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FROM THE HOUSE OF THE SLAVE TO THE HOME OF THE BRAVE

THE MOTIF OF HOME IN POETRY BY BLACK WOMEN SINCE THE LATE 1960s

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Introduction

In this book I am concerned with the motif of home in the poetry of black women since the Black Arts Movement, which means I begin my reflection on poets of the BAM at the end of the 1960s and early 1970s (i.e., Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Audre Lorde). Next, I take it into the post-BAM aesthetics represented here by Rita Dove and her struggle(s) for-and-with cosmopolitanism. And finally, I speak on two voices of the present moment – i.e. Natasha Tretheway and her nostalgia-oriented poetic interests, and Claudia Rankine with her dissection of the idea of citizenship for American blacks in the second decade of the 21st century in her brilliant, prose-poem essay entitled *Citizen. An American Lyric*.

The chapters include parts of articles I have published throughout the last decade in various places, yet they have never appeared in this shape and form, as for the purposes of this monograph I have reshaped them, cutting some parts, expanding others, and merging bits and pieces taken from here and there, to make the idea of home resound more fully and clearly. The first thing, as an acute reader of poetry by black women of the last half century can notice, is the striking presence of this motif in collections by these six women poets from the very start to the end of their poetic careers, whereas it is rather absent in the poetry by their male colleagues and peers. Thus, it must be pinpointed as a particularly important motif for women writers of color.

That said, another observation must be made – i.e. that the idea and 'practice' of home goes together with home-related topics and concerns, such as homecoming, home-leaving, home-dwelling, and home-maintaining, which organize my argument throughout the whole book on a more general level. Nonetheless, I also discuss particular issues which I have found essential to comprehending the very idea of home, such as Africa as a mythical home and a slave ship as the temporary home/house of a slave - ideas apparently perceived in a different way than in poetry by black men, also interested in exploring Africa as a spiritual idea and a literary motif, as if Phillis Wheatley's lines from one of her rare direct references to Africa ("I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate / Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat") gave them inspiration and confronted them with a necessity

to probe into and rethink the idea of that enforced and brutal separation from home.

Throughout all of American history, Africa has been associated by black Americans with the fatherland, the true home and country of origin with which they identified to different degrees. For them, Africa as the Homeland has also provoked mixed feelings, from shame and rejection, to indifference, to a strong sense of pride and cultural belonging. Those emotions have been reflected in various socio-political undertakings whose purpose was to resolve the problem of black Americans in literature as well. A recurring motif in both above-mentioned spheres is the idea of the return home, often perceived as the lost Paradise or the Promised Land. It can even be repeated after Paul Gilroy (207) that "Exodus functioned as an archetypal event for the slaves." In slave histories, death – sometimes by committing suicide – was frequently associated with a return to Africa, which equaled the regaining of one's freedom. In politics and ideology the clearest examples illustrating the power of the idea of return are provided by Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa Movement, W. E. B. DuBois' Pan-Africanism, and various religious-cum-cultural movements such as Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam.

Due to political changes after the Second World War, i.e. many African states becoming independent, and the growing importance of the civil rights and Black Power movements in the US, by the late 1960s and early 1970s masses of young African Americans had become strongly interested in their own African roots as a source of identity. As a result Africa-as-home became one of the most frequent themes of poems written by black women – Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, and Sonia Sanchez among them. Not only do their 'African' poems contrast with the black nationalist ideas so powerfully voiced by Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti, but also rarely fit in with black feminist concepts that made many women writers search for positive paradigms of black femininity in African history, myths, and legends, pushing them in a new direction.

The opening chapter ("Lost and Regained: Africa as the Home of All Black People in the Poetry of Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, and Sonia Sanchez") deals with the idea of Africa as home, and includes a sub-section on the female experience of the Middle Passage. Whereas Giovanni embraces a critical/skeptical attitude to the fashion of searching for African roots, claiming that home for African Americans is now in America,

Lorde's poems from her collections published between 1972 and 1978 represent an affirmative approach to the African past and mythology, locating American blacks' Ur-Home in Ancient Dahomey, simultaneously becoming very intimate confessions concerning her parental home. The last part of the chapter offers an analysis and interpretation of Sanchez's Middle Passage poem entitled "Improvisation," in which a slaver becomes a temporary home for the enslaved women from Africa, who are transported, to quote Robert Hayden, "through death / to life upon these shores."

Chapter Two, entitled "Sonia Sanchez's Homecomings (to the Wild Zone)," takes a look at the poet's long career, and focuses on the motif of her returning home, which ranges from the return of a young, educated woman back to the black ghetto to the metaphoric homecoming of a mature poet who expands the idea in the sense that she celebrates black music, especially of John Coltrane, and ventures into the world of political ideas with the intention of making the world a home for black people. Chapter Three ("Making a Home for Oneself: Cooking, Quilting, and Black Women's Survival in Nikki Giovanni's Poetry") takes a deep look at the sphere of domesticity, and emphasizes the importance of women's bonding and wealth-sharing, and the wisdom of earlier generations of black women through their continuation of the rituals of domesticity. Next, in Chapter Four ("Homeward Dove: Nomadism, Rita Dove's 'World-Traveling,' and 'Unfamiliar Neighborhoods'") I am concerned with Rita Dove's cosmopolitanism which, according to Malin Pereira, is an essential feature of her poetry. It is true that her persona reveals herself as frequently nomadic in the sense given to this term by Rosie Braidotti, yet the relationship between the poet and her lyrical 'I's is not that straightforward. If perceived through the lens of Maria Lugones's concept of "world-travelling," the persona demonstrates an equally strong need to return home to suddenly "unfamiliar neighborhoods." In Chapter Five ("'[T]he Memory of ... Home,' or against the 'treachery of nostalgia': Natasha Trethewey's Deconstructive Reconstructions of the Past") I analyze the presence of the "longing for homecoming" and the working of memory in Natasha Trethewey's poetry with the help of a theory by Nina Boym, who distinguishes between two kinds of nostalgia: "restorative" and "reflective." Close reading of Trethewey's poems leads to the conclusion that she finds the former treacherous and dangerous. The closing chapter, entitled "(In)Visible Citizen in the Home of the Brave. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*," applies

the notion of invisibility / hypervisibility to decode the position of blacks in terms of citizenship in the United States in the present time. The second part of the chapter analyzes how Rankine enhances the metaphor of (in) visibility through the use of works of visual arts inserted in the body of her volume.

In her poem entitled "slave cabin, sotterly plantation, maryland, 1989" Lucille Clifton says:

> in this little room
> note carefully
>
> aunt nanny's bench
>
> three words that label
> things
> aunt
> is my parent's sister
> nanny
> my grandmother
> bench
> the board at which
> i stare
> the soft curved polished
> wood
> that held her bottom
> after the long days
> without end
> without beginning
> when she aunt nanny sat
> feet dead against the dirty floor
> humming for herself humming
> her own sweet human name

The excerpt quoted above reveals quite a lot in terms of what home stands for – for black women in general, and black women poets in particular. Clifton, whose poetry is not particularly concerned with home and domesticity, manages here to put in a nutshell everything home is for the African American women poets I am going to write about. First of all, one's

place in the world ("this little room"), whether chosen or not, is immaterial – a physical space of privacy where one takes a rest and separates oneself from the cruel reality ("the long days / without end / without beginning") of a slave's endless toil and sits "feet dead against the dirty floor." Yet, it is also a space for keeping one's humanity alive, for instance through humming a tune hardly heard to anyone but oneself, "her own sweet human name." Still, above all, Clifton, by sketching a metrilineal past-and-presence, says that it is a specifically a female space of aunts, nannies, mothers, and daughters, granddaughters, and nieces. In this light it may be perceived as a wild zone space where men never venture.

The concept of the wild zone was borrowed by Craig Werner from Elaine Showalter's feminist reflections, for the purpose of research into African American literature in order to demonstrate the position of the experience of the black community in relation to the language of the dominant white majority, the language sanctioning itself as a universal language. Werner shows how the experience of a group marginalized politically, economically, socially or sexually, which consists of the individual experiences of its members and finds its expression in this group's "dialect", is not allowed to enter the level of discourse that affects the shape and character of the language of a given culture. The critic claims that instead of taking into consideration a variety of experiences, which would be characteristic of an ideal pluralistic culture, in American culture we deal with a situation where a pseudo-universal dominant language (being essentially "the dialect of the dominant group" (62), i.e. of white heterosexual men holding power) imposes on minority groups and their individual members its own rules of expression of experience. As a result, any kind of experience incompatible with the norms of the dominant language must be recognized as trivial, unimportant, irrelevant, too narrow, abnormal, sick, not-pertaining-to-us etc. In this way a marginalized twilight language zone is constituted – in Werner's presentation, the wild zone where experience incompatible with the norm is expressed. The official language, hostile to extending the space of publicly expressed experiences to include those insisting on their own integrity, generates a solipsistic culture which, by its nature, prevents the Other from entering the field of discourse.

Introduced in this way, the motif of home may be taken for a place where the sensitivity, spirituality, and intellectual ideas of black women poets separate them from those of their black bruthas. From an historical

perspective it is clear that the experience of black women in America, conveyed in literature has always been marginalized or pushed into a cultural void. From this point of view the Black Arts Movement, as Werner points out pertinently, "[s]een in relation to the dominant cultural solipsism … asserts a racial integrity in areas of discourse previously accessible only to those Afro-Americans employing the dominant language" (74). Among the female representatives of the BAM and post-BAM's generations, the voices of the six black women poets discussed in this book belong to the loudest, most respected, and, arguably, most serious. And here, from a log cabin, the house of a slave is the point of departure for our journey.

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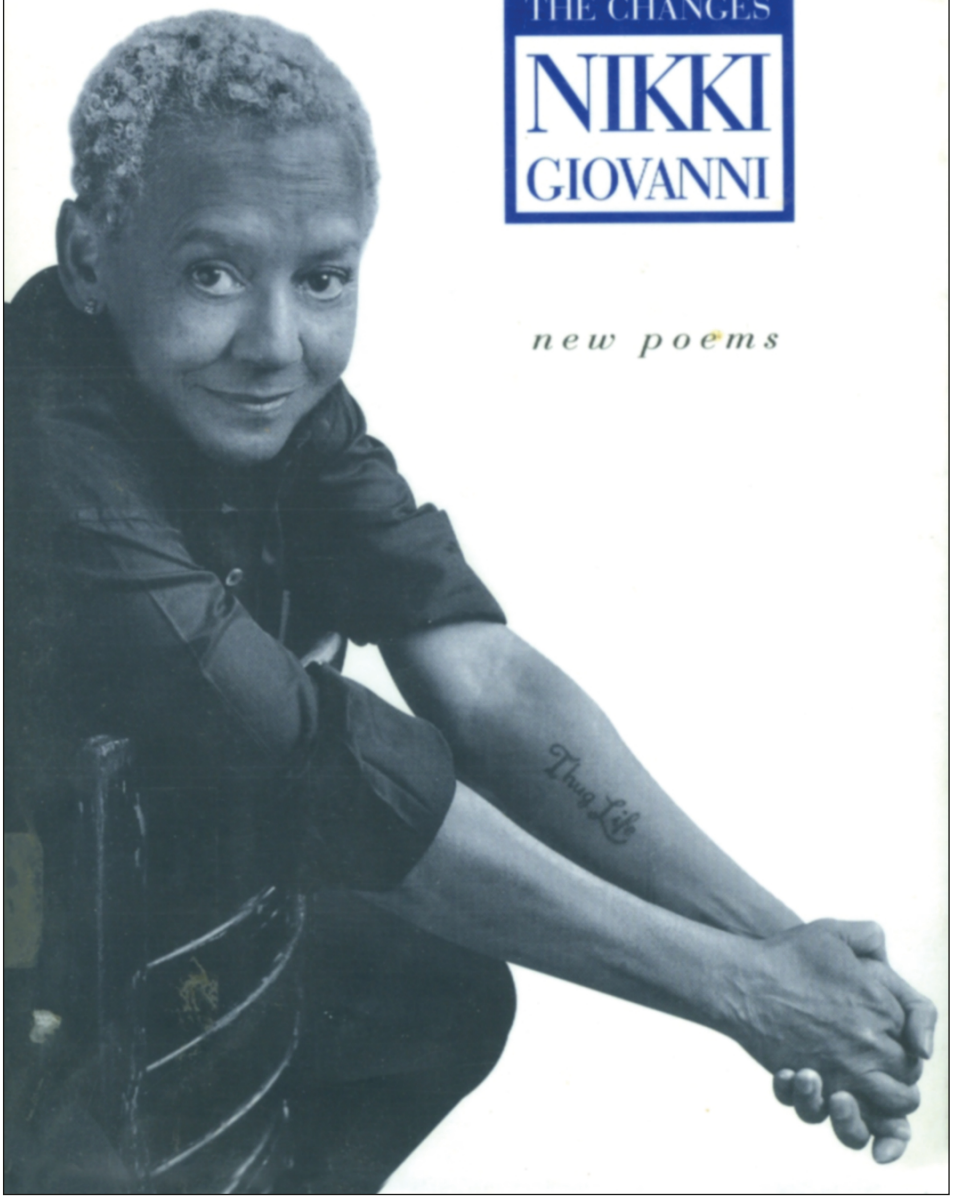
BLUES FOR ALL THE CHANGES

