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"And She is Also Me" Discovering the Womanist Critique in Brooks, Clifton and Giovanni

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"And She is Also Me" Discovering the Womanist Critique in the Poetry of Brooks, Clifton and Giovanni

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by
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"The other dancer has obviously come through it all right, as I have done. She is beautiful, whole and free. And she is also me"
- *Alice Walker ("Beauty" from In Search of Our Mother's Garden)*

Doll taught me how to speak
Lynnie taught me how to read
Lois taught me how to think
Sarah taught me "Purple over Pink"

Table of Content

Introduction

This project will look to explore the origin of the Womanist critique in poetry of the early 70's, specifically in Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton and Nikki Giovanni. The misogynistic aesthetics of Black Nationalist Movement and the embedded racism within the 70's Feminist Movement left black women writers and activist seeking a space for their voice and identity. This space also served to provide political and academic recognition of the long tradition of community based activism. While the term "Womanist" wasn't introduced until 1983, I believe that these poets established the foundations for what defines womanist literature and the lens for its critique. These three women used their poetry to reclaim their feminine identity and continue the efforts for the black community's liberation. At the same time, these women were fighting to include the black community into the intellectual studies and academic discourse of American history. Thier approach to liberation centers around interlocking the issues of black women with the issues of her community. To understand the importance of what establishing space is for the womanist, I feel its important to explain the historical context of the connection between black women's identity/body and the community's institutional oppression.

How Oppressing the Black Woman's Body Means Oppressing the Community.

The black woman in America have for generations dealt with the racist oppression of her

femininity and body. In American history, the establishment of one's race in a space of social supremacy means that it must be constructed in relation to an inferior "other". In constructing the power in white identity there was a dehumanizing establishment of black identity. This meant setting national identity and citizenship equal to that of a basic human identity. Equating a feminine identity with white women aided in neutralizing the image of the white American family dynamic[1] while instilling the non- feminine "other" on Black women. American institutions used the exploitation of physical labor to legally deny them rights to their own bodies and sexuality (Higginbotham, 257). A method of exploiting the black female body was appropriating the images of the 'Mammy' and the 'Jezebel.'

In *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South,* Deborah Gray White explores these two images as myths that were instituted into racial identities. The Jezebel myth defines black women as sexual deviants who were "lewd and lascivious... [who]invited sexual overtures from white men and that any resistance they displayed was mere feigning"(30). This myth solidified the idea that black women lacked a intelligent sense of reasoning and control when it comes to her body and her sexuality[2] (Higginbotham, 263). The Jezebel in slavery was used as a means to sexually dominate black women as well as institutionalize their rape. This image also implies that because black women do not have a feminine sexual identity, they do not possess the identity as a mother to her black children(263). White explains that image of the Jezebel excluded black women from possessing the femininity identity of motherhood by insinuating that black children were a result of animalistic breeding. She writes:

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[1]When I use the term 'American' here, I refer to the neutrality of the white American experience. The American family versus the Black American family refers to white Americans automatically having an national identity. The black American family on the other hand must establish an identity that excludes the the influence of whiteness while remaining aware of their 'double consciousness.'

[2]Higginbotham speaks on the division between white and black people as each represents a "scale of humanity." Within this scale, racial identity is measured on "carnality as opposed to intellect and/or spirit; savagery as opposed to civilization; deviance as opposed to normality; promiscuity as opposed to purity."(263)

> The view that black women were exceptionally libidinous was nourished by the conditions under which slave women lived and worked. The matter of reproduction provides an excellent example. American slavery was dependent on the natural increase of the slave population, and through the use of innumerable incentives, planters made sure that slave women were prolific...Major periodicals carried articles detailing optimal conditions under which bonded women were known to reproduce, and the merits of a particular "breeder" were often the topic of parlor or dinner table conversations. The fact that something so personal and private became a matter of public discussion prompted one ex-slave to declare that "[black] women wasn't nothing but cattle." (31)

There are a few things that can be taken from this passage. One is the obvious exploitation and violence on black women to further instill a sense of racial supremacy. Another is the relation of breeding to the perception of black family and feminine identity. The Jezebel is not a feminine stereotype, it is an animalistic one. So if this is myth associated with black women/ black mothers what does that say for black children? Black men have been emasculated through separation, violence, and humiliation. The legal forbidding of marriage as well as many cases of being forced to witness the rape of black women by slave masters imbedded the idea that black children are not born they're bred. These images were instituted into the American thought process, which explains why it was so imperative for black women to re-establish the black family dynamic. Black women understood that establishing the family dynamic reclaimed gender, nationality, humanity, and control of black American identity.

The Mammy is a myth of black women as domestic figures within a white home. The same way the Jezebel looked to pose black women as extremely sexual and deviant, the Mammy posed black women as asexual,unattractive women who had an inherit nature to care for children. However, the Mammy's "caretaker" attributes were given to white children; "she was the premier house servant and all others were here subordinate.(White, 47)" She had to display the utmost dedication to her slave masters, making sure that the house and children reflected the perfect white American family image; a family image that validates itself through the degradation of the

black family. The Mammy's main focus was the white family she served, which meant she was on call 24/7 and therefore was only given an extremely limited time to raise her own children. This maternal “love” was only permissible to white children, which set black children and the black community as the other to this associated bond of family and community.

The images of both the Mammy and Jezebel carried on into the mainstream perceptions of black community. Black women's gender in the turn of the 20th century was associated with both the exoticism of black bodies and domesticity usually being the only option offered in the workforce. The long exploitation of black women's bodies has effected the black community's stereotypes. She had become the general symbol for black relationships and sexuality (Higginbotham, 263)

The Black Woman's Fight Goes Beyond Any Movement

The history of African American female activism had existed long before the Black Nationalist movement and long before the second wave of white Feminism. From the moment of Slave Emancipation in 1863, black women had taken it upon themselves to establish the black family. Slavery had instituted the displacement and degradation of black men as the role of patriarch in the black family, while placing black women's matriarchal role in a white home (switching out the name matriarch and replacing it with “mammy”). So at the time of the emancipation, black women had traveled across the country looking to reunite with children and/or spouses who were sold to reestablish the family dynamic (Thompson, 150). These black women had understood that establishing the black family meant establishing the liberated American and humane identity that was only associated with white Americans. From the 1890's black women have created national groups to respond to the social and welfare demands of the black community. The groundwork for these clubs often started from literary societies formed in

urban black communities ("NACW", 429). Clubs like the "National Association of Colored Women", the "Colored Woman's League", and the "National Federation of African American Woman" institutionalized the social and political traditions of black feminist activism. Its important to realize that political activism for black women meant fight for social progress within the black community. Education and hands on involvement in organizing protests and boycotts insured that the community was equipped with the tools for successful actions. This insured the community would be knowledgeable of national politics, and be able to pass that knowledge down. Kalenda Eaton, author of *Womanism, Literature and the Transformation of the Black Community,* writes:

> What most historical studies of the era fail to acknowledge is the brevity by women in grass roots organizations including the artistic work of black women novelist. The focused organizing within the black community was a useful and necessary undercurrent to the self – aggrandizement and political rhetoric which became an unwelcome distraction to complex internal issues. (6)

Black women understood that internalized images of the black community in America were constructed and controlled by white patriarchal institutions. This is why it was so important for Black women to establish a black family dynamic; because fighting for family and community in many ways meant raging a political, social, and economic war against white America and their institutions that tried to legally prevent a black community.

Moreover Black Woman had understood that in order to establish a powerful black community there needs to be an establishment of black men as head of household and a face of political and economic power. This does not mean, however that black women thought to set a gender caste upon themselves. While black women looked to re-establish black men as head of the house hold and face of political exposure, it was done knowing that once black men had received that space, any moves towards progress meant aiding in black women's liberation.

There was an acknowledgment that black women looked to help establish a black patriarchal family dynamic because they were excluded from participating in their own family as well (Horton, 454). As I said earlier, any image that would distinguish black women as a motherly figure, that image was only tolerated if she applied it to caring for a white family. Therefore, bringing black men into the forefront meant setting up that family dynamic that would socially create a space for black women to be women in their own home. Before the Black Nationalist Movement, black women who chose to take a behind the scenes approach respected it as a choice to be closer with her community.

The Black Nationalist Movement and the Feminist Movement

In 1968 Larry Neal wrote “The Black Aesthetic” defining aesthetics of black literature and culture as it stands to represent agendas of the Black Nationalist movement. Male writers like him and Amiri Baraka mirrored Black Nationalist idea of woman's role in the movement. In Baraka's essay "The Legacy of Malcolm X, and the Coming of the Black Nation" he states that the only thing missing in the consciousness of the black community is for the "Black Man [to] take control" (168). He expands on that statement in "State/meant," where he explains the role of the artist with heavy male dominant indicators. He writes:

> The Black Artist's role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as *he* knows it. His role is to report and reflect the nature of the society and *himself* in that society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering and, if they are black men, grow strong through this moving (169)

Black women, who till now had been the matriarch in black community activism, had watched Black Men take on the role as face and prime concern of the black community. The Black Nationalist movement and the description of its literary aesthetics took the idea of reestablishing black men as the patriarchal figure in family dynamics as a means to mandate black women to take a silent role in the movement and appropriate that silence to the concerns of her identity as

black women. Black women during the Nationalist movement were told that their main concern was to completely cater to the needs to black men, ensuring that that their black womanhood would not emasculate the strong black male's image (Franklin, 435). Francis Beale[3] was one of the first to publicly criticize this aesthetic in her famous 1969 essay, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female":

> Since the advent of Black Power, the male had exerted a more prominent leadership role in our struggle for justice in this country. He sees the system for what it is for the most part, but where he rejects its values and mores on many issues, when it comes to women, he seems to take his guidelines from the pages of *Ladies Home Journal.* Black men are maintaining that they have been castrated by society but that Black women somehow escape this persecution and even contributed to the emasculation...If we are talking about building a strong [Black] nation, capable of throwing off the yoke of capitalist oppression, then we are talking about the total involvement of every man, woman, and child, each with a highly developed political consciousness...those who are exerting their 'manhood' by telling black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role are assuming a counter revolutionary position (92-93)

The error in the Black Arts and Black Nationalist movement was the idea that the fight for the racial justice meant fighting exclusively for the racial liberation of black men. While these misogynistic aesthetics of male leadership were being inherited into Black culture, it enforced the necessity for women to reclaim their feminine identity in the fight for racial justice. Moreover, this reclamation called on the need for black feminist literature and its critics.

Unfortunately while there wasn't a space within the Black Nationalist Movement for a discourse on the oppression of black women, the Feminist Movement[4] at the time equally ignored issues of blackness in the fight of gender equality. The face of feminine oppression has historically been a white woman's. The discussion of what it means to be liberated from gender

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[3]Francis Beale (b. 1940) is Black feminist and political peace activist. Her essay "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" was published in the 1970 *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, anthology of black women writers, edited by Toni Cade Bambara. This essay became the framework for many black feminist prose.

[4]While this movement in the 60's- 70's is also coined as the Second Wave of Feminism,for the sake of this project it will be referred to as the Feminist Movement.

roles in white and black communities were rarely discussed. Black women who had issues with that were often chastised for not engaging in "solidarity" with white women when the correct term should have been assimilation. In "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory", Bell Hooks comments on the how feminist text like Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*[5] implies that the feminine identity is exclusive to middle class white women, more specifically white housewives, placing non- white or poor white women in the space of non existence. She writes:

> Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique* is still heralded as having paved the way for the contemporary feminist movement – it was written as if these [non-white, non upper middle class, non married] women did not exist. Friedan's famous phrase, "the problem that has no name," often quoted to describe the condition of women in this society, actually referred to the plight of a select group of college-educated; middle and upper class, married white women – housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life. Friedan concludes her first chapter by stating: "We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my house.'" That "more" she defined as careers. She did not discuss who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freed from and given equal access with white men to the professions. (190)

The husband, kids and the image of the housewife are symbols of the "feminine" (middle-upper class) identity. Hooks explains that the privilege that whiteness provides for the feminine identity is the power of choice. These women, granted were suffering, but they have the choice to explore the many facets of their life. According to Hooks, oppression is defined as an "absence of choices." This feminist chooses to ignore the experiences of non-white women the same way she chooses to ignore how they too look to appropriate identities and lack there of on people of color to establish their social caste. Black women and working and lower class women did not have the privilege to be bored with the confines of their home; these women were working and supporting their family. Alice Walker, who coined the term womanist, argues its

[5] *Feminist Mystique,* published February 19, 1963 by W.W. Norton and Co., is a nonfiction book written by Betty Friedan. This book examined the unhappy lifestyles of the housewives of the 1950's and 1960's. Since its publications it has been considered by many white feminist as a pioneering text in contemporary feminist studies.

either an inconvenience or “mind straining for white women scholars to think of black women as women, perhaps because “woman” (like man among white males) is a name they are claiming for themselves and themselves alone. Racism decrees that if *they* are now women...then black women must, perforce, be something else" (qt. in Allan, 3). Also, while these feminists were leaving the home to join the workforce, had any of these feminist stop to think of who would be raising their children? No. That would mean addressing the issue that white women still look to black women to raise their children. White feminist dismissed the black women's experience and the social appropriation of their gender. Feminist and historian, Gerda Lerner makes a brilliant statement about the neglect of the black woman's experience her 1979 book, *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History* when she says, "Black women define their own “liberation” as being free to take care of their own homes and their own children" (63).

The Rise of the Black Feminist Critique

In the late 70's Black feminist began receiving a larger voice and exposure within the community and within the Eurocentric academy. These women understood that discussion on the politics black liberation and women's rights were, in many ways, community based. The history of black women centering their political protest in the community was tradition needed to be respected as much as the traditions within the white suffragist movement. At this point black women were seeking equality from the white home and then reestablishing the outlet for women issues in the black home. Earlier black feminist groups like the Combative River Collective in 1974[6], issued statements that assured that black women who sought gender and racial freedom do not seek liberation as a result of being anti-black male or anti- white women (Combahee River Collective, 204). They sought liberation of their identity because fighting for a space in

[6]Combahee River Collective was a Black feminist lesbian organization active in Boston from 1974 to 1980. One of the founders, Barbara Smith, is considered one of the pioneers of the Black feminist critique.

which black women are respected socially and academically will enhance the fight against the oppression of white patriarchy. Seeing as white patriarchal institutions in the United oppress both the black and female community, black women represent the solidarity between these two social issues and yet thier voices were aggressively being silenced or placed as lesser issue.

The faults of the Black Nationalist Movement did two things to help jump-start the discourse on black feminism and its literature: (1) It failed to expose a space that allowed black women to reclaim a voice, and criticized the black women looking to claim that space. Trying to reclaim that voice socially during the height of the Black Nationalist Movement would be seen as anti-black and therefore pro white women and pro-white. (2) The Black Nationalist movement did provide a grounding for how literary critics and politics would help shape the image of social liberation movements. The Black Arts movement provided a space for black literature (primarily poetry) to be read as imperative and intellectual social critiques that demanded to be respected on an academic level. Furthermore, the Black Arts and Black Nationalist movements felt that in the case of literature and politics, to understand one means to understand the other. The Black Nationalist Movement in many ways projected its message best through artist representation and the Black Arts Movement defined its aesthetics around the fight for specific political agenda. Both were done in attempts to socially uplift the image of blackness and black community as a cultural, intellectual, social and political force that demanded recognition. Unfortunately, the idea that community= black men, really regressed this plight. The late 70's allowed for black feminist to define their own aesthetics as well as make the issue of embracing their womanhood and their blackness synonymous factors in the fight for racial equality. Unfortunately discourse on black feminist literature wouldn't serve as imperative in the social fight until the early eighties.

