Creative Multivalence:

Social Engagement in Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha*

In her essay "Nuance and the Novella," one of the first (and few) substantive readings of *Maud Martha*, Barbara Christian considers the work as "in-between," looking back toward the social protest novels of the 30s and 40s (such as *Native Son*), and prefiguring some of the themes and modes that were to develop in the novels by Black women writers in the 70s, and she offers a reading of how Brooks's use of nuance, as Christian interprets it, allows her to achieve her political and literary goals. I find the question of "nuance" a troubled one, however: criticism on the novel is split between discussions of its understatement, fragmented nature, "limited" viewpoint and subject matter[1], and arguments for reading these as symptoms of a suppressed rage.[2] Interestingly, there are many passages in the novel which seem to suggest irony, ambivalence, or a sort of layering[3] of innocent sincerity with valenced protest – in which I'm not convinced we're supposed to read Maud Martha's silence, restraint, or good nature *simply* as such in the first place, symptomatically or otherwise. Hortense Spillers is the only other critic so far to venture into exploring this ambiguity, and although she does not pursue it in-depth, nor provide many examples, she does remark that "[t]he often sardonic quality of the writing and its persistently ironical force save the narrative from pathos" (Spillers 234).

At the same time, while reading Gwendolyn Brooks's letters in the archives and "marginalia" in her first autobiography, I was struck by the multivalent, and/or dubiously "reliable," nature of her statements about her own life and writing. To begin with, she has said,

[1] Our class discussion, as well as many early reviews of the novel, are examples of this former perspective.
[2] See Washington, Shaw, and Frazier.
[3] I'm grateful to my classmate David Schlitt for the suggestion of this term.

"*Maud Martha* is a lovely little novel about a lovely little person, wrestling with the threads of her milieu. Of course this 'lovely little person' was the essence of myself, or aspects of myself tied with as neat a ribbon as my innocence could manage. The novel is very funny, very often! -- and not at all disappointing [...]" (Self-interview 114). In this fascinating characterization of her novel, Brooks actually echoes the language of its early reviewers, who "gave it the kind of ladylike treatment that assured its dismissal," and "invariably chose to describe the novel in words that reflected what they considered the novel's appropriate feminine values" (Washington 453). That the "lovely little" novel actually takes on racism, the color hierarchy, disillusionment with marriage, war, and lynching, and the inherent paradox of calling one's novel "not at all disappointing" add complexity to the statement, and give the reader to believe that Brooks's words, in her novel as well as elsewhere, are perhaps not meant to be read "straight," even when they are felt in earnest. In this essay, I will first explore this strategic multivalence as it appears in the novel, considering that of Brooks's own commentary alongside it where possible. Then, in a sustained reading of the rat and mouse scenes, I will undertake a comparative analysis of the mechanisms of liberation and hero-formation that operate in *Maud Martha* alongside those of *Native Son*. Finally, I will argue that the sophisticated consciousness with which Brooks endows her protagonist, and the nimbly complex signification through which this consciousness is expressed, point to a new, non-naturalistic form of social engagement which Brooks innovates in *Maud Martha.*

The first instance in which this "layered" sort of narrative struck me was in Maud Martha's thoughts, upon attempting to resist Paul's will to choose an unbearably cheap apartment for them:

> Was her attitude unco-operative? Should she be wanting to sacrifice more, for the sake of her man? A procession of pioneer women strode down her imagination; strong

> women, bold; praiseworthy, faithful, stout-minded; with a stout light beating in the eyes. Women who could stand low temperatures. Women who would toil eminently, to improve the lot of their men. Women who cooked. She thought of herself, dying for her man. It was a beautiful thought. (58-9)

