

ETHOS OF THE STRUGGLE: RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN THE POETRY OF COUNTÉE CULLEN AND NIKKI GIOVANNI

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Abstract:

The evolution of African-American poetry can be meaningfully traced through the works of Countee Cullen and Nikki Giovanni, two poets separated by generations but united by their deep commitment to Black life, art, and identity. While Cullen represents the refined lyricism and racial duality of the Harlem Renaissance, Giovanni embodies the bold, assertive voice of the Black Arts Movement. Their poetry not only reflects the times in which they lived but also challenges the norms of those times, creating a rich legacy of artistic resistance and cultural expression. This paper presents African Americans' journey and resolve toward their roots. The poetics of identity in the context of racial segregation is remarkably remapped in Countee Cullen's "Heritage" and "Incident." Additionally, it addresses problematic research on colour-line discrimination against enslaved communities and false information about their past. African Americans have been denigrated and estranged from their atavistic culture as a result of the slavery system, which has prevented them from enjoying their identity and human dignity. Here, I want to explore the problem of colour discrimination, which not only affects the African American community but also causes them to lose their cultural identity. This paper mostly examines their estranged status in the midst of America's abundant opportunities for material advancement. Additionally, this essay will examine the race's genealogical research as envisioned by Nikki Giovanni, who supports the identity and dignity of the enslaved community. It is true that the African American people's ancestry traces them back to a time before "the slave trade," when they were content and free, enjoying their language and culture in their atavistic homeland of Africa with human dignity.

Key words: race, identity, segregation, double consciousness, and Afrocentrism

Introduction:

Since Countee Cullen's poems "Incident" and "Heritage" both address the hotly debated topic of race in identity politics, it is worthwhile to revisit it here. In order to strengthen the counterculture of colour line discrimination, the narrators of the poems expressly long for atavistic African land and its rich legacy. By doing this, they genetically identify with African race and identity, which they believe are muddled in America because of the idea of white man's supremacy. They value their African ancestry and culture before slavery in an attempt to gain a socially respectable place in American society. The practice of slavery actually minimizes and disregard's human identity. Instead, it encourages the slave to be dehumanized

and relegated to a lower race. The 19th-century eugenics also connected the biological characteristics of the community with race, which is the classification of individuals based on human biology. However, these biologically based human classifications are social constructs. Race theory critics Wright and Rogers also define race as

“Racial classifications are typically linked to noticeable physical differences between individuals; most people believe that race is a natural phenomenon. A basic misconception regarding the nature of racial classifications is reflected in this idea. Race is not a biological category; it is a social one. Inherited biological traits are typically used as the basis for racial classifications; however, social conventions, not biology, determine how those traits are interpreted and converted into the groups we refer to as races.”

Countee Cullen and Apartheid in America

Countee Cullen, who has been raised at White's house, contacts racially awakened W.E.B. Du Bois, whose daughter he marries. When he learns about his upbringing and American apartheid social policies, he falls apart. Inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, he begins to negotiate his atavistic background independent of the tutoring of his white foster parents regarding slavery. Having been fed up with the race-biased narrative that belittles him and his community, created by racist whites in regard to his skin colour and African culture, he starts loving his people, who were seared with the "separate but equal" precedent of 1896 of the American Apex Court (Harry E. Groves 66). Actually, this decision brought racial injustice and hell-like apartheid into American society. Cullen came to the same conclusion to trace out their independent identity by means of creative writing, poetics, as he confronted the colour line demarcation drawn by white supremacists. Here, I contend that the racial injustice and intrusion over their language and culture are the reasons the poets remember their pre-slavery days. Moreover, the lynching practice over Blacks in America greatly reflects the cruel character of white supremacy that drives the victims to dream of their freedom and independent identity. The famous and sublime beauty of imagination is a wonder that the poetic rebirth of atavistic legacy offers.

