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"NO ONE ASKED US": NIKKI GIOVANNI'S POETIC REWRITING OF (AFRICAN) AMERICAN HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Although Nikki Giovanni's calls for "revolution" have often been interpreted as literal calls for militancy, recent scholarship has revealed that her idea of revolution had far more to do with spreading love within the Black community. Interestingly, one way Giovanni promoted this revolution of love was through rewriting American History, a field which had long been tainted by the racist myths and fabrications of the Dunning School. In her 1993 poem "But Since You Finally Asked", Giovanni allowed the 20 slaves brought to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619 to finally speak for the first time. She then spoke for the silenced black voices who were not invited to the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 in order to show that whereas the Founding Fathers merely "wrote" a constitution, the black Community "lived" one out. Whereas the Founding Fathers fought a war for the "revolution" for freedom, the Black community achieved equality and freedom through peace and love in the 20th century.

Keywords: Nikki Giovanni, Black Arts Movement, African American History, Dunning School

INTRODUCTION

Although it is well known that African American writer Nikki Giovanni's poetry is associated with the concept of a "revolution" against racial injustice, it is too rarely acknowledged that her idea of revolution emphasized the power of language over brute physical force. In fact, in an essay titled "An Answer to Some Questions on How I Write", Giovanni once went as far as to describe the "Black community" as "a people whose only power has been the truth" (257). Surprisingly, in the same passage, she argued that the kind of "truth" which provides the Black community with its "only power" could never be found in the scientifically objective disciplines, which one would usually associate with "truth". As she said herself, "We cannot possibly leave it to history as a discipline nor to sociology nor science nor economics to tell the story of our people." Instead, the "truth" with revolutionary power could only be found through the aesthetic creations of the Black poet. She concluded that the reason why poetry is more powerful than sociology, science, economics, or history is that the deepest truth, which the poet can capture in beautiful words, is just the love within the Black community itself: "I believe the poets are the proper people to send [for a revolutionary movement] since we see love and beauty in the blooming of the Black community". Although it contradicts the stereotypes of black militancy, recent academic scholarship on Giovanni's work has shifted away from more literalistic interpretations of revolution as a call for armed struggle Jain (2016) to instead favour polar opposite interpretations of revolution as a call for "peace and love" reminiscent of the hippie and beatnik movements of the 1960s Brink (2016), or even an ecocritical call to love all of Nature Alfuhayd (2025).

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It is not a coincidence that Giovanni cited "history" first in her list of disciplines which could never be trusted to handle the revolutionary need to "tell the story of our people" truthfully ("An Answer to Some Questions on How I Write" 257). On the surface, such a claim will sound totally counterintuitive, given that among all the fields of knowledge, it is precisely *history* that is supposed to provide a totally objective and truthful account of what really happened in the past with regard to a specific community. In contrast, the poet would seem to be free to fabricate non-existent events or characters at will, given that poetry is only guided by the most subjectively arbitrary criterion of all: the aesthetic pleasure of beholding beauty Kant (1987).

Giovanni turns this traditional dichotomy upside down, however, through rewriting history in several of her poems ("But Since You Finally Asked", "The Great Pax Whitie", and "The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.") in a way that ironically gets much closer to the truth of the past than the "official" academic historians had. In fact, much of the blame for racial inequality in the United States can be directly attributed to the so-called "top historians" of former times, such as William Archibald Dunning of Columbia University, whose "Dunning School" was responsible for fabricating the myths portraying the post-Civil War Reconstruction era as the "darkest chapter in American history" in the early 20th century. Popularized by blockbuster films, such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Birth of a Nation*, these myths continue to be universally recognized in the American psyche today, despite being thoroughly debunked by more recent scholarship Loewen (2018), Williams (2023), Franklin (2020), Foner (2013). Above all, Dunning claimed that freeing black slaves at the end of the Civil War opened the floodgates for a tsunami of ignorant, unqualified, intellectually inept, and dangerous black voters to take over the state governments in the South and submit whites to an illegitimate regime of "negro rule" defined by the worst forms of incompetence, financial irresponsibility, and corruption Dunning (1907).

