and Susan Rennie**, editors, *The New Woman's Survival Sourcebook* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1975)
- Gruesser, John Cullen**, *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies, and the Black Atlantic* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2005)
- Gussow, Adam**, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002)

- Guterl, Matthew Pratt**, 'The Importance of Place in Post-Everything American Studies', *American Quarterly*, 61 (2009), 931-941
- Gutiérrez, David G. and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo**, 'Introduction: Nation and Migration', *American Quarterly*, 60 (2008), 503-521
- Guy-Sheftall, Beverly**, 'The Women of Bronzeville', in *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*, edited by Maria Mootry and Gary Smith (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 153-164
- Gwin, Minrose C.**, 'The "Intricate Design" of Margaret Walker's "Humanism"', in *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*, edited by Maryemma Graham (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), pp. 66-77
- Hairston, Alena**, 'Review: Trumpet by Jackie Kay', *Callaloo*, 29 (2006), 691-693
- Hall, Stuart and Paul du Gay**, editors, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 1996)
- Hargreaves, Tracy**, 'The Power of the Ordinary Subversive in Jackie Kay's "Trumpet"', *Feminist Review*, 74 (2003), 2-16
- Harper, Phillip Brian**, 'Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s', *Critical Inquiry*, 19 (1993), 234-255
- Harris, Trudier**, 'This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character', *Literature and Medicine*, 14 (1995), 109-126
- Harris, William J.**, 'Sweet Soft Essence of Possibility: The Poetry of Nikki Giovanni', in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1984), pp. 218-228
- Harrison, Daphne Duval**, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988)
- Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn**, 'Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Women Writers' Literary Tradition', in *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, edited by Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), pp. 16-37
- Hill, Anita**, *Reimagining Equality: Stories of Gender, Race, and Finding Home* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2011)
- Hirsch, Edward**, *How to Read a Poem* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1999)
- Holloway, Karla F. C.**, *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women's Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992)
- Hones, Shiela and Julia Leyda**, 'Geographies of American Studies', *American Quarterly*, 57 (2005), 1019-1032
- hooks, bell**, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 1982)
- hooks, bell**, 'Homeplace (a site of resistance)', in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), pp. 41-49
- Hornung, Alfred**, 'Transnational American Studies: Response to the Presidential Address', *American Quarterly*, 57 (2005), 67-73
- Huhndorf, Shari M.**, 'Picture Revolution: Transnationalism, American Studies, and the Politics of Contemporary Native Culture', *American Quarterly*, 61 (2009), 359-381
- Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith**, editors, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York, NY: The Feminist Press, 1982)
- Innes, C. L.**, 'Accent and Identity: Women Poets of Many Parts', in *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, edited by James Acheson and Romana Huk (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 315-342

- Jackson, Buzzy**, *A Bad Woman Feeling Good: Blues and the Women Who Sing Them* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2005)
- Jackson Ford, Karen**, *Gender and the Poetics of Excess* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1997)
- Jaffe, Dan**, 'Gwendolyn Brooks: An Appreciation From the White Suburbs', in *On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Contemplation*, edited by Stephen Caldwell Wright (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), pp. 50-59
- James, Joy and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting**, editors, *The Black Feminist Reader* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000)
- Jarrett, Gene**, 'The Black Arts Movement and Its Scholars', *American Quarterly*, 57 (2005), 1243-1251
- Jones, Gayl**, *Liberating Voices: Oral Traditions and African American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991)
- Jones, Suzanne W. and Sharon Monteith**, editors, *South to A New Place: Region, Literature, and Culture* (Baton Rouge, LA: University of Louisiana Press, 2002)
- Juhasz, Suzanne**, "'A Sweet Inspiration...of My People': The Art of Nikki Giovanni", *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 1 (1975), 130-146
- King, Bruce**, 'Review: The Adoption Papers by Jackie Kay', *World Literature Today*, 66 (1992), 517-518
- King, Bruce**, 'Review: Other Lovers by Jackie Kay', *World Literature Today*, 68 (1994), 580
- King, Bruce**, 'Review: Off Colour by Jackie Kay', *World Literature Today*, 73 (1999), 742-743
- King, Bruce**, 'Review: Trumpet by Jackie Kay', *World Literature Today*, 73 (1999), 736
- King, Richard H. and Helen Taylor**, *Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Culture* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 1996)
- Komara, Edward**, editor, *Encyclopedia of Blues* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), pp. 995-1002
- Lee, Don L.**, *Dynamite Voices: Black Poets of the 1960's* (Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1971)
- Lemann, Nicholas**, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991)
- Lubiano, Wahneema**, editor, *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1998)
- Mack, Kenneth W. and Guy-Uriel E Charles**, editors, *The New Black: What Has Changed and What Has Not With Race in America* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2013)
- Martyniuk, Irene**, 'Playing with Europe: Derek Walcott's Retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*', *Callaloo*, 28 (2005), 188-199
- McClellan, Sarah**, 'The Nation of Mother and Child in the work of Jackie Kay', *Obsidian III*, 6 (2005), 114-129
- McCulloch, Margaret Palmer**, 'Women and Scottish Poetry, 1972-1999', *The Irish Review*, 28 (2001), 58-74
- McDowell, Margaret B.**, 'Groundwork for a More Comprehensive Criticism of Nikki Giovanni', in *Studies in Black American Literature*, edited by Jow Weixlmann and Chester J. Fontenot (Greenwood, FL: Penkeville Publishing Co., 1986), pp. 135-160
- McLeod, John**, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000)