Cullen clearly writes for Afrocentrism since modern Black subjectivity is flavored with colonial experience and "middle passage ordeals." Through the Middle Passage, European colonists engaged in slave trade and traveled from Africa to Europe and America. This idea is essentially meant to eliminate the lynching rule applied in America. Afrocentrism is the idea that drives the enslaved population to feel as free as before the colonial slave trade.

Cullen: A High Priest of Harlem Renaissance Spirit

The Harlem Renaissance is the Afrocentrism, or movement of cultural awakening of Afro-American people living in White's territory using diverse literary tools including music, dance, art, literature, etc., in the beginning of the twentieth century. By means of these instruments, they communicate their root cultures and emotions for their rebirth, so attaining

aesthetic pleasure. Through his poems "Heritage" and "Incident," Cullen is among the priests to expose such a concept.

Cullen uses poetics as the strong weapon of Black aesthetics to go equal to mainstream literature among the whirlpool of racial discontent and the effects of the Harlem Renaissance. Race critic Jane Kuenz says the goal of the Harlem Renaissance is "Though self-described as a rebirth of African American arts, the Harlem Renaissance fits squarely in a very American tradition that defines the authentic first as authentically American, by which is meant, most specifically, not British." Thus, the enslaved community's movement is not only a means of expression but also a campaign to define a new American poetic identity.

Inspired by this movement, Cullen's "Incident" and "Heritage" unbutton the racial repression and also pursue Afro-Americans' own autonomous identity. Though he is wealthy, he writes on the problems of "alien and exile" (Davis 390), which the enslaved population bears in America, and shares their ordeals. Cullen, as Arthur P. Davies notes, is actually far from the reality of Africa; he knew nothing about the actual continent, and it was not necessary that he should. In his poems, Africa is a symbol rather than a place; it is an idealized land in which the Negro had once been happy, kingly, and free" (390-91). Du Bois calls "color line" (Lane 396) prejudice since colonial history; he is segregated and bound to imagine atavistic land where his forebears were free and happy prior to the slave trade, as the poet is snared in American land because of his color of skin.

Unbelievably, the scene in "Incident" is a wonderland of fairy tales. There in Baltimore, America, an eight-year-old innocent narrator speaking for the Black community in America is on a journey. His eyes land on the Baltimoreans, shining with the greatest happiness. Suddenly, a white boy his age calls him "nigger" ("Incident" 8), and his romance goes scattered.

This negative word pokes him in his heart and stays like an incurable wound. Now grown up, he still remembers that insult—one that his ancestors had also carried since the beginning of the slave trade. Reviewing the past reveals the racial discrimination brought about by Jim Crow laws and white man's superiority. This helps him to discover the hole in the heart of white leaders who instruct their subordinates in following colour line separation. The poet criticizes the artistic environment, **and so I smiled, but he poked out his tongue and called me "Nigger." I saw the whole of Baltimore from May until December.**

Here the "poked-out tongue" and nigger' words are strongly loaded with the sense of white man's supremacy and the "separate but equal" (1896) verdict, which even the small-aged white child knows by heart and shows his brute, sharp, nasty remarks to the enslaved community. Negritude, he believes, is like slavery; thus, a nigger should not stare at him. From the prima facie, these words reflect the hostile environment in which the coloured community survives under Damocles' sword. Ironically, the word "whole" puns with "hole,"

the narrator observes in American white society that treats enslaved people as hostile or enemies.

From the same plane, critic Edward Bland also reads Cullen's poem. He sharply notes the historical, brutal, and forceful actions directed toward the slaves. "The Negro has a great sense of his own humanity and his own adequacy," he says. The whites, taken as a whole, however, question this self-evaluation. To them the Negro is a servile creature, and this state of mind exists to a rather significant degree among the white audience of the Negro poet. Through historical excavation, he grounds the process of rendering slave people docile and servitude—inhumanity.

"Incident" and "Heritage" are two poems that explore the deep-rooted enmity between two races in America. In "Incident," the narrator recalls the hostile environment for blacks in the past, as seen through the poking out of the tongue by a junior white boy and his natural speaking "nigger." Walter C. Daniel, in "Heritage," criticizes the whites for not forgetting and forgiving the Black people, stating that their state and civilization are their own, and they should keep it and use it for themselves.