The result of allowing blacks to vote could not be otherwise, according to Dunning, because the "freedmen were not . . . on the same social, moral, and intellectual plane with the whites" (58). He argued that blacks were so intellectually inferior that they could not even make their own decisions to mess things up so badly: instead, Dunning always claimed to identify some white "carpetbagger" (a pejorative term for a white person from the North) behind the scenes who was controlling the Reconstruction-era blacks by coercing them to vote for Republicans without any rational justification (268). Whereas the black Mississippian congressman John R. Lynch described his own firsthand experience of Reconstruction very differently and much more positively as an era of black empowerment in his book *Facts of Reconstruction* Lynch (1913), Dunning reductively explained away everything that happened in that era as "the struggle between the [white] radicals and conservatives for the control of the great mass of ignorant freedmen's votes" Dunning (1907). By portraying blacks as fully passive and easily manipulated by others, he implied that only whites are free, rational, and fully human subjects.

Although modern readers will find Dunning's account far too racially biased to count as objective history, there actually was a time in the past when Dunning's *Reconstruction, Political and Economic* was generally accepted by scholars as the most authoritative account of the post-Civil War era. In fact, Eric Foner noted in his foreword to John Hope Franklin's *Reconstruction After the Civil War* that as late as the 1960s, American history textbooks still universally promoted the myths of Reconstruction, which had been fabricated in the Dunning School at Columbia University in the early 1900s, despite the fact that their credibility had been being chipped away bit by bit by more recent scholarship (iii).

In retrospect, the Dunning School clearly abused the title of "historical objectivity" to promote a highly distorted narrative of the past in order to justify the racial inequality of his own society as the inevitable outcome of blacks' supposed natural inferiority to whites. Given the blatantly unhistorical nature of the official history, it is not so surprising that Giovanni took it upon herself to rewrite history in the aesthetic medium of poetry in order to capture what had otherwise been left out: the subjectivity and humanity of the Black community.

One of the most important poems to accomplish Giovanni's goal of recapturing black humanity and subjectivity through rewriting American History was titled "But Since You Finally Asked". Virginia C. Fowler noted in her introduction to the 1995 book *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni* that this 1993 poem exemplified the way that, "[e]specially in [Giovanni's] later poetry, African American history becomes an important focus" (25). This poem was specifically "written to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the slave memorial at Mount Vernon", which was the personal residency of George Washington, the first president of the United States. Although Washington remains one of the most recognizable symbols of the American ideals of freedom and democracy, too few Americans have ever contemplated the harsh irony that the same man who fought for the freedom of his fellow white men during the Revolutionary War against the British Empire also fought to keep blacks from obtaining freedom by personally keeping hundreds of slaves on his 8,000-acre Virginia plantation Thompson (2019). Worse still, Paul Boyer noted that "Washington (himself a slave owner) rejected proposals to free slaves who [had] served in the military [during America's Revolutionary War against], laconically warning that this would 'render slavery more irksome for those still in it'" (25).

Fate had it that Giovanni's "initial public reading of this poem" at the "ceremony was accompanied by a deluge of rain" so heavy that, "to the participants gathered on the slope overlooking the Potomac River[,] . . . nature itself seemed to join in mourning the 'many thousand gone'" Fowler (1995). Nature's tears for the slaves who had not been granted the dignity of being acknowledged as fully human subjects during their own lifetimes was complemented by Giovanni's reading of a poem that finally allowed some of North America's first black slaves to tell their side of the story for the first time. More specifically, the title "But Since You Finally Asked" was meant to provide an imaginary response by the 20 slaves who were never asked what they thought about being transported against their will from their homes in West Africa to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. They were never asked for their

opinion, because they were brought as human property whose main purpose was to be exchanged for food upon arriving on the North American continent.