NIKKI GIOVANNI

new poems



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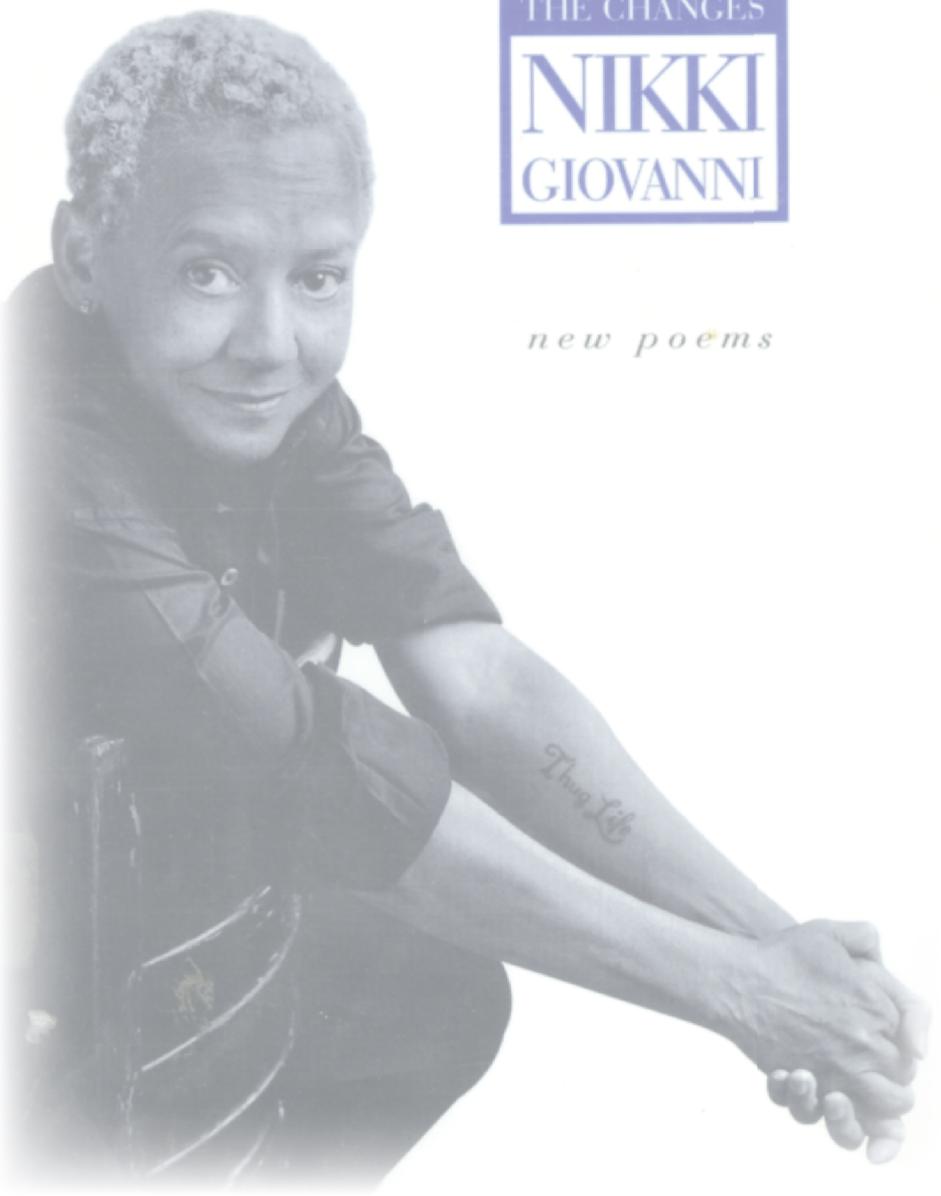

Chapter One

Lost and Regained: Africa as the Home of All Black People in the Poetry of Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, and Sonia Sanchez

I am going to begin discussion of the issue of Africa as the home of all black people with attention being paid to seven 'African' poems by Nikki Giovanni [three from *My House* (1972) and four from *Women and Men* (1975)], which sparkle with playful irony and are full of rational skepticism concerning the (im)possibility for African Americans either to restore their black roots and return home or establish a permanent home in the United States. A stick in the anthill, as it was back in the early to mid-1970s, Giovanni's 'nothing's sacred' attitude toward the roots in the past of black people almost immediately found a fine counterbalance in Audre Lorde's consistent poetic project on her Dahomeyan roots, which encapsulates a series of Orisha-related poems included in her three volumes [*From the Land where Other People Live*, 1972; *New York Head Shop and Museum*, 1974; and *The Black Unicorn*, 1978]. Lorde's concentration on female and androgynous deities of West Africa remains indisputably affirmative of blackness and womanhood, as the poet creates a black matri-lineage leading back to the House of Yemanjá. In the third and last subchapter attention is paid to Sonia Sanchez's poem entitled "Improvisation." Performed, written, and published in 1995, and included in her volume *Wounded in the House of a Friend*, the poem deals with the (un)representability and (un) communicability of the experience of being stolen from African homes / Home-Africa, and transported across the Atlantic; an experience nonetheless communicated from the point of view of black women.

I. Africa "for your people": Nikki Giovanni's shattered dream(s)

In the case of Nikki Giovanni's poems dedicated to the problem of the relationship between African Americans and Africa, we are dealing with a courageous attempt to overthrow the myths of spiritual belonging to the "Old World" and to challenge some cultural stereotypes concerning black roots. As mentioned above, there are four poems about Africa in Giovanni's fourth volume entitled *My House* (1972), and two in her next collection *The Women and the Men* (1975). The title of the former collection emphasizes the poet's intention to define her own place as home, understood as a space of individual freedoms. A house represents the most private or even most intimate space which we shape and organize according to our personal needs, pursuing a sense of safety, comfort, and independence from the surrounding world. Giovanni placed her three Africa poems in the second section of the book, in the part called "The Rooms Outside," which implies a decision to locate Africa on the outside of the space defined as "*my house*," and separate it from black people's American home.

The three poems referred to here ("Africa I," "Africa II", and "They Clapped") were written during or immediately after Giovanni's first visit to Africa, and must be treated as an honest and insightful report on encountering the historical and social realities of West Africa by a young black artist. These texts deliberately dismantle the myth of Africa as Lost Paradise, the Promised Land, or the True Home, still widely held by black separatists of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

At the very opening of the first poem (47) in the sequence, the poet self-ironically informs the reader that her gullible idealistic expectations concerning Africa reminded her of the attitude held by someone affected by a gentle drug taken in order to raise one's spirits:

> *on the bite of a kola nut*
> *i was so high* the clouds blanketing
> africa
> in the morning flight were pushed
> away

This effect is enhanced in the subsequent lines, when we learn that setting out on her journey, the poet took with her a thoroughly unrealistic or even infantile image of Africa:

> a young lioness sat smoking a pipe
> while her cubs waved up at the plane
> look ida i called a lion waving
> but she said there are no lions
> in this part of africa
> it's my dream dammit i mumbled

Despite the fact – or conversely because of the fact – that the poet unwillingly admits to her (day)dreaming about Africa, her grandmother appears, who encourages her with brio: "you call it / like you see it," granting her granddaughter the right to hold an entirely independent view and to judge for herself. The support she receives from her grandmother (and one should know that the poet's grandmother Louvenia Watson was for her perhaps the most important authority) turns out to be indispensable later in the text and in the two subsequent poems, since what Giovanni says differs fundamentally from the officially idealistic presentations of black Americans' relationship with the Dark Continent then widespread among young African American artists and intellectuals. The poet manages to capture in a succinct way the mood of euphoria she shares with the other passengers on board of the plane:

> we landed in accra and the people
> clapped and i almost cried wake up
> we're home

However, immediately afterwards, at the end of the poem (48) appears a signal that prepares the ground for a revision of the popular (among her generation) image of Africa undertaken in the remaining two parts of the triptych:

> and something in me said shout
> and something else said quietly
> your mother may be glad to see you
> but she may also remember why
> you went away

The lines that close "Africa I" seem to put emphasis on the fact that after having experienced her initial, strictly emotional yet ideologically group-programmed response, the persona discovers the complexity of the relationship between black Americans and Africa, referred to in the text as the "mother" who – it should not be forgotten – participated considerably in supplying 'black bodies' to slave traders in exchange for weapons and commodities treated as valuable for a concrete tribe or in a given area (Meier and Rudwick, 37-38). In consequence Mother Africa does not necessarily have to be overwhelmed with happiness upon the return of her long-lost children.

The second poem in the triptych "Africa II" (49-50) is directly concerned with the question of remembering the past, which is symbolized by Cape Coast Castle on the coast of Ghana, a place where slaves were kept before being loaded onto ships to carry them to the New World. The situation in the poem – a visit to the castle with a local guide – serves the purpose of revealing the gap separating contemporary African Americans from their African fellow blacks. Everything that the guide says and the way he says it makes the reader realize that the will to remember and understand the past lies solely on the side of the visitors, the conclusion to be drawn from his words spoken to the American group:

> the guide said "are you afro-american
> cape coast castle holds a lot for *your* people

Apparently, not only does the young guide perceive the American visitors as strangers, but he subconsciously reveals that for him the castle which he shows them around does not belong in the history of *his* own people. This leads to the conclusion that, according to Giovanni, Africans have suppressed the painful, appalling, and shameful part of a mutual history, turning towards partly deliberate amnesia. Therefore, she commits an act of blatant revision of the metaphorical representation of Africa: the image of Mother Africa which belongs to the realm of naïve myth is replaced by a metaphor of Africa as a young man "bathing / in the back of a prison fortress," who is simultaneously "a baby to be / tossed about and disciplined and loved / and neglected and bitten on its bottom." The ambiguity of this metaphor points at the internal contradiction of Africa which the poet discovers during her journey to the 'homeland': on the one hand, Africa is

innocent and defenceless, like a baby who should be pampered and forgiven everything, while on the other hand, it is embodied in the image of a sexually attractive young man ("i … wanted to see this magnificent / man stand naked and clean before me"; "he would never be / clean until he can / possess me"), who the poet demands to reject his "perverse innocence" (Fowler, 71), which stands as a precondition for creating an intimate adult relationship (symbolized as copulation) between two equal subjects.

The third poem in the series, "They Clapped" (51-52), discusses the superficial Afrocentrism of young American blacks who, when coming to Africa, seemed to share a conviction that "africa was just an extension / of the black world". Even though in Giovanni's poem they personally encounter poverty and witness other phenomena whose deeper meaning they do not apprehend, they maintain an illusory image of their *true* Homeland. This illusion is founded on false assumptions which Giovanni points to in an ironic statement that

> … there was once
> a tribe called afro-americans that populated the whole
> of africa.

Such arrogant and essentially colonizatory thinking, presented by the poet as typical of the younger generation, finds enhancement in the fact that "they bought out africa's / drums," apparently preferring superficial cultural fantasy to the hard realities of everyday West African existence, catalogued in the text. As a result, the black Americans visit Africa tourist-style (in Zygmunt Bauman's meaning of the term "tourist"), which generates a sense of self-satisfaction rather than understanding and empathy:

> they clapped when they took off
> for home despite the dead
> dream they saw a free future.

The triptych from *My House* and four other Giovanni's poems from the mid-1970s ("Africa," "Swaziland," "A Very Simple Wish," and "Night" from the part entitled "And Some Places" in *The Women and the Men* collection) demonstrate that it would be in vain to look for a standard mythologizing of Africa, typical of the poetry of the Black Arts Movement, in

her output. Instead, Giovanni's poems may be perceived as her attempts at sharp polemics with all sorts of manifestations of popular Afrocentric illusions and simplifications. The dominant sense of estrangement expressed in the seven poems, signaled discreetly in "They Clapped" by the confusion of the designation of the word and idea of "home," finds its culmination in the cautious hope mixed with skepticism expressed in "Africa" whether the "tales" and "dreams" she tells and dreams "will (…) stroke the tension / between blacks and africans" and in the blank conclusion of the same poem that "nothing is the same except oppression and shame." The exploration of this dualism is continued in "Swaziland" in which Giovanni suggests the possibility of mutual understanding, provided the words are erased, and the music takes over ("if I forget the words / will you remember the music"). It is the matter of a difference between two fundamentally opposite attitudes – one based on (self-)consciousness, and the other grounded in a 'stream of consciousness' ("the words ask are you fertile / the music says let's dance"; "the music is with the river"; "let's dance together").

Nonetheless, the bitter statements about the feeling of alienation from purposefully constructed African roots prevail, and lead Giovanni to the very private and emotional question asked in "A Very Simple Wish," concerning African Americans' attitudes to ward themselves and one another:

> i wonder why we don't love
> not some people way on
> the other side of the world with strange
> customs and habits
> not some folk from whom we were sold
> hundreds of years ago
> but people who look like us
> who think like us
> who want to love us why
> don't we love them

Yet, in spite of the seemingly rhetorical character of the question, which would suggest that Giovanni chooses her home to be located in America, the poem entitled "Night," another 'African' poem in the volume, makes the issue much more complex. Here, Giovanni contrasts, for a symbolic

purpose, the night in Africa with New York nights. "[I]n africa," she says, "night walks / into day as quickly / as a moth is extinguished / by its desire for flame," apparently pointing at the deathly danger that results from and is connected with the realisation of the desire to return home. Moreover, she uses a singular noun form here, and says "night" rather than "nights," drawing on a racist stereotype of Africa as a continent immersed forever in the "Egyptian night," which symbolizes the lack of progress and being stuck at the very beginnings of human civilization at the stage of infantile superstitions. The middle part of the poem introduces the Caribbean as if in the function of a golden mean that would bring the African night closer to home:

> the clouds in the caribbean carry
> night like a young man
> with a proud erection dripping
> black dots across the blue sky
> the wind a mistress of the sun howls
> her displeasure at the involuntary
> fertilization

Yet, the extract generates two mutually exclusive interpretations. It may mean that fertilization, albeit "involuntary," has already happened anyway, and the contamination of "the blue sky" is a fact, which makes the expression of "her displeasure" by the "mistress of the sun" pointless. Like the Yeatsian swan – and the dynamic images and symbolic reverberations strongly suggest a connection with "Leda and the Swan" – the young man may be understood as a blind tool of history which by force pulls Africa out from its infantile timelessness and places it in the Hegelian teleological order of history-as-progress. On the other hand, the carelessness with which the "young man" carries his "proud erection," and "drip[s] / black dots" around, suggests the irresponsibility of youth and unawareness of/ disregard for the consequences, which are rooted in ignorance and childishness since the image simultaneously evokes the young man who is compared to a baby bathing "at the back of a prison fortress" in "Africa II."

However, it would be wrong to expect that American nights would provide a constant solace to Giovanni's persona and other African Americans:

but nights are white
in new york
the shrouds of displeasure
mask our fear of facing
ourselves between the lonely
sheets

New York "nights," unlike the African "night," are not ahistorical, and the plural form suggests that they are arranged in a chronological manner, which signifies the Western order of progress. The ambiguity of the central section of the poem disappears. Everything in this part of the text sounds negative – the "white[ness]" of "nights …/ in new york," which are called "shrouds of displeasure" (thus are associated with death), whose function is to "mask our fear of facing / ourselves," leads to a sense of perfect loneliness and alienation not only for blacks as individuals, but also for African Americans as a group.

Driven by the author's cautiousness in embracing the mythologisation of the past and her skepticism about any possibility of regaining Africa as a home for black Americans, Giovanni's 'African' poems contrast the myth of Africa – as a Lost Paradise, the Promised Land, and Home – with the socio-historical reality of West Africa. Also, embracing America as home IS not and CAN not be permanent, since "nights are white / in new york." The poems emphasize the lack of the poet's belonging to either Africa or America: they communicate a sense of homelessness. Moreover, they express the conviction of cultural separateness existing between black Americans and black Africans. Giovanni's skepticism represents a striking contrast to many black poets' approaches to their African background and provide proof that such approaches were far from unanimous.

II. Out of the Past Endlessly Rocking: Audre Lorde's Uses of African Female Mythology

The purpose of this subchapter is to demonstrate how the past – here in the form of certain myths of African origin – can be used for the benefit of transforming the female identity of African American women. As an example I will examine some poems by Audre Lorde, a New York black

poet of Caribbean background, who made her debut in 1968, at the moment when the Black Power Movement had its heyday and second-wave feminism was gathering speed to become a powerful standpoint for the analysis of patriarchal culture and society. The theoretical context for this brief discussion of Lorde's poetic journey towards her new Africa-oriented identity is provided by the works of those American women writers and critics who, since the 1940s, have contributed to the transformation of women's place in American culture. One of the main ways of challenging the patriarchal positioning of women in society by poets and critics – often of a distinctly feminist persuasion – is by use of the concept and metaphor of myth, especially women's myths from the past, absent in American mainstream culture.