In 1983 Alice Walker, scholar, author, activist and intellectual, published *In Search of*

Our Mother's Garden. This book held a collection of essays that Walker defined as "Womanist prose." In the first page of this book she introduced this famous and influential; womanist is defined as a "black feminist or feminist of color" who "loves women" and sometimes "loves individual men [both genders "sexually and nonsexually']." She is "[c]omitted to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male or female." A womanist is also "traditionally universalist,[7]" and reflects on the traditional history of black women as leaders of her community (83). Critic Farah Griffin categorizes the definition of the Womanist critique into three particular task in her essay "That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black Feminist Literary Criticism." She states:

> The first of these tasks was archeological: In order to construct a tradition that led to the contemporary writers such as Morrison and Walker, critics charged themselves with locating, teaching,and writing about earlier "lost" works by African American woman. Second they created a critical vocabulary and framework for discussing works by African American women. Third they theorized that body of work as well as the critical practices of black feminist critics. The boundaries between these tasks are porous and flexible. (488)

I believe with the need to incorporate the womanist discourse into the academy, many contemporary critics of Black womanist poetry, saw these tasks as meaning that its only the critic who can form a vocabulary of social critique. Furthermore, the only use of this specific literature is to locate literary traditions that could aid in a formal Black feminist text. This, I believe, is because the poetry wasn't a formal essay.

From the late 80's to early 90's, Black feminist literary critics defined formal womanist text in accordance to three factors: the targeted audience, its need to be prose and, the academic

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[7]Walker clarifies that this universalist still means being social conscious of her race and gender. She writes, "Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white beige and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time"" (xi)

background of the writer. These three factors create an intense class divide in the definition of a womanist critique. Since womanist are committed to the welfare of black people and its activism is based in the black community, excluding literature that doesn't have a specific academic background or academic audience in mind, alludes that all others in the black community are not adequate to partake in this separatist discussion. This continues the idea that the black woman is society's "other." These critics should instead be looking to discuss how womanist writers reflect the intellectual social criticisms of the community in the language that encouraged all who lived in the community to actually participate in it. Ann duCille, who was one of the first black feminist literary critics responded to her contemporaries by asking “why have we – black women- become the subjected subjects of so much contemporary scholarly investigation, the peasants under glass of intellectual inquiry in the 1990s?” (qt. in Griffin, 483)

These critics fail to realize that black writers of the 70's had the expressed the intellectual social criticisms and formats of womanist activism in their poetry and poetic process. There is a lack of respect in acknowledging the amazing balance womanist poets did of maintaining the socio- political agenda with the many classic literary traditions. Thus giving the black community a space within American identity and the literary academe.

From reading Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton and Nikki Giovanni (along with black feminist and womanist critiques) I believe some of what makes a piece of literature womanist is: (1)The poet's maintenance of the Walkers definition. (2)The poets articulation of the process by which she transfers the womanist ideologies into a poem. (3) This poem reveals the aesthetics that define her as a black female poet while invoking the black community's involvement - socially and ideologically. As a womanist is a black feminist, (4)her work looks to provide a critique on the black community. Finally, (5) she acknowledges and exposes the community's

intellectual discourses to the academy and to the community itself.

I chose Gwendolyn Brooks because I wanted to illustrate that while there are black women who have major acclaim in the literary world that does not mean that they have had a designated space in literary history to showcase how these women created a socio- political movement. Brooks is Poet Laurent and Nobel Prize winner and while her acclaim transcends race and gender in many ways, her monumental achievements as a classic poet should not overshadow the monumental achievements she's made laying the groundwork for the womanist aesthetic. Specifically, through her community work that reinstated the importance of black woman's participation in community based activism. Brooks was inspired by men of the Black Nationalist Movement but that did mean she would define herself or her efforts secondary to a man. She, like the many socially active black women before her, looked to education and volunteering to help enact social change. She allowed her poetry to act as a mediator between the black community and the academy. Her collection of poetry in *Beckonings* (1975) contains womanist critiques by writing with a voice that embodies the legacy of black American women as powerful figures who have always looked to uplift the black community and engage the discourse of the community's progress and involvement. Through her poetry, Brooks reminds readers that the black American community is a staple in defining what it means to have an American identity. Her poetry illustrates the intellectual, political and psychoanalytic complexities of the black American experience.

In the case of Lucille Clifton, who is also a Poet Laurent, I was most interested in how she describes her poetic process; how she confronts and writes her poetry, especially an interview published in the Callaloo[8] Journal. Black literature tends to look to define the cultural

[8]Calaloo is an academic quarterly founded in 1976 to provide a publication outlet, in English or English translations, for new, emerging, and established creative writers who produce texts in different languages in the African

aesthetics of the current political movement. Therefore, its important to understand the thought process of a womanist. Particularly Clifton's womanist critique on the black woman and double consciousness. In "All the Things You Could Be by Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother," -an extremely influential critique of Black Feminist and Womanist literature- Hortense Spiller argues that the psychoanalytic process that black womanist go through "leads to "greater self consciousness, a self-critical capacity in your relationship to others" (qt. in Griffin 496). In other words, Spillers acknowledged the womanist's "distinction between 'one' and the 'individual'"(Griffin, 469) and how that relates to a black woman's objectivity and subjectivity of race, gender and community. This process of distinguishing the "one" and the "individual" is almost identical to how Lucille Clifton describes her poetic process. While Clifton never formally identified herself as a member of the Black Arts Movement, she explains that consciously existing in the black experience, looking to better improve the circumstances that one is socially oppressed by is automatically a political decision. What also makes her approach to her poetry womanist is her belief that she is automatically of the black community, that there is not limit to what defines a black person and what defines an intellectual or an activist. Clifton also realizes that social progression and social liberation of the black community depends on the communities interest of the social progression and liberation of the black female.

What interests me about Nikki Giovanni is how her critiques in interview and work of poetry actually incorporate the contemporary discoveries that black feminist critics have made concerning the womanist literary tradition in the last 8- 10 years. I felt like her poetic styling and social critiques in *My House* (1972) mesh the original womanist ideologies with the popular contemporary approaches. Giovanni mirrors the early missions of womanist writers with her

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Diaspora; and to serve as a forum for literary and cultural critics who write about the literature and culture of the African Diaspora.

investment to the liberation for all black people. She acknowledges that fight against racial oppression as a black women is something she shares with her entire black community. She then expands into contemporary by incorporating the womanist psychoanalytic approach on the significance of space, and the necessity of it for her liberation as black person and as a woman. Her poetry establishes a brilliant critique on the cultural symbol the black woman's body has become- its oppression, its reclamation and its use in the contemporary literary traditions of womanist text. Her poetry and interviews also give insight into the critique of the white feminist movement, thus illustrating even more that black women needed to formulate a space to engage a discourse on their experience. Giovanni's poetry and interviews showcase that the inclusion of the black community is pivotal in any intellectual and/or academic study of American literature and history. Yet her language is not elitist nor does it look down on the black community. She merely showcases that the black community has always engaged in discussions defining, critiquing and redefining black intellectual thought and identity.

For my conclusion I would like to briefly explore what came from this emerging womanist critique. Using Sonia Sanchez, I look to finish this project discussing how the womanist critique lead to the Africana Womanist movement. The space established by the womanist allowed for the Africana womanist to become more separatist in her ideologies. The Africana Womanist offers critiques as to why she is so "unlike" the black feminist and womanist before her, grounding her aesthetics in the emerging Afrocentrism movement.

Chapter One

Reviving "Love" and Motherhood: The Black Nationalist Critique in Gwendolyn Brooks's *Beckonings*

Alice Walker considers Brooks one of the few womanist writers who had been accepted into the study of American literature[9]. Through her writing and her involvements in community based activism, Brooks showed how black women writers (poets specifically) used the exposure of black womanhood as a means of bringing about progression in the black community. What interests me about Gwendolyn Brooks is that even though she participated in the Black Arts and National movements, that involvement did not counteract with how her writings exercised a

[9] Walker references Brooks in "The Unglamorous but Worthwhile Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist, or of the Black Writer who Simply Works and Writes," "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and a Partisan View" as well as "A Talk:Convocation."

black feminist critique. While she defined herself as proactive in the black arts movement, she rejected the ideal role of a prototypical female ally. This prototypical ally of the movement relies on the the role of the black woman to be silent and 'male liberation' oriented. The idea of “stand by your man” in the Black Nationalist movement instilled the caste of black American women as second class amongst second class. The error in the Black Arts and Black Nationalist movement was the idea that the fight for the racial justice meant fighting exclusively for the racial liberation of black men. While these misogynistic aesthetics of male leadership were being inherited into Black culture, it enforced the necessity for women to reclaim their feminine identity in the fight for racial justice. Writers like Brooks, used their creative writing to lay the foundation of what would be later be used in forming the Womanist and Black Feminist movements (Griffin, 485).

Gwendolyn Brooks was born on July 17, 1917 in Topeka Kansas. The daughter of David and Keziah-Wims Brooks, Gwendolyn Brooks was raised on the principles of education, family and creativity. Her mother was the first person to introduce her to world of poetry when at 16 Keziah had taken her to meet Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson. On the spot Gwendolyn Brooks had read Hughes his poetry and she remained in brief correspondence with Johnson when she had sent the civil rights leader and author samples of her writings. From this moment, Brooks reflected the bond between family, poetry and politics in the African-American community. Her father, David Brooks, was born to both former slaves Lucas and Elizabeth Brooks. David Brooks, with his twelve brothers and sisters would be later raised in Oklahoma City. Though they lived in extreme modest settings, his parents opened their home to hungry and homeless, providing free meals and temporary shelter. When Lucas Brooks died in the 1890's, David Brooks became the head of the household, ingraining the importance of education. Unfortunately it would only be David who would graduate from High School. In the summer of

1914, David Brooks met Keziah Wims, a pianist and 5th grade school teacher who attended Emporia College, the two married in July of 1916. After the birth of their second born, Raymond Brooks, the family continually moved around Chicago until the Brook's family were able to buy a home in the suburbs of Chicago's South Side.

Gwendolyn Brooks's work ranges from critiquing the "goings on" within the black urban community, girlhood and boyhood, and her reflections on love, sexuality and relationship. What makes all of these approaches in her poetry supportive in her political movements is the strong appearance of her voice, as a black female, in each one. When writing about black men for example, she does not write objectively nor does she act as a voice for the black male community. She includes her identity as a woman with the intent of showcasing the inclusive approach to seeking liberation from racial oppression. She involved herself in the political dialogue of black men because it is a part of the race dialogue which involves the black community and therefore deems the need for a black womanist perspective. In a 1971 interview conducted by Ida Lewis entitled "My People Are Black," Brooks talks about how she was "turned on to the black revolution" when she and Margaret Danner watched Amiri Baraka (then Leroi Jones) and Ron Miller inspired such enthusiasm at a Black Writers Conference at Fisk University (54). She had gotten involved in teaching a weekly creative writing workshop for young men who were involved in gang violence in Chicago.

Brooks saw herself as a community leader, not a male ego booster. She facilitated these workshops with the tools she gained from her experience as a black female poet. Her focus was to use education as a tool to equip the progressive future of the black community (as a whole). Teaching was a common way black women became involved in the fight for black liberation. However, in the Black Nationalist Movement, teaching became appropriated as secondary to the

approaches of black male leadership (Barnett, 164). In "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement," Barnice Barnett explains how the constraints of race, class and gender has effected both the marginality of black women's involvement in black liberation movement as well as the scholarship of leaders of the movement (163). Most scholars primarily study the effects ministry had on community based activism, which puts a male face to role of leadership. Black female leadership were bombarded with "a negative problem-oriented image that stereo- typically connects Black women with various "pathologies" within the family such as female-headedness, illegitimacy, teen pregnancy, poverty, and welfarism the category of leadership roles of community activism" (Barnett, 164). The "pathologies" effect the image of the black American family lead black women to seek spaces in the liberation movement that removed their negative images as well as aid in re-constructing the image of black community and solidarity. Education and women working in the church had been equated with a position of following their black charismatic sermonic male leaders. However these women were not followers, those positions allowed black women to have a hands on role of organizing the movements in which black men could establish themselves as the patriarchal support of the black community. An example of this was JoAnn Robinson, an English Professor at Albany State University. She and her black female colleagues of the "Woman's Political Council" organized the Montgomery Boycott (Barnett, 169). Educators like Daisy Bates and Ellie Barker used their roles as teachers to educate young college students on how to organize and execute successful ways of protest. At the same time fellow teachers Septima Clark, Bernice Robinson and Dorothy Cotton set up teaching programs to teach older black Americans how to read and write, as a means to increase the amount of qualified registered voters (169). It is also important to realize that many women took their leadership roles behind the camera because racism and sexism

limited the occupations allowed to black women. During the 50's and 60's education and domestic work in white homes were usually the only places that accepted black women's employment(Barnett,174). Many black female educators involved in the black liberation movement were public school teachers; it was critical that they did not bring attention to their actions since their positions were usually managed by racist heads of the educational system (Barnett, 175). These women were using their school's equipment to print anti-racism leaflets and hold meetings to organize protests. It was more important to these women to educate the community and create social progress then it was to have their names cited or their faces photographed. The misogyny in the Black Nationalist movement used "behind the scenes" leadership to neglect the oppressive issues that the women of the community faced. Black female educators were demonstrating how their positions gave them their ability to work out and around the social and economic constraints of their black womanhood; therefore allowing them to work closer and harder for the black community.

Brooks however was not a "silent heroin" in the Black Arts Movement. Brooks's fame as a poet made her the exception to the black women poets who's work was not considered deserving enough to be critiqued in the European academe. However, I believe her critics have often ignored her response to effects the Black Nationalist movement had on silencing the importance black women's issues and their involvements. This is not to say that her work is purely written to demonstrate her political agenda. Her poetry continues the stylistic traditions of American poetry. Brooks's poetry during the Black Nationalist Movement reclaims the community's national identity by invoking the voice of black women to articulate the social status of the black community. All of these things worked to establish a space to creatively explore the identity of black womanhood and community and responded to the male dominant

constraints of the Black Nationalist and Black Arts movements. Alice Walker claims that what makes womanist's literature is the writer's expression of "emotional flexibility," her wanting to "know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one" (xi). Her work shows the commitment to the bettering of the community as a whole, as well as the "traditionally universalist" approach on her poetic voice (Walker, xi). At the same time, her poems are highly instructive Black Feminist critiques - which is important because the first definitions of a womanist is that she is a Black Feminist.

