

“Black Talk’: Exploring Nikki Giovanni’s Speeches for the Undergraduate Writing Classroom”

a presentation for the Third Annual Symposium on Teaching Writing at HBCUs: Re-Imagining the African American Canon for Teaching Composition at HBCUs

Kendra N. Bryant, Ph.D. | North Carolina A&T State University

The most memorable lecture I have ever attended was delivered by Nikki Giovanni almost 20 years ago. Giovanni was in her late 50s then and had recently tattooed “thug life” on her forearm as homage to the slain Tupac Shakur; she was delivering her talk to a predominantly white audience at Florida State University. Giovanni, who I had then known as only a poet, began her speech discussing the “alien nature” of Black people who remained humane under the inhumane conditions of the Middle Passage and slavery. I didn’t know it then, but her talk was pieced from her poem, “Quilting the Black Eyed Pea (We’re Going to Mars).” Riddled with profane language, Black vernacular, and a griot’s loquacity, Giovanni’s delivery maintained my attention, and like the little girl in Giovanni’s poem, “A Poem for Flora,” who heard about Sheba and wanted to be like her, I heard Nikki Giovanni speak and wanted to be like *her*.

Alas, as a rhetoric and composition scholar and first year composition teacher trained in traditionally white male spaces, I have created a composition classroom that mirrors a patriarchy void of womanist orators (as well as one that has failed to consider the delivered poem as speech). Instead—and as an attempt to decenter the white man—I introduce my first-year writing students to the art of rhetoric by way of Black canonical works by King, Malcolm X, and most recently, after realizing the absolute way to decenter the white man is by way of the Black woman, Sojourner Truth. However, after attending the *Furious Flower’s* 2019 *Living Legacy Seminar with Nikki Giovanni*, which re-minded me of Giovanni’s oratorical genius, I have re-imagined Nikki Giovanni’s works for my composition classrooms.

My presentation, tentatively titled “Black Talk’: Exploring Nikki Giovanni’s Speeches for the Undergraduate Writing Classroom,” aims to invite composition teachers to consider integrating Giovanni’s speeches into their undergraduate composition classrooms, particularly within lessons regarding rhetoric. Although Giovanni’s poetry, like “Nikki-Rosa,” garners much attention in English classrooms—for it is often anthologized—her speeches (like most by Black women poets, novelists, and essayists) are often neglected. However, as evident in Giovanni’s 2007 “We Are Virginia Tech” speech—which, according to *americanrhetoric.com*, is one of the 21st century’s top 100 speeches and, argues Robin Bernstein in “Utopian Movements: Nikki Giovanni and the Convocation Following the Virginia Tech Massacre,” “united the Virginia Tech campus in its moment of crisis” (341)—Giovanni’s speeches are just as rhetorically rich and culturally relevant as King’s “I Have a Dream.” Unfortunately, however, Nikki Giovanni’s speeches aren’t as accessible as King’s. And while many factors may contribute to such inaccessibility, one thing I know for sure, Nikki Giovanni isn’t acknowledged as an orator or philosopher.

As a matter of fact, according to Virginia Fowler, Giovanni’s biographer, academicians don’t love Nikki Giovanni. Although she’s revered as one of the greatest African American poets, particularly as it relates to the Black Arts Movement in which she has almost been pigeonholed, there is very little traditional critical scholarship on Giovanni’s work, which spans across 50 years and just as many collected poems, children’s book, essays, edited anthologies, and transcribed conversations—

with Baldwin and Margaret Walker, I must note, whose credibility amongst the Black Literati may eventually write Giovanni into scholarly discourse. Nevertheless, I think Brittney Cooper in her *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* sums this neglect best:

Though we know the names of women like Mary Church Terrell and Fannie Barrier Williams, Pauli Murray and Toni Cade Bambara, we still know far too little about the actual content of their thinking. Many Black women thinkers labor under the exigencies of historical triage. Their names exist almost like family photos relegated to a wall we rarely touch. We know they are important. We memorialized them with honored places on the wall of our offices and libraries and in the histories we write. We celebrate their voluminous firsts as founders of organizations, published writers, recipients of advanced degrees, and more. But then we shelve them, as though preservation is the most apt way to show respect for their critical intellectual labor. Such acts are rooted in notions of both care and carelessness. We care enough not to let these women be thrown away, but in many respects, the dearth of critical engagements with most of [these] women . . . suggests a lack of critical care in handling their intellectual contributions. (1-2)

The same Black Literati who has fallen short, if you will, of including Giovanni amongst the Black canon not only to be read—cause we do read her “Ego Trippin,” “Nikki-Rosa,” and “The Great Pax Whitie”—but critically analyzed for its attention to black feminist/womanist theory, civil rights rhetoric, and Africana spirituality, are the same elitist, traditionalist Black scholars who maintain the marginalization of rhetoric and composition in their English Departments and National Conferences. On top of all that, with PWIs also marginalizing (if including at all) Black voices in their esteemed Rhetoric & Composition Graduate programs, integrating Nikki Giovanni’s speeches into traditional first year writing classrooms where students receive basic rhetoric and composition training—in Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals, in composing a literacy narrative and argumentative essay, and in writing about composition studies—is not even a figment of one’s imagination, and at one time, not even my own. Until the *Furious Flower*.

The Furious Flower, the nation’s first academic center for Black poetry, founded in 1994 by Joanne Gabbin, distinguished scholar and professor at James Madison University, where the center is housed, “is committed to ensuring the visibility, inclusion and critical consideration of Black poets in American letters, as well as in the whole range of educational curricula” (www.jmu.edu). Its name is taken from a line in *Pulitzer Prize* winning poet’s Gwendolyn Brooks’ 1968 “The Second Sermon on the Warpland” in which she writes: *The time / cracks into furious flower. Lifts its face / all unashamed. And sways in wicked grace.* Gwendolyn Brooks was the center’s 1994 honoree; Nikki Giovanni was its 2019’s, of which I was a participant.

When completing the application to participate in *The Furious Flower’s* 2019 *The Living Truth: The Life and Work of Nikki Giovanni* week-long seminar for K-12 teachers and professors, I was asked (and asked again on the first day of participants’ roundtable discussion) particularly what about Nikki Giovanni’s poetry interests me so much that I wanted to study her works—in the midst of her physical company and instruction. And I, unabashedly admitted, I am not so enthralled with Giovanni’s poetry as I am with her delivered speech—and like her written word, she has delivered 50 x 50 x 50 x 50 speeches, and I want to read and study them—along with her essays, which

carries the rhythm of her oratory. A few days later, I caught Nikki Giovanni (who insisted I call her Nikki) and Virginia eating their lunch, and I swooped in and privately shared my interest with them, about which they both agreed collecting Giovanni’s speeches for study and critical analysis a great idea. “But, there’s one problem,” Nikki said. “My archives are closed to the public until I die.” “Got damn it,” I said (and I’m pretty sure I said “got damn it” cause, well, I was talking w/Nikki, and she curses).

Nonetheless, including “We Are Virginia Tech,” Giovanni has five published speeches I have been able to retrieve, four of which are gathered as “Introductions” in her 1988 *Sacred Cows . . . And Other Edibles*: “A Ribbon on the Maypole: For Paule Marshall”; “The Spiritual: Evolution of a Plaintive Message”; “The Women’s Alliance: Introduction to Mari Evans”; and “Stained-Glass Windows: For Bobbi Sterne.”