- McLeod, John**, 'Living Room: Buchi Emecheta, Joan Riley and Grace Nichols', in *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London, UK: Routledge, 2004), pp. 120-125
- Melham, D. H.**, *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1987)
- Miller, R. Baxter**, 'The "Intricate Design" of Margaret Walker: Literary and Biblical Re-Creation in Southern History', in *Black American Poets Between Worlds: 1940-1960*, edited by R. Baxter Miller (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), pp. 118-135
- Miller, R. Baxter**, 'The "Etched Flame" of Margaret Walker: Literary and Biblical Re-Creation in Southern History', in *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*, edited by Maryemma Graham (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), pp. 81-97
- Mintz, Sidney and Richard Price**, *The Birth of African American Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 42-51
- Mitchell, Angelyn and Danielle K. Taylor**, editors, *Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009)
- Monteith, Sharon**, *Advancing Sisterhood? Interracial Friendships in Contemporary Southern Fiction* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000)
- Moore, Honor**, 'After Ariel: Celebrating the Poetry of the Women's Movement', *Boston Review*, 1 April, 2009, Online, 2014 < <http://bostonreview.net/honor-moore-after-ariel-celebrating-the-poetry-of-the-womens-movement>>
- Mootry, Maria**, "'Tell It Slant": Disguise and Discovery as Revisionist Poetic Discourse in *The Bean Eaters*', in *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*, edited by Maria Mootry and Gary Smith (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 177-192
- Mosley, Walter, Manthia Diawara, Clyde Taylor, and Regina Austin**, editors, *Black Genius: African American Solutions to African American Problems* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1999)
- Nasta, Susheila**, editor, 'Jackie Kay with Richard Dyer', in *Writers Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2004), pp. 237-249
- Naylor, Gloria and Nikki Giovanni**, 'Conversation', *Callaloo*, 23 (2000), 1395-1409
- Nelson, Jennifer**, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003)
- Oliver, Paul**, *Aspects of the Blues Tradition* (New York: Oak Publications, 1970)
- Oliver, Paul, Tony Russell, Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye**, *Yonder Come the Blues* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001)
- Papachristou, Alexander**, editor, *Blind Justice: A Reader on Race and Justice* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2011)
- Papaleonida, Paraskevi**, "'holding my beads in my hand": Dialogue, Synthesis and Power in the Poetry of Jackie Kay and Grace Nichols', in *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-Century Women Poets*, edited by Vicki Bertram (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 125-139
- Parisi, Joseph**, 'Gwendolyn Brooks', in *100 Essential Modern Poems* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), pp. 127-128
- Parker, Kenneth**, 'Home is Where the Heart...Lies', *Transition*, 59 (1993), 65-77
- Patterson, James T.**, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle Over Black Family Life From LBJ to Obama* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2010)

- Pettis, Joyce**, 'Margaret Walker: Black Woman Writer of the South', in *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*, edited by Maryemma Graham (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001), pp. 44-54
- Phillips, Caryl**, *Colour Me English* (London, UK: Harvil Secker, 2011)
- Plimpton, George**, editor, *Women Writers At Work: The Paris Review Interviews* (New York, NY: Random House, 1998)
- Poulin, A., Jr and Michael Waters**, editors, 'Gwendolyn Brooks', in *Contemporary American Poetry*, ed. 7 (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), pp. 67-73
- Procter, James**, editor, *Writing Black Britain 1948-1998: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000)
- Ramazani, Jahan**, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy From Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994)
- Rampersad, Arnold**, *The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006)
- Reeves, William T.**, 'The Significance of Audience in Black Poetry', *Negro American Literature Forum*, 9 (1975), 30-32
- Reynolds, David S.**, *Walt Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1995)
- Rice, Adrian**, 'Stars in Their Eyes: Review: Off Colour by Jackie Kay', *The Poetry Ireland Review*, 61 (1999), 61-67
- Roberts, Diane**, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima* (London, UK: Routledge, 1994)
- Rohan Preston**, 'Poet Nikki Giovanni Writes of a Love Supreme', in *Star Tribune*, 22 January, 2009, Online, 2014, <<http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/38000304.html>>
- Rowell, Charles Henry**, editor, *Angles of Ascents: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013)
- Rustin, Susanna**, 'A Life in Writing: Jackie Kay', *The Guardian*, 28 April, 2012, Online, 2014, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/27/life-writing-jackie-kay>>
- Saber, Yomna Mohamed**, *Brave to Be Involved: Shifting Positions in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang AG, 2010)
- Scanlon, Mara**, 'The Divine Body in Grace Nichols's "The Fat Black Woman's Poems"', *World Literature Today*, 72 (1998), 59-66
- Scarry, Elaine**, *The Body In Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985)
- Scheneck, Celeste**, 'Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-Constructing the Elegy' in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 5 (1986), 13-27
- Scott, Heidi**, 'Gay Chaps at the Bar: A Close Look at Brooks's Sonnets', *The Explicator*, 66 (2007), 39-41
- Sesay, Kadija**, editor, 'Gwendolyn Brooks in Celebration', *Sable*, 11 (2007), 61-64
- Shockley, Evie**, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2011)
- Slater, Robert Bruce**, 'The Blacks Who First Entered the World of White Higher Education', *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 4 (1994), 47-56
- Smethurst, James**, 'The Popular Front, the Rural Folk, and Neomodernism: The Case of Margaret Walker', in *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), Online, 2014, <[http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s\\_z/walker/smethurst.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/walker/smethurst.htm)>
- Smethurst, James Edward**, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Charlotte, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 85

- Smith, Jon and Deborah Cohn**, editors, *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004)
- Smith, Michelle**, 'Blackening Europe/Europeanising Blackness: Theorising the Black Presence in Europe', *Contemporary European History*, 15 (2006), 423-439
- Spiller, Michael R. G.**, *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* (London, UK: Routledge, 1992)
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty**, *Outside the Teaching Machine* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 1993), pp. 1-25
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty**, 'Acting Bits/Identity Talk', *Critical Inquiry*, 18 (1992), 770-803
- Stallworthy, Jon**, editor, *The Oxford Book of War Poetry* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008)
- Stanford, Ann Folwell**, 'The Complications of Being Nikki Giovanni', *African American Review*, 28 (1994), 481-484
- Stevens, Wallace**, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: NY: Random House, 1965)
- Stevenson, Bryan**, executive director, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror* (Montgomery, AL: Equal Justice Initiative, 2015)
- Taylor, Henry**, 'Gwendolyn Brooks: An Essential Sanity', in *On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Contemplation*, edited by Stephen Caldwell Wright (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001), pp. 254-275
- Torsney, Cheryl B.**, 'The Critical Quilt: Alternative Authority in Feminist Criticism', in *Contemporary Literary Theory*, edited by G. Douglas Atkins and Laura Morrow (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), pp. 180-199
- Van Vechten, Carl**, 'The Black Blues', *Vanity Fair*, 24 (1925), 57-92
- Wacquant, Loïc**, 'From Slavery to Mass Incarceration', *New Left Review*, 13 (2002), 41-60
- Wald, Elijah**, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'N' Roll* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009)
- Ward, Jerry W. and Robert J. Butler**, *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008)
- Warnes, Andrew**, *Richard Wright's Native Son* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007)
- Warren, Kenneth W.**, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2011)
- Watts Gafio, Jerry**, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2001)
- Welsh, Sarah Lawson**, *Grace Nichols* (Horndon, UK: Northcote House Publishers, 2007)
- Williams, Gladys Margaret**, 'Gwendolyn Brooks's Way with a Sonnet', *CLA Journal*, 26 (1982), 215-240
- Wilson, Elizabeth**, "'Le voyage et l'espace clos":—Island and Journey as Metaphor: Aspects of Woman's Experience in the Works of Francophone Caribbean Women Novelists', in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, edited by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), pp. 45-58
- Winant, Howard**, 'Racial Dualism at Century's End' (1997), in *The House That Race Built: Original Essays by Toni Morrison, Angela Y. Davis, Cornel West, and Others on Black Americans and Politics in America Today*, edited by Wahneema Lubiano (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1998), pp. 97-115
- Witt, Doris**, *Black Hunger: Soul Food in America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999)