Gwendolyn Brook's book of poetry *Beckonings* (1975) has a variety of protagonist all showcasing the community's diverse identities. That portrait of diverse voices continue the "Whitman-esque" tradition of constructing the American identity by inserting herself in all of faces of America (Greasley, 17). This insertion aids in including the black community in the group of what defines an American nationality. Brook's approach to poetry best exemplifies Kelenda Eaton's theoretical framework of womanist literature: This means that the work must showcase "prioritizing strength, survival, unity and health(mental and physical) by first addressing the needs and concerns of the existing poor and working class, as they define these needs [...as well as] resist[ing] reliance on singular leadership as the method by which members of the black community understand their roles in the political process"(8). Brooks in Eaton's eyes created writings that could be included in the revolutionary movement without the comprising the issues of gender and community. Brooks first poem in this collection, "The Boy Died In My Ally," does just that. It is also critical of her inaction; she accuses herself of not acknowledging the experience of black men's racial injustice as part of her experience as a black woman. She writes:

> The Boy died in my alley
> without my Having Known

> Policeman said, next morning,
> “Apparently, died Alone.” (lines 1-4)

Notice that she capitalized B, giving this person a name and a sense of importance when society usually places the death of black men in the jargon of obscurity and irrelevance. In other words, "Boy” gives a name to the black community, removing its existence from the obscurity of the "other.". This is not to be confused with giving a gender to the community. The use of “The Boy” in the stanza has no indicators that it has a specific gender, which suggest that that the victim in the black community is not a specific gender. “The Boy” can also act as a metaphor for the subjectivity of the black body. "Boy" responds to how the black physique has been stereotyped as a symbol of black people's instinctual and animalistic prone to violence. To properly call someone a 'Boy' means that their formal title is based child-like or less developed distinctions. Furthermore, his death instills that image because it suggests he engaged in some act of violence that lead to it. "Having Known" can also be a proper noun, a title of significance to "The Boy." The line talks about how "The Boy" died without Brook's actual "Having Known." Seeing as many of the constructed images black community have been establish through symbol of the black body, Brooks might be showing that consciousness must be seen as a specific thing that works in relation to the symbol of the black body. In other words, if the identity of the community is seen as physical space then the space of consciousness takes up a physical space as well. The black community needs to know what is going on in our spaces, even our alleyway. This is not to suggest that the black community isn't aware of the violence that exist in the inner city, Brooks is holding every person in the community accountable to themselves and to each other. This accountability is an example of the social consciousness associated with political activism. The policeman not being aware of a crime until the next day reflects how institutions of law and order in America do not prioritize the well beings of black Americans. Thus the

policeman shows no care to know who this 'Boy' was. In fact, the policeman in the poem seems to be more interested in him being dead rather than who he is. Which is why its even more crucial to Brooks that the black community needs to be accountable for their health and their identity.

The fourth line continues the use of capitalization in common nouns: “Apparently, died Alone.” While the capitalizing of the word 'apparently' could be just the grammatical respect of quotations, one could say that this capital 'A' would suggest that knowledge and awareness of the goings on in the community is majorly important in the shaping of racial justice, especially since the power of ignorance and suggestion define the black community to those looking in (hence the policeman). Having something “appear” a certain way obviously means that your basing a judgment what you see but not fully know. This “Boy,” who apparently has no name, according to the police man “[a]pparently died alone." One can ask what does it mean to die alone? Brooks capitalized “Alone” which mean that 'alone' could represent a person or place. Either way 'Boy' - while she and the policeman consciously might not know- is of family and community, therefore he was not truly alone. Brooks then writes:

> “You heard a shot?” Policeman said.
> Shots I hear and Shots I hear.
> I never see the Dead. (line 5-7)

Its important to close read the 7th line in accordance with the first four. While she heard shots, she “never” sees the dead. Yet again Brooks is formalizing and naming the unknown. Her never seeing the dead means she doesn't see the lives associated with the dead. Its as if at the moment of death, they are forgotten to her, Brooks might be critiquing the community blind eye to death.

Since the poem is being read as a womanist text, this lens is both singular and plural. Brooks sees and responds to her involvement in the death of the Boy as a black woman and as an

un-gendered, non-singular member of the community. The community aided in creating her perspective. Eaton argues that maintenance of the female experience is what honors the womanist perspective in African American political and social culture (9). Notice the repetition of "shots I hear." When she says, "shots I hear and shots I hear," the use of "and" might suggests that there are two different shots. It is suggested that because the cop's presence is introduced in this particular stanza, the two shots could refer to what is fired in the community and shots fired by the "other[10]." The speaker then goes on to distinguish the particular gunshot saying, "the shot that killed him yes I heard/as I heard a thousand times before;/[...]across my years and arteries" (lines 9,10,12). She speaks on her accumulating the sounds of shot with age, and the image of shots running down arteries is Brooks showcasing her emotional attachment to the community. One could say that it is her womanhood, her experience as a woman throughout the years and witnessing the crime in the community that has sealed her bond with it. This is not to perpetuate the image that women's responses to society are overly "emotional" in relation to men's "rationality" and "pragmatism." This connection of Boy's death to her heart ("arteries") suggests a physical maternal connection. This metaphor is brilliantly illustrated in the 5th stanza:

I have known this Boy before.
I have known this boy before, who ornaments my alley.
I never saw his face at all
I never saw his futurefall.
But I have known this Boy. (lines 17- 21)

The first two lines of stanza 5 begin with " I have known this Boy before." The

[10]The "other" in this case refers to a combination of the racial and authoritative others. The police officer is a symbol of the power of instituting supremacy with the intent of preserving whiteness as a social, political and economic power. When surveying Race Critical Theory, whether it be my means of literature, feminism, history, sociology , its important to address the significance of the "other." When discussing the "other" in American norms, that usually means non- white/of- color/black/socially inferior. When the experience of race is seen through the lens of the black community the "other" can refer to how the community deals with living with the Dubiosian "double veil" of knowing that they are and must act as the "other" when encountering whiteness. It can also be used to describe the white community when the black community is viewed as a natural and safe space. This is how Brooks describes the policeman as the "other." The Black community is neutral to blacks because the community is is the space where they are socially the 'norm'.

repetition in this case is the speaker developing context and connection with the man who died in her alley. The repetition of alley (“your alley” “my alley”) signifies her personal space, and the significance of it being shared with the Boy. Walker mentions that a womanist "loves individual men, sexually and/or non sexually"(xi). The death of 'Boy' that she knows but doesn't see, the image of him 'ornamenting' her alley as well as how the death effects her heart, creates an image of still birth, where her alley is a metaphor for the birth canal. When Brooks says she knows 'Boy' she knows the person in relation to a space in her 'alley,' while "ornament" is a symbol of celebration. She knows Boy but not his face, which also suggests that her alley is a space to produce the Boy, and her unknowing of his "futurefall" illustrates the surprise of a still birth. This aids in illustrating the pain she feels of her body's responsibility and her not having control of the situation. She finally sees the 'Boy' as a symbol of light/life ("ornament") in her alley when he dies.

I want to explore the metaphor of still birth in the poem stylistically as a well as exploring the deeper complexities of Brook's womanist voice. In the first stanza Brooks first introduces the image of still birth in the lines "Policeman said, next morning,/"Apparently died Alone,"" (lines 3-4) I had stated that the police man creates assumptions of the state of the community through an established distance of time ("next morning"). What can also be taken from this line is the assumptions of black motherhood and black children. The capitalization of "Alone" is a location outside of Brooks's birth canal which suggest the the policeman (who symbolizes whiteness as a position of power, institution, and oppression) has generated an image of the community that lacks the image of a black mother. Brook's comments on how her literature means to rebut this external perception of community and black life in a interview where she states, "[t]he prevailing understanding[of the poetic voice]: black literature is literature BY blacks, ABOUT blacks,

directed TO blacks... Black life is different from white life. Different in 'nitty gritty' Different from birth, Different at death" (qt. in Greasely, pg 20). In the fourth stanza the policeman interrogates Brooks in the death of Boy stating "A Boy is dying in your ally/A boy has died, and in your alley/ And Have you known this boy before." 'Boy' has been changed to 'A Boy' which suggests he sees Boy as an undefined isolated being. Brooks had the policeman then divides the death of the boy and the location of her alley with a comma and an "and". This suggests that policeman can objectively visualize the death of a boy in the space of a woman, but image of black women giving birth to black children cannot be conceptualized. The process of giving birth and the pain of a mother losing life through still birth are instances that depict situations in a universal image of family. Including blacks in the universal image means that they are not the "other" to normal (white) family dynamics.

Brooks recalls hearing the "Shot" that killed the Boy. I began to wonder if the Shot should be read as an object of death other than a gunshot. The "Shot" and the "Thousand" heard before can refer to the to the many social setbacks of the new generations in the black community. However, what caught my attention about the word shot was how she heard it the shots "careening tinnily down the night/ and across my years and arteries." A shot 'careening tinnily' literally translates to tilting cheap thin metal, while "down the night" and a moving across arteries illustrates this shot being injected into a space of darkness and sleep by the ways of arteries. This is an image of heroin use. Heroin itself is an example of both death in the community and death that transfers between a woman and her unborn child. Whether Brooks, in the poem, is literally injecting heroin or not is uncertain; what is certain is that the imagery of passing symbols of poison down equates a "still born" death of a future generation.

In the next stanza, Brooks aggressively charges herself with the crime. The repetition of

the word "I" reconstructs the space of the poets voice from victim to willing participant. She writes:

> I have always heard him deal with death.
> I have always heard the shout, the volley.
> I have closed my heart-ears late and early.
> And I have killed him ever.
> I joined the Wild and killed him
> with knowledgeable unknowing
> I saw where he was going
> I saw him Crossed. And seeing,
> I did not take him down. (lines 22 -30)

The multiple use of the 'I' is Brook's voice of consciousness concerning her participation of this killing. The 'I' exists in spaces of sensory imagery; one always hears and sees thing, but is the conscious "I" actually defined by the senses? Brooks closed “heart-ears” is her denial of her senses (eyes, ears). She admits that while she heard his encounters with death and she had heard the many sounds of crime, she silenced herself to it. Notice that she draws another connection between the heart and sound. She said that she had felt connected to the crime in the community, (stanza 3) yet she closed herself off to the man involved. Brooks is critiquing how we see crime in relation to black men. The speaker is effected by death in the community, but not by what caused these deaths. Its very easy to speak on violence within the black community, but to speak on what leads a black man to life of violence - to be killed in his neighborhood - would mean speaking on one's personal involvement or disregard for the black American community in the inner city. She then says that she “killed him ever” which means her neglect and her closed off-ness to is what lead him to death. Brooks, in the poem, is unable to see that she effects him as he effects her (shown the mother/child image of the still birth).

That idea really pushes what Gwendolyn Brooks tries to convey in her poetry and in her hands on activism. Both black men and black women need to see how fighting for each others

rights means fighting for themselves. Its as if she decided to complete Baraka's statement about black women. Black women shouldn't focus of on the black male instead of herself. She should fight for her liberation and her community/black men, and her male counterpart should do the same. Black women are responsible for reestablishing the family dynamic in the black community post slavery, and to Brooks, a woman turning her back to the legacy of maintaining that family and that community is as detrimental as killing 'Boy' in the alley. Black women activist supported black men's progress for the purpose of re-establishing the black family dynamic and community post slavery. If the alley is a metaphor for the birth canal, then 'Boy' is a symbol for the progress of the black family, black youth, and black men. Boy is created through the support and shelter of the woman's alley, its death as a still born suggest a critique on the isolation of black women. Women who were active without recognition were having these roles marginalized into being expected to keep a silent tongue, yet do whatever is told of them. While this isn't what most black women involved in the revolution did, it was image associated with them. In reality these women began bringing the womanist critique and literature into a more intellectual discourse.

In the eighth stanza she says how she heard Boy cry for his father mother brother and sister:

> He cried not only "Father!"
> but "Mother!
> Sister!
> Brother."
> The cry climbed up the alley.
> It went up to the wind.
> It hung upon the heaven
> for a long
> stretch-strain of Moment. (lines 31 - 39)

She suggest how it was expected of 'Boy' to call on the patriarch but for him to call for family

rather than for an alpha male is what made the “cry...[hang] upon the heaven/for a long/stretch - strain of Moment.” The cry for aid- aid from all aspects of the black community- holds monument for Brooks. In this stanza, calling for the community means calling for a spiritual guidance, illustrating that even calling for guidance for a moment is monumental (hence the capitalization of “Moment”).

The ninth stanza only contains two lines putting all focus on the haunting image of the remnants of the alley. She writes, "[t]red floor of my alley/is a special speech to me" (lines 40-41). The minimal lines in the stanza returns the reader to how personal the space of "alley" is to Brooks. The tragedy of the still birth, even with social and external imagery, is an experience of confronting death that only a mother can fully understand. The color "red" paints the image of the birth canal and of the 'blood shed' a (black) mother, sacrifices in the attempts to give birth (birth to a child and birth to the community). One could say that stating that this personal and internal space of motherhood is a "special speech" showcases how voicing black womanhood is equal to the sermonic power and presence associated with male ministry in the black community. In "Heralding the Clear Obscure: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Apostrophe," Lesley Wheeler claims that Brooks use of the "voice of the mother and its metaphoric extension into the voice of the minister enables her to investigate whether or not...the lyric has a social function" (229). Brooks use of poetry to reclaim the ministerial voice that is usually male is an efforts to reclaim the voice of black womanhood. We see the effect of the female minister arise more in "Black Wedding Song" as Wheeler claims "the voices of the mother and the preacher fuse, public and private worlds and their separate discourse become indistinguishable" (234).

“A Black Wedding Song” expresses how Brooks views the value of marriage in the black community. She uses 'love' as metaphor to critique the irony in a male dominant ideology of

black solidarity. While the failure of integration was evident, it resulted into the more aggressive pursuits of the Black Nationalist movement. The antithesis to the Black Nationalist aesthetic was the idea that the black community was a symbol of social regression and the black woman was face of this failure. Black American men have constantly been held as the antithesis of the "prototypical" American white man. Their manhood has been subjected to degradation since the antebellum period. Integration posed the opportunity for black men to assimilate not only into white culture but into white manhood. After the Loving vs. Virginia ruling in 1967[11], some black men saw interracial marriage as the way to showcase their "manhood" since white women in America have been seen as the symbol of racial citizenship (in opposition to the black community). Marrying and living in the epicenter of whiteness along with having half-white children, showcased ones ability to be partnered with whiteness and attain a sense of national identity. One has to ask how did this way of thinking effect the image of black woman in creating the ultimate American family? Black Americans as a whole are rarely credited with national identity and black women have been seen as second class within the second class. Up to this point, establishing a black family dynamic was crucial in order for a black men to achieve the "American Dream." Now black women, in terms of family dynamics, were second rate. If marrying white women is a symbol of racial supremacy, then marrying black women symbolized racial inferiority and social defeat. Interracial marriage used for pseudo social climbing further instilled that black women cannot possess a positive feminine identity, especially since they were not even seen as necessary within their own community.