The first paragraph opens by lamenting, "No one asked us…what we thought of Jamestown…in 1619". The reader soon learns that the reason why no one asked the slaves for their opinion about their involuntary relocation to North America was that the channel of two-way communication had been closed off from the start. The white slave traders felt no need to say *anything* to the black slaves, because the former had adopted a stance towards the latter defined by total, dehumanizing objectification: "No one said a word…They just snatched our drums…separated us by language and gender…and put us on blocks…where our beauty…like our dignity…was ignored" (para. 1).

In addition, Giovanni's observation that the slave traders "put us on blocks…where our beauty…like our dignity…was ignored" (para. 1) reveals the irony that although one might assume that slaves are dehumanized through the addition of new offensive stereotypes (ignorance, laziness, barbarism etc.), Giovanni shows that slaves are actually dehumanized through *subtracting* their defining features from consideration. The slaves continued to really have their "beauty" and "dignity" even after being reduced to the legal status of human chattel: the slave traders simply refused to acknowledge these positive qualities. One could go further and argue that the institution of slavery *always* requires one to overlook or pretend not to see the slave's most important quality: his or her humanity as a fully human subject. For this reason, Harriet Beecher Stowe repeatedly argued against the evils of slavery in her highly influential, bestselling abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on grounds that slavery causes one to commit the sin of treating a person as a thing through repressing one's awareness of that person's full humanity: "So long as the law considers all these human beings with beating hearts and living affections, only as so many *things* belonging to a master . . . it is impossible to make anything . . . desirable in the best regulated administration of slavery" (18).

In the second paragraph of the poem, the colonial era formally comes to an end as the Declaration of Independence is signed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1776. As one might expect, no African Americans were invited to participate. Giovanni noted, "No one said a word…in 1776…to us about Freedom" (para. 2), because the kind of "freedom" and "equality" promoted by Thomas Jefferson and the other Founding Fathers was never meant to include anyone except plantation-owning white aristocrats, who were the only people allowed to vote in the earliest elections. For this reason, Giovanni considered the white Founding Fathers to be no better than the white British monarchists against whom they had rebelled: "The rebels wouldn't pretend…the British lied" (para. 2). This selective granting of freedom left the Black community forced to wait for the Civil War and Reconstruction to abolish the hideous institution of slavery nearly a hundred years after Jefferson had hypocritically declared, "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness".

Giovanni argued that blacks endured this exception to being counted among "all Men" only through taking ownership of their inner souls, as their bodies continued to be legally designated the property of someone else: "We kept to a space…where we owned our souls… since we understood…another century would pass…before we owned our bodies…But we raised our voices…in a mighty cry…to the Heavens above…for the strength to endure" (para. 2). One might argue that she emphasized the inner soul, because that is where the revolutionary power of language resides, providing a much stronger force than the brute physical strength of the outer body. Even in the worst of times, this inner power remained vital to the struggle for freedom and equality.

In the third and final paragraph, Giovanni presumably speaks from the present time, which would have been 1993 when the poem was composed. After the Emancipation Proclamation of the 1860s and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the Black community had finally been granted at least nominal freedom and equality under the law of the United States. Reflecting on this long journey, Giovanni observes that if she were asked to name "[w]hat I like about your people", her response would be to say, "I am proud that we believe…as no other people do…that all are equal in His sight…" (para. 3). Giovanni clarifies that whereas the white Founding Fathers merely preached the ideology of freedom and equality without backing this talk up with meaningful action, the Black community achieved through their actions what the Constitution had only promised in empty words: "We didn't write a constitution…we live one…We didn't say "We the People"…we are one…" (para. 3).

After reading Giovanni's rewriting of African American History, one realizes that the United States of America did not truly become a democracy until well into the 20th century, because the empty words of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence were not sufficient to create a democracy in reality: only the love within the Black community could achieve that. Whereas the white Founding Fathers interpreted "revolution" as a violent struggle against the British Empire in the 1770s, Giovanni realized two centuries later that the true revolution would have to consist of the power of love.

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