- Woodcock, Bruce**, “‘Long Memored Women’: Caribbean Women Poets’, in *Black Women’s Writing*, edited by Gina Wisker (Basingstoke, UK: The Macmillan Press, 1993), pp. 55-77
- Wright, Richard**, ‘Introduction’, in *Black Metropolis* by Horace Cayton and St Clair Drake (London, UK: Jonathan Cape, 1946), pp. xvii-xxxiv
- Wynter, Sylvia**, ‘Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Unsilencing the “Demonic Ground” of Caliban’s “Woman”’, in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, edited by Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), pp. 355-372
- Yorke, Liz**, ‘British Lesbian Poetics: A Brief Exploration’, *Feminist Review*, 62 (1999), 78-90
- Young, Kevin**, editor, *Blues Poems* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003)
- Young, Robert**, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity, Culture, and Race* (London, UK: Routledge, 1995)

APPENDIXAN INTERVIEW  
WITH JACKIE KAY**Transcript of Conversation between Jackie Kay  
and Karen E. Concannon, University of Newcastle,  
Newcastle, UK, 18 April, 2013**

KEC: Shall we get started? I have these few questions prepared, but let's see where the conversation goes. Let's start with the other poets that I have done my research on, with whose work yours is associated: Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Nikki Giovanni, and Grace Nichols. Have you read any of their poetry?

JK: Yeah, I have read all of their poetry. I particularly love Gwendolyn Brooks. She is a fantastically exciting writer. I have been reading her for years. She is exciting with form, exciting with her interests. A lot of her interests are similar to mine. She crosses similar themes. She's got a theme to Paul Robeson, for instance.

KEC: Yeah, definitely.

JK: Which is really lovely. I think she's a stylish writer. Just brilliant. Just fantastic. I really love the work of Grace Nichols as well. I kind of grew up with her in a way. We were both published initially together. In a book called *Dangerous Knowing: Four Black Women Poets*.

KEC: Oh, I have encountered that text. I didn't realise that was the first time you two had been published.

JK: Yeah. It was the first time I had been published. Grace had been published before with a book called *I Is A Long Memored Woman*.

KEC: I love that volume.

JK: Yeah, it's fantastic. I think that had come out before *Dangerous Knowing*. But for me, *Dangerous Knowing* was the first time I had any little collection or any body of work published. Next to Grace.

KEC: That must have been exciting.

JK: It was exciting. It was. I loved Grace. I loved the way that she used voices. You know, I loved *I Is a Long Memored Woman* and *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* later and her work for children. And I love the way that the Caribbean dialect fuses into her poetry. That I found inspiring to come across at a young age. Nikki Giovanni, I read her when I was 19-20 at Stirling, and I really found it exciting when I first came across her. In fact, when I first came across lots of black women writers from the States, I found it really liberating. I started to become obsessed with black American writers, or African American writers. So I read a whole host of writers: Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison.

KEC: That is quite the collection!

JK: Yeah. Yeah. There was a whole bunch. Nella Larsen, Margaret Walker. So I went back into the past and forwards. Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. Just a lot.

KEC: That's quite the who's who among black American writers.

JK: Yeah, I was going to do my thesis at Stirling on black American writers generally, but there was so little written then, back then, in 1983, that I dropped it and wrote about women and madness instead.

KEC: Women and madness? Can you say a little more about that?

JK: That was just my undergraduate thesis. I included Toni Morrison in that and Jean Rhys. I was looking at the ways in which, between the nineteenth century and twentieth century in women's literature, the images and the metaphors and the ways of dealing with madness were similar.

KEC: Hmmm.

JK: So that was fun. That was a fascinating subject for me.

KEC: I bet that was really compelling, something you could find multiple ways into, how women address madness.

JK: Exactly.

KEC: Good for you. That's really interesting. Just to return for a moment to the influence you were just talking about with African American writers and, I guess I would say, artists, I wanted to chat for a moment about the blues if that's okay. You've said that the blues has been especially formative for you in your youth, particularly the work of Bessie Smith, whom I personally adore. And you write about her a lot in poetry and prose. I was just wondering if this has shaded or informed any aspect of your present identity. Was it just your youth, or is it into your adulthood? How has blues worked?

JK: It's an interesting question. I think when you really love somebody's work, it is a lifelong relationship, if you like. It's a lifelong thing. And yes, it has informed me, my work, in lots of different ways. One: it made me think that I could be bold with subject matter. Because in the blues, there is no subject too shocking for the blues, and any theme can be dealt with in that form. And two: it made me think about narrative forms in poetry and being able to tell a story at the same time as writing a poem.

KEC: Absolutely. Yes, that storytelling. I find that the best poetry is poetry that does in fact tell stories, and I find that the best stories are those that use poetic images.

JK: Hmmm. Hmmm.

KEC: So the two working together I think is really important.

JK: Absolutely. I think that's right. And then I think I have used lots of blues forms in my poetry itself, not just in the poems I wrote about Bessie. It's in other poems too. And I've experimented with musical forms in one way or another. My novel *Trumpet* takes a musical form really.

KEC: Indeed.

JK: In the form of jazz solos, and then it's a main narrative, which is like the main band. And then there are solo characters that appear. So it's basically a jazz structure that I took for *Trumpet*. So I think music has continued and will probably continue to influence everything that I write in one way or another. I have quite a close relationship with it. Even though I don't play an instrument or sing, I think I am very musical in the sense of how I listen to music and how it informs the way that I write.

KEC: It seems that you had a very musical childhood. Your parents were always playing blues and Bessie Smith. It sounds like the home was always filled with music.

JK: It was, definitely. And I was really lucky like that. We had sing-songs, at our house parties, sing-songs. My dad has a very good voice, and he is also a huge jazz and blues fan. So that was lucky growing up with them. It's actually still probably when I'm happiest, when I'm sitting around at lunch with people all singing songs. [laughs] I find it makes me really happy.

KEC: Specifically with your family, or just anyone who will sing?

JK: Anyone who's got a good voice that will suddenly burst into song makes me very happy. Live. Someone singing live in a moment in any situation makes me happy.

KEC: That sounds great! I don't even need to ask my next question. You've already said that friendships are for life. So I guess Bessie Smith is a friend for life. Started young, and a friendship that will always continue.

JK: Yeah. That's right.

KEC: I feel that friendships come in many different forms. And you have written a poem about, I suppose we would say, an imaginary friend, Brendon Gallacher, when you were a child. It seems perhaps one could say that your friendship with Bessie Smith almost replaced that friendship with Brendon Gallacher, someone that you could associate with, imagine yourself with. Is that fair to say?