Many of Lorde's poems, from her debut collection *The First Cities* (1968) to her 1978 volume *The Black Unicorn*, document the process of rebellious self-definition and the poet's journey from her disintegrated and alienated American identity, defined by an oppressive social and political reality, towards a powerful personal-cum-communal African self, rooted in Dahomeyan mythology. The latter bears a similarity to Donna J. Haraway's metaphor of the vampire – a figure that "makes categories travel" and problematises "the purity of lineage…boundary of community, order of sex, closure of race…and clarity of gender" (80) I would like to discuss these themes in Lorde's poetry in the context of feminist attitudes toward patriarchal myths concerning women and in the light of specifically feminist mythmaking.

Since the 1940s many American women writers and critics have worked with myths with the implicit or explicit intention of redressing women's place in culture and history. It is enough to mention here such pioneering works as H.D.'s *Trilogy*, a collection in which the poet juxtaposes myth and history by implementing symbols of archaic rebirth; Muriel Rukeyser's *Beast in View* exploring the ambiguities of femininity in a patriarchal culture; Louise Bogan's "Tears in Sleep" and "The Dream", featuring in an unorthodox manner the wild figures of Medusa and Cassandra; and the black poet Margaret Walker's witch-like heroines from *For My People*. As Margaret Humm (54) puts it, "in post-war writing, women utilised mythic symbols to defy traditional ideas of the feminine."

This working with myths, which took the shape of wrestling with rather than embracing canonised mythological literary patterns, reached its

climax in the 1960s, when virtually all important American women poets turned to myths in their attempts to challenge and subvert the images and concepts of woman(hood) and femininity then in circulation in the predominantly male culture. When Adrienne Rich mentions the "book of myths…in which/ our names do not appear" and demands "the wreck and not the story/ the thing itself and not the myth" (1961) she expresses the need for women writers, and the necessity for feminists, to practise what Alice Ostriker later defined with the term "revisionist mythmaking". Ostriker (317) explains the term in the following way:

> Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.

It is important not to overlook here the subtle connection between the private and the public: the advocated project of cultural change springs from the individual poet's dissatisfaction with the existing state of things and from her personal understanding of the existing archetypes of femininity as inadequate or even false and, as a result, supportive of the patriarchal social order.

It is difficult to deny that although women in Western mythology are well documented and widely discussed both in literature (and art in general) and criticism, the documentation and discussion have been undertaken from the male point of view. Female characters in Greco-Roman mythology fall into two fundamental categories corresponding with the dual division into the positive and negative: they are either angelic (i.e. virtuous and passive) like Iphigenia, Mary, Cinderella, and Ophelia, or monstrous (i.e. driven by their wicked sexuality and therefore not active in the classical sense) like Pandora, Medea, Medusa, Venus, Helen, Eve, Cinderella's step-sisters, or Gertrude. Dorothy Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* discusses how, through constant exposure to such negative representations during the process of upbringing and education, individual women internalise these patriarchal archetypes. Feminist revisionist mythmaking works towards exposing these archetypes as products of a culture,

products that can and should be deconstructed and interpreted rather than, as the Jungian approach presents the issue, as emanations of some absolute truths beyond individual understanding and control that are, as such, uninterpretable.

Feminist mythographers and writers – believing that the myths of Western culture, especially those in the Greco-Roman tradition and the Bible, keep women in a subject position in culture and society by falsifying their psychological experience – have devoted considerable intellectual and artistic energy to re-reading and re-interpreting the mythological and literary canon. This has resulted in several culturally challenging phenomena, four of which are worth mentioning now for the purpose of placing Audre Lorde's poetry in the context of feminist mythmaking.

First, it has led to a hypothesis most powerfully formulated in the first part of Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* that, to quote Humm (65), "Christianity incorporated goddess religions and transformed their symbols into a new mythology stripped of female power." Second, it has challenged traditional criticism by utilizing myths not generally derived from the Greco-Roman tradition, such as American Indian myths in Marta Wiegle's *Spiders and Spinsters* or frequent references to African mythology in the works of Black feminists. Third, the feminist mythographers have focused attention on those myths which are *wrong* or marginal from the point of view of the critical establishment – e.g. those fascinated with images of monstrosity, rebellion, and madness in the context of male violence. For instance, Medusa features in poems by Sylvia Plath ("Medusa"), Rachel DuPlessis ("Medusa"), and Ann Stanford ("Women of Perseus"); the two latter poets stress the fact that she was raped by Poseidon. Fourth, they have searched for the specifically female forbidden energy and power in matriarchal myths and in mother-daughter bonding – especially in the Demeter-Kore story.

Thus, the feminist task in dealing with myths is twofold: to reject the ready-made identity of woman in the patriarchal culture and, simultaneously, to produce a new positive identity that could be affirmative for women as a class and as individuals. Although, as has been outlined above, the enforced patriarchal identity appears to be a universal problem for women in a patriarchal culture, the situation of Black women in America has always been especially bad in this respect, since in their case cultural definition has taken place through misogyny working together with racism.

Hortense J. Spillers (384) points this out at the beginning of her provocative essay by making a quasi-personal statement:

> Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," "God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.

It does not come as a surprise then that since Phyllis Wheatley's attempts to meet the demands of an overtly hostile culture, many Black women poets have stubbornly worked towards producing a positive identity for themselves, even if they were working within the dominant white tradition. One original case worth mentioning in this context is the poetry of the 19th century poet Frances E.W. Harper, who used the Bible as the source of a new identity for Black women. Harper often concentrates on rebellious Biblical women: Deborah, Esther, Miriam, Sarah, and most importantly Vashti. Queen Vashti was King Ahasuerus's wife who refused to obey her husband (he wanted her to unveil her face since he wanted to boast about her beautiful looks) and was banished by him. This was done in order to discourage other women from disobedience and scare them into submission, but Vashti accepts her punishment with surprising (to the king and his lords) dignity and strength. According to Erlene Stetson (8) "Vashti" is a poem that speaks in a metaphorical way about "the right of women to rebel against unjust laws promulgated by those in authority," being at the same time the first poem by a Black woman to advertise the image of a rebellious and strong woman "in the tradition of African female warriors." Later Black women poets – for example Anne Spencer, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Margaret Walker – willingly implement this image in their texts. Walker adds a new quality to it though – her 1942 collection *For My People* presents several banished women as sources of knowledge and wisdom: Marie Le Veau, Molly Means, and Kissie Lee are witches whose power resides in their ability to use words. As we will see, these aspects of female power are in the foreground of Audre Lorde's poetry.

Lorde's poetry well illustrates the process of moving from negation and rebellion against the dominant culture to affirmation and celebration of Black femininity. America, in whose mythology there is no place for the Black woman, in Lorde's poems is without exception racist and oppressive, an idea precisely expressed in the title of her 1973 collection *From a Land Where Other People Live*: whereas Africa is constructed as the mythical home (especially in *The Black Unicorn*). From the Black woman's point of view America represents a mythological wasteland, a historical and spatial *here and now* characterised by insecurity and political conflict, while Africa exists in a mythical *always*, as if Lorde were suggesting that reaching Africa brings a Black woman back into her future. The tone of Lorde's *American* poems is angry, sometimes cynical; her voice oscillates between rage mixed with despair and tired resignation. In the *African* poems, on the contrary, her voice is full of joy and strength, and the tone celebratory.

America and Africa are Lorde's two motherlands. The former is the one she was born into: the latter, the one that she craves for. Lorde's poetic journey to Africa is a spiritual journey, an imaginary flight into dignity and creativity. Let me illustrate this claim with a few examples.

In *From a Land Where Other People Live* there are poems that talk directly about social injustice and political oppression. For instance "Equinox" (63-64) treats the matter of hopes destroyed by the racist, militaristic world:

> The year my daughter was born
> DuBois died in Accra while I
> marched into Washington
> to a death knell of dreaming
> which 250,000 others mistook for hope
> believing only Birmingham's black children
> were being pounded into mortar in churches
> ...
> and on the following Sunday my borrowed radio announced
> that Malcolm was shot dead
> and I ran to reread
> all that he had written
> because death was becoming such an excellent measure
> of prophecy
> As I read his words the dark mangled children

> came streaming out of the atlas
> Hanoi Angola Guinea-Bissau Mozambique Pnam-Phen
> merged into Bedford-Stuyvesant and Hazelhurst Mississippi
> haunting my New York tenement that terribly bright summer
> while Detroit and Watts and San Francisco were burning
> lay awake in stifling Broadway nights afraid
> for whoever was growing in my belly

It is worth pointing out here how effectively Lorde combines the private sphere with events happening on a social and global scale, engaging the reader simultaneously on a level of intellectual reflection that demands a critical and analytical perception of the cruel events on the level of a purely emotional response. As a result, a purely human solidarity is struck between the reader and the victims of oppression and injustice, which makes us accept the anger present in the poem and take it as understandable and natural.

The next collection *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974) is, as Irma McClaurin- Allen (219) puts it, "an odyssey through the decaying city" and Lorde's "most political and rhetorical work." The volume contains many poems presenting scenes from street life in New York in which the stress is put on violence, brutality, dirtiness, noise, corruption and dehumanisation. New York functions in these poems as a spatial symbol of lost hope, a field of tension and conflict, especially of a racial kind. Lorde sets herself in the role of a Black Virgil, showing her readers around hell, which is enhanced by her usage of metaphors with infernal associations, as in "New York City 1970" (102):

> I hide behind tenements and subways in fluorescent alleys
> Watching as flames walk the streets of an empire's altar
> Raging through the veins of the sacrificial stenchpot

One can hear weariness and exhaustion in these lines drawing on Ginsberg's *Howl*, but are we to take them automatically, as Sandra M. Gilbert (298) does, as "hollow and rhetorical"? Perhaps Lorde is at her best in the reportage-like poems, in which the speaking subject talks directly and without metaphors – and which should be interpreted as powerful metaphors themselves. One good example is "Cables to Rage" (298), apparent-

ly an autobiographical recollection from the time when the poet lived in Brooklyn in "a furnished room with cooking privileges":

> and there was an old thrown-away mama who lived down the hall
> a yente who sat all day long in our common kitchen
> weeping because her children made her live with a schwartze
> and while she wept she drank up all my Cream Soda
> every day before I came home.
> Then she sat and watched me watching my chicken feet stewing
> on the Fridays when I got paid
> and she taught me to boil old corn in the husk
> to make it taste green and fresh.
> There were not many pleasures in that winter
> and I loved Cream Soda
> there were not many people in that winter
> and I came to hate that old woman.
> The winter I got fat on stale corn on the cob
> and chicken foot stew and the day before Christmas
> having no presents to wrap
> I poured two ounces of Nux Vomica into a bottle of Cream Soda
> and listened to the old lady puke all night long.

"Cables to Rage" is a bitter poem which through small details of everyday life talks about an enforced integration, an unwanted coexistence, about being as if sentenced to living together and, resulting from this situation, a paralysing ill-will and cold hatred towards the other, blended with feelings of resentment, grudge, shame and guilt. Helen Vendler (8) calls this poem a "parable of mutual oppression and unwilling symbiosis."

Similarly "full of the grotesque tyrannies of cooperative living" (Vendler, 320) is another long poem "Moving Out" (74) from *From a Land Where Other People Live* in which the sense of bitterness and hopelessness are seemingly soothed – but actually deepened and dramatised – by a real opportunity to move out and separate from the other:

> I am so glad to be moving
> away from this prison of black and white faces
> assaulting each other with our joint oppression
> competing for who pays the highest price for this privilege

For McClaurin-Allen (221), in her subsequent book *The Black Unicorn* Lorde "freed herself from the prison of the city and reclaimed her birthright – the land, culture, and people of Africa" the birthright Phyllis Wheatley longed after and mythologised ("I, young in life, by seeming cruel fate/ Was snatch'd from Afric's fancy'd happy seat"), while knowing full well that it had been lost forever.

Yet, it is not that this thread had been absent from Lorde's earlier output. As early as *From a Land Where Other People Live* there appear poems anticipating this line of thinking and writing; we can read in "Prologue" (96)

> through my lips come the voices
> of the ghosts of our ancestors
> living and moving among us
> Hear my heart's voice as it darkens
> pulling old rhythms out of the earth

Lorde constructs her poetic ego as a medium through whose mouth archaic powers speak, "the ghosts of our ancestors".

It is necessary to point out the opposition between the spoken and the written language: in many of Lorde's poems including "Prologue" the former is valorised positively, which stands for choosing the African oral tradition that accentuates the magical aspect of speech and emphasises pre-verbal elements of communication ("old rhythms out of the earth"). As a result, the message transcends an individual dimension while the speaker – like a shaman in a trance – fully develops the power of her voice by melting herself within the subjectivity of her community, as is directly expressed in "The Winds of Orisha" (90):

> Impatient legends speak through my flesh
> changing this earths formation
> spreading
> I will become myself
> an incantation
> dark raucous many-shaped characters
> leaping back and forth across bland pages
> and Mother Yemonja raises her breasts to begin my labour

The above quote refers to a sort of *rite de passage* during which one undergoes something that in Zen buddhism is called "shedding the illusion of the ego" and which leads one to realising – through contact with the very source of vital power – one's completeness and perfection. In Lorde's case, the source of this power is the aboriginal culture of West Africa; what is more, this power turns out to be an essentially female power, signalled in the poem by mentioning Mother Yemonja and defining one's creative energy with the metaphor of labour.

In this context *The Black Unicorn* appears to be a conscious and logical development of the above mentioned thread in Lorde's poetry. The collection should be perceived as a coming back/building of home and as a creating/regaining of Mother. In the latter aspect *The Black Unicorn* is a self-therapeutic undertaking, the poet's act of freeing herself from her own biological mother, as a Mulatto who cut herself off from her Black roots. Knowing this fact helps us better understand such extracts as the one from "Prologue" in which the speaking subject declares: "when I was a child / whatever my mother would mean survival / made her try to beat me harder every day"; or the one from "From the House of Yemanjá" (235) where first we are informed that "My mother had two faces and a frying pot / where she cooked her daughters / into girls", and then we hear that as a result:

> I bear two women upon my back
> one dark and rich and hidden
> in the ivory hungers of the other
> mother
> pale as a witch

Thus, black identity does not come to Lorde as something simple and natural, but rather as a sort of choice that demands a conscious effort to break through her mother's "bleached ambition" which "still forks throughout my words" ("Prologue"). In this light the incantational apostrophe "Mother I need/ Mother I need/ mother I need your blackness now" in "From the House of Yemanjá" should not be read in a literally autobiographical way, as Joan Martin does (283). A much more convincing interpretation comes from AnaLouise Keating (152) who says that "by drawing from West African myth, Lorde reconstructs another mother, a mythic maternal figure whose darkness enables her simultaneously to discover and

invent her own 'black' ethnic identity." In order to emphasise the complexity of the issue discussed, Keating draws on Chinosole's interpretation of the poem to suggest that "by doubly inscribing a West African 'blackness' and a U.S. 'whiteness' onto her body/text" Lorde recognises her own cultural identity as a "threshold identity" (1-17), – in Chinosole's nomenclature a "mestizaje cultural identity" (153). Nonetheless, we should not understand Keating's remark as a suggestion that in Lorde's case there is a qualitative parity between cultural blackness and whiteness. The surface and depth antinomy, which Lorde willingly implements in her texts, resolves the issue in favour of blackness. It is also worth pointing out that Lorde's 'homecoming' and her choosing blackness are undertaken to a large extent in the name of her biological mother – in a painfully autobiographical poem "Black Mother Woman" (*From a Land Where Other People Live*) we read: "look mother/ I Am/ a dark temple where *your true spirit* rises" (italics mine).