There are many different threads of meaning interwoven here. To begin with, the initial two questions do sound potentially sardonic, particularly since we have just been told a few lines prior that Maud Martha had "resolved to hold out firmly against stove-heated flats. [...] And no basements. You got T.B. in basements" (58). This context seems to suggest that these first two questions are aimed rather at the reader, in a challenging tone, and to discourage their reading as earnest questions directed inwardly – and yet, this latter reading is not altogether precluded. As the narrative rolls on, it is possible to imagine that Maud Martha becomes overwhelmed with the images of female self-sacrifice she has seen extolled, and begins to yield herself to them; and yet, this reading does not sit comfortably for at least two reasons. First, the word choice of "*pioneer* women" refers to a primarily white imperialism, a dedication to the expansion of a white patriarchy, among whose ranks I'm not sure Maud Martha would readily count herself, as Valerie Frazier claims she does in that moment (136). Second, the first word that might really indicate Maud Martha's allegiance is "beautiful": "It was a beautiful thought" (59). Especially given the novel's investment in emphasizing the oppressive nature of contemporary beauty standards,[4] this begs the question: beautiful to whom?

The critical message underlying "innocent" interactions, minimalistically portrayed, becomes more pronounced in "*the young couple at home*": they spend an evening out at a musicale, during the whole of which Paul acts much like a small child: he sleeps through the show and then annoys Maud Martha with "clowning" all the way home (66). The chapter shows

[4] See Shaw, "The War With Beauty."

us multiple examples of Paul's tiresomeness, his intellectual inaptitude next to Maud Martha, yet all of this goes without explicit comment, save for one clue: while Paul, having failed at his sexual advances, settles down to read a paperback titled *Sex in the Married Life*, Maud Martha reads W. Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*. In context, the implication of the title itself is nearly unavoidable in Maud Martha's situation; Maugham's grim portrayal of attempts at romantic love and the intellectual disparity between the couple's choices of reading add further possible shades of meaning. If this reading of the chapter is correct, it is the first and most explicit statement the reader gets from Brooks regarding Maud Martha's awareness of her unsatisfactory marital situation. At the same time, it is an important turn, for fiction of its time, that here the suffering protagonist is not left alone or in ignorance, but is allowed the company of a novel that might help to develop her understanding of her circumstances. This understanding, as I will argue further on, will become the key to Maud Martha's survival, and the key to the new kind of novel Brooks was after.

Meanwhile, Paul's lack of curiosity in the arts reappear in "*we're the only colored people here*," although this time he does agree to accompany Maud Martha to *The World Playhouse*, a movie theater downtown generally patronized by whites, and the couple both suffer their cool reception there. But during the magic of the film itself, Paul "presse[s] her hand" and says to Maud Martha that they should come back, and attend plays as well (77-78). In an ambiguously presented response, "She pressed back, smiling beautifully to herself in the darkness. Though she knew that once the spell was over it would be a year, two years, more, before he would return to the World Playhouse. And he might never go to a real play. But she was learning to love moments. To love moments for themselves" (78). Against the dark background of the chapter – the intellectual inequality between Maud Martha and Paul, the racism of their environment – it's difficult to read these ameliorative last two lines completely in earnest.

Although one could argue that this sentiment might match the way Brooks would come to regard marriage a quarter-century hence,[5] the reader almost certainly doesn't share this generous view of Paul as a husband at this point in the novel, and Maud Martha's valiant efforts to be contented nevertheless strike one as somewhat pitiable. This effect does not necessarily entail any lack of sincerity on Maud Martha's part – that question is left open; regardless, it illustrate the fact that a scene may evoke pity, anger, sadness, etc. simply by showing the situation of a character, even (and perhaps especially) without the character's directly voicing this response for the reader. In this way, Brooks carves out a sense of protest that departs that of naturalism: both the lachrymal prose of earlier versions, such as that of Stephen Crane's *Maggie*, and the raw drama of *Native Son*. While depicting everyday hardships, *and* while employing understatement, Brooks can evoke an emotional response in the reader.