Cullen's poem uses quatrain stanzas with iambic feet to make colonizers aware of the historical blunder they made by belittling the enslaved community. This politics of poetics is significant in questing identity. In "Heritage," the narrator finds himself torn between Americanized African narratives and the real history of America. He ascribes Du Bois's 'double consciousness' to being raised and fed by white Methodists. The narrator feels fed up with the episteme he has been taught and seeks to liberate himself from it through poetic imagination. He views Africa as similar to "Eden," where Adam and Eve were happy and far away from power politics that creates inhumane episteme, white man's supremacy.

In "Heritage," Cullen has an ironic tone when recalling the subversion and disruption of Eden-like African land by European colonizers. He aims to undo the fabricated history the colonizers made about Africa and Africans, reminding them of the sound and dignified position of his African predecessors before being abducted for the slave trade.

Gilroy critiques the pursuit of social and political autonomy, arguing that it turns away from the promise of modernity and finds new expression in a complex term often understood as modernity's antithesis. Africology/Afrocentrism ensures the autonomy of the enslaved community but makes one forget the travails and trauma of the enslaved community, which is the topos of Black poetics.

Therefore, Africa is merely a symbolic imagination to defy racial atrocity in diaspora. Coupled with it, Davis explains that Cullen suggests that the Negro in America is a perpetual alien, an exile from a sun-drenched, beautiful Africa, his lost homeland. Being an alien, he suffers all the insult, injustice, and humiliation that unassimilated foreigners go through; hence, he naturally develops great resentment against and mistrust of his adopted nation. The Negro represents Cullen's spiritual as well as geographical exile. 390) African

Americans live in America, but they are treated as aliens and suffer legal, cultural, and social injustice. Their African ancestors are crammed with filtered knowledge that always treats them as savage and tames them into docile servitude. The most interesting truth is that the book and song created with a colonial theme support white supremacy and criticize the enslaved population. The narrator thus seeks to keep them at a distance. He comments on his conundrum: Africa? A book is thumbed listlessly until sleep comes; she is not remembered. 31–33 The narrator shows his mental duel of whether or not to believe the perpetrator's story or rely on the uncontaminated atavistic land that his forebears had as he loses himself in the rhapsodic scenery and exotic beauty of the humid jungle as portrayed in colonial writing. He likes to "doff the lovely coats you wear" (42) because of his African background that comforts him and somewhat releases him from American shame. Unlike American treachery and unkindness to the ex-slave community that has led the poet to feel "writhing like the baited worm," her coat is the stuff that hides your real identity and helps you to show off that the poet likes to take off and be as naked as his ancestors, who were "jungle boys and girls in love" (51). This is the ailment he suffers from when his people underwent Christian conversion under force. Linking his hybridity, "Do I play a double part?" (98), with his anguish, "My conversion came high-priced," he laments the cost of his "double consciousness." "Heathen gods are naught to me" (92), he regrets being high while reconciling with his Christian background at the price of pagan culture. His camouflage had misled him greatly since white people never turned out to be friendly.

At last, after being carried by the tsunami of white supremacy like the floating woods belonging to nowhere, he likes to go through penance since he had made a mistake at the price of forgetting his atavistic legacy and embracing American life. "Cullen's poem "Heritage," which I have called Black Waste Land because it addresses the same basic dilemma as the Eliot poem—that of the modern individual, aware of his rich heritage but stranded in a sterile, conformist culture—and because it shares with that poem some similar imagery," David Kirby rightly notes.

" The narrator finds himself caught between an angry fire and a frustrated flood. All told, American fetish culture and atavistic art captivate him. He regrets it more the more he recalls and studies about his background.