We also have to note that Keating (150) speaks in Lorde's case about the "paradoxical process of identity formation" that "synthesizes invention and discovery" and about "going 'back' to an invented ethnic past," emphasising in this way a gesture of self-creation. However, the problem seems to be a bit more complex than that: Lorde's homecoming/home-inventing goes together with, as has already been mentioned, creating/regaining Mother or, to widen the issue, her gender and sexual identity. For this purpose Lorde, like many other feminist writers, implements motifs taken from mythology. In their hands myths often become useful tools for deconstructing or re-interpreting patriarchal culture, but they are also used to re-discover/create an alternative culture founded on specifically feminine values, among which the mother-daughter bond occupies the central position. According to Kazimiera Szczuka (5-65), in positive or affirmative implementation, myths serve the purpose of (re)creating women's genealogies.

Among the (re)constructed myths there are two that feminist writers and critics pay special attention to: the matriarchal Great Goddess myth and the myth of the witch (or Wicca) – the one who *knows*, a source of wisdom and power and, as a result, a dangerous and threatening woman. *The Black Unicorn* brings these two myths together. In this collection Lorde draws on the mythology of her 'homeland' Dahomey by referring to different *orisha* – the goddesses and gods from the pantheon of the Yoruba peoples. Among them is Seboulisa, who – as the poet explains in the glossary – is the goddess of Abomey, the capital and "heart of the ancient kingdom

of Dahomey", "The Mother of us all" (330); she is sometimes called Sogbo (creator of the world), being at the same time a local name for Mawu-Lisa the Dahomeyan androgynous deity (Mawu is either Lisa's first son or her twin brother). In Lorde's private mythology Seboulisa is the regained Mother: "It was in Abomey…/ … where I found my mother/ Seboulisa" (239). In "125th Street and Abomey" (241) the lyrical I, addressing Seboulisa directly and apparently alluding to the above quoted lines from Phyllis Wheatley's poem, speaks movingly about the pain of separation (this extract is also very intimate since Lorde had a mastectomy):

> Seboulisa mother goddess with one breast
> Eaten away by worms of sorrow and loss
> See me now
> Your severed daughter

In this way Africa is, as earlier in Margaret Walker's poetry, associated with femaleness. As Humm observes, Lorde "uses mythological analogies to understand the angry chthonic powers of the goddess figures of prehistory" (54). Lorde completes, by (re)constructing its beginning, the tradition – begun by Harper and later maintained by Spencer, Brooks, and Walker – of creating affirmative images of rebellious and powerful women characters. In Lorde's poetry the power of the Black Woman springs from her prehistoric roots and her ability to use the magic power of words; "A Woman Speaks" (234) is a clear example of this:

> I have been woman
> for a long time
> beware my smile
> I am treacherous with old magic
> and the moon's new fury
> with all your wide futures
> promised
> I am
> woman
> and not white

In this respect Lorde draws on genuinely African traditions which, as Trinh T. Minh-ha (127) informs us, "conceive of speech as a gift of God/

dess and a force of creation. In Fulfulde, the word for speech (*haala*) has the connotation of 'giving strength', and by extension of 'making material'." It has to be stressed here that in Lorde's poetry individual power is an emanation of collective power, and the poet concentrates on communities of women. In "Coniagui Women" (237) we read that "The Coniagui women/ wear their flesh like war," whereas "The Women of Dan Dance With Swords in Their Hands to Mark the Time When They Were Warriors" argues that real power is connected to affirmation of life and inspiring hope.

This approach comes close to the thinking about the creative power of women artists presented by Alice Walker in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Walker writes not only, even not predominantly, about literature, but about gardening, weaving, and singing, stressing the anonymity of these activities. It is worth quoting in this context an observation made by Keating (56) that in the first section of *The Black Unicorn* Lorde defines herself with references to West African myths as "a black woman warrior poet" in order to move on to creating a community of "mythic, historic, contemporary, and imaginary women – extending from the Yoruban goddesses through the ancient Dahomeyan Amazons, her family, friends, and female lovers to the 'mothers sisters daughters/ girls' she has 'never been'."

Lorde uses her poetry for the purpose of (re)discovering the sources of her complex identity and creative power. Her self-(re)discovery through references to the female characters of West African myths does not mean imprisonment in the limited space of Dahomeyan mythology. Keating demonstrates how much Lorde's Sister Outsider has in common with the womanhood discovered/produced in two other poets stigmatised with threshold identity: Paula Gunn Allen and Gloria Anzaldúa. Furthermore, Sister Outsider appears to be one more variety of the archetypal Wild Woman exhaustively analysed by Clarissa Pinkola Estés. She can also be presented as Donna J. Haraway's metaphorical vampire. This figure is implemented by Haraway for analysing (i.e. for foregrounding or centralising) the notion of race-cum-femininity, which in this case means deconstructing it so that it is rediscovered as a non-essential, historically and socially coded Western invention. Yet, the usefulness of the vampire metaphor consists in its ability to "figure the pollution of [all] 'natural' categories" (144). The vampire has had a long history in Western culture, addressing its unconscious fear of impurity and infection with the blood of the Other.

Haraway (215) provides a list that should not be taken as exhaustive: the Jew, the diseased prostitute, the gender pervert, the alien, the traveller, the immigrant, the dislocated one, etc., steering the reader towards solidarity with 'the outlaws.'

Lorde's poetry, by exposing the differences, offers the reader an opportunity to overcome the temptation of dividing people into traditional categories often based on false dichotomies. Through her revisionist mythmaking Lorde works towards activating, as Haraway (265) states it, "models of solidarity and human unity and difference rooted in friendship, work, partially shared purposes, intractable collective pain, inescapable mortality, and persistent hope." In this sense, Africa as a wild zone becomes the home of black women.

III. Africa Lost (in the Middle Passage): Sonia Sanchez's "Improvisation"

Sonia Sanchez's poem on the Middle Passage entitled "Improvisation" from her 1995 collection *Wounded in the House of a Friend* successfully and creatively makes accessible to the reader the experience of losing home and being enslaved from the gendered point of view of black women. Phyllis Wheatley's "Afric's happy seat," an Edenic Sun/Homeland is temporarily replaced by a slaver that transports enslaved Africans across the Atlantic, as Robert Hayden puts it, on a "journey through death to life upon these shores." The ship with its double instability – as it rocks on the waves and sails into the unknown – becomes a home for the enslaved Africans. In "Improvisation" Sanchez found powerful poetic and linguistic means to confront her readers/audience with the atrocities of the Middle Passage, especially as they affected women.

"Improvisation" represents an exciting and conspicuous example of a phenomenon characteristic to Black Aesthetic poetry that emerged alongside the Black Power Movement in the 1960s, a phenomenon which Stephen Henderson (61) identifies in his ground-breaking critical work *Understanding of the New Black Poetry* as "destruction of the text" which stands for "relegation of the printed poem to the status of a 'musical score'" as well as a "lack of concern with 'performance' in the Western, Platonic sense of IDEAL FORM." The poem should be perceived as an ideal illustra-

tion of Sanchez's skill in using the jazz idiom to achieve an original rhythm for a poem. Its printed form emerged from an improvised verbal-cum-percussive performance given by Sanchez together with Khan Jamal at the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia. The text of "Improvisation" is a transcript of Sanchez's verbal improvised performance – its aural form chronologically predates its graphic form. Joyce Ann Joyce (155), who emphasizes this striking reversal, concludes that "[f]ollowing the tradition of the chanting African oral performer, [Sanchez] re-lives the experience of Black people taken from Africa through the Middle Passage to a land full of oppression." In this way "Improvisation" fulfills the most fundamental criterion that classifies it within the African tradition of oral poetry whose one distinguishing feature is, according to Albert Bates Lord quoted by Isidore Okpewho (68), that "an oral poem is not composed *for* but *in* performance," creating conditions for more immediate contact between the performer and her audience. On the other hand, as Frenzella Elaine De Lancey (73) points out, Sanchez's poem must be recognized as simultaneously interconnected with or even rooted in at least three other texts that concentrate on the transportation of enslaved African people to America: Hayden's "Middle Passage," Charles Johnson's novel under the same title, and the extracts pertaining to the horrors of the trans-Atlantic voyage in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Nonetheless, the critic emphasizes Sanchez's originality of approach to this subject since she observes that "[i]n projecting her poetic vision with blues/jazz elements, Sanchez raises the issue of compatible forms for expressing the collective psychic grief of thousands of diasporan Africans, particularly African Americans." De Lancey perceives Sanchez's implementation of the medium of jazz as a move that is

> Both unique and quite ordinary, for if blues/jazz are classic African/American forms, why not insist upon their efficacy for telling our story?.... In effect, Sanchez's use of these forms presents a new look at the psychological toll of this crossing, which is, as Morrison describes, unspeakable. It is this unspeakableness that Sanchez conveys in her "Improvisation."

In order to comprehend the power of the impact on the reader/listener that Sanchez achieves in "Improvisation," it is essential to underline her virtuosic usage of the pronoun *I* in such a way that the chanted first-per-

son confession must be simultaneously understood as an utterance made by an African American collective subject, a poetic device frequently used by the poet. As Lauren Frances (59) informs us, the importance of this specific treatment of the personal *I* as a carrier and exponent of the truth of collective experience in the discursive practice of the African American community has been emphasized by Bernice Johnson Reagon, a singer and scholar specialising in African American oral performance and the protest traditions that Sanchez can also be placed within. Frances identifies this particular usage of the pronoun *I* as one of the distinguishing features of Sanchez's poems throughout her long career. Yet she gives as examples only verses in which the speakers are black men, ignoring completely the fact that the most interesting exemplification of this phenomenon is provided by poems in which we listen to wild-zone voices of women speaking the unspeakable.

It is quite surprising that both De Lancey and Frances overlook the fact that in this five-page long poem, which consists of approximately sixty words used in a way that represents scat singing (i.e. vocal *improvisation* without words, using random syllables; as a result, the poet's words acquire additional significance), Sanchez exposes and foregrounds the female experience of the slave ship. Unquestionably, her purpose is not to create a universal poetic version of the experiences of Africans transported across the ocean, as seems to have been the ambition of Hayden. Obviously some experiences were shared by all the people shipped to America – this category includes phrases obsessively repeated in the text: "it was the coming across the ocean that was bad"(75), "it was the packing of all of us in ships that was bad" (76), and "it was the standing on auction blocks that was bad" (77) Nevertheless, some other extracts – the most emotionally loaded, at that – demonstrate the poet's particular interest in the fate and lived experience of the African women going through the horrors of the Middle Passage:

> it was the raping that was bad
> it was the raping that was bad
> it was the raping
> it was the raping
> it was the raping that was bad
> (…)
> Don't don't don't don't don't don't don't don't

don't don't touch me
don't don't don't don't touch me
don't don't don't don't don't don't don't touch me
please please please please please
ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ahhhhhhhhhhh
ahhhhhhhhh Olukun Ayo Olukun
(…)
It was the giving birth that was bad
It was the giving birth that was bad
Every nine months, every nine months
Every nine months, every nine months
Every nine months, every nine months

In this way Sanchez highlights the horrors of the sexual abuse experienced by the black women who were defined *by and within* the discourse of white male power as sexual objects and as females who were supposed to reproduce for the economic benefit of the plantation owner. This kind of treatment provides a link between their slave-ship and plantation experience, and demonstrates the depth of their carnal vulnerability in the hands of their white male oppressors who reserve for themselves the position of, to use Toni Morrison's word, "definers." The most striking and shocking thing in the above-quoted extract is linking the motif of regular birth-giving – that takes place in the shortest possible time intervals– and rape. Therefore, it is impossible to accept Joyce's view (155), who sees in "Improvisation" the simple representation of black women as the "progenitors who give birth to a strong line of African people." Even though it can be said that on one level the poem as a whole talks about physical and psychological survival in dramatically inhumane conditions (hence the affirmative statement: "I am, I shall be, I was, I am"), in the presently discussed extract stress is put on the strict interconnection between the institution of (American) slavery and the sexual mistreatment of women that started during the crossing. By exposing such a link, Sanchez signals the necessity to perceive the Middle Passage as a *rite de passage*, during which black females are transformed into objects of institutionalized sexual exploitation.

In this context, it is worth quoting the extract from Morrison's *Beloved* (62), in which the slave girl Sethe finds that "her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew." Later

they were regularly raped on the plantation where they worked together. In her story directed specifically at Sethe, Nan puts stress on the fact that the girl's mother "threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them." Sethe learns that she was not abandoned by her mother, because she had been begotten by a black man her mother "put her arms around" while the thrown-aways were the fruit of rape. Sanchez's phrase "It was the giving birth that was bad" signifies the same thing: children conceived as a result of rape were the offspring of white oppressors. This provides a conspicuous example of Sanchez's effort to underscore the specificity of the female experience of the Middle Passage and of the subsequent period of functioning as a slave, which situates it outside of the common sphere of experience of the whole African American community.

One more aspect of Nan's story needs mentioning as it seems to be of capital importance to understanding Sanchez's achievement in "Improvisation". In Morrison's (62) novel the narrator informs the reader that Sethe remembers only the message of what Nan told her about her mother, because "she used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now…What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back." In "Improvisation" Sanchez also ponders the complex interdependence and contradictions involved in the relationship between remembering and forgetting:

> Whatever
> I remember I forget
> Whatever I forget I remember
> Whatever I don't want to remember I forget
> Whatever I want to forget I remember
> I remember

Sanchez's poem speaks about the trans-Atlantic voyage towards slavery from the black female point of view, but simultaneously it represents a journey towards reclaiming the forgotten language of those separated from equal access to the mainstream discourse, the only linguistic form that makes it possible to communicate the immediacy of the experience of

the Middle Passage. In this respect one essential feature of the poem is its (already mentioned) orality, which manifests itself in the consistency with which Sanchez uses repetition. James A. Snead (68) argues that repetition is not merely a poetic device, but a 'figure of black culture' whose most distinguishing feature is improvisation. The critic states that "[w]ithout an organizing principle of repetition, true improvisation would be impossible, since the improviser relies upon the ongoing recurrence of the beat." According to Okpewho (78) the "oral performer cultivates repetition both as a means of achieving auditory delight in listeners and a convenient framework for holding the distinct elements of the composition together." Yet Sanchez seems to have at least one more intention on her mind: to move beyond the barrier of written poetry, and, through chanting the pain and hope of the transported female slave, to confront the listener/reader with her bare experience.