In this model, Maud Martha's uncomplaining nature is a key factor, and therefore it must be preserved even while she serves as the vehicle of criticism. Accordingly, Maud Martha's extremely magnanimous responses to the questionable behavior of others is even more striking in "*a birth*," which Brooks has said, "is a fairly good mirror of the birth of my first child" (*Report From Part One* 192). To a neighbor just arriving after little Paulette is born, Maud Martha says, exultantly,

> 'Did you hear the news? I just had a baby, and I feel strong enough to go out and shovel coal! Having a baby is *nothing*, Mrs. Barksdale. Nothing at all.'
>
> 'Aw, yeah?' Mrs. Barksdale smacked her gum admiringly. 'Well, from what I heard back there a while ago, didn't seem like it was nothing. Girl, I didn't know anybody

[5] In an interview with Gloria T. Hull in 1977, Brooks said, regarding her views on marriage, "young women are, and properly so, determined to have everything right. And I believe every young woman ought to start out with that intention. It takes many years before you realize that nothing is going to be flawless. You put the positives over here and the negatives over there, and if the positives are bulkier than the negatives, you go with them. And it's really beautiful – this steady companionship – having somebody you can talk things over with, whom you're [sic] known so long that you can count on certain responses" ("Update" 95).

> *could* scream that loud.' Maud Martha tittered. Oh, she felt fine. She wondered why Mrs. Barksdale hadn't come in while the screaming was going on; she had missed it all.
>
> People. Weren't they sweet. She had never said more than 'Hello, Mrs. Barksdale' and 'Hello, Mrs. Cray' to these women before. But as soon as something happened to her, in they trooped. People were sweet. (98-99)

In this passage, it seems that the innocent, "sweet" framing of Maud Martha's response allows her to communicate to the reader two less-than-rosy observations without seeming critical: that Mrs. Barksdale, who has just answered Maud Martha's triumphant account of her strength by contradicting it, did not try to help her during her labor, and that her neighbors' sudden appearance might possibly have as much to do with nosiness as with altruism. But by conveying this information in the manner Brooks chose, she allows us to be annoyed at Mrs. Barksdale *and* to appreciate what might yet be an earnest sunniness in Maud Martha's character, without forcing one to contradict the other.

Before leaving "*a birth*," I'd like to pause to consider a fascinatingly multivalent statement of Brooks's own, regarding her desire to have children. Much of her reason for this, she says, was "because I respected and marveled at and admired my body – I wanted my body to do everything its composition suggested it was *supposed* to do. I did not want my body to fail. I wanted my body, as well as my mind and spirit, to succeed, to reach an appropriate glory" (204). In the midst of such positive and intrinsic valuation of her body, Brook's middle line, "I did not want my body to *fail*," is quite unexpected. How not to have children would be to *fail* is not altogether clear – nor is it clear precisely whom it would fail, or according to what standard. If Brooks "marvels at" her body (as it is) and simultaneously anxious that it might fail at some sort of test, I am unable to trace exactly where and how that shift occurs – or how the two sentiments play out simultaneously. Nonetheless, it seems that competing views and feelings can coexist in

the same moment, that individual physical vitality and social anxiety can be experienced at once, in this perspective that provided the model for "*a birth*" in *Maud Martha.*

One of the most-discussed chapters in the novel is "*Maud Martha spares the mouse*", which has been cast as a direct response to Bigger's battle with the rat at the opening of *Native Son*.[6] This essay will join in that discussion – but first, I'd like to visit "*brotherly love*": the chicken scene that, some eighty pages later, doubles and then departs from the compassion of the mouse scene. In doing so I hope to prime my reader for the ambivalence that the this scene casts back onto the earlier one.