Basically, it is a poetics of memory for the quest of identity at the cost of American exclusion: **"In the least way realized/They and I are civilized."** His life's irony is that African Americans, who followed the Harlem Renaissance, still lack mainstream development inclusion, which drove them. The great preponement he has undergone is the endorsement of lying about himself being Christian and living in civilized America: **"So I lie," since neither of them appease and save him from racial violence. He laments, "I can never rest at all," since his presumption of acculturation proves to be regressive. He is restless because he is outnumbered in American mainstream culture.**

After reading Cullen's entire body of work, Bertram L. Woodruff discovers not only alienation but also a search for happiness: Cullen's attitude toward life seems to be a negative one at the first casual reading. Writing of the transience of life, he explores moods ranging from clever irony to cynical realism. Still, we might have in this life—where everything changes—a brief hour for happiness. But a man has to grab his happiness when and where he can find it if he is to be content, even temporarily. Woodruff notes in Cullen's poetry the negative attitude combined with violence. He uses irony and seeks to use *carpe diem* for snatching happiness in the hostile environment since life in America for his community is "separate but equal," and happiness in life seems to be rare.

Racial Themes in Cullen's Poetry

Of the six discernible racial themes in Cullen's poetry, the first is *Négritude*, a ubiquitous worldwide Black literary movement including what academic Arthur P. Davis in a 1953 *Phylon* article titled "The Alien-and-Exile Theme" Cullen's poem "Atlantic City Waiter," whose elegant movement resulted from "ten thousand years on jungle clues," shows submerged pride exhibited by the waiter; specific examples of this motif in Cullen's poetry include his attribution of descent from African kings to the girl featured in *The Ballad of the Brown Girl*. Cullen's poem "Heritage" features perhaps the most well-known example of the Pan-African impulse when the narrator discovers he cannot finally give his Black heart and mind over to white civilization even though he must hide his African background. Like most of the *Négritude* poems of the Harlem Renaissance and like political expressions such as Marcus Garvey's popular back-to-Africa movement, "Heritage" powerfully suggests the duality of the Black psyche—the simultaneous allegiance to America and rage at her racial inequities.

Cullen's poems feature four related motifs that convey other kinds of racial prejudice. These include a kind of Black chauvinism that was popular at the time and Cullen portrayed in both *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* and *The Black Christ*; in those works he judged that the passion of Blacks was better than that of Whites. Likewise, Cullen suggests in "To a Brown Boy" a racially motivated affinity toward death as a preferred escape from racial frustration and indignation, and the poem "Near White" reflects the author's admonition against miscegenation. Another poem, "For a Lady I Know," shows a satirical perspective of whites alluvially mistreating their Black counterparts as it depicts Blacks in heaven performing their "celestial chores," so allowing upper-class whites to stay in their heavenly beds.

Cullen uses a sixth motif to directly express irrepressible anger at racial injustice. Though that is a matter of Cullen's natural and learned gentility, his voice is more subdued than that of some other Harlem Renaissance writers, Hughes, for example, and Claude McKay. Those who ignore Cullen's severe critique of racism in American society miss the central focus of his work. As in "Incident," when Cullen remembers his personal reaction to being called "nigger" on a Baltimore bus, or in the selection "Yet Do I Marvel," in which Cullen identifies what he regards as God's most amazing miscue: that he could "make a poet black, and bid

him sing!" His poetry thrums with anger. Cullen emphasizes public events in addition to his own life experiences. In "Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song," he criticizes American writers who had supported white anarchists in the contentious Sacco-Vanzetti trials for not defending the nine Black youths arrested on charges of raping two white girls in a freight car passing through Scottsboro, Alabama, in 1931.

Early experiences with the deaths of his parents, brother, and grandmother, as well as a premonition of his own early death, helped Cullen treat death in his work. Running through his poems gives one a romantic longing for the surcease of death and a sense of the shortness of life. Death is clearly accepted as a normal component of life in "Nocturne" and "Words to My Love." "Threnody for a Brown Girl" and "In the Midst of Life" show even more positive attitudes toward death as a welcome release. And in songs like "Only the Polished Skeleton," death is eagerly expected to offer relief from racial injustice: A stripped skeleton cannot have race; it can only "measure the worth of all it so despised." Cullen, meanwhile, embraced sleep as a useful surrogate as he looked forward to death. He presents slumber in the poem "Sleep" as "lovelier" and "kinder" than any other. Though the suck be small, "Though the suck be short, 'tis good." It is both a feline killer and gentle nourisher that suckers the sleeper. Less than three years before his uremic poisoning death, Cullen related in "Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts" that "blessingly this breath departs."