Gwendolyn Brook wrote "A Black Wedding Song" as a dedication to three black

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[11] ***Loving v. Virginia*** (1967) was a landmark case in which the United States Supreme Court declared Virginia's "Racial Integrity Act of 1924", unconstitutional, thereby overturning Pace vs. Alabama (1883) and ending race-based legal restrictions on marriage in the United States.

marriages. This puts attention on the many forms of black love while showcasing the relevance and power in these unions:

> This love is a rich cry over
> The deviltries and the death.
> A weapon-song. Keep it strong.
>
> Keep it strong.
> Keep it logic and Magic and lightening and Muscle. (lines 1 -5)

These two stanzas show that Brooks looks to express the power of black marriages as well as use its imagery to signify the 'marriage' between the aesthetic and the political voice of the womanist poet. The literal definition of love as "a rich cry over/ the deviltries and death" is an illustration of a force powerful enough to overpower the effects of death and evil. Brooks invokes the voice of the minister because the black church has been the base for many political and social movements in the black community; it was black women who constructed and organized this space. There is also a re-construction of literary tradition in these lines. Brooks uses "Love" to indicate ironic coexistence. "This Love" ('this' indicates that its a type of 'love' different from before) is defined by the stanza. A "rich cry" is a modern and more direct use of what critics define as her Dickinsonian poetic style used in her earlier work. Yemisi Jimoh best describes this style- in "Double Consciousness, Modernism, and Womanist Themes in Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Anniad""- as using "noble and heaven -focus language" then transforming the "form, punctuation and line rhythms" with irony as a resistance to gender roles. (168). Instead of using coded noble terms she uses the word "rich." Yet 'cry' suggest vulnerability, a trait not traditionally noble. The marriage of the two however, does defeat the "deviltries and death" which I believe refers to Eurocentric and colonial aesthetics control of the black female voice. Jimoh states that "through mastery of form, African American writers [like Brooks] create a space for their own voices. This space simultaneously critiques European

American models and speaks for itself" (176). Black marriage is metaphor for the Black community using the Eurocentric traditions of the Church (an example of institutions that have oppressed black people) to create a space for constructing traditions for the black community by the community themselves. Whiteness used marriage in America as a symbol of racial hierarchy and dehumanizing black slaves by not recognizing black unions. However, black marriage is now a tool of black power, hence 'This Love' is a "weapon song." Notice in the 5th line how Brooks uses letter and capitalization patterns of 'l' and "M": "Keep it logic and Magic and lightening and Muscle." The pattern suggests a vocal inflection that gives the poem the sound of a sermon. As mentioned earlier, this assertion of woman's voice into the sermon makes the voice of impact on the black community indistinguishable to a gender(Wheeler, 234). She then writes:

> Strong hand in strong hand, stride to
> the Assaults that is promised you (lines 6-7)

The union of two strong hands means that a black marriage is a union in the community as a whole. There is no gender specifics, only strength, because what a black marriage represents outside of the two's union is a joining of black people; it represents commitment and solidarity. When Brooks continues on to say that they must “stride to the Assaults that is promised...”she is calling out the activism embedded in everyday decisions made in the black community. With all the assaults made on black gender, sexuality and family, the idea that two black people see past those images and ideologies and want to be united in the support growth of the other is not just a step in a relationship but a proactive course. It exposes black power as an ideology that shapes how black people carry on in relation to each other. According to Brooks black love is a political movement towards Black liberation. This expanded definition of 'love' reminds me of how Walker uses the word 'love' to describe her 3rd definition of a womanist. She states that a womanist, "[l]oves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food

an roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless"* (xii).

Part 2 of this poem explores more on the ironic metaphor of "Love" for the black community and the poetic voice. Brooks uses that irony to stage a tension (marriage) between the Euro-centric lyrical aesthetics and the direct black national utilitarian voice. She writes:

> For you
> I wish the kindness that romps or sorrows along.
> Or kneels.
> I wish you the daily forgiveness of each other.
> For war comes in from the World
> and puzzles a darling duet-
> tangles tongues,
> tears hearts, mashes minds;
> there will be the need to forgive. (lines 12 - 20)

The marriage between the aesthetic and the utilitarian reflects what Jimoh states is the "double conscious sister in the veil"(169). In the Womanist tradition, Brooks mirrors the health and progress of the Black community with health and progress of the black women. The communal black health along with her poetic health helps expose a lens onto the progress inside the black community and black community's progress in a white society. For Black Marriage, which is indicated in the "for you", Brooks wishes them to be aware of 'Love', as it is both a testament to the community as as well as a racial term that help institute them as the "other." "Kindness that romps or sorrows along" contains oxy-moronic verbs to define the kindness of 'this love'. She wishes them both forms of Kindness because being aware of the self-defined and what defined from oppressors is important for the survival of the black family. As Jimoh states, "Brooks uses oxymoronic contrasts of beauty and decay to describe [the protagonist] and to describe her relationship to the [allusions] in the beacon of democracy" (180).

The forgiveness of each other might refer to the forgiveness between Brooks two poetic voices. Brooks's critics tend to see her voices in opposition of each other. For example, Phillip

Greasley attempts to set up these voices in "Gwendolyn Brook: The Emerging Poetic Voice":

> Brooks's early poetry is dense, allusive, European based poetry. Its orientation is the aesthetic:conveying feeling and experience as art seeking audiences attuned to art across the ages...her poetry appeals primarily to a white audience...
> Her later poetic style reverses all these poetic choices, opting instead for oral, oratical verse clear and simple enough to be understood in one hearing by untrained mass audiences. Her approach moves conscious and programmatically from aesthetic to utilitarian...(14)

I don't agree that voice directed to the black community is so "simple" or "untrained" nor do I agree that poetic aesthetics are necessarily a European tradition. He later states that in order for Brooks's poetry reflect the "search for black self- identity and values" the voice must be "angry" in opposition to a poetic voice containing "beauty" (Greasley, 21). This idea marginalizes the black female poetic voice as well as belittles the intellect of the black community. However, I believe Brooks is aware that her poetic voices is divided and marginalized as such. What she has stated was that her earlier work was "addressed to white people. We [she and her fellow writers see ourselves crying "UP" to them" (qt. in Greasley, 17). She also comments on that the new direction of her poetry was to "successfully "call" all black people" and that her voice was not new but "newish" (Malewitz, 1). This is an important distinction; "newish" avoids that poetic tradition and the poetic ear are "other" to the black community. The line "for war comes from the World/ and puzzles a darling duet-" might refer to the original approach of "crying up" in her poetry of the late 40's. For example, the Annaid - which is a critique on racial and gender roles through the tradition of epic poetry - was written and set in post World War 2. The puzzling "darling duet" is sarcastic critique on her earlier attempts to discuss racial and gender oppression for a white audience ("darling" suggest something pretty but not respected). The "tangle tongues" illustrate the schism in excluding the black community from the discussion of their own oppression. The brutal image on the mind and heart reflect the oppression on the consciousness.

Yet she ends the image reminding that "there will be a need to forgive." Forgiveness here represents her poetic voices' duties to reclaiming an aesthetic without seeking validation from a European audience; while at the same time being aware that the voice and aesthetic have a duty to the black community. The marriage of directness and lyrical imagery speaks to the diverse audience of the community while acknowledging that there is an intellectual discussion of literature that exists. As Raymond Malewitz reiterates in "My Newish Voice": Rethinking Black Power in Gwendolyn Brook's Whirlwind, "[Gwendolyn Brook's] voice thereby enacts a process of the black community speaking to itself and explores the diverse implications of its "ultimate reality" from a position within than external to, its audience" (4).

In conclusion, Gwendolyn Brooks develops what defines the womanist critique by simultaneously establishing the black woman's voice and establishing the progressive image of the black community. The womanist looks to take the intentions of the Black Nationalist movement and continue the progress of black liberation by removing the misogynistic tones of its male faces. Also she establishes a space that acknowledges the concerns of black women as well as respect that their fight for the black community is beyond any one particular black liberation movement. Brooks's work illustrates the dual consciousness of the black female poet and the community activist. What I look to do in the next chapter is demonstrate how Lucille Clifton further establishes the womanist critique of the spaces of blackness and womanhood through deconstructing the dimensions of the black female consciousness in her poetic process.

Chapter Two

"The Kids are Here Too": The Significance of Black Children and the Womanist's Consciousness in Clifton's *Ordinary Woman*

For Lucille Clifton the influence of American History and culture weighs heavy on her work. This influence came from her parents who, although not educated, instilled in their daughter a fondness of books This knowledge of black American literature and the academy

along with knowledge of her ancestry[12] (a knowledge that many African Americans don't have access to), I believe, sets a tone for her work acknowledging black American history as a pivotal factor in American history and any intellectual conversation on the subject.

Clifton would be the first in her family to attend college when she received a full scholarship to Howard University. While she did not graduate,[13] during her attendance she was introduced to poets Leroi Jones (later known as Amiri Baracka) Sterling Brown and Toni Morrison. She married yogi Fred Clifton in 1958. Throughout the ups and downs of both her education and marriage she took to writing many books of poetry. In 1969, with 6 children and working as a claims clerk, she looked to poet Robert Hayden to help get her poetry published. When he passed her works to Carolyn Kizer, another poet, Kizer entered them in a YMCA poetry contest where Clifton would win the award and her work was published into a book of poetry entitled *Good Times* (1969) which was acclaimed by the New York Times . This book of poetry introduced, what Clifton often does in her works, her fervor and celebration of black American culture, history and remembrance of African heritage by praising historic resistance to oppression and their survival of economic and political racism. In 1970 she went on to publish two children's books. One of them entitled *Some Days of Everett Anderson*, which won the Coretta Scott King Book award. The story of Everett Anderson- a young man growing up in the inner city - would be published in series of books from 1970 – 1984. From 1971 -1984 Clifton published over 30 books of fiction (poetry and children books). Clifton served as Poet Laureate of Maryland from 1979 to 1982. Her achievements also include fellowships and honorary degrees from Fisk University, George Washington University, Trinity College, and other

[12]Great Grandmother Carolyn was a slave brought to America from Dahomey, West Africa

[13]. Clifton would have to withdraw from Howard University when she lost her scholarship due to low grades. She would then attend teacher's college in Buffalo but she didn't not graduate.

institutions; two grants from the National Endowment of the Arts; and an Emmy Award. Clifton was a distinguished Professor of Humanities at St. Mary's College in Maryland and had a position at Columbia University from 1995 to 1999.

In 1974 Clifton's collection of poetry, *Ordinary Woman* was published. This collection acted as a memoir of her father's family tree, starting with her great grandmothers kidnapping and settlement as a slave in New Orleans, Louisiana as well as Clifton's conflict with spirituality when discussing her mother's epilepsy and mental illness. In this collection, Clifton also acts as a witness to the oppression of Native Americans and Black slaves addressing the failed promises of reparations. She testifies to the pain of oppression manifested in her parents' tormented marriage; she confronts racism as an institution "that undermines progressive movements for social change, in disregard for the black community and the planet Earth as a living and sentient being" (Jocelyn, 75). She does all of this while illustrating her experience as a socially conscious black woman tackling the identities of mother, daughter, wife, sister and friend (Jocelyn, 75). She died in Maryland, February 24th 2010.

Lucille Clifton is a Womanist because she, like Brooks, sees her liberation in relation with the community. Clifton has stated that while her work can be read without knowing of her race and gender, knowing allows for a better understanding (Rowell, 58). In relation to how her works mirrored womanist ideologies, she carefully uses language to make her poetry a reflection of herself, her community and her politics. Her work speaks to audiences who share her experiences as well as those whose experiences might be completely opposite. Clifton's emphasis on identity and language, specifically her poetic process of "I"s demonstrate how creative writing and activism are not mutually exclusive (Eaton,9). Clifton's appreciation of language is where she exposes her political agenda. During the nationalist movements she did not affiliate

herself with any particular movement per-say, but that doesn't mean that she was unaware of her race, her gender and her class. She has stated that she “always wanted to use language to its fullest possibility.(Rowell, 68)” In the case of race and gender liberation, language and communication plays a major roll in her literary activism. The language of social critiques do not fit one particular aesthetic. Her wanting to explore the importance of language in American poetry and its cultural influence(s) means that she looks to expose and articulate an experience for, at the least, social cognitive change.

In her work, Clifton particularly articulates on the significance of double consciousness in creating this social change. Understanding one's identity means locating the sources of its oppressive construction, identifying its specific intentions and liberating the oppression that exists within the conscious and subconscious. Calvin Herton in his essay, "Sexual Mountains and Black Woman Writers," mentions that what makes the approach to freeing the conscious a Womanist approach is the awareness of black women's "triple consciousness"(143). The triple consciousness allows a self -critical perception of the oppressed experiences of being a woman, being black and claiming an American identity. Hernton claims that the triple consciousness is what lead black woman to find a space that didn’t victimize their sex the way the the nationalist movement did. It also makes sure this space recognizes the racial dynamics associated with their gender issues (Hernton 143). I believe that a womanist takes this understanding of the triple consciousness to further understand the significance of each member of the communities perspective; in hopes that it aids in forming a deeper bond of solidarity within the community.

Clifton showcases her Womanist use of "conscious raising" activism (Herton,143) in her extremely detailed, self critique of her consciousness in her writing process. Clifton has a brilliant way of demonstrating the complexities of her identity and how it effects the stages of

creating work for the community. In an interview for the Callaloo Journal, she discusses the importance of what she claims is the African tradition of “both/and” and its common misplacement with “either/or" (59). Both her triple consciousness and concern for the community's consciousness introduces a womanist's critique of Double Consciousness. This view draws on how a womanist not only sees her liberation in relation with the community's liberation, she also sees a relationship in enlightened consciousness. Clifton discuss this womanist lens in relation to writing poetry. She talks about the process of the "I" in creating the works that are critical and instructive for the community:

> So my “I” tends to be both me Lucille and the me that stands for people who look like me, and the me that is also human, [to the interviewer] you know. I think if I distinguish anything, there's a distinction between what I look like on the outside and what somebody else does, and what we are inside. So it's me on the outside and me as the inside. A guy once said to me something about how he liked my poetry but couldn’t get into it because he was interested in history. And I said, “Me too.” [Asking the interviewer] You know? What I'm writing is also history. And some of it is the history of the inside of us; and some of it is the history of the outside.(59)

Clifton first stage is establishing the "I"s and the consciousness associated with each. The first “I” is the "me," the identity that represents internal and personal. This “I” represents personal aesthetics and a space for her identity over which she has total control. The second “I” she describes as the “I” for people who look like her. This represents the identity she shares with her community; it represents the common experiences, cultural traditions and social oppressions that form a bond of understanding and solidarity. The third “I,” represents her identity on human level. While she is aware of her identities as a black woman (and as a member of a community), this "I" symbolizes the identities of all human beings. In this "I," the diversity in identities that make up the human race are not placed in social hierarchies. The significance of the human level “I” is to remind that the ideals that encourage using difference as a means of institutional

oppression are a social problem, not a biological one. This idea articulates Alice Walker's definition of a womanist being a "traditional universalist"(xi). It also indicates that there is an experience that is shared by all people, and that this experience allows basic levels of empathy. What Clifton shows is that the womanist concept of consciousness and its application in protest literature was already practiced as tradition.