For the purpose of my argument, I have extracted a paragraph from each of the four aforementioned speeches that illustrate Giovanni’s rhetorical skill and intellectual capacity. (*Here, I and presentation participants discuss Giovanni’s excerpts.*)

“A Ribbon on the Maypole: For Paule Marshall”		“The Spiritual: Evolution of a Plaintive Message”	
Rhetorical Skill	Motifs	Rhetorical Skill	Motifs
Ellipsis	Black feminism	Rhetorical question	Slavery
Parallelism	Spirituality	Parallelism	Spirituality
Alliteration	Environmentalism	Repetition	Capitalism
Tricolon	Patriarchy	Satire	Citizenship

<p>To those who ask . . . in this space-age . . . high-tech . . . fast-paced . . . materialistic . . . immediately gratifying society of ours . . . what is the purpose of art . . . We would reply cavewoman has answered that question . . . In the defiance of damp cold and dark habitat . . . against men and animals who would make of her their evening meal . . . despite a lack of adequate tools or knowledge of their proper application . . . on clay walls in tune with the rhythm of her crackling fire and crying babies . . . she took the time to sketch a saber-tooth . . . to etch the power of a mammoth . . . to exhibit awe . . . that the sun warms . . . the waters flow . . . the winds bend trees (275)</p>	<p>One is, of course, forced to ask what level of choice are we dealing with? Did the Black Plague of Europe constitute a ‘choice’ when the options were death or migration? Did the religious persecution of the British and French constitute ‘choice’ when a man was not allowed to follow the dictates of his heart? Did the rotten potatoes lying in Ireland’s fields constitute ‘choice’ when the options were starvation or migration? I suggest the Spaniard with the viciousness of the Inquisition had no more ‘choice’ than the African captured by a rival ethnic group and sold to the slavers. No option, philosophy teaches us, makes the perfect choice. And imminent death presents no option (278).</p>
---	---

"The Women's Alliance: Introduction to Mari Evans"		"Stained-Glass Windows: For Bobbi Sterne"	
Rhetorical Skill	Motifs	Rhetorical Skill	Motifs
Anaphora	Language	Ellipsis	Black feminism
Parallelism	Spirituality	Belles-Lettres	Spirituality
Aporia	Censorship	Symbolism	Creativity
Amplification	Education	Metaphor	Socialism

<p>One of the new terms is 'role model.' When people do not want to do what history requires, they say they have no 'role models.' I'm glad Phillis Wheatley did not know she had no 'role model' and wrote her poetry anyway. I'm glad Harriet Tubman did not know she has no 'role model' and led the slaves to freedom. I'm glad Frederick Douglass did not know he had no 'role model' and walked off that plantation in Maryland to become one of the greatest oratorical fighters for freedom. I'm glad Thurgood Marshall did not say the Constitution prescribes me as three-fifths of a man therefore I cannot argue the <i>Brown vs. Topeka</i> case before the Supreme Court. I'm glad Martin Luther King, Jr. did not say but segregation is the law of the land and we cannot defy the law, but rather raised his voice in constructive engagement against the segregationist practices of our generation (282).</p>	<p>Stained glass is a colorful quilt . . . of processed sand . . . formed to keep the cold away . . . while allowing the light to come through . . . This is woman's work we are discussing . . . those who can see . . . the beauty and majesty . . . of that which has been left behind . . . Those who know with their hands and their hearts . . . that the little pieces need each other to make a different day (286)</p>
--	---

Clearly, Giovanni's work, like most of the speeches and essays written by our Black womanist poet-writers (Alice Walker, June Jordan, Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde) are fodder for rhetorical study and theoretical debate. I mean, even before she passed, Toni Morrison gave us *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations*, which includes 24 delivered speeches. Because Morrison is more than *Beloved* just as Giovanni is more than "Ego Tripping" (and Walker more than *The Color Purple*, and June Jordan more than "Poem for South African Women," and Maya Angelou more than "Still I Rise," and Audre Lorde more than "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.")

We Black scholars and instructors must take better care of our Black women writers-poets-activists-teachers-creators. We must take them seriously as intellectuals, says Cooper, trust that these Black women are just as capable of "deep thoughts" as the white men we have been systematically trained to trust (2). "We must be willing to trust them (Black women) . . . [to] acknowledge, appreciate, struggle with, disagree with, sit with, and question . . . [to] approach Black women's long history of knowledge production with [the] same kind of trust" we give "white males

of all varieties" (2). After all, Black women are "so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal / We cannot be comprehended / except by our permission" (Giovanni, "Ego Tripping").