Nikki Giovanni: Radicalism and Personal Revolution

As a Black woman who came of age during the Black Power and civil rights movements, Nikki Giovanni's poetry combines fierce conviction, gentle humor, and an unflinching loyalty to telling her truth. Using apparently straightforward language to examine difficult concerns of race, gender, love, and politics, scholar Virginia C. Fowler writes, "She is the definitive 'poet of the people.'"

Giovanni grew up close to Cincinnati, Ohio, having been born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1943. She had started the civil rights movement by the time she was in high school, and it grew to be a major focus of her life and a central motif in her work. She has written several books for young readers as well as many pieces of nonfiction and poetry. Her three books, which were New York Times bestsellers, evidence her easily approachable, very captivating poetry. Of her decades-long career, Ebony magazine said, "She has been there to chronicle the Black experience and interpret it for us in words we could understand and feel." Giovanni will be receiving the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize in 2022.

These poems taken together show a lonely childhood in which the poet was forced to be an observer—either by her family or as a self-employed survival mechanism—and a childhood in which her father's destructive behaviour taught the poet that material objects have no value. The poet was outside the relationship her mother and sister shared. Still, her own values—developed maybe in response to those of her parents—have brought her happiness.

—from Virginia C. Fowler's "The Shortest Way Home: On Nikki Giovanni," released in Poetry, April 2023

Giovanni self-published her first collection, *Black Feeling Black Talk*, in 1968, and this poem finds expression there. She wrote in her autobiography, "No one was much interested in a Black girl writing what was called 'militant' poetry." She thus "formed a company and published myself." Though more light-hearted than one would find in a "militant" poem, this one address the massive political and social upheavals of the 1960s and closes with a call to Black Power. It captures Giovanni's participation in radical politics following the murders of eminent Black Arts movement leaders as well as in the Black Arts movement itself. Written for Giovanni's sister's friend, a civil rights activist, Barbara Crosby, the poem has a laid-back tone but a harsh critique of current power systems. Giovanni sharpens those criticisms even more by purposefully misspelling and reversing, such as "masturbate."

"Nikki-Rosa" (1968)

And I really hope no white person ever has cause to write about me because they never understand Black love is Black wealth.

A few months later Giovanni published another collection, *Black Judgement*, using *Black Feeling Black Talk*'s earnings as well as a grant from the Harlem Arts Council. Six thousand copies of the book sold in its first three months. It features this poem, dubbed Giovanni's "signature poem" by Margaret Walker. An intimate view of the poet's early years, "Nikki-Rosa" remained a compass for his career. Three years following the controversial Moynihan report, which blamed Black families for the continuation of racial inequality, written in 1968, it is a sardonic, sensitive defence of Giovanni's family in which "Black love is Black wealth." Written in a conversational language, the poem celebrates emotional complexity. Giovanni mentions "Hollydale," a new Black housing project, as evidence of the difficulties poverty and racism threw at her family. Her family bought venture stock, but racist lending policies prevented them from getting a house-building loan. She also validates the love and care that defined her childhood, so countering the negative preconceptions too frequently associated with Black children and Black families.

A pound of flour drops at what speed? What distinguishes a political movement, and why do some of them veer off course? What keeps two people apart, and what drives two people toward each other? Giovanni probes these issues in this thick, multilayered poem from *The Women and the Men* (1975), which weaves together an analysis of love, desire, politics, and environment. She questions the reasoning of what we thought we knew about science and math—"laws of motion tell us"—by repeating phrases borrowed from these disciplines along with if/then statements. The poem implies that certainty can be sustained only while keeping "very still"—that is, while forsaking the attempt to traverse the planet and toward one.

