Also by Nikki Giovanni

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RACISM 101



NIKKI GIOVANNI

FOREWORD BY VIRGINIA C. FOWLER







PIONEERS: A GUIDE



The first pioneers who were Black came to America as explorers. Though exploring is a pioneering adventure, they were simply considered men who sailed toward the unknown, seeking riches, dreams . . . something different. History has ignored them, tried to wipe them out, because the people who could have told their story didn't realize there was a story to tell.

The Africans who came to this shore from the second decade of the seventeenth century weren't considered pioneers either. No one sang songs of their journey, no one would be on shore to welcome them home. They came in chains on ships that would never take them back. "I'm going to fly away." They were the true pioneers. We talk, in American history, about the wagons moving westward, but we don't get the miniseries of *Middle Passage*; we get no weekly sitcom called "My Night in the Galley." The songs that were ultimately sung were sung by us about us. But the

true pioneers were those whose hearts, hands, and souls made this land come alive. Black pioneers cultivated the land and Black songs cultivated the spirit.

You would think from our history books that Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were just about the only Black people who were abolitionists, all other people of color being so very content just to be a slave or to be some sort of "freed man." I don't think so. The slaves who had to stay and the slaves who were able to leave were pioneers not only of Black freedom but of the American ideal.

The Harlem Renaissance brought us another pioneer, artistic pioneers. For the first time, the masses of people could not only create something but sign their names to it. It could be a poem, a play, a novel, a dance, a piece of music or sculpture, or the food on the table. In the 1920s, for the first time, a "signature" was meaningful to Blacks because we owned ourselves.

Throughout these centuries Black Americans have been breaking open doors that others would close, opening lands others stumbled through, finding emotional strength to carry on when a lesser people would have capitulated. Emmett Till found the strength to put his socks on before he was carried out to be brutally murdered; his mother found the strength to open his casket. Rosa Parks found the strength to stay seated; Martin Luther King found the words to define a movement.

But if there has been one overwhelming effort made by Blacks since the beginning of our American sojourn, it has been the belief in the need to obtain education. The laws that were made against our reading, voting, holding certain jobs, living in certain areas, were made not because we were incapable; you don't have to legislate against incapability. No one tells an infant, "You can't walk"; one tells

that to a toddler. No one tells a six-year-old, "You can't drive"; one tells that to a fifteen-year-old. No one tells a man or a woman, "You can't read," unless there is the knowledge that if that person becomes educated, he or she will no longer be my slave; will no longer sharecrop my land; will no longer tolerate injustice.

Those of you looking now at colleges are pioneers, too. History may not record your struggles, but they will be there, and you, like your ancestors, will have to find a way to overcome. Education, higher education, graduate education, professional school—all these different ways of learning more and more will set you more and more alone ... will make you stand out and become a target. But as you climb the education ladder, your ancestors hope you will "walk together, Children ... and don't you get weary." Every pioneer looks at a horizon, and sometimes that horizon can look so far that it seems safer and easier to go back. Your ancestors are whispering: "Don't let nobody turn you 'round." College is a great, though difficult, adventure. Those of you who find your way there, like our ancestors on stormy seas, like our foreparents forging their way on the underground railroad, like your grandparents working against legal segregation, like your parents sitting in, kneeling in, praying in in the sixties, know that once again Black Americans are being called to be our best selves. Knowledge is power. May that force be with you.