JK: It's a nice idea. Yeah, I think it's a lovely idea because Brendon Gallacher is completely imaginary, and Bessie Smith was a real person. The relationship that I had with her was kind of partly imaginary because it was partly fantasy, and partly I imagined her in my life the way that you do with an imaginary friend, you know. And she's very, very vivid to me in the same way that an imaginary friend is vivid. And she was present and absent in the same way as a person that's made up in your head.

KEC: Certainly. You couldn't invite Brendon to a party very easily.

JK: Exactly. Exactly. So yeah, I think it's quite interesting the early relationships that you form imaginatively when you're a writer because your imagination is a powerful thing, and it's the things you're going to use most when you think about exercise for the imagination.

KEC: What a great concept.

JK: Yeah. When you think about exercise for the imagination, as opposed to for the body, exercise for the imagination would include creating an imaginary friend and would include

having an imaginary relationship with a real person. It would include having a conversation with somebody who was dead or continuing to visualise somebody who's gone missing or absent in some way. Because what we do when we write is we create conversations, if you like, relationships with absent presences. That's what we're creating. Then we're relying on that same facility in a reader to recreate that again. So I create an imaginary character. Then the reader recreates that imaginary character, making that imaginary character real for them. As they're reading, hopefully, if I've done my job properly, then the reader will be able to do theirs properly. And imagine that. It's a very powerful thing. Sometimes when you finish a book, you feel really sad because you miss the writing of those characters, or when you finish reading a book you miss those characters being in your life.

KEC: Yes!

JK: Because our lives are peopled by the real people that are in our lives: our sons, our partners, our mothers, our fathers, and the imaginary people have quite an important place.

KEC: It seems that way! What you were saying about this process of imagination being exercises for the mind, it's almost like scales for the musician. And even though you said you don't play an instrument, you are incredibly musical, and it's not that far removed to be practicing, stretching your imagination in order to make it do the things that you ask it to do.

JK: Exactly! I think that's a good analogy.

KEC: And you've been spending a lifetime doing it.

JK: [laughs] Yeah, trying to. I think that's a good analogy of scales for the imagination. I like that. I like that phrase.

KEC: In your book about Smith that you wrote in 1997, you said that you associated her state of being down and out with her colour. And then later in your memoir *Red Dust Road*, you said, 'perhaps one's experiences of racism gather together like clusters or cancerous cells.' Do you think that the link with Bessie's colour helped you overcome or think differently about any of these racist experiences of your youth?

JK: In a way, yes. Because I read about her when I was quite young. I read a book about her when I was 14. A biography of Bessie Smith. And the biography had lots of instances of times when she just got into fights, you know fighting people off. [joint laughter]

KEC: Scrappy.

JK: Yeah, scrappy. Knocking down.

KEC: I like that.

JK: And it made me think she's a strong woman. She didn't take any rubbish from anybody. And what you *can* survive will just make you stronger. And it made me think about survival as a response to racism. And imagination, really. She used her singing voice to fight against the Ku Klux Klan. Yes, I think that the imagination is a great tool if you've got any kind of artistic sensibility or any artistic talent in any way at all, then you can use it with big horrible things like racism, poverty, really real things that impact on your life. I am constantly interested in and fascinated by the works of different writers who've had to

deal with different difficult things and how that's affected what they write, what they write about, and the style of writing.

KEC: It seems that, in your accounting of these different experiences of racism throughout your life, some were more malicious than others. One that I suppose is less malicious, although still problematic, is the moment you recall your friend Sandra saying that 'all black people should go back to Africa, but not *you*, Jackie, you're one of us'. [joint laughter]

KEC: I think your next comment about it is that you were left with nothing left to say because what do you say to that exactly?

JK: Yeah. That's right.

KEC: So, even though she didn't mean it hatefully, it still must have been a moment that caused you to think?

JK: Yeah.

KEC: Did it hurt you?

JK: Yeah it did. I think racism is a multi-levelled system, I guess. People can be racist. People can be carrying a kind of a racism within them that is from our society. And they wouldn't describe themselves as racist; they wouldn't think of themselves as racist, but they can make casually racist remarks or unthinking racist remarks. And that happens a lot of the time. That kind of racism is very, very different from a deliberate, thought-out and murderous and malicious racism. I think it's quite important to distinguish between the two.

KEC: Yes. It's that intent to be hateful, I suppose.

JK: Mmm.

KEC: Versus a social carelessness, perhaps?

JK: Yes. An unconsciousness about it. Yes, that's right.

KEC: It seems that, in a lot of your writing, you talk specifically about American racism mostly in the framework of you and Bessie Smith travelling together in the American South, such as in poems 'In the Pullman' and 'Even the Trees'. I was wondering whether American racism specifically as such changed the way that you interpreted Scottish racism. Does it represent it? Did it help you think about things? Is there something specifically about American racism versus your experience of Scottish racism? Is it all the same?

JK: No, I don't think it is the same. I think that's a good question. Really good question. I haven't thought about it before. I think, actually, if I had to try and analyse why I do that it's because it was written about, it was openly acknowledged, you know, in the literature of American writers. And if I read someone like James Baldwin or Nella Larsen or Alice Walker or Toni Morrison or Audre Lorde's poems about Emmett Till, for instance, all of these writers took on board the subject of racism in different ways. And because America has such an extreme, for such a long time, such an extreme form of racism, it was something that you knew about. You knew about the Deep South. You knew about the

obsession with quadrants and percentages, and you knew that America was the system that South Africa, for instance, took its system of apartheid from. America.

KEC: That's a legacy I wish we weren't known for.

JK: Yeah. Yeah. Seriously, so that's interesting. But it was at least something that was out in the open. People knew that there was such a thing as it, there were terms for it, racism in America. And then there were responses to racism in America. There was the Black Power Movement. 'Black is beautiful.' There were people like Angela Davis. There was a whole reason in this country. When I was teenager in Scotland, there wasn't an exact equivalent right then and there. There wasn't a means of talking about racism in Scotland or even acknowledging it. So when I had to look to role models of that, it was an American role model I looked to. The same with writers. There weren't other Black Scottish writers I could reach for, so I had to go for—back then there weren't a lot of Black British writers either. They were all just emerging about the same time as me. There were a few of them about, but not many, and they weren't easy to access. So for me, the easiest way of accessing people that were thinking around issues of colour, they were all Americans then.

KEC: Interesting.

JK: And a few African writers. But mostly Americans. And even if I wanted to read somebody who was writing as a theorist, you would come across that person from America.

KEC: I guess it's a good thing that you've paved the way.

JK: Yeah. Yeah, I guess so. Pioneers.

KEC: So I suppose a young black person writing now, they have someone more local to turn to, someone whose work they can read rather than specifically having to rely on the American example first.

JK: Exactly. That's right. I think that young black writers now have lots of different black writers they can read and look to. And for other black Scottish writers, they've got me. [joint laughter]

KEC: Have you come across many other black Scottish writers?