Robert Stepto in his critical work on African American literature makes a distinction between two kinds of artistic philosophies out of which literary works emerge, which he labels as *ascension* and *immersion*. The former applies to those texts whose authors consciously aspire to achieve the levels of excellence recognized by the dominant culture, and, as a consequence, adapt this culture's 'language' in order to place black experience within the realm of 'universal' human experience. The latter refers to texts that immerse themselves in specifically black forms of expression and deliberately contest the dominant academically-sanctified forms of literary expression, believing them not only inapplicable to the purpose of talking about black life, but that they inevitably distort black experience by erasing the 'vocabulary' used by individual participants of African American culture. Furthermore, this *immersion* literature is deeply rooted in what Stepto calls "pregeneric" sources, which are, as Craig Werner clarifies, "texts not consciously taking form from the cultural language institutionalized in literary genres" (71) such as diaries, slave narratives, folk songs and tales, and oral artistic and historical performances. As Werner points out, these rude original forms and their literary progeny give us "the most direct possible access to 'pure' vocabularies, in part because many such sources were never intended for any audience outside the wild zone" (71).

It does not need further arguing that Robert Hayden's "Middle Passage" belongs to the former, and Sonia Sanchez's "Improvisation" to the latter category. Hayden's long epic poem, modeled on the example of T.

S. Eliot, attempted to find its audience among the privileged participants of the cultural power game who were not interested in black experience and black poetry unless they were 'properly' stated and written. In consequence, "Middle Passage" must be regarded as an example of so-called "integrationist literature" that turns towards the white reader with its moral appeal for justice and recognition. Sanchez's poem is the opposite case – its features are *integrity* understood as "the full experience of all individuals… consigned to the wild zone", and *extension* which "involves the desire to draw on and contribute to the experience of other groups and individuals" (Werner 54), confronting them with the Other and her truth in its 'original' shape and form; in this way, making on them quintessentially ethical demands of looking into each other's face and working towards proximity through appreciating the differences. As a result, to continue this cursory reference to Emmanuel Lévinas, Hayden in "Middle Passage" remains within the realms of utterance referred to as *dit*, something that is accepted in a given culture since it has already been petrified in a normalized form that regulates the conditions and rules of speaking, something whose very mechanism makes it support the existing order. Sanchez's chant situates itself within the boundaries of *dire,* a term used by Lévinas in reference to a living and forever open speech which avoids being locked in pre-existing formal categories, and which represents a gesture towards the other (Skarga).

The Middle Passage, a four-century-long journey of millions of Africans-turned-into-slaves by the demands of the Euro-American economy, and simultaneously the archetypal experience of African Americans, has become a subject of motif in several important and original works of black literature in America. But its importance for the writers does not lie in the question of recreating, through the combined means of historical research and imagination, the conditions of the journey. As the two examples discussed here show, it provokes many more fundamental questions pertaining to the communicability and unspeakableness of this experience. It also forces the writers to explore and challenge the allowed limits of linguistic expression of the black experience. If on the one hand, it can be solemnly described as a "voyage through death to life upon these shores," on the other hand, it provokes the fundamental yet open question asked at the very end of Sanchez's poem:

How to live.
How to live.
How to live…
How to live…
How to live…
How to live… (80)

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Chapter Two

Sonia Sanchez's Homecomings (to the Wild Zone)

The poem opening Sonia Sanchez's debut collection *Home Coming* (1969) entitled "Homecoming" should be treated as a poetic manifesto pertaining to the relationship between the poet and the black community whose truth and experiences she wants to express. The persona, who in this case can be treated as identical with the voice of the poet herself, confesses:

i have been a
way so long
once after college
i returned tourist
style to watch all
the niggers killing
themselves with
3 for oners
with needles
…
now woman
i have returned
leaving behind me
all those hide and seek faces peeling
with freudian dreams.
this is for real.
black
niggers
my beauty.
baby.
i have learned it
ain't like they say
in the newspapers.
(9)

In the first part of the poem the persona speaks about visiting home after being away for a longer period of time during her studies in the college, when she discovers her own estrangement from this place – she perceives her return as done "tourist style." Gaining an education, a process connected with getting out of the ghetto, signifies alienation from the space of childhood and adolescence. Being "a / way so long" and her return in the role of a tourist suggest that the America of colleges and the America of the black ghetto represent completely different worlds, separated from each other to such an extent that her studying in college makes it impossible for the persona to remain in a ghetto understood as the place where she belongs. Being a tourist means being in permanent motion, skimming the surface of experience without putting down roots or even taking a longer rest necessary for a deeper reflection. The role itself prevents one from succeeding in understanding the inhabitants of the space a tourist has ventured into: they themselves and their life become only a part of the local landscape; they remain at the level of impressions responded to with one's senses – the persona says: "i returned …/ … to watch all / the niggers killing / themselves." "To watch" means no more than to perceive somebody as an object of interest for the subject, which excludes *being together* with the inhabitants of the visited place.

The second return that the poem talks about is the result of a mature decision ("now woman"). It also requires leaving behind the white intellectual world represented here by "freudian dreams" and "the newspapers." The persona rejects this world as generating a false picture of black reality: "i have learned it / ain't like they say / in the newspapers." This part of the poem is vital for understanding the whole poetic output of Sonia Sanchez and the artistic choices she has made. It talks about the untranslatability of the experiences of the Afro-American community living in ghettos into the language of the white majority, in spite of this majority's – trumpeted to all and sundry – objectivism and universalism. The right means to getting to the truth of these experiences, and simultaneously guaranteeing the possibility to express them, is black speech – a kind of dialect resulting from a dialogue carried on inside the community. In "Homecoming", after the words "this is for real" (with the emphasis put on the pronoun "this"), the so-far disciplined structure of the poem is broken by a passage graphically highlighted for the purpose of its stronger expressive quality, a passage which – because of the expletive "baby" characteristic to the poetics of the

blues – seems to demand shouting/chanting it out: "black / niggers / my beauty." Moreover, in contrast with the rest of the poem this passage strikes the reader with its harsh ungrammaticality. In this way Sanchez becomes a poet of the wild zone, a linguistic sphere driven out of social consciousness by the white dominant culture, and pushed out of the realm of the officially accepted forms of verbal expression and experience.

The concept of the wild zone was borrowed by Craig Werner (from Elaine Showalter's feminist reflections) for the purpose of research into African American literature in order to demonstrate the position of the experience of the black community in relation to the language of the dominant white majority, the language sanctioning itself as a universal language. Werner shows how the experience of a group marginalized politically, economically, socially, or sexually, which consists of the individual experiences of its members and finds its expression in this group's "dialect", is not allowed to enter the level of discourse that affects the shape and character of the language of a given culture. The critic claims that instead of taking into consideration a variety of experiences, which would be characteristic of an ideal pluralistic culture, in American culture we deal with a situation where a pseudo-universal dominant language (being essentially "the dialect of the dominant group" (62), i. e. of white heterosexual men holding power) imposes on minority groups and their individual members its own rules of expression of experience. As a result, any kind of experience incompatible with the norms of the dominant language must be recognized as trivial, unimportant, irrelevant, too narrow, abnormal, sick, not-pertaining-to-us, etc. In this way a marginalized twilight language zone is constituted – in Werner's presentation, a wild zone where experience incompatible with the norm is expressed. The official language, hostile to extension of the space of publicly expressed experiences to include those insisting on their own integrity, generates a solipsistic culture which, by its nature, prevents the Other from entering the field of discourse.

From an historical perspective it is clear that the experience of African Americans conveyed in literature has always been marginalized or pushed into a cultural void. From this point of view the Black Arts Movement, as Werner points out pertinently, "[s]een in relation to the dominant cultural solipsism … asserts a racial integrity in areas of discourse previously accessible only to those Afro-Americans employing the dominant lan-

guage" (74). Among the voices of the younger generation Sanchez's belongs to the loudest and most serious.

Sanchez's first two collections, in a most uncompromising way, document the experiences of the inhabitants of American black ghettoes. The poems are addressed to the people and speak their language, which is, as a rule, far from standard American English and sometimes even transcends the imaginable frame of *licentia poetica* in the United States. In an introduction to the second collection *We a BaddDDD People* (1970) Dudley Randall (9) underscores that Sanchez "writes directly, ignoring metaphors, similes, ambiguity, and other poetic devices. But her *bare passionate speech* can be very effective" (italics mine). Sanchez does not want to be poetic, but has the ambition to tell the truth of black life from the point of view and in the language of a black ghetto dweller:

there are blk / puritans
among us
straight off the
mayflower
who would have u
believe
that the word
fuck / u / mutha / fucka
is evil.
un / black.
who wud
ignore the real / curse / words
of our time
like. CA / PITA / LISM
(*We a BaddDDD People*: 17)

In an interview carried out by Claudia Tate (146) Sanchez defends herself from accusations of being vulgar in her poetry – and it is not difficult to find in her poems from the early phase words universally considered indecent and obscene, and brutal representations of sex – claiming that it is the world that is vulgar, and "[o]ne has got to talk about it in order for it not to be." Looking at the content of *We a BaddDDD People* and of the preceding volume *Home Coming*, we can notice that their author not only does not shun extreme subject matter but strives for direct confrontation

with it. Many poems in both these volumes are concerned with problems that plague the Afro-American community by destroying it in physical and moral terms – they pertain to questions about drug abuse ("hospital/ poem," "summer words of a sistuh addict," "why I don't get high on shit"), prostitution ("indianapolis / summer / 1969 / poem"), being manipulated and stupefied by the mass media ("summertime T.V./(is witer than ever)," "television / poem"), treatment of black women as sexual objects ("short poem," "to a jealous cat," "Memorial 3. rev pimps"), sexual relationships between black men and white women ("to all sisters," "to all brothers"), racism in the legal system and sport ("in the courtroom," "on watching a world series game"). Sanchez's preoccupation with the above-listed themes seems to be even more important when we realize that she directly expresses her opinion that drugs, popular entertainment, infiltration of the politically active circles in the form of arrests and assassinations have been used by the authorities as the means to "systematic destruction of the revolutionary thrust" (Tate 133) among blacks. Apparently, from the very beginning of her career Sanchez has been a poet interested in social matters of the Afro-American 'here and now'.

Writing poetry so radically sociologically- and politically-oriented has not helped the poet gain wider critical recognition. Sketching the assumptions of the social theory of literature for the purpose of research of Afro-American texts, Donald B. Gibson (4-5) observes that American reflections on poetry and prose after the Second World War are dominated by the "denigration of any literature that focuses on social issues." The critic associates the discrediting of literary works concentrated on social issues and problems with the inheritance after formalism. In the United States formalism found its most complete expression in the New Criticism that understood a poetic work as an integral whole, autonomous both of the personal experience of its author and of the socio-historical reality in which the poem is created and interpreted. In this conception the value of a poem and its 'meaning' are understood as immanent, since they are contained in its linguistic-cum-symbolic autonomy rather than in the act of transcendence that would make it possible, thanks to foregrounding the discursive value of the poem, to leave the enclosure of the 'tower of words' towards the world, reality, or life. As a result, as W. Ross Winterowd (10) underlines, in American criticism "[l]iterary texts that have the taint of discursiveness are valued less highly than 'pure' literature." What is a poem

that does not respect this hierarchy? If it is not poetry, why then it is often an object of critical evaluation that results from application of tools made for those texts that demand the subjective interpretation of a critic convinced of the primacy of intratextual formal perfection over that of being open to socio-historical reality.

Sanchez's poetry at the early stage of her career is a conspicuous example of the practical realization of principles of the Black Aesthetic which demanded a literature not submitted to Western ideals of creative perfection or even the norms of artistic correctness in terms of language and composition, while treating the broadly understood cultural identity of black Americans. The creators of Black Art never aspired to winning a place within the realm of 'high culture' by proving themselves to be capable of making 'perfect' works of art of universal value. On the contrary, in practice they questioned both these principles as *the* touchstone of value of Black Poetry, believing that 'universalism' and excessive emphasis on form represent a distancing from the matters of life and a lack of social commitment by the writer and her/his work. Instead, black artists postulated that Black Form serve especially the purpose of a more effective communication of messages, in this way highlighting the conviction that poetry should not be written for poetry's sake. As Larry Neal– for whom Black Art is the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" – puts it: "the Western aesthetic has run its course: it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structure" (272-3).

The intention of exposing the truth about the oppressive character of the dominant white American culture coupled with the ambition of modeling attitudes, making African Americans aware of their cultural separateness and forging a positive black identity, are blatantly present not only in Sonia Sanchez's poetry, but in the output of almost all the poets of the Black Revolution such as LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Lucille Clifton, Jayne Cortes, Nikki Giovanni, Etheridge Knight, Don L. Lee, Audre Lorde, Larry Neal, Carolyn Rodgers, A. B. Spellman, and Askia Touré; and even in the poetry of the on-duty dissenter within the movement, Ishmael Reed, who parodied it thematically and formally. Similar features can also be found in poems from the Black Arts Movement decade by Gwendolyn Brooks, a poet of the earlier generation. The artistic and critical activity of the above-mentioned poets represents a direct reaction to the social, political and cultural events of one of the most socially violent decades

in the history of the United States. Moreover, in some cases this activity stimulated these events. Thus, there is close feedback in the relationship between art and life here: on the one hand the socio-political, economic, and cultural context determines artistic expression, but simultaneously art wants to intervene into the current reality in order to change it, making the world a better place to live.

Sanchez, who subscribes in her poetry to this way of understanding the purpose of practicing Black Art, seems to be at the same time aware of the danger of falling into the trap of empty rhetoric. This awareness is conspicuous in "TCB", a poem consisting of a series of vulgar invectives directed at the white majority, and ending in the following conclusion: "now. that it's all sed. / let's get to work"(*We a BaddDDD People*: 59). Similarly in "blk / rhetoric" – the poet warns against mistaking verbal declarations not followed by concrete deeds with acting for the sake of the whole community:

> who's gonna make all
> that beautiful blk / rhetoric
> mean something.
> like
> i mean
> who's gonna take
> the words
> blk / is / beautiful
> and make more of it
> than blk / capitalism.
> (*We a BaddDDD People*: 15)

At the end of the poem Sanchez confronts catchphrases and slogans such as "Black is Beautiful" with the reality in which Afro-Americans lead their daily existence:

> who's gonna give our young
> blk / people new heroes
> (instead of catch / phrases)
> (instead of cad / ill / acs)
> (instead of pimps)
> (instead of wite / whores)
> (instead of drugs)

(instead of new dances)
(instead of chit / ter / lings)
(instead of a 35 c bottle of ripple)
(instead of quick / fucks in the hall / way
of wite / america's mind)
like. this. is an SOS
(*We a BaddDDD People*: 15-16)

As Sanchez suggests, the task for poetry is creating positive heroes who could become role models to be emulated by the entire young generation the poet is especially concerned with. Furthermore, this task is extremely urgent, which is emphasized by the phrase "this.is an SOS." According to Sanchez, Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, is a public figure whose vision of work for the benefit of the black community should be spread around. His activities become the subject of "let us begin the real work (for Elijah Muhammad who has begun)." Another poem from *We a BaddDDD People* entitled "Memorial 2. bobby hutton" commemorates one of the founders of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence, and "sunday / evening at gwen's" is a tribute paid to Gwendolyn Brooks. In later phases of Sanchez's career we can find more poems of a panegyrical or quasi-panegyrical character about such important figures of black life as the blues poet Sterling Brown, political activist Shirley Graham DuBois (in the volume entitled *I've Been a Woman*), the Civil Rights Movement leader Martin Luther King, the South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele, and the older woman poet Margaret Walker (in the *Homegirls & Handgrenades* collection).