Scholar Fowler claims that when it came time to write *My House* (1972), the book Giovanni "knew she wanted to do, she would not write any more 'revolutionary' poems." Like this one,

several of the poems in *My House* centre on family and personal life. Giovanni removes capitalization and most punctuation and faithfully copies the back-and-forth between the grandma and granddaughter, so fostering hominess. Giovanni can peer in from the outside on an event that seems as though she could have pulled from her childhood by writing in the third person. As a poet peering in, she is able to convey some sense of the legacy passed between them even though she guesses **"nobody ever does"—certainly not this granddaughter and grandmother.**

Giovanni was keenly aware of the dual challenges of racism and sexism Black women faced—including, in this poem, from Black men. This dialogic poem contends that despite what their critics say, Black women have a long history of talent, resilience, and struggle to be proud of. This poem, from Giovanni's third collection, *Recreation* (1970), was written for the singer, actress, and civil rights activist Lena Horne, who negotiated a racist entertainment industry to become a major star. In addition to Horne's talent and resilience, **Giovanni was likely inspired by her attitude: at 80, Horne said, "My identity is very clear to me now. I am a Black woman. I'm free. I no longer have to be a 'credit.' I don't have to be a symbol to anybody; I don't have to be a first to anybody. I don't have to be an imitation of a white woman that Hollywood sort of hoped I'd become. I'm me, and I'm like nobody else."**

Included in *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* (2002), this poem takes a panoramic view of one of the civil rights movement's most iconic leaders. Though it bears her name, Rosa Parks doesn't appear in the poem until two-thirds of the way through. Instead, Giovanni begins with the Pullman porters and their grassroots struggle that made possible some civil rights victories. In doing so, she suggests that the everyday defiance of overworked and underpaid people, such as the porters, is as necessary and worthy of celebration as the work of a few great leaders commemorated in history books. Giovanni uses Christian language and imagery—Parks "shouldered her cross," for example—to remind readers of the moral roots of the civil rights movement. "No longer would there be a reliance on the law; there was a higher law," she proclaims.

Bay Leaves" (2023)

Mixed collards, turnips, and mustard greens

Garlic cloves, bay leaves

Very beautifully green

Nikki Giovanni puts together a generational narrative around the poem's titular ingredient—bay leaves—in this work. Giovanni employs enjambment and reconfigured repetitions as the speaker moves between her mother and her grandmother over this scene of food. (Who does the speaker see as she cooks?)? With whom does the speaker cook to portray both the

densities of these relationships and their subtle variations? Beginning with the picture of a speaker closely observing their mother, the first stanza best illustrates this: "I watched Mommy / Cook / Though I cooked / With Grandmother." The poem formally and methodically balances these relationships; the first lines weave all relations together, the second focus on the grandmother, the third on the mother, and the last close with the self, powerfully declaring, "I make my own." Not one of material abundance but rather of relational intimacies and knowledge so priceless that, as Giovanni writes, the "very beautifully green / stiff so fresh" bay leaves from the previous stanza enliven a new kind of generational wealth.

"Her Dreams" (2023)

Mommy always wanted

To be famous

Giovanni uses simple language with emotional weight across her work. In "Her Dreams," the poem starts to weigh emotionally right from its title; readers might perhaps follow or sense the undercurrent of not mine, but hers. The poem opens quickly with the mother's desire to be famous leading to her having "us (my sister and me) / Sing / In all the talent shows," so clearly indicating that the speaker is a vehicle for her dreams. Every time we meet the speaker, she negotiates her own shortcomings to be one with her mother and sister. "But I could not carry the harmony," she writes, or subsequently, "So I and all others / Lost." The speaker says, "We had to sing," both daughters carrying their mother's fierce hope, her mandatory directive, despite distance and failure, even while waiting for a bus with no one to hear her. "Maybe someone will come by and hear us." With the bus arriving at the end of the poem, consequence settles in with sharp lines marking the long separation and loneliness of this burden in the plainness of the scene: "She and my sister sat / Together / I sat on the other side / Alone."