In "*brotherly love*", Maud Martha is having to clean a chicken for dinner, and is thoroughly disgusted by her task. After a stomach-turning description of the ordeal, Maud Martha begins to reflect in wonder that people are capable of performing this grizzly disembowelment of the "corpse" of a chicken (152):

> But if the chicken were a man! – cold man with no head or feet and with all the little feath – er, hairs to be pulled out, and the intestines loosened and beginning to ooze out, and the gizzard yet to be grabbed and the stench beginning to rise! And yet the chicken was a sort of person, a respectable individual, with its own kind of dignity. The difference was in the knowing. What was unreal to you, you could deal with violently. If chickens were ever to be safe, people would have to live with them, and know them [...]. (153)

As Frazier points out, Maud Martha "anthropomorphizes" the chicken much as she had the mouse (139), and, particularly in her ruminations about the antithesis between violence and awareness of another's reality, for the chicken "[w]e can substitute the disenfranchised woman (or even minority group), thus establishing that only when men can empathize with the plight of

[6] See especially Malin Lavon Walther, "Re-Wrighting *Native Son*: Gwendolyn Brooks's Domestic Aesthetic in *Maud Martha*."

women will they discontinue the destruction of women's existential selves as perpetuated through the domestication of females" (139). Indeed, although this reading might also be possible, I believe the passage in context suggests African Americans in the 1950s as the primary subject of the metaphor – especially when one considers *Native Son*. In any case, Brooks reinforces the compassionate piece of this chapter in her later comments on it in *Report from Part One* "Marginalia": "'brotherly love' is based on my old feelings regarding 'dressing' a chicken, and on my continuing feelings that chickens are people, as are dogs, cats, rats, ants, birds, snakes, roaches, bears, fish, trees, weeds, flowers. People, that is, in the sense that we conceive people to be: things of identity and response" (193). These sentiments are certainly noble and in concurrence with those of the earlier mouse scene. Then what can we make of what immediately follows the passage quoted above? The very next sentence reads, "[w]hen the animal was ready for the oven Maud Martha smacked her lips at the thought of her meal" (153). Suddenly, the "person" so sensitively considered had reverted to "the animal," and the sort of "knowing" just advocated seems to have gone out the window. While the meaning of this is not clear, any number of interpretations suggest themselves: that this line is meant humorously; that it's meant to "humanize" Maud Martha; that it's a celebration of vitality; or that it's a representation of the appetite for (or, at least, habit of) enjoying the fruits of predation against which the compassionate must struggle. Perhaps, in addition, it is an instance of contradiction for its own sake; as Spillers suggests of the novel more generally, "the voice of the interior monologue mobilizes a plenitude of terms that evoke the fundamental ambivalence at the core of consciousness itself" (245). Particularly since Brooks's own commentary on this chapter seems to leave the last line out of consideration, this may well be an example of a split or dual perspective. Then again, perhaps Brooks simply meant to show that Maud Martha is not bound even by her own goodness. If Maud Martha "is clearly aware of ugliness and oppression, but she

chooses to defy with grace, to live as best she can" (Lattin and Lattin 140), perhaps this last line tells us that she, as well as Brooks, are going to carry on regardless.

What we have established by now, at the very least, is that Brooks has widely demonstrated a tendency to insinuate multiple meanings at once, and it is with this point in mind that I would like to reconsider "*Maud Martha spares the mouse*" as a response to the rat scene in *Native Son.* In her short note on the subject, Malin Lavon Walther interprets Brooks's chapter as a "positive rendering of domesticity [that] contrasts starkly with that of Wright" (144). Moreover, Walther concludes,

> Departing from Wright's naturalistic cycle of destruction, Brooks affirms a nurturing and life-centered world view in this chapter and specifically associates it with creativity, broadly defined. Letting the mouse go is presented as a greater aesthetic and ethical act than killing it. [...] through the character of Maud Martha, Brooks negotiates hegemonic aesthetic standards of physical and literary or artistic beauty and creates an alternative aesthetic space in the domestic. (144).

I would like to expand this valuable reading to engage more explicitly the way Brooks implicates the responsibility of the author to her or his protagonist as parallel to that of the protagonist to her or his surroundings.