The next part in the Womanist view of double consciousness lies in using the "I" to educate the community. Clifton states that when she's writing poetry she is "writing history also" (Rowell, 59). This idea of writing history in poetry is a way of using the womanist consciousness as a means of community uplift. Specifically because Clifton draws a distinction between two forms of history, she enlightens the community on the issue of consciousness. The two forms of history are the history "Inside of Us" and "some of [...]the History of the outside." (Some Outside History) I believe the "Inside of Us" refers to the history that helps transform the two "I"s (People that look like me and me) into the "us". This history instills identity, citizenship, freedom (for the community and the self) and tools for dealing with the 'outside' that doesn't acknowledge their history. It implies traditions and aesthetics for the community that do not allow a space for outside oppression. The "Some Outside History" refers to teaching the history that was constructed to oppress the community by its establishing black people as the "other." The distinction between the two allows the community to understand the history while being aware to not internalize the oppression as factual makeup of their person(s). Understanding that history without internalizing it allows the person within the community to be both conscious of his/her personal relationships with identity and letting that personal relationship aid in becoming a better ally for the community.

Clifton has stated that she didn't know what the Black Arts Movement "was" as she "did

not reflect it" (Rowell,65). She has admitted that the movement opened a “gateway” for non-white writers, but she did not understand who was defining the black arts movement and why its aesthetic marginalized many members of the black community. Moreover, Clifton did not find a definition within these aesthetics that allowed the full embodiment of herself. Clifton had stated giving all of herself to the creative process as a conscious critical black woman meant that she participated in creating history. The Black Arts and Black Nationalist movements for many black women writers meant writing through the “either/or” of what constitutes as black freedom. She further exemplifies how her existence through her “I” creative writing process demonstrates the ideology as an Afro-Political womanist:

> The Black Aesthetic. I am a black person; everything I write is a black thing. How could I not? But on the other hand, its always struck me as strange that all of a sudden [black] people discovered that when somebody said “nigger” they were talking about them[...] At the time I thought this must have to do with college. That's terrible but I'm talking about my younger self. I had not done that. I had come from poor folks in Buffalo, New York [...]and had seen that my parents were not even elementary school graduates. My grandparents – I don't know if they'd seen a school. So the kind of struggles and things that were happening were not things that I had suddenly discovered involved me too; I had *been* know that. (66)

Clifton describes solidarity in its true form. She is a black woman and “expression” of her blackness shows every action. Therefore when Clifton talks about the “black thing” that will always be exposed in her writings, it removes the stigma that black literary experience is abnormal or inorganic. Clifton is saying that to be a black writer and write from the black experience is no new epistemological finding in American history. Being black is an identity that shapes how we coexist with others in America. The Black Power/ Black Arts movement fought against the racial oppression afflicted on our race. Clifton simply articulates that writing black literature is not a newly found choice of black writers.

In her 1974 collection of poems, *Ordinary Woman*, Clifton eloquently externalizes

personal accounts which makes her poetic voice both subjected to and critical of black woman's liberation and the synonymous attempts to heal the black community. In "Come Home From the Movies," Clifton confronts the community on the contradictions of their current blinded (in some ways artificial) consciousness. The approach to understanding true consciousness lies in the physical involvement and distinguishing one's own experience and history from that which is constructed by someone else. Clifton directs this poem to children which, I believe, showcases the womanist thought in literary style:

> Come home from the Movies
> Black girls and boys,
> the picture be over and the screen
> be cold as our neighborhood. (lines 1-4)

"Black girls and boys", illustrates that who she's commanding are the black children of the community. This entire time we discussed how women looked to improve the community as a whole, and Clifton is continuing that tradition by introducing the significance of African American children in the discourse of black liberation. If the image of the black family had been appropriated with the category of the "other" would mean that black children too are left with the task of reclaiming their own identity? As a womanist, Clifton is aware of that experience and how the fight for their liberation is just as significant as fighting for themselves.

But why the image of children?

For one, articulating the experience between a child/mother disproves that the image of the black family as this "other" or "abnormal" to the image of a traditional family dynamic (this had been illustrated with Gwendolyn Brooks). Her voice in the poem takes the tone of an older and authoritative participant in this community which suggests that she has taken on the role of an instructor/teacher.

Like Brooks, Clifton is also respected as a traditional American poet, her poetry is

respected in the eyes of the Eurocentric academe. The image in the first stanza demonstrates how Clifton's poetry brings the community into the literary tradition. When the voice tells the black children to come home now that movie is over, the image of the "screen being as cold as our neighborhood" painted an image that reminded me of Plato's Allegory of the Cave. The image of the movie theater taking the attention of black children away from the community in many ways mirrors the essence of Plato's allegory, in which he states:

> Make an image of our nature in its education and want of education, likening it to a condition of the following kind. See human beings as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood...they are fixed, seeing only in front of them...Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show puppets.(Book VII, 514 a- b)

Clifton brings the classic literary and philosophical image of the oppressed mind into the contemporary settings of the 60's -70's America. The movies is a great comparison to the image of the cave: the long dark hallways, the people only able to look forward as images are projected to them from a light source high and behind them. The images of the movie are illustrated only when the film isn't playing to establish a comparison between the coldness of an empty screen and the coldness of the (real) living neighborhood. This comparison sets a stage that will showcase how the movie, like the cave, represents the artificial ideologies that are constructed through oppression.

The next stanza further develops the movie being a metaphor for the oppressed conscious when Clifton writes:

> Come home from the show,
> don't be the show
> Take off some flowers and plant them,
> pick up some papers and read them,
> stop making babies and raise them.

The voice again calls the children home, instructing them to "not be the show" which plays on the image of the movie being an artificial vision that's meant to alter the viewers reality. Asking them to not be the show suggests that Clifton is also aware of the implications of the movie. The double consciousness of history that Clifton says she writes into her poetry makes its way into this stanza as she distinguishes what it means to be "the show" and what it means to be part of actual progress. In the lines "Take off some flowers and plant them,/ pick up some papers and read them" notice how Clifton takes the images of flowers and papers from a space of artificiality into organic and active spaces. The flowers that are taken off and planted suggest that the children validated the artificial significance of the image rather than doing something creative, natural and insures growth. The artificial flower might be Clifton addressing the popular social movements of the time, possibly the flowers that are taken off refer to the "flower power" trend of the free- love movement. The history of African Americans of being conscious and proactive go beyond the trending images of what it means to be pro- black. The "papers" might suggest text that the movement used to support their current aesthetics or the black nationalists bashing of earlier black political/literary movements (Harlem Renaissance). Clifton asks the black youth to not let the "show's" message determine what writings of your own community to read. The importance is to "read" the literature, understand its significance and its context as establishing a black voice within the literary aesthetic. These lines mirror her discussion on writing the "history of us" because basing the consciousness on the "show" means existing the artificial space of trending fashions and ideals when there is a history that showcases a tradition of progress, growth and intellectual thought. The line "stop making babies and raise them" I believe is Clifton asking for the community to not just focus on immediately altering the mind-set en masse. Instead, the community should be focused not only on educating themselves with

Black history but also with the history of the society in which they live. Raising a child means ensuring that it is capable of surviving and functioning in the world. Clifton wants to ensure that the future of the black community doesn't base all knowledge of black pride and legacy in one specific time frame. That extremely limited view- no matter how pro-black- subjects the community to having their aesthetics and beliefs altered for them.

While black women have become victims of oppression within their own race, the voice realizes the importance of healing the community by giving direction to the younger generation. Clifton continues to showcase the significance of exposing the black youth to the dimensions of consciousness. In the following lines Clifton demonstrates how the youth participate in empowering the black community through being the symbols of transformation :

> Come home from the movies
> Black girls and boys,
> show our fathers how to walk like men,
> they already know how to dance. (10-13)

She repeats the first two lines of the poem reminding the reader that the first objective is to get the children away from that space of artificial consciousness. She then writes that the children need to "show our fathers how to walk like men," In this line I saw Clifton brilliantly showing the significance of including black children in the discussion of black liberation. Black children are members of the community who interact least in spaces of whiteness. Where adults work, study and interact in spaces and institutions that simulate racial oppression, children -however slightly- are less affected by the daily oppressive encounters of their elders. This suggests that black children serve as a reminder that the black community is still a black space of support and solidarity. Children are still being taught to "walk like men," where the oppressive acts on black adults' consciousnesses might have lead some to stray off the path. If we were to put these lines in context with the Black Nationalist Movement, the children in the community represent a

generation born into the notions of "black power," and "black is beautiful" yet their age has protected them from the oppressive context to which black males were subjected. The black men knowing how to "dance" instead of "walk" illustrates that black men have become "the show." Their actions are as reactionary as dancing to music. Black children portray black solidarity as not reactionary but progressive and proactive. Children are Clifton's attempt to link the black men and women from their separatist aesthetics. Alice Walker states that a womanist is not a separatist, therefore the goal of a womanist is to not punish the failures of black men but empower them back to their better consciousness. The aesthetics of the Black Nationalist movement created a separatist approach to the black family and gender roles. Children of the black community however are reminded that the issues of the community are not just a matter of "men vs. women." For Clifton, children represented the importance of maintaining the "dynamic" within the community.

But Why So Little Critique?

While I was researching prose on what defines a womanist, critiques on locating womanist literary traditions, when it came time to researching these political critiques on Lucille Clifton I could barely find enough to support a one page paper. If there were any black feminist critiques that mentioned her name, they did just that - mention her name in a sentence and move on. So I began to look at the essays that did critique her work and what I noticed was that these critiques focused on her American identity; essays concerning race focus on her language as a traditional American poet who loves sharing stories between the generations. Why were there so few black feminist critiquing the political analysis of race and gender in her work and so many of Gwendolyn Brooks? So I looked into the history of the black feminist critique and came across this quote by Farrah Jasmine Griffin on black women's poetry of the early 70's; she writes:

> (Regarding the *Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970)) Although that volume does not contain literary criticism, it does contain poetry, short stories, essays, and critical analysis by an emerging generation of black women thinkers. This text is not addressed to an academic audience but instead to a diverse variety of black women readers... the text itself is not necessarily a feminist document; instead it holds a myriad of opinions about the status and place of black women in the black freedom movement, in the women's rights movement, and in American society at large (485)

This statement disregards Black woman writer's literary tradition of invoking political thought by making her efforts of exposure revolve around the community. As Eaton states, "black women activists were working within and writing about the black community in ways that they hoped would ensure progressive action after the signing of the civil rights legislation and in the coming years. (8)" Brooks might have received many more critiques because her early works were written specifically to/for the readers of the academy. While her later works openly staged her conflicts of writing for the academy and the black community. Clifton describes her poetry as "many- layered," meaning that she dedicates the use of language to makes her poetry able to be "read and understood in some ways by literary critics and theoreticians and also by [her] Aunt Timmy and Uncle Buddy" (69). That statement on its surface means that she wants her writing to connect to everyone, but it also references writing from that human level that connects all people. In other words her writing process shines light on the intellectual consciousness that exist within the varied people(s) that make up black community.

Clifton has consistently maintained that (especially in the black community) poetry exposes the "layers" that connect all of us. One major way academics like Griffin determine when text is academically feminist and a "myriad" of opinions, is class. When womanist began fighting for the improvements in the black community it usually meant reaching out to working and lower class black communities. Poetry from Clifton and Brooks both reference and write to the lower and working classes in the black community, which is why to write- off addressing

literature to the everyday person as not being a formal feminist document actually goes against one of the major staples of the womanist movement. Moreover, Griffin's statement puts the diversity of black woman in opposition to academics. If this is the case, then the following questions must be answered: How do they distinguish these images as an "academic" critique or "myriad opinion"? And how does one avoid class, when the targeted audience is defined by whether or not the images and language are academically worthy? For: there are two pieces of poetry both discussing the black female body in response to misogyny in the black nationalist movement, both are written during the beginning stages of the womanist movement; what makes one piece likely to be more important? According to Griffin, the audience needs to be directed to the Eurocentric academe (which usually means an audience of higher economic class). This results in the literary image of the female black body being treated as commodity. Instead of saying this image is of "higher class," it is coined "academic."

While this may not be Griffin's intention, it is evident that when discussing literary theory of oppressed people in the academy, if black women's images are not placed in spaces of extremes or irregularity, there's a common exclusion of black women. To fix this, womanist poets like Clifton stage an encounter between literature and community, creating a space for black women in the American literary discourse.

While it was not labeled yet as "womanist theory," Clifton's process of the "I"s and the "both/and" are highly intellectual tools for translating her identity and agenda. This practice is almost identical to what Eaton later states that "by using literature as a form of activism, the black woman writer's insider position and stake in the eradication of injustice enables her to negotiate multidimensional experiences (ie black /woman/ partner/ writer/ activist)" (9).

The "I"s allow for multidimensional experiences within teaching this history. The "I" is

not allocated to a particular identity or specific time in history, that would mean using the "either/or." When it comes to writing her poetry, Clifton states that her work comes from "both intellect and intuition. One does not separate oneself out" (61). To write from both intellect and intuition requires writing from the all "I"s. It requires personal reflection, observation of how you see yourself and how others see you as a representation of your gender, race and other objective signifiers. In other words, when Clifton writes her poetry, she documents herself while truthfully expressing and intellectually critiquing herself and her experiences from an internal, external and instinctual position. This, I think, is how one uses creative literature as a means of executing a creative black feminist and womanist critique. Clifton makes her work both primary and secondary historical sources by writing both creative and historical pieces. She takes on the discourse of womanism and creates poetry that has no limits on what it means to be a poet, a woman or black. She states, "A person can, I hope, enjoy the poetry without knowing that I am black or female. But it adds to their understanding if they do know it – that is, that I am black and female. To me, that I am what I am is *all* of it; *all* of what I am is relevant" (58).

Clifton's poetry and her articulation of the poetic process demonstrates how a womanist critiques the triple and double consciousnesses of herself and of the community. She engages and enlightens the community to critiquing consciousness thus keeping black progress an issue that will be carried into future generations. With Nikki Giovanni we will see how she continues the critique of black consciousness, and the significance of black women in establishing space, aesthetics, and ideologies. Giovanni explores the Black woman's body as a route by which aesthetics and ideologies (whether they be progressive or oppressive) are placed.

Chapter Three

Reclaiming the Body, Redefining the "Space": Critiquing Feminist and Femininity in Giovanni's *My House*

"Love" has been a theme both Gwendolyn Brooks and Nikki Giovanni have used to illustrate the balancing act of maintaining support for her community while maintaining a space of her black womanhood and aesthetics. In "Black Wedding Song," Gwendolyn Brooks used love to stage a marriage between her black militant and traditionally eloquent poetic styles; while demonstrating how articulating on the subject of 'love' in the black community represents a pro-active move to reclaim the identities in the black family dynamic. Nikki Giovanni uses "love" to define the poetry she has written in her 1972 collection *My House* (Domash and Juhasz, 149). Her work focuses racial politics of motherhood, the black community, and the everyday encounters. However, love is not a term of endearment between two people, it is an institution that takes on the role of unity and restriction. Giovanni also defines her books of poetry for the specific duty of black militancy "works of love" (149).