JK: Yeah, there are quite a few now. But they're much younger. There weren't that many around my age. There was Maud Sulter, who died, but she was another black Scottish poet who's exactly the same age as me. Yeah, not many.

KEC: To change the subject slightly, I wanted to ask you about what I think is one of your most significant and transitional poems, your poem 'Pride'. It seems to me that this is important because it is a moment when the Nigerian component of your heritage comes to the surface more fully, perhaps, than it had before. I was wondering if the memory of this Igbo man approaching you on the train or the act of writing a poem about it changed your own perceptions about culture or heritage.

JK: It's interesting because people often read that poem, and they ask me if the man was real or he was a figment of my imagination. And I wanted at the end for him to deliberately, to just disappear off the poem, so you have to really wonder if the man did

exist or not. That's what I want the reader to ask. The man did exist. He was a stranger on the train. It was a fascinating thing because the man said to me that he thought I was Igbo. And that turned out to be true! I found that out years later.

KEC: That's incredible!

JK: I wrote that poem years and years before I wrote *Red Dust Road*, years and years. It is incredible, isn't it? It's incredible.

KEC: The way that you communicate in that poem, it seems that, even before you'd investigated what his claims were, suddenly now your Scottish heritage was really disrupted. This Nigerian half of you came to the surface.

JK: Yeah. Yeah.

KEC: Like we hadn't seen before in your work.

JK: Yeah, that is interesting.

KEC: It's a fascinating moment in your poetry.

JK: Yeah, I think it probably is. I think it's interesting that you should pick that out in that way. I think it is. I think, if I look back on my poetry, I would see that particular poem as a turning point or as a poem that opened another road for me to go on. Just like actually writing *Red Dust Road* feels like it's opened another road for me to write down. And I think that, as a writer, you're on a kind of a journey, and the journey is a personal one as much as anything else. A journey of self-discovery as much as discovering the people that you're creating. But for me, that's definitely been that. It's been a process of revelations and surprises. The first surprise, one of them, was that man on the train because it led me to think about the other self in a very easy-to-understand and concrete way, in a way that strangers sometimes can hold up a mirror to yourself. That mirror can be a surprising mirror, sometimes an uncomfortable mirror. But it holds up another side to yourself, and that was what it was like, me seeing him. So that is probably why, yes, that poem is one of—I think of that also being like an older version of Brendon Gallacher. [joint laughter]

KEC: Interesting.

JK: Because he's also like this semi-real/semi-imaginary man that you meet, you know?

KEC: Yes.

JK: You know, he shares a bit of the patty and then he goes.

KEC: Wow.

JK: He disappears. Again, he disappears. He makes a momentary appearance. Like Brendon dies at the end, this man disappears.

KEC: He comes into your life then steps right out of it.

JK: Vanishes, yeah.

KEC: Yet he opens significant doors for that moment that he was there.

JK: Mmm. Exactly. Yeah, that's right. That's right. Yeah.

KEC: In the way that you just said that *Red Dust Road* opened up a different pathway for you, it seems that much of the experience that you describe in that book is about you searching for your family. You actually describe a kind of disappointing encounter with your biological father. Has that changed at all since the writing of the book?

JK: Would you like it to have?

KEC: No. No, I don't have a problem personally with it being as bad as it was, although I feel bad for you.

JK: [laughs] Aww, how kind.

KEC: But I was just wondering because there was a very optimistic moment with your brother in that book, and I was wondering if perhaps the experience of claiming siblings altered your biological father's perspective or if he remains at an arm's length.

JK: No, he remains at an arm's length.

KEC: His loss.

JK: Yeah. His loss. That's right. It was really wonderful finding my father and then finding my brother. That's been fantastic. But, no, I think he only wanted it to be one meeting. As I say in *Red Dust Road*, I try and see him again and he didn't want to meet. I imagine that, if I go back to Nigeria, that would be the same. When my brother did confront him, he said that I could write to him if I wanted to get permission to write to him, but he wouldn't be writing back. And I just thought well I don't really know if I want to be writing [joint laughter]...

KEC: You could write a journal for that if you didn't want someone to write back.

JK: Exactly. So no.

KEC: Do you maintain a relationship with your brother?

JK: Yes, I do. So that's great. Yeah.

KEC: Good.

JK: Yeah.

KEC: How about any other extended members of the family? Do you have any grandmothers who are alive?

JK: No, no grandmothers.

KEC: I am sorry that none are still alive. But it's interesting that you write about grandmothers, it seems, fairly often. It seems like both your Scottish and Nigerian grandmothers are pretty central to your literary imagination.

JK: Yeah, I think so. I would have loved it if my father's mother had been alive. That've been fantastic. And I would have loved to have got a sense of her. I do have, there is a poem, there is a moment in *Red Dust Road* when I have a kind of fleeting sense of this other person in the car as if she's in the car with me, and I do like the way that we can create, partly from things that we've been told and partly from the things we've imagined. We can create our own family tree, invent ourselves. That's one of the most liberating things about being adopted is that you invent part—you are already part invention. You are your own story. And the thing that is passed down to you when you're adopted is a story. So your relationship to the imagination is right up and running from the get-go [joint laughter], as they say in America. From the get go, there you go.

KEC: It seems as if you were destined to be a poet from the start.

JK: I think so. Exactly. I mean, you've already got a story there. You've got a story. And you come, and instead of just coming in your Moses basket, you come in your Moses basket with a story. So yes, you're already inventing, you're already making up, already imagining what the original mother or father would have been like, and then, when you get to actually meet them, you then have to compare. You might have a grieving process for your imaginary version because that was a lot kinder [joint laughter] and nicer. And then you've got to compare and contrast your imaginary version with the actual real one. So that's what we do all the time as writers. So that whole thing about being adopted, there's so many parallels between the processes of adoption and tracing and asking questions about nature versus nurture that are the same kind of questions and processes that you use for creating things.

KEC: Mmmm.

JK: The creative process is very, very similar to that. And it's triangular as well.

KEC: Sure, definitely.

JK: Most good structures involve threes in some ways. So does adoption. It's triangular.

KEC: It seems to me that, in your writing and, I suppose, by extension, your life as well involves threes because here you were having this Scottish childhood. Then it seems like you triangulated to America with your association to the blues and Bessie Smith.

JK: [laughs]

KEC: And the other part of the triangle is Nigeria.

JK: Yes, that's right.

KEC: So in your writing, those three are a triangle. I would say.

JK: Yeah, that's true. That's very true. [laughs] Yeah, that's great. You're a sharp cookie, Karen.

KEC: Thank you. So I really like the image you gave a moment ago of arriving in your Moses basket with a story. It seems now though, perhaps in a way that was murky in your childhood, in your adulthood, you have *two* clear stories.

JK: Mmm.

KEC: You have your Scottish story and your Nigerian story. And you have written about the joy that comes with being able to accept both of these, which to me seems more about your awareness of these heritages, rather than your genetics. I would say that they both come together to create a more complex version of you.