Nevertheless, the most important hero, role model, and moral guide for young blacks is Malcolm X, about whom Sanchez wrote two poems printed in *Home Coming*: "malcolm" and "for unborn malcolms." Nearly every poet of this generation wrote at least one lyric about him, most of which maintain a solemn, lofty and grandiloquent mood, and are of a hagiographic character. Sanchez's two poems are not different in this respect, yet the former demonstrates a profoundly personal and bitterly angry tone simultaneously:

… this man
this dreamer,
thick-lipped with words

will never speak again
and in each winter
when the cold air cracks
with frost, I'll breathe
his breath and mourn
my gun-filled nights
he was the sun that tugged
the western sky and
melted tiger-scholars
while they searched for stripes.
he said, "fuck you white
man. we have been
curled too long. nothing
is sacred now. …"
(*Home Coming*: 16)

Apart from the unquestioned political and spiritual leaders of the black community, Sanchez, like other Black Arts Movement poets, frequently brings into her poetry famous black musicians, who are unexceptionally presented in a positive light as repositaries of quintessentially black cultural values. Some of her poems mention or concentrate on great blues and jazz figures such as: Pharaoh Sanders, Papa Joe Jones, Nina Simone, Billie Holiday and John Coltrane. The most original from this group of texts is "a / Coltrane / poem" which can also serve as one of the most convincing examples of jazz poetry, a unique Afro-American poetic genre. For this reason it is worth paying close attention to it, recalling beforehand some basic theoretical assumptions concerning the relationship between black poetry and music, which is a fundamental condition for understanding Sanchez's poem.

Reading Afro-American poetry one needs to remember three fundamental assumptions. Firstly, its context is the Afro-American culture of the blues, and – as Houston A. Baker (3-4) puts it – the blues should be understood as a matrix and foundation of black culture in the United States rather than as merely a concrete musical form. Simultaneously, music itself and its influence on Afro-American literature and the life of black people cannot be overestimated, a point which has strong historical grounds. As Paul Gilroy (74) says, "the power and significance of music … have grown

in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language." Secondly, the blues represent here a label for a certain type of sensitivity and expressiveness – other musical genres such as gospel, spirituals and jazz can also be placed in this category, together with the poetry inspired by them. Thirdly, as Baker underlines, "the blues offer a phylogenetic recapitulation …of species experience," which means that in blues songs and blues-inspired poetry the lyrical I should not be treated rashly as personal; here we deal not with "a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole" (5).

Stephen Henderson (31-46) in his introductory essay to his anthology of music-inspired black poetry *Understanding of the New Black Poetry* enumerates and discusses ten categories of – completely conscious and deliberate or not – usage of music in black verse. These are in summary:

1. The casual reference of a general character to music as a vital element of black culture.
2. The carefully planned allusions to song and album titles.
3. The quotations from song lyrics.
4. The adaptation of musical forms (e.g., blues, spiritual, be-bop etc.).
5. The stimulation of the reader's tonal memory as poetic structure – the final success depends on whether the reader knows a particular song or even whether he/she remembers a concrete performance of the song.
6. "The use of precise musical notation in the text" (e.g., in the form of musical notes inserted in the text or in the form of comments on 'how it should be played / sung / chanted').
7. The attempt to bring back or provoke the reader's assumed emotional response to a concrete song incorporated into the poem; in this case Henderson uses the term the "subjective correlative"
8. Making the figure of a musician (treated as a real person or a myth) the subject of the poem.
9. The incorporation of language from, as Henderson puts it, "the jazz life" (e.g., borrowing words and phrases from the slang of musicians or critical jargon).
10. Erasing the difference between a song and a poem by approaching the text as only a starting point for oral interpretations. Such a poem is treated as a "score" or "chart", and similarly to a jazz standard it can have various realizations in performance, which also means that

its form is forever open, in spite of the fact that it exists in a printed (closed) form.

There is no need here for a detailed discussion of Henderson's subsequent categories and illustrating them with examples. Using this paradigm, we only have to remember that the ten usages of black music in poetry that are enumerated in Henderson's essay do not have to take a pure form, but can interlock, overlap, and complement each other in the poets' attempts to achieve desired linguistic, performative, structural, and thematic effects. Moreover, the whole issue is complicated by the fact that black music is closely connected to black verbal communication, whose characteristic features are: strongly rhythmical speech, intonation enhancing the emotional expressiveness of utterances, frequent usage of rhyme, non-standard vocabulary, or the usage of standard words with specific black undertones and meanings, and frequent repetitions of words and phrases. It is characteristic that Henderson, discussing the interconnections between black speech and poetry, concentrates on "jazzy rhythmic effects" (35-37) and "virtuoso free-rhyming" (37-38) among other things.

In the context of Sanchez's "a / coltrane / poem," it is worth sparing a few comments on point 8 of Henderson's list, pertaining to the usage of the figure of a musician in poetry. The musician, as has already been mentioned, plays in the Afro-American community a sacerdotal function, becomes a spiritual guide, a seer and prophet, roles that the black poet also aspires to and identifies with in order to gain access to the fountain of black insight and power. Having a charismatic personality and being an outstanding individual, the musician becomes an exponent of the feelings, emotions, experiences, hopes, and aspirations of the other members of her/his cultural community. Nonetheless, the musician is nobody without this community with its history and present-day experience. Thus, the musician belongs to the group not in the sense of being one of the many (since he is *not one of the many*), but in the sense of being 'possessed' by the community. Apparently, the autonomy of the musician in Afro-American culture is strongly curtailed, and the freedom of artistic/ideological speech allowed only within certain limits. As a result, in most musician-poems from this period the musician appears to be more myth than real person.

The saxophone player John Coltrane emerges from Sanchez's "a / coltrane / poem" as such a mythical figure. In Sanchez's poem Coltrane, in his ecstatic solos on albums and at performances in the mid-1960s (especially

A Love Supreme and *Ascension*) seems to break through the sound barrier, and a musical theme (the tune of "My Favorite Things") becomes a pre-condition for the act of transcendence:

> my favorite things
> is u / blowen
> yo / favorite / things.
> stretchen the mind
> till it bursts past the con / fines of
> solo / en melodies.
> to the many solos
> of the
> mind / spirit
> (*We a BaddDDD People*: 69)

This passage is immediately followed by lines quoting the popular children's song "Brother John", which is both an allusion to the musician's premature death (Coltrane died in 1967 at the age of forty-one), and a signal of immersion in a state of deep meditation which allows transcendence of the physical limits of the body and instrument. Like a shaman, Coltrane sends himself into a trance, which enables him to fly away from the here-and-now determined by the slave past:

> u blew away our passsst
> and showed us our futureeeeee
> screech screech screeeeech screech
> a /love /supreme, alovesupreme a lovesupreme.
> A LOVE SUPREME
> (*We a BaddDDD People*: 69)

In the excerpt above, by imitating Coltrane's original sound and style, where irregularities and dissonances raise the emotional temperature and drama of the composition, Sanchez underscores that the virtuoso shaping of the sound serves the message ("A LOVE SUPREME"), and simply the purpose of demonstrating technical proficiency which is incredible and unprecedented in Coltrane's case. The musician himself on many occasions stressed his ambition to communicate by his playing to the people the hidden spiritual dimension of existence. In Coltrane's understanding of his

music there is a similarity to Martin Heidegger's conception of *Lichtung*, which is the opening that creates the proper conditions for the Being to emerge and shine. Nevertheless, Sanchez emphasizes in her poem a strict connection between transcendence and transgression in the political and social dimension, which situates this poetic rendering of Coltrane's music within the blues esthetic whose "internal strategy … is action, rather than contemplation" (Williams 125). The extended middle part of the poem contains belligerent and bitter accusations of the white system's hypocrisy and use of oppression in the form of economic exploitation, torture, and numerous assassinations of Afro-Americans. The third part of the text represents an attempt to remove a barrier between Sanchez's poem and Coltrane's music: alongside the 'conventional' text there are an equally important series of single syllables, which demand to supplant the *reading* of the text with *singing* it out and *stomping* the rhythm in the right tempo to the tune of "My Favorite Things" as performed by Coltrane:

(to be rise up blk / people
sung de dum da da da da
slowly move straight in yo / blkness
to tune dad um da da da da
of my step over the wite / ness
favorite that is yesssss terrrrrr day
things.) weeeeeeee are tooooooday
(f da dum
a da da da (stomp, stomp)
s da dum
t da da da (stomp, stomp) da da da
e da dum
r) da da da (stomp) da da da dum (stomp)
weeeeeeeee (stomp)
areeeeeeeee (stomp)
areeeeeeeee (stomp, stomp)
tooooooday (stomp.
day stomp.
day stomp.
day stomp.
day stomp!)
(*We a BaddDDD People*: 71-72)

This means for removing the barrier between a conventionally understood poetic text and a song or even an instrumental piece can be regarded as a characteristic feature of black poetry of the Black Arts Movement period. At the same time it is an example of the contesting of Euro-American aesthetic norms, according to which the poet works towards closing his message in a Platonic perfect form. The black poem, on the contrary, assumes a formal openness, inviting individual interpretations in a similar manner to a jazz standard that usually has many different versions. This is connected with a conspicuous feature of the above-quoted extracts from Sanchez's poem, which Larry Neal labels as "destruction of the text" (after Henderson 61), whose purpose seems to be a change of value hierarchy between the printed and spoken / sung word.

A hagiographic attitude toward the figure of the blues and jazz musician predominates in the black poetry of the late 1960s and early 1970s. A few of the most striking examples are Sanchez's earlier poem "on seeing pharaoh sanders blowing"; Walter De Legall's "Psalm for Sonny Rollins"; "Tribute to Duke" by Sarah Webster Fabio; "Poem for Eric Dolphy" by Donald L. Graham; Etheridge Knight's "To Dinah Washington"; and Coltrane poems by Don L. Lee ("Don't Cry, Scream"); Michael Harper ("Dear John, Dear Coltrane"; "Brother John"); A. B. Spellman ("Did John's Music Kill Him?") and Sharon Bourke ("Sopranosound, Memory of John"). These poems unexceptionally are tributes paid to musicians as cultural and spiritual leaders of the whole Afro-American community. At the same time, most of the poems also have a more personal dimension – the musicians are presented in them as mythical figures who play an important role in shaping a sense of black consciousness and the black pride of their authors.

In two subsequent volumes – *Love Poems* (1973) and *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1974), written and published in the period of the poet's membership in the Nation of Islam, Sanchez concentrates her poetic energy on personal experiences – love relationships, sexual desire, a sense of loneliness or simply being a woman – and on the values conducive to the well-being of the black community. The change of subject matter is accompanied by replacement of the earlier formal means of expression, which were a kind of Sanchez signature, with new ones. The most striking is the giving up of the spelling of the word 'black' as 'blk', an almost total absence of the dashes which used to divide some lines even a few times in the first two volumes, and resignation from extremely scrupulous rendering

of black speech by application of non-standard grammar and spelling. The purpose of these means enhanced the utterance's dynamics and reinforced its expressive power by quickening the tempo and emphasizing the polyrhythmic quality of the poem, which in consequence led to an erasure of the dividing line between poetic speech and the language of the ghetto streets. Moreover, vulgarisms and obscenities, which had earlier caused great controversy both among critics and 'common' readers, disappear almost entirely. Beginning with *Love Poems*, the graphically and phonetically aggressive form becomes supplanted by 'smoother' and more 'traditional' forms, more appropriate for reflective poetry. Since then, Sanchez has frequently used shorter poetic forms such as haiku, tanka, or their variation – named after the poet herself sonku – which are characterized by intensive concentration of sensual experiences and personal emotions, and by concise and succinct formulation of intellectual ideas. They constitute the lion's share of the content of *Love Poems* and of the much later volume *Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums* (1998), but are also a vital component of three other collections: *I've Been a Woman* (1978), *Under a Soprano Sky* (1987), and *Wounded in the House of a Friend* (1995). It needs to be underlined that these concise and condensed forms, whose epitome is the Japanese haiku genre, represent a particular ideal of discipline of artistic expression for American Modernist poetry, especially strongly emphasized in the concept of Imagism. Simultaneously, as Joyce Ann Joyce (144-147) maintains, by using short forms Sanchez establishes a strong link with the African tradition of rhyming proverbs, puzzles, and practical wisdoms, which can be regarded as a means for extending the frame of tradition-sanctioned poetic discourse.

All this means that Sanchez has never given up her position as a poet speaking from within the wild zone. Even her decision to join a Muslim organization universally perceived as radical, and popularizing its ideology through poetry, demonstrates how far it was for Sanchez to the American cultural mainstream. The question is additionally complicated by the fact that being a member of the Nation of Islam, Sanchez became a spokesperson for the rights of black women, which sometimes led to clashes within the organization in which women were on principle pushed to marginal positions – the poet mentions this problem in an interview with Claudia Tate and makes the following comment: "My contribution to the Nation has been that I refused to let them tell me where my place was" (139). Thus,

on the one hand Sanchez seems to have felt the need to belong to a community with a strong sense of religious and racial identification as well as the high moral standards which the Nation of Islam officially represented, but on the other hand from the very beginning she demonstrated a willingness to reform and rebuild this organization. Eventually, she decided to leave the Nation after a three-year membership.

A book-length poem *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women*, Sanchez's positive proposal for home-searching blacks who live in the ghettos, is a kind of documentation of the poet's spiritual transformation which brought her close to Islam, but also allowed her to redefine her understanding of her own femininity. The poem describes a journey to the very sources of the persona's cultural identity, which by the same token can be perceived as an affirmation of her African roots. The catalyst for undertaking this journey is the oppressive nature of the American here and now that generates in the black, urban population a sense of homelessness, an idea quite conspicuous in Sanchez's first two volumes. It is worth pointing out that a similar journey takes place in certain poems by Audre Lorde, another female poet of the same period, discussed in Chapter One. The basic difference between them is that while Lorde makes an effort to find her *personal* identity in the context of the mythology of Dahomey, the country of her biological ancestors, Sanchez attempts to make American blacks (and especially black women) aware of the existence of their *common* cultural cradle, i.e. the religion and culture of Islam as explicated by the leader of the Nation of Islam – Elijah Muhammad.