For the black community, love represents a balancing act between symbolizing an opportunity to celebrate the black community as well as act as a metaphor for its division. As I had discussed in the introduction, images of the black woman had been instituted to dehumanize the idea of black femininity, specifically regarding black sexuality and motherhood (Higginbotham,257; Franklin 434). The images of the "Jezebel" constructed the idea of black women's animalistic promiscuity and made it impossible for black people to engage in relationships; while the image of the "mammy" suggested that the black mother was not located

in the black home but in the home of her white masters. Therefore, 'love' (as a metaphor for division) symbolized an emotion that was particular to a feminine identity black women were "unable" to possess; the idea of a black women loving a black man, having a family and loving her family as a mother was also impossible (White, 61). Black women activists look to reconstruct the image of black family because its image has been so oppressed institutionally. Having the image of a family dynamic had been equated with having a national (and humane) identity (Higginbotham, 263). For black women poets, "love" was a political force because it rejected all of the images that symbolized black people's 'inhumanity'(263). "Love" represents a relationship that exists in the black home, moreover, a relationship with black women, black men and black children. "Love" proves that the black family is, and has always been, an American image.

The black American family dynamic had reached a turning point in the Black Nationalist Movement when it came to identifying and racing gender status. Before this movement, establishing the black family meant black women, black men and black children working together to help each reclaim their gender and national identity (Thompson, 159). Since it was usual that black men and women were both working out of the home, gender roles were not seen through the patriarchal lens from which white feminists aimed to free themselves. Restoring the black family meant the ability to participate in building black community. The aesthetics of the Nationalist Movement, however, employed an aesthetic that black men needed to appropriate the same roles of patriarchy their white counterparts had done in their families. Therefore, the nationalist movement redefined black solidarity in the family dynamic by demanding that the role of black woman was to"inspire her man" (qt. from Franklin, 434). As V.P. Franklin discusses in "Hidden in Plain View: African American Women, Radical Feminism, and the Origins of

Women's Studies Program," the academe of Black Studies, black women were "repelled" by the misogyny "exhibited by male Black Power advocates" (434). For black women, restoring the progressive gender roles meant reconstructing a black feminine identity. Giovanni's "love poems" - like Clifton's use of the 'I's - reminded readers that the history of black liberation (especially concerning black women) has always meant liberating black identity from its white oppressive construction.

In a 1974 interview conducted at the University of Colorado, "A Talk With Nikki Giovanni," Nikki Giovanni explains that, for her, to be a feminist is impossible because of its racial bias. This interview really clarified how black women saw their role in the liberation movement. She responds to not calling herself a feminist by simply saying that she "cant define it and tell you why [she's] not" (147). How can she become unified with an identity that doesn't acknowledge her oppression. She is oppressed as a black person and the problems that she faces "predominately, are problems of racism in America" (147). From this point on in the interview her critique on white feminism also touches on aesthetics that would define black feminism/ womanism. Giovanni continues to elaborate on how she cannot support the feminist movement because it does not support the efforts of other oppressed people, particularly the oppression of children of color. She references the racist protest taking place in Boston concerning bussing children of color to school. She brings up the example of Gloria Steinem, then president of NOW[14], stating that she "goes all over the world...to build the case for women, but she can't to Boston say, 'Please Stop Throwing Bricks at Those Kids'" (147). Here Giovanni sees her oppression in relation to her entire community.

Giovanni then discusses that what separates the black female and white female's

[14]The National Organization of Woman (NOW) is the largest feminist activist organizations. Founded in 1966, NOW has over 500,000 members around the country.

perception of oppression and liberation depends on social experience. She argues that "We [black women] are not talking about the quality of life, we are talking about having to participate in the life as it exists, and that is a big hell of a difference" (148). When Giovanni talks about quality of life versus participation she means feminist mystique[15] searching for an alter reality, a place of escape from life that they consider mundane and restrictive. No matter what they do, the image of the white community as a whole is not tarnished because women's freedom and escapism has become synonymous in definition. They are subjected to roles that might limit the spirit but still hold their feminine identity to a certain esteem and unmovable role in family dynamics. Participation is vital for any form of liberation in the black community. According to Giovanni, calling yourself a feminist depends on how you participate in life aware that your womanhood is a social construct (Domash and Juhasz, 149). Black feminist/ womanist since the 19th century have understood the importance of how they participate within the dynamics of whiteness, masculinity, and nationality. As she stated in her interview, "the history of black women is beyond feminism.(149)" In other words, the moment in which black women were legally given citizenship required that they fought for equal rights and equal participation in the spaces of America that symbolized social, economical, and political prosperity (Thompson, 161).

In the same interview, Giovanni hints that these women might have turned away from the issues of black women because they were not willing to relinquish the privilege and power that comes with whiteness. She writes:

> In about ten years, the white woman will be where the black women are, in terms of responsibility
>
> White women are just now experiencing the problem of desertion. A greater number of white men are just walking away from their families; they're saying "we dont want it." And the women who thought that they were liberated, thought it was really a lot of fun, all of a sudden find they have to pay the rent and

[15] *Feminist Mystique*, published February 19, 1963,[1] by W.W. Norton and Co., is a nonfiction book written by Betty Friedan. This book examined the unhappy lifestyles of the housewives of the 1950's and 1960's.

> buy shoes and get food...In other words, they found themselves where black women have found themselves for the last hundred years, standing alone saying, How do I rear a family? (148)

Womanist poets like Giovanni critiqued white feminist ideologies and simultaneously translated the political ideologies of the black community that were formulated by black women, into poetry that mirrors the socio-political encounters of black people. Like Brooks, Giovanni's poetry has the voice of a womanist activist, but it's important to not marginalize her voice as a black woman poet to the space of a political lecture. As poets, there is a literary aesthetic with which these women identify. So while there is purpose to respond to an external effect, the poetic aesthetic is what allows the poem to reflect her personal identity (as I mentioned earlier, Clifton demonstrated this effect in her breaking down her consciousness - the 'I' for her community and the 'I' for the the individual). Also, Giovanni is aware that marginalizing the activism in the black female community to one current political movement discredits the political and social plights these women made.

In *My House* (1972), a common theme that occurs in these poems is how black women in many ways act as a vessel that allows the transferal of traditions, culture, and identity between generations. In her 1992 essay, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Frame Words,” Hortense Spillers discusses sexuality and the space of the black women's body in the tradition of black literature and culture. Spillers writes, “[the black woman] became instead the principle point of passage between the human and the non- human world. Her issues became the focus of a cunning difference – visually, psychologically, ontologically – as the route by which the dominant male decided the distinction between humanity and the 'other'" (qt. from Griffin 497). Contemporary critic Sharon Holland, one of the many new critics who are inspired by Spillers, elaborated that idea in "*Raising the Dead: Reading of Death and (Black) Subjectivity”*:

> Black female bodies serve as a passage between the humanity and non-humanity as well as the articulation of the passage. I would suggest that this border, which is no border at all but a passageway, also encompasses the terrain between the living and the dead, between the ancestral and the living community...Elaborating on Spillers central points in 'Interstices' that 'black vestibular to culture,' I would like to add that this space is both material and linguistic – a chamber housing the flesh and its attending language. (43)

It is this theme that suggest that the term “love” is a metaphor for reclaiming the black female body and black femininity. What the Jezebel and Mammy both have in common is that these myths portray black women as incapable of loving herself and her family. A womanist articulation of love suggests choice, aesthetic traditions, and feminine identity that are defined, controlled and passed down by black women. "Categories" approaches what happens when a black woman realizes the duality in her consciousness and how the conscious exists in multiple spaces, particularly in the space of white feminism. "When I Die" explores the significance and variations of defining space.

In her poem"Categories," Giovanni illustrates the process by which a black woman, realizes that her identity is victim to construction of these myths. Further more it takes the reader through the process of deconstructing these images and re-defining her identity and reclaiming her body through the traditions passed down from the black women before her. Thus establishing a consciousness that engages the reader to the importance of how the liberation of the black female is crucial for the liberation of the black community. Giovanni's first stanza introduces how one realizes the exploitation of her identity. She writes:

> sometimes you hear a question like "what is before
> your responsibility as an unwed mother"
> and some other times you stand sweating profusely before
> going on stage and somebody says "but you are used
> to it" (lines 1- 5)

These five lines introduce Giovanni's womanist thought on who she is versus what she represents.

The questions and statements said are very personal of Giovanni's life as she was an unwed mother in the late 1960's, yet she uses the word "you" instead of "I". This distinction is done to establish that these statements about her identity are not internalized. Giovanni has made mention to how she is aware of the roles society expects her to internalize concerning her motherhood. In an 2003 interview, Nikki Giovanni expressed how she dealt with the image of being a single mother in 1969. She responded:

> "I never looked at myself through anybody's eyes. And I was talking to somebody else recently. I've never looked at the world through white eyes and I've never looked at myself through anybody's eyes...anybody that didn't have anything positive to say to me about my expecting the baby, I knew they weren't a friend. And so they had to go..."[16]

It does however, show how something as personal as motherhood and poetry are immediately appropriated with roles that she is expected to perform. The "you" also invites other black women to participate in this confronting of the issue of differentiating the external and personal construction of identity. What caught my attention was how the question "what is your responsibility as an unwed mother" is not closed with a question mark. A question mark would make that line appear as a literal question and therefore expect a response. While she uses the word question, the line reads as a statement. It is as if whoever is saying this is not asking how she feels about being an unwed mother, rather demanding that she know the roles constructed with the image of an unwed black mother and act them out accordingly.

Giovanni from the beginning knew that while her identity as black woman had been stereotyped, she was always nonetheless conscious of the external nature of these images. In other words, she understood that it was illogical to see herself through "white eyes" or "anybody's eyes" because that would mean that she has no consciousness of her black

[16]Nikki Giovanni (The HistoryMakers A2003.027), interview by Adele Hodge, 01/31/2003, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 4, story 4, Nikki Giovanni discusses being pregnant and unwed in 1969. http://www.idvl.org/thehistorymakers/iCoreClient.html#/&n=4505

womanhood. If she had no say in something as personal as her body, it meant the oppressors who constructed those images were in control of her and her child. Therefore, Giovanni does not end that "question" with a question mark because it doesn't deserve her answer. In the first two lines she expresses that black women already have the power to separate the external images of oppression from her personal relationship between her body and her community (the child.) This realization is what allows Giovanni to create a space to exercise her woman(ness), since social constructions provided none.

Then she writes on her emotions and vulnerability about performing (what would presumably be her poetry) and the external voice responds, "but you are used to it." I believe Giovanni wants to show how external construction not only looks to claim your identity as a woman but looks to appropriate your relationship with your personal creative process. The voice discredits and rejects Giovanni's external emotional reaction. Giovanni wants to demonstrate how the oppressive construction of black women's identity looks to control the most personal parts of the self. Stating "but you are used to it," is a command that immediately denies Giovanni's attachment to her poetry.

Giovanni's first 5 lines exposed the control and creative freedom poetry has for self-defined identity. The next lines begin the process of how one might realize the shaping of black women's identity, and where that realization leads to if they wish to deconstruct it. She writes:

> Or maybe you look into a face you've never seen
> or never noticed and you know
> the ugly awful loneliness of being
> locked into a mind and body that belong
> to a *name* or *non-name* - not that it matters (lines 6- 10)

Notice that Giovanni writes "look into" instead of "look at." Looking into a face signifies looking at what the object represents, as well as examining how it effects your visual perception. The

ambiguity in who's unrecognizable face the black woman ("you") might be looking into is a clever way of illustrating that once you internalize an external construction of your identity you lose perception on whether the reflection is your own or the person who constructed it. Once internalized, the face is ambiguous because it cannot be distinguished between your own and the other nor can you distinguish if you've had no input in defining it. Once the person has looked into this unknown face, they start to notice just how this face has affected her internal perception of the self. These internal perceptions ("ugly" "awful" "loneliness") represent how these social images are meant to have the black women become symbol of failure of what defines a feminine identity (Hernton, 144).Then Giovanni writes how these images are "locked into the mind and body that belongs to a *name* or *non-name*." The term 'lock', solidifies that once these images are appropriated it's no longer just a matter of personal aesthetics; the social oppression of your womanhood acts as parasite- its attaches to the body, molding the mind's perception of the self. In Hortense Spillers essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," she elaborates on how external construction looks to capture the black feminine identity with locking the intimacy of black women's sexuality with reductive and objective imagery. She brilliantly explains:

> But this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join. This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by externally imposed meanings and uses: 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time in stunning contradiction- the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness"; 4) as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness," resonating through various centers of human and social meaning. (67)

The internalized images are used as a route by which oppressive ideologies of race and gender

become programmed as inherited traits black women possess biologically, not socially. This mirrors what Spillers claims on the oppressive side of the tradition of black female body as a passage ("Interstices", Spillers, 76). Giovanni exposes that this body belongs to a "name or non-name." The name and non-name are both italicized which suggests that each has a significance to its title (or lack there of). *Name* signifies that there is no longer a specific person or a set group of people who can be identified as the sole oppressor. Racist ideologies in America have long since been ingrained in almost every major institution, as well as ingrained in the everyday encounters we have with each other. *Name* calls out the individuals who perpetuate these ideologies, holding them accountable. The *non-name* symbolizes how the state of racism being institutionalized makes it easier for the individual to be less accountable for their actions. As I mentioned earlier, using the black woman's body against itself by constructing her identity instills her image of failure, her oppressions, the negative images she represents to others and to herself. The power of not having a specific face to institutional racism makes the oppression of identity seem like it's her fault. However Giovanni insists that whether or not the source of oppression can be named in this case "it doesn't matter." The important matter at this point of the poem is to realize that the source of black women's oppression is external. The interest should be re-claiming the black female body as a personal space. I believe in reclaiming this space, Giovanni is reclaiming the literary tradition of using the black female body as passage. The black woman has control of her body and the passage that it represents is allocated to her community.

In the next stanza, Giovanni stages an encounter between black and white women. This stanza is Giovanni's critique on how images of black women's body are sometimes used as a symbol of "otherness" to establish the positive image of the white female. Now that the black female body has been exposed to the distinction between her identity and the socially constructed

one, Giovanni also seeks to de-myth the identity of the black women when placed in these racialized encounters. She writes:

> and sometimes on rainy nights you see
> an old white woman who maybe you'd really care about
> except that you're a young black woman
> whose job it is to kill maim or seriously
> make her question
> the validity of her existence (lines 17- 22)

The white woman is old because she represents the tradition of a racist femininity. Before the black woman became aware of her identity she might have "really care[d] about" this tradition because her identity was constructed in maintaining the construction of the old white woman's identity. Giovanni describes the black woman as "young" to represent the new consciousness which threatens this tradition. This the why the images of "kill" and "maim" are set in comparison with questioning her validity (the use of "or" suggests two options - questioning validity and physically harming a person- are of the same value). The young black woman is destroying the validity of the tradition. Her "new" self construction no longer supports the self construction of the white woman. This encounter being set on a rainy night might speak on the vulnerability of the racialized tradition. A rainy night suggest being more exposed to the "elements." In the case of this stanza the old white woman might be vulnerable to the changing "elements" of the black female identity.