JK: Mmmm.

KEC: Different pieces of a mosaic, perhaps. I was just wondering, at this point in your life, if one half of you is more dominant. Are they both as strong? Are you as Scottish as you are Nigerian? Does that change sometimes?

JK: Yeah, I think it does. It has changed a lot in the course of my life. If I was to draw a little graph, a chart [laughs], like they do in these, and I had to kind of do black and white pens and tried to pick which one was in ascendance at which point in time, the graph would look like a heart graph, it would be up and down and changing. I think that identity is a fluid thing. I think we all have different relationships with our parents, with the countries that we're from, with how much we like certain customs, or how daft we think they are [laughs] at different times. I remember that I spent my early years not being properly aware of being African at all. Then my teenage years, I started to develop a sense of that. Then I went to University. I developed that even more strongly. And then I became annoyed about being Scottish because I felt—when I first went to University there were black people all nodding at me, and I wondered what was going on. [joint laughter] Secret camaraderie of black people! I didn't understand it. I was a complete ingénue, really. Then, so I became very annoyed that I had the African side of myself denied for one reason or another. So I completely focussed on being radically black [joint laughter] and furious. To the point that my brother said you're making an arse of yourself. [joint laughter]

KEC: Sometimes brothers have to do that.

JK: They do. It's fantastic. But then I met Audre Lorde, and she said you don't have to choose. You don't have to choose. You can be Black *and* Scottish. And I wrote about that in *Red Dust Road*.

KEC: Yes.

JK: That came to me as a revelation, of being both. It seems to me that at different points in time—now I feel very comfortable being Scottish and Nigerian, and I don't feel like I have to choose.

KEC: How liberating!

JK: I feel it's very liberating. And I feel that, at different points, different voices come out more strongly than others. So I obviously feel very comfortable creating Scottish voices. But now I also feel comfortable creating Nigerian ones because I've spent enough time there, and I've got that accent in my ear. It used to feel like a real burden as a writer that I didn't feel comfortable creating black characters, getting them to speak and getting them to be authentic unless they were from England. So I didn't feel like I had the advantage, say that, Grace Nichols might have or a Caribbean writer might have because they had that in their own experience and culture.

KEC: Right, Grace Nichols was in her childhood surrounded by other black people.

JK: Right. Exactly. And other people speaking with a Guyana dialect and accents, so she had Guyanese phrases, sayings, everything to use in her work, and I didn't have any of that, so it meant that on the page all I would be able to do to tell you that a character was black was to say that they were black [joint laughter] and write about it. But I always wanted to be like Toni Morrison. She never, ever had to tell anyone who was black.

KEC: It was understood.

JK: You could read it. It was just understood. The diction and the syntax and the tone and the way that somebody appeared. And so now I feel like I can have more of that nuance and subtlety creating black characters because I've had more experience and I've been to more places. More crucially because the Nigerian side of myself has had a road to travel on. The imaginary red dust road became a real one, and I was able to put my bare feet on it.

KEC: Your bare feet in their waiting footprints.

JK: That's right! Exactly. So to put your bare feet in the waiting footprints allows you then to be able to dip your pen in ink.

KEC: But at the same time, even though perhaps you had to acquire these characters so that you could say that they were African and didn't have to explain it, you've never had to explain your Scottish characters. Those have been very natural from the beginning of your poetry.

JK: Yeah, exactly.

KEC: Now you get both.

JK: Yeah hopefully, hopefully. That's the hope. I'm talking about mainly in fiction terms because, in poetry terms, creating a voice for a poem is easier in a sense because you have to maintain it for less, and it does have to be authentic, but it doesn't have to be authentic in the way that fiction voice has to be.

KEC: Absolutely.

JK: You know, concerned with the nitty-gritty. In a poem, for instance, like in 'Egusi Soup' that I wrote about in *Fiere*, the father in that poem just gets up and flies off at the end. He just turns into a fable. It's very easy to do that in a poem. A poem can have a lift-off, a moment where the real then suddenly becomes completely unreal. It's doable, whereas in prose you can do that in short stories (some of my characters give birth to foxes and turn into tortoises) [joint laughter]

KEC: As you do.

JK: As you do. There are all sorts of strange things in my stories, but, in order for them to work, they have to be really, really grounded in enough detail to make that possible.

KEC: It's interesting that you just mentioned *Fiere* because I find that volume to be a very compelling juxtaposition of Scottish and Nigerian heritage, specifically the poem 'The

Road to Amaudo' where you actually speak in Scots English and in Nigerian, and they come together.

JK: Mmmm.

KEC: And for this road in Africa, this imaginary village of peace, to be written in a volume of poetry which is the Scots English word for companion, I found that to be you embracing both.

JK: Yeah, that's right. That book feels to me—that's why I like *Fiere*, probably of all my collections, because it's a bringing-together book. When we write, we're often looking for a way of bringing together seemingly separate or disparate forces, even within ourselves. And for me, yes, it was definitely a way of saying 'Halloo' [joint laughter]. Hello to both sides and to find that rich imaginative legacy, to be able to use Igbo dialects, to be able to use a Scots dialect, to use it all in the same book felt quite liberating.

KEC: Along those lines, at this point, and there may not even be an answer to it—it may be like the black and white pens on the graph changing positions—but at this point, where do you consider home? And home is not necessarily where you receive your post right now. In *Red Dust Road*, you say that Nigeria feels like home even though it's a million miles away from Glasgow. Do you feel like you have a sense of what is home now? Is it different than where perhaps it used to be?

JK: Yeah, it is different. I think home has shifted, and just as you shift, so the notions of home and what home is shift and become more complex as you get older. It becomes layered with nostalgia, along with some other things. Your original versions of what you thought home was, they mix in with what actually turns out to be home. So I quote V. S. Naipaul in *Red Dust Road* as saying 'all landscapes exist in the imagination', so I had this imaginary sense of Africa, and that's now mixed up with the real picture and the real experience of being in Nigeria. So, when I think of what's being home, home is all of these things. Home is my imagination, probably. My default home would be my imagination actually because there I can go to home in any place in the world [joint laughter] in my head.

KEC: Instant first class ticket.

JK: Yes, instant first class ticket to home inside my own head. Home is so resonant the way that we all think of home. If you just give home as a theme to students, and just get them to riff on what they think of home.

KEC: That must be very rich.

JK: Yeah, and there are so many things they think of they will say simultaneously. Contradictory things.

KEC: Hmmm. Interesting.

JK: Because home's in your imagination, home's in your head, and home's also a real place. Home's got a hearth in it. Home's where you hang your hat. Home is also where you can be estranged from. Home is where you left. Home can be an unhappy place, and home can be happy. So home, or feeling at home, or feeling at ease, is I think something that we all strive for. So I now feel at home, I suppose, with being able to be Nigerian and Scottish.