In *Blues Book* Africa does not function as a geographical category, but as the spiritual home of black Americans – a cultural, religious and ideological phenomenon which exists as one of the constitutive elements of Eastern civilization based on the spiritual and ethical principles of the Mahometan faith, representing a contradiction to the Euro-American West. This opposition is emphasized by Sanchez through implementation of striking formal similarities and conspicuous textual allusions to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, while the poems simultaneously remain philosophically and ideologically antinomical. Moreover, it is worth keeping in mind that the final lines of *The Waste Land* suggest the necessity of turning towards the wisdom of the East in order to overcome the overwhelming sense of exhaustion and ever-present crisis of Western culture, although Eliot points to Buddhism and Hinduism rather than Islam. This antinomy is under-

lined by the epigraphs of both poems: *The Waste Land* opens with a passage from Petronius' *Satyricon* pertaining to Cumaean Sybil, which speaks of her wish to die, whereas Sanchez's poem is preceded by a sura from the Quran that treats about the wisdom and knowledge necessary to lead a righteous life.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the journey east in Sanchez's poem also has some other connotations. As Joyce Anne Joyce (179-198) points out, in several places her text refers directly to the religion of Ancient Egypt and to the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, which is strictly connected with a myth about the origins of the black race promoted by the Nation of Islam[(190)]. According to Elijah Muhammad black people come from the lost tribe of Shabazz which developed its civilization in the Nile Valley and built the holy city of Mecca in Arabia (189). It is worth adding to Joyce's observations that in this way Muhammad established an inseparable connection between the greatest ancient civilization on the African continent and Islam. In the pantheon of Egyptian gods at the top of the hierarchy stands Ra who reveals himself to people as the sun. Every day Ra is born and dies again and again, which allows to construct opposition between the east as the source of life and the west as the land of the dead. To this important symbolic layer that co-produces the message of the poem, Sanchez adds another one: the journey to the east is in yet one more sense a voyage towards life, as it takes place in the opposite direction to the several-centuries-long transportation of African slaves across the Atlantic. The second part of *Blues Book* entitled "Past" opens with an excerpt which talks about a profound need to overcome the experience of being transported towards physical and cultural death:

> Come into Black geography
> you, seated like Manzu's cardinal,
> come up through tongues
> multiplying memories
> and to avoid descent
> among wounds
> cruising like ships,
> climb into these sockets
> golden with brine. (21)

The expression "Black geography" suggests the existence of a discrepancy between the standard division of the world through means of strictly scientific criteria treated by the West as indisputable, and an alternative representation which takes into consideration Africa's belonging to the Orient and the culture of Islam. Sanchez emphasizes the inseparability of Africa from Islam when the persona, who experiences a metamorphosis from a *false American I* into *a true African/Moslem I*, says:

> i vomited up the waters
> that had separated me
> from Dahomey and Arabia
> and Timbuktoo and Muhammad
> and Asia and Allah (36)

As August Meier and Eliot Rudwick remind us, the territories along the coast and to the north of the Gulf of Guinea, which provided the largest number of slaves for the New World have, since the 10th century, remained under the strong influence of the civilization and culture of Islam. It is worth mentioning several historical facts in this context. From the 10th century Kumbi-Kumbi, the capital of the Empire of Ghana, was divided into two cities: the one where the royal court was situated was the center of the local religious cult, while Muslims lived in the other part. The Muslims had full access to high governmental positions, and Arabic was the official written language of the empire. At the beginning of the 14th century the emperor of Mali, Mansa Musa, impressed the Mediterranean world with the sumptuousness of his pilgrimage to Mecca. At the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries Askia Muhammad I – the ruler of the kingdom of Songhai, chronologically the third superpower in the region – contributed to the establishment of the University of Sankore in Timbuktu, one of the largest academic centers of the Muslim world.

Apparently Sanchez creates the myth of Islamic Africa as a cultural formation that contemporary black Americans have come from, on the one hand making use of the fantastic mythology of the Nation of Islam, and combining it with verifiable historical knowledge on the other. However, it should not be overlooked that some of the motifs implemented in the poem are borrowed from the essentially matriarchal cults of the indigenous tribes in that region. Mentioning by name Dahomey – in whose religious panthe-

on we find many female deities (also deliberately emphasized by Lorde in her poems based on Dahomean myths) – points clearly at Sanchez's intention to saturate Islamic Africa, as the source of identity of African American women, with specifically female elements.

In several places in her *Blues Book* Sanchez makes use of the metaphor of rebirth which stands for the discovery of her real identity. In this respect the poem must be read simultaneously in two parallel yet complementary orders: as a metaphorical 'report' on the poet's personal journey towards enlightenment and her subsequent conversion to the doctrine of the Nation of Islam, and as a lodestar for other black women of the younger generation who, by accepting the lifestyle offered to them by white America, sever themselves from the life-giving sap of their own cultural tradition of home, as a result rejecting their own profoundest Self:

> and my name was
> without honor
> and i became a
> stranger at my birthright. (32)

The act of vomiting up the waters which separate the lyrical 'I' from the African motherland has an obvious connection with the metaphor of rebirth.

In Sanchez's poem the force that takes responsibility for the final success of the black woman's rebirth is the primeval Mother-Earth, a chthonic deity who cannot be found either in the classical version of Islam or in Elijah Muhammad's doctrine. An invocation to her turns out to be a necessary condition for discovering her true Self by the poet/ persona:

> Come ride my birth, earth mother
> tell me how i have become, became
> this woman with razor blades between
> her teeth.
> Sing me my history O earth mother (23)

Nonetheless, in spite of the fact that Earth Mother – whose coming is accompanied by the ringing of bells, which should be perceived as an allusion to one of the ways through which Allah reveals himself to Maho-

met – summons the lyrical heroine of the poem to her true life by uttering the words: "you are born / BLACK GIRL" (24). The effort of giving birth is made by the young woman herself:

> i gave birth to myself,
> twice, in one hour.
> i became like Maat,
> unalterable in my
> love of Black self and
> righteousness.
> And I heard the
> Trumpets of a new age
> And I fell down
> Upon the earth
> And became myself. (39)

The quotation above, by describing the moment of rebirth or *birth in the truth*, represents a condensed conclusion of the journey in search of the black woman's own identity and home, of the voyage whose route leads east to Africa – a mythical Promised Land situated outside time and space, which combines elements of indigenous matriarchal cults with the mythology of Ancient Egypt as well as principles of Islam. Nevertheless, this ritual of rebirth contains a strict hierarchy: the Earth Mother, undoubtedly providing a connection with the cult of fertility widespread in Africa, only sets in motion the process of symbolic birth of the poem's heroine. The birth itself consists of two separate phases: first, the woman becomes similar to Maat – the Egyptian goddess of righteousness, permanence, truth, firmness, etc.; second, she becomes herself only at the moment when she touches the ground with her forehead in the gesture performed during a Muslim prayer.

In *Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* Sanchez treats as one her racial identity with its ethnic roots in Dark Africa and her cultural identity fundamentally and inseparably connected with Islam in Elijah Muhammad's version. As a result, she herself joins the tradition of creating utopian myths about the origins of black Americans, myths that remain in opposition to the predominant Euro-American constructs of the black race.

In the 1980s and 1990s a recurring theme in Sanchez's poetry was the drug addiction debilitating the African American community. As has already been mentioned, the poet strongly believed that this was a result of the deliberate policy of the state, depriving black ghetto inhabitants of any real opportunities and prospects for the future. This point of view is developed in the prose poems "Norma," "Bubba," and "After Saturday Night Comes Sunday" from *Homegirls & Handgrenades*. Sanchez stresses the fact that the problem of drug addiction concerns not only all blacks in America, but also the whole of American society – for the two former poems concentrate on the wasted opportunities of two talented school friends of the poet's, presented as the result of racial and social discrimination; the latter talks about the problem of how drugs affect the functioning of a family. The striking feature of these poems is their strongly individual point of view and highly personal tone. Moreover, the poems do not condemn drug addicts, but attempt to understand them, perceiving them as victims of hostile social mechanisms. Sanchez's interest in the problem and compassion for those who abuse drugs can be partly accounted for by the poet's personal experiences – at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s she was married to the poet Etheridge Knight who was himself addicted to drugs (in this context "After Saturday Night Comes Sunday" should be perceived as a strongly autobiographical text, similarly to two other poems from *We a BaddDDD People* ("answer to yo / question" and "hospital/poem"), and many years later, in 1981, Sanchez witnessed her brother's death by AIDS, caused by his abuse of drugs. This tragic death became the subject of "A poem for my brother" from the volume *Under a Soprano Sky*, and of the whole 1997 *Does Your House Have Lions* collection that takes the form of a psychodrama in which we "hear" the voices of a sister, brother, father, and their African ancestors. Out of these monologues emerges a family history in which the brother's addiction and subsequent death turn out to be the price for physical survival in the culturally alienating world of 20th century capitalism – in the poem the brother's addiction developed in an atmosphere of conflict with his permanently overworked and absent father.

Sanchez has constantly remained a careful observer of the surrounding socio-political reality, never having given up writing the politically involved poetry of social intervention, which is additionally characterized by historiographic reflectiveness. Her most successful poems in this category are "Reflections After the June 12th March for Disarmament", "MIA's

(missing in action and other atlantas)", "elegy (for MOVE and Philadelphia)" and "3X3."

The last one, which consists of three parts (each one is a short monologue – of a Hiroshima girl, a black man, and the poet herself), once again demonstrates how sharp Sanchez's consciousness is on whose behalf she speaks, understanding that her voice always breaks some kind of silence. Her own monologue is entitled "the poet: speaks after silence":

> i am going among neutral clouds unpunctured
> i am going among men unpolished
> i am going to museums unadorned
> i am going home
> (*Under a Soprano Sky*: 35)

The "home" referred to in the third soliloquy stands apparently for the space of existential experiences of ordinary people who "have been amid organized death" and "have been under bleached skies that dropped silver" (*Under a Soprano Sky*: 33) like Shigeko from Hiroshima, or "come from walking streets that are detoured", "come from indifference (…) from hate (…) from hell" (*Under a Soprano Sky*: 34) like the black man Carl. The speaking subject in Sanchez's poetry, who can be identified with the personal 'I' of the poet herself, emphasizes her solidarity with marginalized, deprived, and oppressed people by reminding us of her own origin as a descendant of slaves from the South:

> I have come to you tonite out of the depths
> of slavery
> from white hands peeling black skins over
> america;
> (*Homegirls &Handgrenades*: 65)

The whole text of "Reflections After the June 12th March for Disarmament" takes the form of a fervent and passionate speech in which the speaker, whose involvement reminds us of a black preacher, demonstrates the strict connection between the exploitation, oppression, and extermination of certain categories of people – and indeed the whole planet – as the policy of an extremely narrow interest group possessed by a desire for

profit and the idea of 'progress' at all costs. The poet's aim is to change her addressees' attitudes and their way of thinking in such a way that peace, equality, justice, and beauty could become this world's reality:

> I have come to you tonite not just for the stoppage
> of nuclear proliferation, nuclear
> plants, nuclear bombs, nuclear
> waste, but to stop the proliferation
> of nuclear minds, of nuclear generals
> of nuclear presidents, of nuclear scientists,
> who spread human and nuclear waste
> over the world;
> …
> I come to you because the world needs sanity
> now, needs men and women who will
> not work to produce nuclear weapons,
> who will give up their need for excess
> wealth and learn how to share the
> world's resources …
> (*Homegirls &Handgrenades*: 67)

In spite of all this Sanchez has never become a poet of naïve optimism spinning utopian visions for the future in isolation from reality, even though an unshakable faith in the possibility of making the world a better place to live is a driving force behind her literary and other activities. Her poetry writing is work done for the purpose of uniting the excluded, those deprived of political and discursive rights, and the marginalized, in the name of necessity for making economic progress. This seems to be the reason for placing together in a single poem, "MIA's", images of poverty and the bleak prospects for the black children of Atlanta under Ronald Reagan's neoconservative government, the political violence and lies of apartheid in the context of the murder by the police of South African civil rights leader Stephen Biko in prison, and the fighting carried out in El Salvador against a dictatorship supported by the United States. Sanchez argues that all three phenomena have a common source – this is why pro-better world activities should be united for the sake of the present and future. The poem becomes at the end an appeal to all who can discern the lowest common denominator of the political and social violence in the world:

cmon. men. and. women.
plant yourself in the middle of your
blood with no transfusions for
reagan or botha or bush or
d'aubuisson.

plant yourself in the eyes of the
children who have died carving out their
own childhood.
plant yourself in the dreams of the people
scattered by morning bullets.
let there be everywhere our talk.
(*Homegirls &Handgrenades*: 76)

It is worth pointing out that the poem strongly emphasizes the right to express one's own individual-and-collective truth, and to permit expression of the experiences pushed by the universal language into non-existence. This becomes clear not only in the last of the above-quoted lines, but also in the refrain-like phrases in Swahili and Spanish: "yebo madola / yebo bafazi" and "quiero ser libre / pues libre naci." They serve the purpose of extending the universal language by – to refer once again to Werner's terminology – certain 'dialects' of the oppressed which were not allowed to become a part of accepted discourse, and which express experiences perceived from the point of view of the official language as deserving no attention and as unimportant, since they actually present a threat to the *status quo*.

The question of how vital it seems to Sanchez to try and extend the territory of language by including discursive practices rooted in dialects capable of expressing the truth of the Other is treated indirectly in the poem "elegy." The work demonstrates how Otherness – repressed by being pushed out of the sphere of language, but still assertively insisting on its validity and presence – becomes a target for the brutal oppression and violence of the guardians of law and public order. The poem talks about the "pacification" on 13 May 1985 in Philadelphia of the headquarters of an African American organization called MOVE, which preached against technology and advocated a close-to-nature lifestyle. In the attack on the dreadlocked members of the organization, the police used explosives dropped by a heli-

copter, as ordered by the mayor. Despite the fact that the bombing resulted in a conflagration, the firemen's action was postponed by forty-five minutes, which caused many casualties – men, women, and children. The follow-up investigation proved that the methods used by the police were exaggerated, and those who survived received sumptuous compensations from the city. Sanchez in her poem directly links the physical violence directed at people leading an alternative to the 'universal' life-style with the controlling and stigmatizing of them in the sphere of language. The mass media, instead of giving MOVE members an opportunity to speak for themselves, turned the attack into a sensational news item which did not explain and clarify anything, but imprisoned the oppressed in the discourse of the authorities:

> c'mon newsmen and tvmen
> hurryondown to osage st and
> when you have chloroformed the city
> and after you have stitched up your words
> hurry on downtown for sanctuary
> in taverns and corporations
>
> and the blood is not yet dry.
> (*Under a Soprano Sky*: 12)

Thus, it is not difficult to recognize Sonia Sanchez as a poet of social and political radicalism in the positive meaning of the word, speaking about matters which are universally marginalized or forced into discursive non-existence. Additionally, she speaks in a strikingly politically incorrect way, frequently violating the norm of consecrated poetic themes and forms. It may be that the cause of the poet's artistic and intellectual difference began at home, somewhere in her childhood, at the time when her mother died prematurely, and she stuttered so much that her first attempts at writing were the only available way to her of communicating herself to the world. Even in comparison with other poets of the Black Arts Movement, Sanchez appears to be a poet exceptionally dedicated to the cause of expressing the experiences of those absent within the realm of the official language of the dominant white American culture. She is an uncompromising voice of the wild zone.