Giovanni is not advocating a divide between women. She had stated that "[black and white women] should support each other, but I will not take on your oppression" (Domash and Juhasz, 148). Giovanni is aware of this gap between black and white women. I see her next stanza as the clever and careful way of approaching double consciousness when directing a voice to the idea of a slight universal womanhood, but still staying true to betterment and empowerment of her community She then writes:

and you look at her kind of funny colored eyes
and you think
if she weren't such an aggressive bitch she would see
that if you weren't such a Black one
there would be a relationship but anyway- it doesn't
matter
much - except you started out to kill her and now find
you just don't give a damn cause it's all somewhat
of a bore (lines 23- 31)

The first thing I noticed is that Giovanni states that black woman "looks at" which is a departure from the black woman who "looks into" when her identity wasn't self constructed. She then threads the perceptions each woman has of each other, holding them both accountable for the "relationship" that could have happened. Giovanni doesn't just illustrate the black woman's perception of the white woman. She claims this relationship could have happened if the white women was honest about her anger perceptions of black women. However Giovanni states "you just don't give a damn cause its all somewhat of a bore," which can translate into the black woman being beyond what her identity is suppose to be at the moment. While Giovanni introduces this idea, she does not pine over it when she states "it doesn't matter." The last two lines of this stanza might be Giovanni trying to reintroduce the roles of the black woman's constructed identity.

The next stanza explores black women when engaging in a white feminine space. Giovanni is extremely intentional about the construction of her poetry. The story told can be both interpreted because of its poetic space and also "pretty much stand without explanation"(Domash and Juhasz, 150). This poem's structure is an extremely organized process by which Giovanni takes the image of the black woman deconstructs it to make her conscious of her body as a route to distinguish her otherness and her oppression. The stanza following demonstrates the womanists ability to exist with certain universalist qualities without compromising her black

identity. She writes:

> so you speak of your mother or sister or very good friend
> and really you speak of your feelings which are too
> personal
> for anyone else
> to take a chance of feeling
> and you eat that godaweful food and you get somehow
> through it and if this seems
> like somewhat of a tentative poem it's probably
> because i just realized that
> i'm bored with categories (lines 32- 41)

Giovanni had written in the previous stanza that she is "bored" by thinking of what relationships could have been formed between the two women. Instead she has the black woman engage in a conversation that illustrates what it means to operate in a white feminist space. The black woman speaks on the black women in her life to assert the image of the black woman in this space. Once the image has been brought in Giovanni then writes that the black woman "speaks of [her] feelings which are too/personal/for anyone else/to take a chance of feeling." These lines have a slightly satirical tone, since Giovanni switches from illustrating the white woman being maimed and now she is an outlet for personal feelings. However, feelings might be Giovanni's sarcastic 'boredom' with racialized feminine images. When Giovanni says discussing these feelings are "too personal for anyone else," she critiques the privilege and narcissism of the white feminist tradition. The white feminist movement was not going to address the oppressive concerns of being a black woman, so Giovanni's reduces the feminist discourse by defining the sharing of the black woman's experience to talking about "feelings." The image of getting through the "godawful food" illustrates the black woman dealing with ingesting this tradition that her new consciousness is not interested in internalizing it. Having to reduce the black female experience to "feelings" while having to get through being fed "godawful" aesthetics is what leads Giovanni to end this poem with the clear, direct and aloof "i just realized that/i'm bored with categories."

To Giovanni her identity and "the history of black women is beyond feminism" (Domash and Juhasz, 148).

While categories addressed the black woman's multi- consciousness in different spaces, "When I Die" begins to explore the many definitions of space and why a deconstruction of that word aids in better understanding the oppression of the black identity and body.

In the poem "When I Die," Giovanni creates a last will and testament, as she expresses her last wishes for her family, the community and the society that looked to define or silence her existence. Moreover, she makes the location of her influences ambiguous to a specific raced group. Which make sense seeing that black women have been used to shape and define the different spectrum of gender, racial, and American identity. She writes:

> when i die i hope every worker in the national security
> council
> the interpol of the fbicia foundation for the development
> of black women gets
> an extra bonus and maybe takes one day off
> and maybe even asks why they didn't work as hard for us
> as they did
> them
> but it always seems to be that way (lines 8 -16)

In this second stanza she calls out the institution of government. More specifically she addresses the FBI and CIA, (as one word because they are interchangeable in their duties) and states that these groups worked for the "development of black women." This statement displaces and expands the space for black women in the ethos[17] of society. By placing black women in the

[17] This poem, like all womanist text needs to be read for its literal and figurative context. Black women represent the "characteristic manner or spirit, either of a community, or individual." As she exists within the the triple veil of identity as an "other." She (the black womanist) is aware that she must live conscious of both her self-defined and socially defined identity. She must also deal with the fact that she defines her co-inhabitants and oppressors. Literally 'ethos' "is a word that indicates a certain "attitude" or sense of comportment towards others, and generally associated with questions of character or moral self-hood, where character or moral self-hood disclose a bond with others." (www.texascollaborative.org/Urban_Module/glossary.htm)Figuratively, in the case of womanist poetry, I use 'ethos' as an " internal social context of a work of literature, comprising the characterization and setting of fictional literature and the relation of the author to his reader or audience in

surveillance of governmental groups who's missions are to protect the American people and provide "intelligence" for them and their governmental superiors,[18] Giovanni refutes the idea that the black woman is invisible to society. The "fbicia" symbolize the communication of intelligence between the different sectors of political power and black women are a topic that is not only discussed but a sector of focus for members of these groups. Notice, though, that she did not suggest that these workers are working to protect these black women, she instead says that these people work for the "development" of black women.

Firstly, "development" can stand for the architectural actions the American government has enacted for the sake developing a 'space' for "black progress." Historically, the development of government Public Housing (commonly known and used in this project, as the "projects") plays an influential role on how America sees the black family, and in many ways the black mother/motherhood. The American housing projects were first established during the New Deal of the 1940's, as one solution to cure the economic travesty that was the Great Depression (1929 - 1935). The initiative was to provide subsidized housing for the middle- class residents. Residents of the first 8 projects went on to own their apartments, thus, at the time, establishing the projects as successfully aiding in the development of the American economy. Evictions and tenemant demolitions, shifted the projects demographic from middle-class to a more diverse mixture of the middle, lower middle and working class and because of the subsidized and rent-controlled apartments, some living on and below the poverty line were able to find residence in them. Yet at this point, the projects were still seen as a triumph in the American economy

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thematic literature." (http://web.mac.com/radney/humanities/litcrit/gloss.htm)In both the literal and figurative manner, Black women help construct and are constructed in the fabric of the American aesthetic, law and policy, ontological theory, and oppression and freedom.

[18]This is paraphrase comes from reading both mission statements of the FBI and the CIA. The FBI web description states to "Our mission is to help protect you, your children, your communities, and your businesses from the most dangerous threats facing our nation..." (FBI.gov) The CIA's webpage states "The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is an independent US Government agency responsible for providing national security intelligence to senior US policymakers" (CIA.gov)

because it showed the American government as wanting to participate in uplifting its citizens to the modules of urban middle or upper class living. I would say that this image was funded and supported because when one puts the terms 'American citizen' and 'middle-class' in an image that was usually white. Mostly whites lived in these projects at the time. By the1950's the baby boom was in full force, the establishment of an American middle class, and with this post war middle class there came a push to recreate the suburban American family image. At the same time, more people living in poverty began looking to housing projects because Federal Law required that residents of the projects only had to pay a quarter of their income for rent. This was not appealing to the middle-class who would have to pay more. Thus began, what historians call, the "ghettofication" of the projects (Jackson, 229). This meant that as more black families were moving into the projects, the government increased their neglect in maintaining and funding of these apartments and neighborhoods. Giovanni is addressing the government's part in aiding in constructing ("developing") the black female image. Moreover, the stanza illustrates how she saw the fight for liberation from government oppression as a fight for her blackness, her womanhood. Governments rejected the image of the black family by rejecting the images of black neighborhood.

The "interpol of the fbicia" literally means that that there is a federally funded communication between the sectors in this institution about the welfare of black people; this sharing of intelligence means that that black community, the black family, and thus the "black woman" is of importance to maintaining an "American status quo[19]". Giovanni illustrates the insidious nature of institutionalized racism by using the image spy-groups who are in charge of

[19]When I say "American status quo," I refer to to the maintenance of whiteness as a neutral space that defines what it means to have an American identity/citizenship. American history shows that institutions have defined white as a race that is biologically inherit the "intelligence and capability" of maintaining economic prosperity. (*The Bell Curve*, Hernstien and Murray 269 - 316)

surveillance and monitoring of the black community; with the approach of covert actions rather than overt ones. What's unfortunate is that the goal of their actions is to prefabricate the black image as a means of systematic oppression. Giovanni then wishes that when she dies, these fbicia workers "get an extra bonus and maybe a day off/ and maybe even asks why they didn't work as hard for us/ as they did /them." A bonus and day off further instills that the government's coded oppression of blacks through residential segregation and economic neglect is not an unconscious action.

This idea of being completely "unconscious" of enacting oppression on blacks is something that Nikki Giovanni does not stand for. Any exposure of the unconscious thought in *My House* applies to subjects of oppression, because part of reclaiming and redefining your own racial and gender identity from a supremacist construction, means being conscious of the double veils of being black in America and the triple veils of being a black woman in America. In the interview "A Talk with Nikki Giovanni," she states that *My House* marks the moment where if she were to critique a particular politician (presumably white), or her opinion on current political issues she would not put it in her poetry; "[a] poem would give it too much space, and it doesn't deserve that kind of space, because what you've got say is 'The President is a crook,' and 'General Ford' is a liar,' and that's not poetic. You don't want to give anybody any space to say 'Well she didn't mean that. (149)'" This is not to say that her opinions on her social surroundings shouldn’t be seen as affirmative and conducive to her critique and solutions on the state of the black community. This statement is drawing attention to creating a poetic space to discuss the unexposed levels of oppression of blacks, not a space on deciding whether or not blacks are oppressed. That statement also means that she is critical of the term "politics", and the space of politics, like feminism purposefully excludes a black woman's participation and perspective.

Structurally, this stanza gives insight to why poetry best demonstrates a womanist politics and the importance of keeping activism and its dialogue community based. Giovanni translates the oral tradition through poetry because, as she stated in her interview, [p]oetry always gives you that space, you could take it either way, or one, or two or three or four ways. (149)"

We had discussed how Giovanni mirrored both Spillers's and Holland's idea of the black woman as a passage. Giovanni goes on to explore the tradition of the black women's body by illustrating the negative and positive images of the passage. She does this by simultaneously exploring the use of the body (as Holland had mentioned "materially" and "linguistically" (43)) through the uses of "I" and "Us". In other words, linguistically, when Giovanni uses "When I die" as a prefix to her wishes and request, she removes many of the social barriers of communication the black female body symbolizes in racial and gender hierarchy. Having these requests at her death, is a way of maintaining remembrance through passing beliefs and actions. Yet, the limitations in her request for the fbicia ("'maybe they") suggest that she's staying realistic about racial encounters to her community and about the solutions to achieving black liberation. A major solution to the achieving social equality for the black community is for the people in the institutions to "take a day off," or physically remove themselves from the ideologies of the institution. Those people need to confront their part in oppression and realize that what institutionalized racism does is take the responsibility away from the individual participants. The "maybe" symbolizes that while this solution is possible, this cannot be forced upon by Giovanni or anyone in the black community because of the power dynamic in American racism. In American racism, the black American represents social inferiority; so how can one be forced to change their mindset by someone they consider socially and intellectually inferior, especially when their inferiority has been instituted in every canon? A black person's presence is not the

fool-proof option to deconstructing racism. To think that its just the physical presence of a black body that triggers a racial dynamic insults the importance of black community fighting for liberation; it also limits the black identity to physical mass that is at fault for its own oppression. This was proven in the institutionalizing of the "Jezebel.[20]" The way Giovanni writes the communication between the "I" and "Us" demonstrates why the tradition of black women as passage aids in defining a womanist. The "I" has a wish for the better treatment of "Us." Giovanni exists in both, as a living person and in spirit (death) The "I" can communicate with the "Us" because Giovanni uses the idea of limitless space of a spirit to illustrate her self-defined identity. Death in this stanza mirrors what Kalenda Eaton would later state is one of ideologies of the womanist movement: "By using literature as a form of activism, the black woman writer's insider position and stake in the eradication of injustice enables her to negotiate multidimensional experiences (ie black /woman/ partner/ writer/ activist). For women fighting against sub-alternative, writing and political activism are not mutually exclusive" (9).

"They" is a pronoun that suggests that an action is being done. Grammatically, "them" cannot be followed by a verb, yet Giovanni uses both 'they' and 'them' to describe the two types of white people in this poem. Giovanni defines the space for "they" as determinant on what they will or will not do for 'us'. Which means that while "they" can choose to ignore 'us,' the 'us' existence in the line is somewhat dependent on the actions of 'they'. She then compares that

[20]There were many political and medical pamphlets that tried to claim how the "Jezebel's" uncontrollable sexual nature put white men out of a state of their control or that the only way to "tame" the Jezebel was sexual 'restraint'. Coincidentally laws were being legislated claiming that it wasn't illegal for a black woman to be raped by her slave master or any white male. A major example was *State of Missouri vs. Celia* case in 1855.Celia, a slave was charged with murdering her slave master when attempting to defend her self from being raped (as she testified, he had serially raped her over the course of her life, and at the time of this rape she was both pregnant and ill). While the state had laws that protected women from rape, the courts had declared that Celia was not the "woman" classed in those particular laws. She was found guilty under the statement "If Newsome (the slave master) was in the habit of having intercourse with the defendant who was his slave,...it is murder in the first degree." Celia was sentenced to death in December 1855, after she had given birth to her child. In 1661,Virginia's a paternal law was changed, stating that if a child of mixed race was born, it would take the racial identity of the mother and that a white father had no paternal bonding to the child.

encounter with the encounter between "they" and "them." What's noticeable is the distance between "they" and "them" in that when discussing their relationship each pronoun has their own lines, their own space. More specifically, notice that line 14 ("as they did") is an affirmative action conducted without the existence of an object to do the action on. She is exposing how racism in institutions works, if they oppress one, it is to protect another (vice versa). 'Them' stands alone to possibly create a visual on space and privilege; that group is alone in opposition to how the 'us' is crowded. Meaning, 'them' is not burdened with knowing that its existence works in relation to another existence. They're space is not interrupted or limited. Giovanni 's 14th line above it gives "them" its own space to protects its social power. As Higginbotham mentioned in "Metalanguage of Race," "[w]hite law and public opinion idealize...and enforce the protection of white women's bodies, the opposite is held true for black women" (257). Another way that space is protecting the social power of 'them' is having the line above act as a visual divide from the 'us'. In a way Giovanni creates that divide to establish how the 'fbicia' institutionalizes a racist 'development[21] of space.