To develop the latter element in this equation, that of the manner in which the protagonist engages the world, we must return to an earlier metaphor: that of the rat or mouse to the African American subject white racism, as discussed above. Bernard Bell concurs and adds that "the deadly confrontation is a metaphor for Bigger's relationship to white society in much the same manner that Wright's vision of the Afro-American is a metaphor for American and modern man" (157). Furthermore, "for the rat and Bigger, fear evokes increasing aggression, and only murderous violence overcomes the fear" (Bell 157). While the adrenaline-intensive account of

the battle does not include much portrayal of Bigger's thoughts or feelings, we are told, "The rat's belly pulsed with fear. Bigger advanced a step and the rat emitted a long thin song of defiance, its black beady eyes glittering, its tiny forefeet pawing the air restlessly" (6). The mutual fear and aggression of which Bell speaks certainly do pervade Wright's account. Yet, in a version no less suggestive of social parallels, Brooks tells us of the mouse, "Its bright black eyes contained no appeal – the little creature seemed to understand that there was no hope of mercy from the eternal enemy, no hope of reprieve or postponement – but a fine small dignity" (69-70). Finally, in considering the mouse's perspective, imagining the mouse's family, and empathizing with it, "Maud Martha could not bear the little look" (70). Although Brooks undeniably does make the animal more appealing by casting it as a mouse instead of an aggressive rat "over a foot long" (indeed, Brooks hints at this just a few pages earlier, when Maud Martha thinks, in her aversion to roaches, "She had rather see a rat – well, she had rather see a mouse" (63)), she does not necessarily moderate the portrayal of its basic opposition to "the eternal enemy." What she does do is allow it to "seem to understand" its situation, thereby preserving its "fine small dignity," just as she proposes that Maud Martha's understanding of it might open up the option of responding with compassion instead of violence.

In the case of both options, however, the protagonists' responses to the intruder in their apartments bring them a measure of satisfaction, self-definition, and *creation* (or its prefiguring, in Bigger's case). Bigger's first smile in the novel appears when he sees that he has killed the rat (6), and suggests Wright's account of creation, when Bigger is eating breakfast with his family just after having accidentally killed, and then beheaded and incinerated, Mary Dalton: "The thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared. He had murdered and had created a new life for himself" (Wright 105). If

Bigger "create[s] a new life for himself" by doing something even more fearsome than the world he fears, Maud Martha does accomplishes the same (self-)creation through defying, counteracting, the fearsomeness of the world, defining herself as an exception to, rather than an excess of, that fearsomeness: "Suddenly, she was conscious of a new cleanness in her. A wide air walked in her. A life had blundered its way into her power and it had been hers to preserve or destroy. She had not destroyed. In the center of that simple restraint was – creation. She had created a piece of life. It was wonderful" (70-1). Maud Martha feels a giddy new sense of responsibility for – even credit for – the life of the mouse, just as Bigger's "elation" (107) comes largely from his rapidly decreasing sense of responsibility for, or ties to, the lives around him. Moreover, this new sense of life is reinforced in both protagonists by their own conscious affirmation of their act and its implications for their respective self-definitions. For Maud Martha, the climax of the scene is her realization:

> 'Why,' she thought, as her height doubled, 'why, I'm good! I am *good*.'
>
> She ironed her aprons. Her back was straight. Her eyes were mild, and soft with a godlike lovingkindness" (Brooks 71).

On the other hand, in a parallel passage, "There was in [Bigger] a kind of terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it" (Wright 106). Whether becoming a powerful murderer or a "good," "godlike" woman, both Bigger and Maud Martha feel transformed by their actions.