"Her Dreams 2 (Runner-Up)" (2023)

I always liked

That trophy

"Runner-Up"

Following "Her Dreams," this second poem keeps Giovanni's research of her mother's yearning for the permanent glory of fame via excellence under active pursuit. But this poem presents this want within a different arrangement. Inspired by references that ground it in a historical context (the Cal Johnson Park, the era of segregation), the poem also gently points toward the reality of gender and the sneaky ways it shapes daily life: "But the men got the

court when their employment ended. Matthew and Marvin struck the ball so powerfully that I started to doubt." Why"?

By contrast, the mother of the speaker "played every day, hitting harder and harder." At last, when this tenacity yields the runner-up trophy in the finals—"Where Grandmother got the money / To send her I still / Don't know"—again highlighting the labors congealed inside this dream—the speaker's father "broke it" during an argument, "just jealous / Because he doesn't have one'." Since Althea Gibson, who was on the other side of the match her mother participated in and who went on to become the first African American to win a Grand Slam title, was in fact "Runner-Up," this ending is where the poem's title, "Runner-Up," and historical tethering truly shine. The poem's ending captures all this: the precarities so close to a dream, historical records, and the richness behind archives; thus, even if the trophy was destroyed and the work her mother put into this dream was smudged, "she was still the Runner-Up / To Althea Gibson."

"The Longest Way 'Round" (2023)

Their marriage

It is none of your business.

Giovanni's poems reveal not secrets but rather an accumulation of little honesties that lead to knowledge rather than revelations. The Longest Way "Round (Is The Shortest Way Home)," a children's book the speaker's mother taught in the third grade, provides the framework through which reckoning and, finally, happiness are discovered in this poem. Returning via the long road and years from and through childhood to a truth about one's parents, the speaker says, "I was an adult / Before I realized / How True." She agrees "finally" that "They Have Nothing / I Want," except for a "Blue Book" and "Mommy singing "Time After Time," for which the little stand-alone line "I remember" is absolutely vital. Giovanni seems to be saying that the possession and awareness of these memories from winnowing through a challenging life that "worked" determines the happiness that the poem ends with rather than the objects themselves.

"No Complaints" (2002)

Maybe there is something about the seventh of June ...

Giovanni often responds to current events—including the deaths of Black luminaries—in her poetry, as in this poem on Gwendolyn Brooks. Giovanni writes in her book of essays *Sacred Cows and Other Edibles* (1988), "I have even gone so far as to think one of the duties of this profession is to be topical, to try to say something about the times we are living in and how we both view and evaluate them." Written in a style she first embraced 20 years earlier in *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* (1983), this poem also appears in *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* (2002): phrases split by ellipses. These ellipses allow Brooks and her poetry to have a

kind of immortality and reflect the "revengeful revolving restructuring" they experienced by allowing a fluid movement between elements.

Observation: Afro-Americans' Pang of Uprootedness

Countee Cullen: Tradition and Racial Duality

Countee Cullen, a leading voice of the Harlem Renaissance, is often regarded as a poet who sought to blend classical poetic forms with the lived reality of Black identity. Educated in elite institutions and inspired by the English Romantic tradition, Cullen often wrestled with the tension between his love for Euro-American literature and his commitment to his racial identity.

In poems like "Yet Do I Marvel," Cullen questions the divine logic behind racial suffering, blending traditional sonnet form with a profound interrogation of Black existence. His poetry is characterized by refined language, formal structure, and a sense of spiritual introspection. Though he did not always engage in overt protest, Cullen's subtle articulation of racial pain and beauty made him a unique voice among his contemporaries.

Nikki Giovanni: Radicalism and Personal Revolution

In contrast, Nikki Giovanni emerged during the Civil Rights and Black Power era, where the tone of Black poetry shifted from accommodation to confrontation. Giovanni's work is unflinching in its embrace of Black pride, love, resistance, and womanhood. Her early poetry, particularly in collections like *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk* (1968), exemplifies the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s, using free verse and direct language to challenge racism, patriarchy, and systemic violence.