In her 1998 critique, *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings*, Valerie Smith states that "black feminist inquiry is a site of critique that challenges monolithic notions of Americaness, womanhood, blackness, or for that matter black womanhood" (qt. from Griffin, 494). Unfortunately, critics like Valerie Smith used this statement as a preface to how her claims of the role of the contemporary Black Feminist. The method is to establish a way of reading black women's writings that would distinguish black feminist/womanist text from the "open myriads of opinion," locating traditions that demonstrated a "sophistication" worthy of acceptance in the academic study of black women (Smith, xv). The problem with this method is

[21]Earlier, I discussed the architectural "developments" of racialized space with the example of government housing, other examples of this type of development is the prison systems and higher education.

that it (as mentioned in the Gwendolyn Brooks chapter) [1] insinuates that being a member of a specific academia is what qualifies one to define proper traditions in a political movement that was created for the inclusion of the whole black community. In the case of womanist literature, receiving an education that follows a Eurocentric tradition of criticism should aid in exposing the class and race divides that exist in higher education because its history of racial oppression is as active as Giovanni's 'fbicia.' These critics are just appropriating the image of a black community as limited in intellectual thought, and thus need an academic to decide the relevance of their experiences. These critics should be discussing how education has been accepted as a divide within the community rather than aiding the reductive images of black thought and aesthetics. [2] That ideology also discredits Womanist and black feminist poetry writing to target the black community as a whole. The institutions of higher education, enforced the image the black community as a lesser "other." These institutions rarely acknowledge black literature, especially black women poets of the 60's and 70's as equal participants of American literary studies. For Black Feminist critiques to have the same attitude validates that idea of black literature. On the other hand, out of fear of marginalizing black women writers, Black Feminist critics looked to avoid identifying the womanist ideologies in these poems completely. Carole Boyce Davies argues in her book, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994), that because the spectrum of black women's writing is not fixed to a particular location and definition of nationality, she claims that these works "should be read as a series of boundary crossings" and therefore black women's writing of this time should only be considered "Black Women's Writings [as to] redefine identity away from exclusion and marginality"(4). I agree that black women's literature crosses boundaries on fixed identities; however, I believe Davies was missing the point in the case of womanist poetry. For example, In "When I Die,", the moments of

ambiguity (Us, They, Them) are deliberately placed in the structure of the poem as a means of critiquing and challenging 'space' as it applies to the personal and social construction of the black feminine identity.

Nikki Giovanni uses her poetry to deconstruct the ideologies of racism and sexism within the contemporary liberation movements. Her poetry threads the literary and social tradition of black women's bodies, constructions of space for progress and oppression, and the womanist theory of double consciousness as a means of providing health for her identity as well as the black community. She acknowledges the social progresses made by black women before her, and looks to reconcile (while critiquing) the gender divide within the black community. Her criticisms of the feminist movement demonstrate just how important reclaiming a feminine identity is for black women and for reclamation of the Black American family dynamic. As scholar Nikol Alexander-Floyd says it best, "[the image of the] black family has functioned as a prime source of resistance to oppression." I believe Giovanni's ability to better examine and articulate the tenets of her aesthetics aids in a better study of the later routes black women's liberation would take once Walker took the aesthetics and critiques from works like Brooks, Clifton, and Giovanni and entitled it "Womanism."

Conclusion

Where Do We Go From Here?

The Africana Womanist term was created by Clenora Hudson -Weems in 1981. Taking on the ideologies that were more or less suggested in the womanist text, Africana Womanist prose articulates its qualities and aesthetics in an 18 point system. The Africana Womanist bases her principles around the contemporary Afrocentric tradition. The womanist, as I discussed in this project, looked to establish a space for their black feminine identity that was often ignored or silenced in the racial and gender liberation movements of the time. The womanist was establishing her space in a time where these women were criticized by both the Black Nationalist Movement and the Feminist Movement. Since the womanist was not a separatist, her ideologies suggested a civil compromise in the form of being a "traditional universalist." The womanist looked to define her space within and around the spaces that already established a political agenda. Educating these spaces of activism was a necessary move for the womanist because she saw the betterment of herself in relation to her community. Community activism for the black women meant being hands on and inclusive in organizing pro-active protests and establishing a progressive consciousness. This non-separatist attitude was also instituted as to not cap the history of black women's activism in America. The womanist reintroduced the topic of the black family being the epicenter of political action.

Womanist literature focused on articulating the use of the black women's body to pass traditions and identities that existed in and out of the black community and articulate the social

spaces that defined the black community. The womanist was reclaiming her body and her identity in attempts of re-establishing the black community. She looked to reconcile and separate herself from the traditions of abusing the black body that was instituted during slavery. While black women have been doing this since emancipation, the womanist at the time of the early 70's wanted to make certain the plight of the African American woman was articulated in the academic study of American history. Establishing a tradition within the American academy breaks the myth of the African American being the racial "other." Also locating a tradition within the American academe meant establishing an American identity. The Feminist Movement and Black Nationalist Movement were making ground in the academic discourse; the womanist was not about to become the "other" in a time where black men who were oppressed were re-claiming their national and intellectual identity.

What Brooks, Clifton and Giovanni did was articulate the issues concerning the womanist while establishing this discussion as part of the American/classic literary tradition. This was their route of joining the community in to the academic forum. Brooks used her notoriety and fame as a poet to teach the black community as well as establish the issues of the community into her traditional poetic eloquence. Lucille Clifton too, used poetry as a way of bringing the community into the overall academic discourse. However, her articulation of her poetic process demonstrated the importance of constructing the African American consciousness. The black woman's reclaim of her identity and understanding of how her consciousness works in different environments is necessary if she is going to properly educate the black community about progress. Clifton's poetry suggested an emphasis on legacy; this includes a legacy in black progress. As the black woman's history in activism transcends trending social movements, so does the history of the community she fought for/with. Her poetic process called on her

awareness of her duality in consciousness in the form of the "I"s: the "I" that was personal; it held her aesthetics and a space for her identity as she saw it. The "I" that connected her with her community; it touched on the shared experiences and oppressions that joins her with her community. Then the "I" that connected all human beings as she reminds us that a personal and cultural identity exists in all humans. This consciousness, that's particular to black women, is what aids in writing works to engage the community to address their own consciousness. Giovanni's work symbolized the bridge forming between the womanist and her Africana Womanist contemporary. Giovanni's work illustrated both a need for space and a critique on the use of "space" in the African American experience. Her poetry and work begins to touch on the metalanguage of race and oppression, which is extremely important to the Africana Womanist. These poets, and the writers like them, established a space for a more in depth critique on the blacks woman, black family, and community politics.

One of the major factors that I believe aided in the Africana Womanist aesthetics, particularly that they see themselves as "unique and separate from" black feminism and womanism (Floyd, 1), is a reconciliation with the black men of the Black Nationalist Movement. While Walker's collection of womanist prose wasn't published until the early 80's, most of her womanist prose were written in the early 70's. The "Africana Womanist" was conceived and articulated long after the failed attempts of the male oriented Black Nationalist Movement. The idea that black women were fighting for their space was no longer treading on a larger movement that was aimed at uplifting the black community. Nor was there any movement looking to publicly chastise the black women for being concerned about her womanhood. Men of the Nationalist movement who were now major investors in the academy were openly supporting the mission of the Africana Womanist. Former black nationalists C. Eric Lincoln, Charles V

Hamilton (who co-authored "Black Nationalist Classic") and Robert L Harris - who stated that Africana Womanist provided "much healing... for men and women of African Ancestry and ultimately for all caring men and women" (Floyd,1) - were all praising the Africana Womanist for her uncompromising plight to seek a space for her black womanhood (2). The black community had witnessed the failures of misogyny in black solidarity; moreover institutions enacting racial oppression became ever more relentless in the black community in the late 70's and 80's; the black community were witnessing oppression by social and economic neglect. Black women still being vocal, I believe, was a beacon of hope in restoring black community from the failures of the nationalist movement and the oppression that came after it. Weems's *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (1993) was received favorably by the National Council of Black Studies. This was social freedom that the womanist did not have; but their spacial foundations allowed the Africana Womanist to formally explore the womanist ideologies. In other words, the womanist critique on the need for space and the legacy of the black women reserved a space for future women to have this discourse beyond the trending movements that might have occurred before.

Another element that was crucial for the Africana Womanist was the Afrocentric movement that was occurring. Molefi Kete Asante (who helped lead this movement) stated that Afrocentricity is the "belief in centrality of Africans in post modern history...On the basis of our story, we build upon the works of our ancestors who gave signs toward our humanizing function (qt. in Keaveny 466)" The Africana Womanist sets her inclusion to the Africana woman and Africana male only. This attempt was to explore traditions of the community that exceeded beyond the middle passage. This allows for the African American experience to be seen beyond its beginning point of slavery. In ""Come Colour My Rainbow": Themes of Africana Womanism

in the Poetic Vision of Audrey Kathryn Bullett," Marueen Keaveny and Ronald J Stephens explain the use of Afrocentrism as a method of Africana Womanism:

> As a method, Afrocentricity focuses on the process of centering or locating oneself in his or her culture and history (Bekerie, 1994, p.131). With the process of centering, the individual becomes subject rather than object of examination. Thus as a tool for oppressed people. Asante's suggestion of using the Afrocentric method extends beyond a focus on Africa as the seed of history to a process of centering oneself in one's own culture and history. (468)

The Afrocentric method of centering oneself in their own culture and history relates to the African American's relationship with the academy. As it will be further explained, one of the Africana Womanist's key tenet is self-defining one's space and identity because using words that are associated with ones oppression further instills the oppression of the conscious. The Afrocentric method calls for making sure that ones intellectual community is central to African Diasporic studies. Rather than placing the black community in historical and literary traditions of the American (Eurocentric) academy, there should be recognition of a separate Afrocentric academy. The Afrocentric academy stands for reconstructing the social and literary aesthetics that are considered primary and traditional. The Africana Womanist believes "the traditional Eurocentric epistemological and ontological foundations have been critical in silencing and denigration process of non-Europeans in the United States as well as throughout the world" (Keaveny, 466). The Africana womanist not only looks to create a space for the Africana woman's voice but to also re-construct the language in which we discuss race and identity.

The metalanguage of race is another crucial tenet for the Africana womanist. The first of the 18 African womanist characteristics is agency of self-naming (Floyd,3). The term "nommo" was employed by Assante to refer to power of language and words to construct reality. As Daphne William Nitri notes, "naming is too critical an act to be left in the hands of the dominant

group" (qt. in Floyd, 3). According to the Africana womanist identifying one's self in relation to their oppressors' language suggests that that person identifies him/herself with the oppressive images constructed by that same group. If black literature looked to establish itself in the Eurocentric academy then they are casting themselves and their cultural traditions within the marginal space of lesser importance. For Africana womanist studies, articulating the maintenance of the oral tradition is an example of holding on to African traditions. It is important that the Afrocentric academy is established because the oral tradition is "perceived as less "true" by Western European standards" (467). For the Africana womanist, the literature must address characteristics of their tenets in order to further establish an Afrocentric academic discourse.

The 18 characteristics of the Africana Womanist, and her literature, are as follow:self-naming, self-definition, role flexibility, family centeredness, struggling with males against oppression, adaptability, Black female sisterhood, wholeness, authenticity, strength, male compatibility, respect, recognition, respect for elders, ambition, mothering, nurturing and spirituality (Floyd 3).

Sonia Sanchez's poetry has seemed to host this reconciliation between the self and the misogynistic patriarch that oppresses both in and outside of her community. Her poetry is centered in unifying the community while possessing imagery that illustrates the complexity of black women's sexual identity as to remove it from the reductive roles of promiscuity or asexual maternity. The tone of her poetry does not try to bring the community into the academy, it rather suggests that the history of the community is expected to be seen as an academic topic of discussion. Sanchez, like the Africana womanist, has remained rather militant and still maintains a slightly nationalist perspective when speaking of and to her community. Her 1978 book of poetry *I've Been a Woman: New and Selected Poetry* contains poems that suggests a redefinition

of an academy that is strictly centered to an African American or Afrocentric tradition. In "Blues," Sanchez puts the critique of the black women's sexuality in a dream; this dream state questions the reality and legitimacy of naming and identifying. She begins the poem:

> in the night
> in my half hour
> negro dreams
> i hear voices knocking at the door
> i see walls dripping screams up
> and down the halls (lines 1-6)

Sanchez has established that the following will exists in "negro dreams," allocating this experience to the African American community, and more specifically the African American subconscious. The image of "voices knocking" and "walls dripping screams up/and down" might refer to the objectivity of black people by having objects take on humanistic qualities of suffering ("dripping screams"). Sanchez's use of " I"("I hear" and "I see") is stressed which could suggest that it's her particular consciousness that can illustrate the objectivity of the black experience. Having the poem take place in a dream state can also reflect the characteristic of "authenticity," especially because she also questions the idea of external constructions on her consciousness in this alternate reality:

> won't someone open
> the door for me? won't some
> one schedule my sleep
> and don't ask no questions?
> noise. (7 -11)

"Won't someone open" is written to the right of the margin which suggests an outside force not associated with Sanchez's subconscious. Yet the question that's being asked is whether she wants this external construction on her identity to happen? Also, if this external construction is a positive or negative thing? But the second question asks for this external force to create her sleep schedule without asking any questions. I think that this calls on the characteristic of "male

compatibility" and "role flexibility." Meaning that Sanchez is aware that being in the "negro dream" means that part of your (sub)consciousness will exist with counterparts of your community, but participation does not mean taking over (hence "don't ask no questions").

To some respect, the 18 characteristics are extremely womanist. However what the Africana womanist does with these characteristics is use them to separate themselves (Africana Womanist) from the previous black women's movements. These characteristics have not only existed in the womanist aesthetics but in prior black feminist movement and black women's liberation movements. The African womanist seems to separate herself from the history of black women that had laid foundations for their very own ideologies; because the analysis of language is not centered around a maintenance of a "general" African tradition. I believe is an extremely reductive concept, seeing that Africa as a continent has over 250 languages spoken, there is no one central tradition for an entire continent. That is not to say that there isn't a shared ancestral history with black Africans on a diasporic level. However, the idea that black Americans should not establish an American identity - after participating in the building of this nation, the creation of its aesthetics and popular culture, as well as its scientific, political and artistic contributions to the country's foundation for over 400 years- applies the same racist idea that black people in America are incapable of having a national identity in their own country of residence.

Weems claims that Africana womanist looks to address and critique issues within "white feminist, black feminist, the African feminist and the Africana womanist. (1)" Moreover she claims that contemporary Africana womanist needs to be even more critical of the Africana womanist ideals; as Floyd demonstrates:

> Although Hudson-Weems correctly identifies racism in the mainstream feminist movement, the master narrative underlying Africana womanism uses White feminism as its primary point of reference and neglects the contributions of Black feminists in critiquing White feminists' racism. Such treatment reinforces

> prevailing notions of the women's liberation movement- that feminism is the cultural property of White women and the Black women who support its tenets are less authentically Black- and deprives readers of a much more complex and nuanced [black] history... Africana womanism is a type of standpoint theory that fails to account for the diversity of Black women's experiences, even while claiming a special right for Africana womanists to speak for Black women. (5)

While Africana womanists have more room to expand the discourse of Black liberation and womanhood, the separatist attitude mirrors the faults of the Feminist and Black Nationalist movements that caused womanist to construct a space in the first place. "Womanist" is a term used to described to the cross-generational history of black women fighting for racial and gender equality. The womanist writers of the early 70's were not looking to speak for the community, but to demonstrate the inclusivity of voices needed to truly enact change for the Black community, and maintain that change for generations to come.

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ii

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iii