I feel at home in myself. And that's not a physical building. That's the concept of being at home. I like that. I like the idea of life being a search, really, to feel at home.

KEC: Oh, that feels so accurate.

JK: You think, oh gosh, it was you all along. [joint laughter]

KEC: You've been there the whole time!

JK:[laughs] You've been there the whole time. You go all of this distance to find that you complete the circle, to some extent.

KEC: I believe Dorothy may have done that in *Wizard of Oz*.

JK: Yeah, that's right. In fact, *Wizard of Oz* influenced *Red Dust Road*. That's where I got the title, from *Wizard of Oz*. Rather than yellow brick road, red dust road. And rather than meeting that guy at the end [laughs], you know,

KEC: [laughs] Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!

JK: [laughs] Yeah, meeting Jonathan was like meeting the man behind the curtain.

KEC: Wow. What a great metaphor.

JK: Yeah. Yeah, the man behind the curtain.

KEC: It seems to me that one image that is really closely related to the idea of home in your poetry is the image of the river. You refer to the Mississippi in America, the Dee and the Don in Scotland, the Niger in Nigeria. It comes up more generally in 'Igbo Bath' and 'Dark River'. The river seems to be a space where you can talk about the source of your origins, or the route to your roots.

JK: Hmmm.

KEC: I was wondering if there is anything about that. Is that a conscious choice? Is that something that is just in your psyche and comes out?

JK: It's fascinating that you should ask that because I hadn't actually connected all these rivers or been aware of them. But now that you say it, I can see that 'tis true. And there's other rivers as well, rivers in children's poems, and Stinchar is a river in one of my children's books. And in one book, I talk about river reflections. And yes, there are a lot of rivers. I hadn't thought about it consciously. It's not something that I've been using deliberately as a pattern of imagery or as a motif.

KEC: It just means it's a part of you.

JK: It must be part of me. But I do find, in 'In My Country' a poem of mine—'In my country/ walking by the waters/ down where an honest river/ shakes hands with the sea', I think the reason I put the river in that poem is because my country was—yes, the river is the source of the country, and the river is the life-force of the country. Rivers often divide or separate cities, they often run right bang through the middle of cities, so you've automatically got an image of a half and a half. You've got the river running through, and

you've got what's on one side and what's on the other. And then you've got the idea of crossing a river, crossing over from one side to another, and whether or not there's any transformation involved in that. Then there's lots of myths that come out of rivers.

KEC: Sure.

JK: And often rivers come in pairs.

KEC: Like the Dee and the Don.

JK: Like the Dee and the Don in Aberdeen. So yes, I found, when I was in Nigeria, I just wanted to find out about the rivers while I was there, so I just did. I just think I am interested in rivers. And I love Langston Hughes's poem.

KEC: Ahh.

JK: 'I've known rivers. Ancient dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers.'

KEC: The surviving recording of him reading that is so powerful.

JK: Oddly enough, when I was in Washington the other day, there was a public radio station I just happened to tune into, and there he came on. Him reading that poem. [joint laughter]

KEC: It's Langston Hughes on the radio.

JK: I couldn't believe how lucky it was.

KEC: That is fortunate.

JK: Yeah, it was just bizarre. Just lovely. That's probably his most famous poem.

KEC: Yeah, especially in America. That's probably the one for which he gets the most credit.

JK: You only need one poem like that. In your whole life. One single poem. That's all you need to do.

KEC: Do you think you have that poem of your own?

JK: Already? Don't know. That would be for other people to think. [laughs] I've got no idea which poem of mine, if I was dead and gone, which poem of mine would be one that people—if any, they'd probably all get lost.

KEC: I doubt that.

JK: Very few people survive their poetry these days in the way that poets from the past do. It's an effort to remember people I think.

KEC: If you don't feel that you have this one, I guess, famous poem, which maybe it's 'Pride', maybe,—

JK: In my country, it's probably the poem of mine that gets talked about the most or 'Brendon Gallacher'. I think in my country there has certainly been more written about it. Lots of academics have written about it, even a tiny little poem, so I think probably that one. I don't know.

KEC: Do you have—and I suppose this is more personal, rather than your poetic legacy—do you have a favourite? And it could be a favourite because of the way that it's written, or the memory it's about, or the imagery you've used, or the experience that you as a poet felt when writing this poem. Do you have one that is sort of, you think, top of the heap?

JK: I think the favourite always changes depending on what you've just written.

KEC: That's how it is for me too.

JK: So I think your favourite is always something more current than something in the past. So my current favourite is a poem called 'The Returning', which is in *Fiere*. It's a poem about my son having a fever convulsion. So that would probably be my favourite at the moment. 'Brendon Gallacher' is definitely one of them, and 'Pride' is another because they brought to life for me something that had happened in my imagination in one case and something that happened on a train in the other. They felt like accurate sort of representations or enough for me to be able to feel like I could hang onto that in some way. If writing a poem is a way of giving yourself the gift of a memory, or giving yourself a kind of continuity, a way of continuing or allowing yourself to trust from being a child to an adult, or an adult to an older adult, then poems are always concerned with the middle passages. And I suppose, if you like, you grow fond, perhaps too fond, of poems that capture that business of crossing over from one state to another.

KEC: There's one of your poems that I actually think captures this transition or this going from one state to another really well. It's a smaller poem, so maybe it's not one of your more well-known poems; it's 'Pencil, Knife'.

JK: Oh yeah.

KEC: You describe your experience of this artist representing you. In the poem, you seem to say that he is creating you, while he is representing you. You say you feel yourself shift, change. If that is a poem in which you can say this was a moment of transition, what was that like? What was the experience like of sitting for that art?

JK: It was a pencil drawing. It is an artist called Joyce Gunn Cairns. She's got a few drawings of me actually. You could probably find them, or I could give you her email if you're interested.

KEC: Okay.

JK: She might then provide you with a printout of a drawing that you could also include in your thesis.

KEC: I'd like that very much.

JK: That would be quite neat.

KEC: It would be quite neat.

JK: I'll email her. She's created a drawing based on a character of mine that appears in *Reality, Reality*. There's a character that's called Mrs Vadnie Marlene Sevlon.

KEC: That's quite the character!

JK: Yes, she's Jamaican. She calls herself her whole name most of the time. [joint laughter] 'So, Vadnie Marlene Sevlon, what are you going to be doing today?' I like the idea that this artist is not only drawing me, the real me, but she is also drawing one of my characters. She seems to have quite a close relationship to my work. She reads everything. So I was thinking of that time she was drawing me, and of the idea of, if you could just be invented, the way that people draw cartoons. And then you've got them up and moving. So you go from a line drawing or a sketch to a graphic.

KEC: Animation.