Her poem "Nikki-Rosa," for instance, presents a counter-narrative to white conceptions of Black poverty, celebrating the joy and strength found in Black family life. Giovanni's voice is intimate, bold, and politically charged—she speaks from and to the community, creating poetry that is both personal and collective.

Points of Convergence and Divergence

While Cullen and Giovanni differ greatly in form, tone, and historical context, they both explore themes of identity, oppression, and love. Cullen's work suggests a desire for inclusion within American literary and cultural traditions, often yearning for racial harmony without abandoning poetic elegance. Giovanni, on the other hand, disrupts those very traditions, demanding not inclusion but transformation.

Their different approaches reflect their respective eras: Cullen wrote during a time when Black artists sought recognition within white cultural frameworks, while Giovanni thrived in a time of cultural revolt, advocating for Black self-definition and autonomy.

Conclusion: Tradition Meets Transformation

Countee Cullen and Nikki Giovanni represent two poles of African-American poetic expression—one rooted in the classical traditions of the past, the other surging forward with the political urgency of the present. Together, they chart the dynamic evolution of Black literature, showing how poetry can both preserve and revolutionize culture. Their voices continue to resonate, reminding us that Black poetry is not a monolith but a multifaceted dialogue across time, style, and struggle.

In conclusion, identity vacillation is explicitly depicted in both poems through the historical injustice that the Afro-American community has endured. Forceful kidnapping, displacement, religious conversion, scathing racial gaze, foreign language, hardships in the middle passage and plantation camps, and, of course, the lynching act are just a few of the events that Cullen revisits and anchors in the genealogical history. The pitiful trauma of the enslaved community is projected by all of these differences, which Cullen skilfully remaps to reveal their erratic identity. As a result, the narrator uses poetics to return to Africa before the "slave trade" in order to escape the brutal racial atrocity that has abandoned his community. He hopes to experience regal freedom in a tranquil wilderness while listening to the songs of the birds, just like his great-grandparents did. His recollection of African atavistic ancestry and culture provides him with a symbolic safe haven where he can experience the unparalleled level of joy that is the sublime aesthetics of Black poetics. Above all, he longs for atavistic ancestry to uphold his racial identity, which is objectified and devalued in America due to his African ancestry. Cullen's poetry was limited to the status of a minor poet with a genuine lyrical gift due to its imitative and archaic ring, occasional verbosity, and propensity to forgo common sense in favour of conventional prosody. However, he did not engage in the blind acceptance of white values that led to his dismissal by Black Power poets like Don Lee (Haki Madhubuti) in the 1960s. Cullen never sacrificed his Black manhood for personal benefit. His main objective was to attain total and colourblind artistic freedom while also advancing racial harmony in America via his own and his contemporaries' artistic creations. His program was too universal to be contained, as he boldly declared in "To Certain Critics" (published in *The Black Christ*), even though some might accuse him of betraying Black people: "Never shall the clan / Confine my singing to its ways / Beyond the ways of man."

More than any other writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Cullen embodied the ideals of Black American intellectual giants such as James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. Du Bois. Given that Cullen was expertly following their advice and nearly perfectly embodied Alain Locke's "New Negro," these people had nothing but the best things to say about him. In a 1928 *Crisis* article, Du Bois stated that "it is a fine and praiseworthy act for Mr. Cullen to show through the interpretation of his own subjectivity the inner workings of the Negro soul and mind in a time when it is vogue to make much of the Negro's aptitude for clownishness or to depict him objectively as a serio-comic figure." Cullen's decision to reject "any limitation to 'racial' themes and forms" pleased Johnson. Cullen's refusal to be "a Negro poet" was "not only within his right: he is right," according to Johnson. According to these sources, reading

Countee Cullen's writings is like listening to a voice that captures the essence of the Harlem Renaissance.

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