In Brooks's case, perhaps especially since her novel is roughly autobiographical, I think we can see her self-conscious implication of the creative role of the novelist in her discussion of the "creation" that her protagonist chooses. If, as Patricia and Vernon Lattin posit, "Brooks suggests a positive way of life that can help one maintain one's self respect and creativity in the face of the racism and death which surround one. *One can create* in spite of the deadening

realities of life" (142, italics mine), I would argue that this exhortation might apply to the novelist herself as well as her protagonist and readership. Perhaps, for Brooks, the "life" that "had blundered its way into her power" had been that of her protagonist, "hers to preserve or destroy" (70-1); perhaps she sees her treatment of her protagonist as a moral and an artistic choice at the same time.[7] As Maud Martha "'sees' that she need not blindly succumb to circumstances but that she can in her own fashion create value and meaning" (Lattin and Lattin 143), perhaps Brooks makes this argument for herself as a novelist at the same time, as resistance to the "naturalistic cycle of destruction" evinced in *Native Son* (Walther 144).

At the time he wrote *Native Son*, Wright was heavily invested in a naturalism largely inspired by the "Chicago School" of sociology (Bell 151). After Bigger's murder of Mary Dalton, he tells us, "His crime seemed natural; he felt that all of this life had been leading to something like this" (106). Bell observes that "those [novels] influenced by the example of *Native Son* are informed by the belief that the character and history of man can be completely explained by biological and socioeconomic facts. The Wright paradigm of naturalism stresses the violence and pathological personalities that result from racial oppression and economic exploitation" (167). Wright's goals in pursuing the types of characterizations he employs in *Native Son* may be said to involve alerting the white establishment to the chaos that *certainly would* ensue from the racism they were perpetuating; the inevitability of these dire consequences, in this view, helped to drive the need to emphasize sociological inevitability, rather than individual agency or exceptionalism, in his rendering of the novel. Yet, Bell points out, "Wright sacrifices verisimilitude and the intellectual integrity of his protagonist in his effort to universalize the psychological and sociological message of the book" (158). In order to conform to this message, and the naturalism the views people as "animals in the natural world, responding

[7] See Lattin and Lattin 143, on Maud Martha's "uniting art and morality" as pertains to her character; I believe that Brooks is doing this as novelist as well.

to environmental forces and internal stresses and drives, none of which they can control or understand" (Holman et al. 309), we are shown a protagonist who "is controlled by social and psychological forces" (Bell 157), and "we understand more than Bigger does" (Bell 158).

The protagonist's capacity for understanding, however, is the key to survival in the case of *Maud Martha*, and what gives her character its depth.[8] The emphasis of the novel on Maud Martha's ruminations and imagination is important, as Spillers argues in this sterling passage, drawing from "*Maud Martha and New York*":

> that the imagined and the real abrade unrelentingly here is intentional since we gauge Maud Martha's internal resources in even bolder relief against the brute 'facts.' We could go so far as to say that the poet's insistence on the narrative strategies of the piece and its rhetorical energies that plumb the interior world of the character spares Maud Martha the peculiar burdens of the 'naturalistic' agent. In other words, if *Maud Martha* were 'read' through eyes not the character's own, as would an omniscient narration, bent on imposing a content from the 'outside,' already made to order, then we would not only lose Maud Martha's complexity, but might also conclude that victimage determines her. (241-2).

It seems, then, that Maud Martha's understanding of her situation does a triple work: it offers her the option of distinguishing herself from, rather than being determined by, her circumstances; it frees her thereby from naturalism; and it thus allows us as readers to understand Maud Martha as a full individual[9] distinct from her oppression. Moreover, Maud Martha's understanding, her ability to contemplate intellectually and empathetically the individuals and society around her, allow her some measure of mental freedom – or at least independence; some measure of self-

[8] According to Lattin and Lattin, "The difference between Bigger and Maud is not their emotions but rather *understanding* of the emotions and their ability to control them" (139, italics mine).
[9] Paule Marshall, one of *Maud Martha*'s earliest champions, said in retrospect, "For me, Maud Martha was one of the first black women in fiction to be given her full weight and substance as a character. She was a powerful and necessary answer to the limited, largely stereotype image portrayed in white, mainstream literature" (53).