JK: Yeah, to then being animated in some way. I liked in that poem playing around with the idea of being invented by a pencil. And being animated. That just seemed a great idea. That happened, and I've had a sculpture done. It's in the same book as *Life Mask*. That whole book is about exploring masks, and what's real and what's not in terms of visual images and inspired by art, as that collection was, and also by trauma, and rupture, and separation. I think for me, at that time, art was a way of bringing the self together. The whole book is really about that in one way or another.

KEC: You could wear trauma and separation like a mask.

JK: Mmmm.

KEC: And it could be the version of yourself that is presented to others before they see the deeper version of you, or it could be something that you remove at times, like a mask. So many things, so many experiences, it seems, can be worn like masks.

JK: Yes.

KEC: So to have a volume about that trope, I think, is really fitting. The things we go through and the things that inspire poetry.

JK: Yes.

KEC: Even poetry itself, I suppose, could be a mask.

JK: Yes.

KEC: Although you seem rather authentic in your poetry.

JK: I try to be. [laughs]

KEC: Maybe it's only a partial mask, or a transparent mask.

JK: You're right in the sense that any words that you put down in a form can be a mask because you can use the form to hide in or, with everything that you say, there's something that you don't say. For every word that you're writing down, there is another word that

you're deliberately not writing down. For me, those silences or those things you choose not to say are those things that are undercurrents in the overcurrents. That's a river image, I suppose. The undercurrents and overcurrents. The double-current river. That's to me just as important. What you say and what you don't say. What you stay silent about. I suppose also being cheerful in a poem is a way of having a mask. And humour generally can be a kind of disguise.

KEC: Absolutely.

JK: So, yes, I'm fascinated with the ways that writing can be a form of disguise.

KEC: Interesting.

JK: The ways that the self can be revealed or hidden within different forms.

KEC: Certainly. I suppose you've spent your lifetime painting this self or composing this self, to put it back in the musical image.

JK: Mmmm.

KEC: The way that you're revealed. The way that you're transformed. The way that you're concealed. All of these things come together to present us, the readers, with you, Jackie Kay.

JK: Yeah, and with different versions of me. But not even so much in order to give people me but in order to explore different ideas that come from that. Maybe that interest is similar to an artist doing a self-portrait because it's not straightforward and autobiographical. It's art. It's a way of looking at art. And for some reason, with artists that paint themselves, like Frida Kahlo, for instance, we don't necessarily think of them as being people that are exploiting themselves in the way that we do with writers who write about themselves in different ways. So I find that interesting. I think of it as having several different canvases, if you like, that all go towards looking or being able to look at the whole issues of race and identity in different ways. I suppose I use myself as a springboard. I use myself as oils and canvas and paint.

KEC: I guess it goes back to that image I mentioned a while ago of mosaics and the different pieces coming together to form the whole.

JK: Yes, exactly. Exactly. That's fascinating the way that you've put that. And the earlier question the way that you've put it. Because it does feel like a lifetime's work to me. When I was in America recently with all these students that had studied my work, I was quite fascinated because they looked at the whole work, as you're doing, across, rather than just looking at specific things. It made me feel quite joined up. [joint laughter] I felt a joined up person. [laughs] I felt quite joined up like, and it was really—

KEC: The image that we can see when we step back and look at the entire canvas.

JK: Yeah. That's right. I suddenly felt joined up by the process of people doing that, which made me think that literary criticism, you know, what people say—A lot of writers say they don't like to read critics, and I don't particularly read critics either because there's lots of stuff out there about my work that I haven't read at all because I don't want to become too self-conscious, but on the odd occasion where you do happen to meet, say, somebody like

yourself, or I was at a conference in Belgium recently called ‘What’s Africa to Me Now?’ and there was a woman there giving a paper about me [joint laughter]

KEC: You’re just listening in the audience?

JK: It seemed to me rude not to attend because she’d been to interview me that morning so it’d be rude not to be there [laughs], so I was there and it was really quite fascinating because it was really quite post-modern. I was sitting there taking notes. [joint laughter]

KEC: About yourself?! I’d almost consider that post-post-modern. [joint laughter]

JK: That’s post-post-modern, isn’t it? And people were wanting to know what was in my notes, or whether I was just diddling. Actually I could send you her paper.

KEC: I’d love to see it. Yes please.

JK: Anyway, that was a funny process. It made me think that listening to her paper and taking questions from people who know your whole body work, it’s like paying for an hour in analysis. [joint laughter]

KEC: Only cheaper for you.

JK: Cheaper. Much cheaper.

KEC: So I have just one final question before our talk is over. What are you working on right now?

JK: Right now, I am writing a novel. I am writing several poems actually. So I am doing two things simultaneously. I always do more than one thing at the same time. It’s interesting with poetry because what happens is I start to write poems all individually, and what happens is they start to collect. I see that there’s a concern. Then the concern that unifies the poems makes itself known to me some way into writing the book. So, at the moment, I am writing a book that’s loosely titled in my head *Public Poems* because all of the poems seem to me to be about public spaces and my relationship to them, to football grounds, to a Christmas tree, or Trafalgar Square, to refugees, so they’re all poems that feel important in a different kind of a way. They’re less personal and more public.

KEC: And public, of course, can sometimes mean political.

JK: Exactly. They are. For some reason, they’re just all congregating. The poems are starting to congregate, and soon they’ll be marching. [joint laughter]

KEC: Soon, they’re no longer in your control.

JK: They’re out and about. They’re up and down. They’re *oot* and *aboot*. That feels quite liberating for me. That’s a complete change of direction with those poems that I am writing at the moment that are very different from the *Fiere* poems. The novel I’m writing is called *Bystander* at the moment, and it almost sounds stupid if you try to give any kind of thought about what the novel is about.

KEC: That’s fine. I can wait until the publication.

JK: So I won't say much except to say it's about the ways in which people are passive or active depending on what they witness. *Bystander*: the ways in which we witness things and don't act. The ways in which we witness things and do.

KEC: That almost sounds like it has a way of being public or political in and of itself as well.

JK: Yeah, I think so. I think they go together. Often what I am writing goes together in mysterious ways, and I don't quite know. But yes I think that's right. That's true. Yes, you're a sharp cookie, Karen [laughs]

KEC: Thank you. We've actually managed to come full circle. You're working on things that are public and political at the moment, and that brings us right back to where we started. You're in a collection of other black women poets who very often diverge from the private, domestic self and address the public more boldly.

JK: Yes, that's right. Which is great. I think that's exciting when you do that because we're responsible people, citizens of the world. Writers are citizens, too, and sometimes people forget that writers are citizens, too, and that we have a kind of civic model in responsibility, as well as an imaginative one. I quite like if you can find a way of fusing those two things, if you can fuse being a good mum with being a good citizen with being a good writer. You can get all of these complex identities to come together to form some sort of whole.

KEC: And what a whole it forms. Thank you so much for this.

JK: Thank you, thank you.