determination despite it all. In stark contrast, a naturalistic precursor to understanding, "consciousness," is precisely what threatens Bigger: "The full consciousness of the shame and misery of the way they are forces to live threatens to engulf the protagonist in fear and despair. 'He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness,' says the limited omniscient narrator, 'he would either kill himself or someone else' (p. 14)[10]," (Bell 157). So where consciousness of one's circumstances incites fearful desperation, understanding of the same frees one from such a reaction, at least to some extent. For Brooks, it seems, understanding and mental fortitude are an essential part of what make empathy functional and effective: here I am reminded of the phrases "educational sympathy" and "sane gentleness" which Brooks penned in a thank-you card to her editor and friend, Dudley Randall, in 1974. These formulations of hers, particularly "educational sympathy," seem to evoke a sympathy that uplifts through a combination of instruction, reflection, and emotional support – and that, fundamentally, understanding is what can set constructive emotional reactions in motion.

D. H. Melhem, Brooks's student and critic, maintains that "the novel reveals an archetypal, postwar, bourgeois concern with home and family, and an aversion to politics" (87). Although this characterization is helpful for understanding the literary milieu in which the novel was written, and although its reference to class does register as significant, I'm not sure that the political engagement is avoided in *Maud Martha* as much as it is presented in intricately woven layers of meaning throughout the novel. Politics are not, in fact, absent even from the surface – multiple encounters with racist whites and Black people who discriminate against the darker-skinned appear throughout, and the reference to lynching (179) in the last chapter is nothing to be taken lightly. Nevertheless, Brooks focuses on Maud Martha's inner life, as this is an aspect of existence – and even of revolution – that she takes seriously: in her interview with Gloria T.

[10] The edition of *Native Son* to which Bell refers is the 1966 Perennial Classic.

Hull, she spoke of "times when women are really rousing themselves and doing some fiery things, *and even more than that, thinking* fiery things" ("Update" 101, italics mine). If the modern "elevates the individual and the inward over the social and the outward" (Holman et al. 298), Brooks did write primarily from the perspective of the former two, but was interested in the interplay between all of the above.

Maud Martha is "not at all disappointing," Brooks says in the 1984 self-interview referenced at the beginning of this essay, "even *though* my heroine was never raped, did not become a lady of the evening, did not entire the world of welfare mothers ([...]), did not murder the woman who stepped on her toe in the bus" ("Self-interview 114, italics in original). Making tongue-in-cheek reference to contemporary expectations of representations of the "Black Woman," Brooks defends the space she has carved for Maud Martha in her own right. Just as Maud Martha "has developed her own standards, her own concept of the valuable" (Christian 140), so does Brooks maintain the value of her novel, which enshrines, in an "unheroic ordinary black girl from Chicago, a value that is almost always celebrated in the heroic, the extraordinary, the male" (Christian 140): the power of self-definition and, thereby, world-definition. In doing so, Brooks avoids the "sense of alienation, loss, and despair" (Holman et al. 298) usually associated with the modernism in whose poetic style and emphasis on interiority her novel participates, instead "choosing to defy with grace" the many depressing elements around her (Lattin and Lattin 140), while nonetheless protesting them through her layered prose. Due to his sense of political urgency, Wright presumably felt that he could not afford to present his readership with a novel whose messages were ambiguous; yet, in her departure from naturalism and her emphatic investment in the significance of her protagonist's self-understanding, Brooks found a way to make ambiguity work for her, even while registering various forms of social protest. Her dear friend, Haki Madhubuti, wrote for Brooks's funeral, "you've always been your

own clock and as the seasons disappear and rise you know exactly what time it is, beating the beat in storms not of your own making." In the same way, the protagonist of her autobiographical novel defied her oppressive circumstances without finally allowing herself to be defined by them.

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