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Chapter Three

Making A Home for Oneself: Cooking, Quilting, and Black Women's Survival in Nikki Giovanni's Poetry

Cooking and quilting are recurring motifs in Nikki Giovanni's poetry. Implemented not only as concrete, mundane chores or activities, but also in the function of central metaphors in her work, since the early 1980s they have added to the diversity of black experience and allow the poet to reflect both on the physical and cultural survival of African Americans within an oppressive white order. Giovanni says: "We survive on patches…scraps… the leftovers from a materially richer culture;" a statement that should be read not so much as a complaint or simply an outcry of despair, but as an affirmation of black 'practical' creativity.

Nonetheless, it must be remembered that the topics of cooking, food, and quilting appeared much earlier in the poet's writing, and in inseparable connection with the motif of setting up a home, in the eponymous poem entitled "My House" from her fourth collection (*My House* 67), in which the persona-Giovanni says openly:

> i mean it's my house
> and i want to fry pork chops
> and bake sweet potatoes
> and call them yams
> cause i run the kitchen
> and i can stand the heat
>
> i spent all winter in
> carpet stores gathering
> patches so i could make
> a quilt
> does this really sound
> like a silly poem

Deceptively simple as it is, the poem seems to be a staunch manifesto of individualism, an individualism which proves itself to be American to the marrow as the house turns into a fortress where the "i" decides what to do. This unintimidated insistence on selfhood and deciding on one's own about fundamental things means in practice making a home for oneself ("it's my house", "i run the kitchen"). Yet, in the excerpt quoted above, this individualism is expressed through cooking and quilting, which in the final part of the poem reveal themselves to serve the purpose of expressing love to the other:

> i'm saying it's my house
> and i'll make fudge and call
> it love and touch my lips
> to the chocolate warmth
> and smile at old men and call
> it revolution (…)
>
> and this is my house and you make me happy
> so this is your poem (68-69)

Giovanni makes a brave attempt to create a home understood as a space for expressing love through ordinary gestures and trivial, everyday activities, discovering their potential for putting people together. It seems that it would not make sense to "fry pork chops", "bake sweet potatoes," and "make fudge" and "make / a quilt" just for oneself. No matter that we suspect it to be a sentimental yielding to a romantic love myth; Giovanni's later volumes have proven that the poet managed to extend her home-making strategy to the whole community of black women.

Arguably, the poet represents here an approach similar to ideas formulated by Alice Walker in her now-classic essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," which allows the interpretation of the poet's standpoint as *womanist*. Thus, Giovanni situates herself as a poet and artist not so much within the African-American women's *literary* tradition, but in the long and broad *continuum* of black women as creators of a wild zone culture, including for example cooks, patchwork quilt-makers, blues singers, amateur garden-designers and, last but not least, poets. This simultaneously emphasizes the value of the movement from what exists to what can be

created, from being in a state of 'exclusion from whiteness' to expression of her (and her readers') craving and appetite for blackness. Exploration of the phenomenon of quilts, the "everyday use" they were made for, but also their role in black survival and their later being turned into objects of visual art exhibited in art galleries and museums, provides us with the key to black women's spiritual culture, a culture that was usually created in private space, at home. The homemade quilts open the so far invisible doors to African American history and culture, and also give us a deeper insight into black literature by women, with such important names as, for example, Alice Walker ("Everyday Use"), Lucille Clifton ("Quilts"), and Nikki Giovanni.

A similar move towards "saying it like it is" and an urgent need for supportive linkage among black women can also be found in Giovanni's 'food poems,' in which cooking and eating are at present the means of preserving traditional black cuisine. Simultaneously, however, they make it tangible to experience, albeit vicariously, the past when food was scarce, rations small, and stomachs empty, and hence, when survival depended on the intelligent and economical use of every bit of available ingredients – as Wanda Coleman once said: "including the oink."

I. "We survive on patches…": On Homemade Quilts and Black Survival

The first part of this chapter discusses Giovanni's poetry as a form of intentional strengthening of a bond among black women (frequently illiterate) who have been marginalized within the 'official' discursive practices in America. It focuses on the motif of quilting in the poet's work, and draws specific parallels between her poems and the works of such quilt-makers as Elizabeth Keckley and Harriet Powers. It argues in favor of perceiving Giovanni as a poet celebrating American diversity and pluralistic universalism expressed at home, which incorporates the voices of black women/homemakers as an indispensable component of the universal.

Giovanni, who as a Black Arts Movement poet was asking in 1968 after the assassination of Martin Luther King, "what can I a poor Black woman do to destroy america," (*BF*) implements an entirely different rhetoric in

her poem written in the aftermath of the September 11 attack, when she characterizes *her* America as:

> Not a bad country…neither the best nor the worst…just a place we call home…and we open that door…to the tired and the poor…to the huddled masses yearning…to be free…to those in need…because we need…to be needed
> (…)
> Not a bad country in fact…most likely…the best possible hope…of human beings…to exemplify differences that: can share prosperity… can tolerate choices…can respect individuals…can teach us all…to love (*QBEP* 53)

Giovanni's uncompromising Black radicalism of revolutionary yesteryear so conspicuous in her 1969 *Black Judgement* collection, has been replaced by a standpoint that can be labeled as pluralistically universalistic. This replacement is reflected and immediately accessible in the way the word America is spelled – the lower case 'a' in "Reflections on April 4, 1968" has been substituted by the upper case 'A' in "My America." Nonetheless, it is much more important to notice that the latter verse appears immediately after four poems that are concerned with the World Trade Center terrorist attack. Taken together they form a distinct thematic group in the collection. Coming as the fifth text in this set, "My America" appears to function as its summary. It is worth emphasizing that Giovanni's private opinions and feelings pertaining to the September 11 tragedy, expressed in the four poems that precede "My America," can be perceived as representative of outlooks and emotions experienced by a majority of the African American population. Sociological research carried out by Roxanna Harlow and Lauren Dundes and the results quoted by them from other sources, demonstrate a very critical attitude among the members of this race group to the policies of the United States in Third World countries, their almost universal rejection of the "unconditional loyalty" (459) attitude towards the state and the government, and unwillingness to demonstrate their patriotism in public. As a conclusion to their presentation of research results, Harlow and Dundes quote a sentence from a conference speech given by Cedric Herring who puts forward a thesis that such a pervasive attitude of black Americans may be perceived as a "struggle to remain loyal

to the United States…while pursuing social justice." Arguably, Herring's thesis may be regarded as a statement perfectly expressing Giovanni's own attitude in social and political matters presented in her turn of the centuries volumes *Blues: For All the Changes* (1999) and *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* (2002), in which she looks for a "poor black woman['s]" home in the American patchwork quilt.

Formally, stylistically, and thematically preceded by an early 1980's volume entitled *Those Who Ride The Night Winds* (1983), they testify to their author's effort to make a whole poetic patchwork put together from poems on various social and political subjects, as well as verses about individuals highly respected by the poet herself and at the same time considered by her as important for the well-being of the African American community. In a poem titled "Quilts" Giovanni utters a not-so-humble-as-it-seems request to be included herself in this patchwork:

> When I am frayed and stained and drizzled at the end
> Please someone cut a square and put me in a quilt
> That I might keep some child warm (*A* 30)

This request reveals the poet's sincere hope that not only thanks to her writing she deserves a place in the African American female writing tradition – represented as a patchwork quilt – among such poets as Phillis Wheatley, Gwendolyn Brooks and June Jordan, but also that her poems (like theirs) will turn out to make a home, and provide emotional support and protection to a younger generations of African Americans. Simultaneously, using the metaphor of a patchwork quilt, Giovanni consciously locates her poetry within the realm of activities of black women who traditionally have occupied themselves with handicraft.

In a poem entitled "Hands: For Mother's Day" from *Those Who Ride The Night Winds*, Giovanni shares her reflections on a patchwork quilt as a symbol that stands for the quintessence of life and cultural functioning of black women oppressed within the hegemonic white American culture:

> Some people think a quilt is a blanket stretched across a Lincoln bed…or from frames on a wall…a quaint museum piece (…) Quilts are our mosaics…Michelle-Angelo's contribution to beauty…We weave a quilt with dry, rough hands…Quilts are the way our lives are lived…We survive on patches…scraps…the leftovers from a materi-

> ally richer culture…the throwaways from those with emotional options…We do the far more difficult job of taking that which nobody wants and not only loving it…not only seeing its worth…but making it lovable…and intrinsically worthwhile (17)

Here the poet presents patchwork quilts as a product of the efforts and skills of black women's work-worn hands, the same hands that also "plait hair…knead bread…spank bottoms…wring in anguish…shake the air in exasperation…wipe tears, sweat, and pain from faces…" (16), thus belonging to the sphere of everyday routine and love. At the same time, in this poem Giovanni perceives quilts not so much as objects for – to use Alice Walker's phrase – 'everyday use' ("a blanket stretched across a Lincoln bed") or artifacts of historical value and products of traditional folk culture ("a quaint museum piece"), but as objects of art and products of communal-*cum*-individual creativity ("our mosaics…contribution to beauty"). Their value also resides in the fact that they are made by anonymous ordinary black women, half-jokingly referred to in the text as "Michelle-Angelo." Clearly alluding to the name of Michaelangelo, Michelle-Angelo brings to mind the figure of Judith Shakespeare, a fictitious sister of the Bard 'called to life' by Virginia Woolf in her milestone feminist book-length essay *A Room of One's Own* in order to put forward a thesis that the absence of great women writers in history of literature does not result from lack of genius or talent among the 'second sex,' but is a consequence of the 'natural' discriminatory mechanisms of patriarchalism. Nevertheless, while in Woolf's concept there is not even a single trace of female artistic creativity from the past (hence it is a matter of sheer speculation or wishful thinking), Giovanni's patchwork quilts provide a material proof of its existence. The quintessential difference between Judith Shakespeare and Michelle-Angelo lies in the fact that the former had no opportunity to express her genius in forms of creativity belonging to the sphere of so-called high art (in the past a 'natural' preserve of men), whereas talent, imagination, and the sensitivity of the latter found expression in forms from outside of this sphere. In this way Giovanni's thinking about black women's creativity is similar to Alice Walker's concepts formulated in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Thus, the literary philosophy of the author of *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* may be classified as *womanist*.

Apparently, Giovanni intentionally places herself as an artist not only in black women's literary tradition, but also in a very broad continuum of 'wild zone' creativity. As Floris Barnett Cash observes, "the voices of black women are stitched within their quilts" (30). Cash supports her claim with the results of careful study of the relationship between patchwork-making and poetry-writing done by Bettina Aptheker, who maintains that both should be perceived as indispensable forms of interpreting reality from black women's particular perspective.

Seen from this point of view, Giovanni's turn of the 20th century poems seem to be, according to her implied intention, a way of strengthening a bond with women absent in the official universal solipsistic discourse, who are often illiterate or semi-literate. For them sewing and quilting were frequently the only means that gave them some sort of access to 'speaking' at home yet in public and – by extension – to voicing their feelings and opinions. It is worth mentioning here briefly two nineteenth century needle artists in order to realize how close is the relationship between Giovanni's poems and their artistic bedcovers, rugs and tapestries.

The most famous two black American quilt-makers of all time are Elizabeth Keckley and Harriet Powers. It can be said about both that, similarly to Giovanni, they enriched black culture with their art, combining awareness of its aesthetic specificity and subservient function to the needs of their community with sensibility to the experience of racial discrimination and oppression. What is more, like the author of *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea*, they expressed in their needlework a respect for a system of values that can be regarded as 'universally' American.

Keckley was a slave for thirty years, and later – beginning in 1861 – for four years she was employed in the White House as a dressmaker and a personal modiste of Mary Todd Lincoln, the President's wife. Her most well-known work is a patchwork quilt made from silk and velvet scraps of her employer's dresses, hence known as the "Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt". In the center of this quilt is shown an eagle carrying olive branches, and an American flag next to which the word "LIBERTY" is embroidered.[1] Un-

[1] The history of making the bedcover by Keckley is described by Susan Wilemuth In her article entitled "Elizabeth Keckley & the Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt", *Quilter's World Magazine*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2019), www.quilters-world.com/webbonuses/pdfs/elizabeth_keckley_mary.pdf (accessed: 15.02.2019). Also a picture of Keckley's quilt is available on the site.

doubtedly, the implementation of this kind of iconography for the purpose of representing the idea of freedom is strictly connected with Keckley's close relationship with the President's family. All the same, the fact itself that a newly-freed former slave used the word "liberty" in her work must have had its significance both on a personal level for Keckley as a person and on a public level for her racial group. Simultaneously, it points at the problematic position of a black woman needle artist, privileged to be employed by the President's spouse yet discriminated against by default within the white interior of the White House, which could never become her permanent home.

It is impossible to overlook in Giovanni's "Hands: For Mother's Day" the presence of a sentence which reads: "Some people think a quilt is a blanket stretched across a Lincoln bed." An ordinary Lincoln-type bed takes its prestigious name after a very ornamented bed purchased by Mary Todd Lincoln for a White House guestroom, known ever since as the Lincoln Bed. Placing the name of this kind of bed in her text that concentrates on patchwork quilts, Giovanni makes an overt allusion to the "Mary Todd Lincoln Quilt," simultaneously signaling that as a poet she regards herself as an heiress of Keckley's art.

Conversely, the dream of a home of one's own conceptualised as a piece of the Christian Paradise, seems to have inspired some works of Harriet Powers. The most highly-valued work by Powers is a quilt with biblical scenes, among which there is a picture of the Garden of Eden surrounded by a red and blue picket fence. Cuesta Benberry(297) puts stress on the fact that taking care of a garden of one's own and fencing it (no matter how small it was) meant for African Americans that by enclosing it, they extrapolate a plot of cultivated beauty and safety from a space of oppression and ugliness. Seen from this angle, the Biblical Paradise in Powers's quilt becomes an expression of the need for privacy. Additionally, art historian Rosalind Jeffries points out that in Powers's quilt the fence is represented from a bird's eye view, which "strongly suggests railroad tracks." Jeffries interprets this as an allusion to the Underground Railroad – a secret route for smuggling runaway slaves to the North, which must have been clear for her contemporaries as the quilt "was made at a time when the Underground Railroad was remembered" (after Benberry 296). Such an interpretation emphasizes the fact that there was more to patchworks than their practical everyday use: that they functioned also in a symbolic sphere. This mutual

inseparability of the practical from the symbolic dimensions in quilts is underlined by Marek Gołębiowski (46) when he notes that before the Civil War a quilt hung in front of a house, if there was a black color in it, signified a safe house on the Underground Railroad track. Moreover, it must not be overlooked that the red and blue pickets in the fence in Powers's Garden of Eden quilt correspond with the colors of the flag of the United States, presenting the idea of freedom as a fundamentally American value, and black aspiration to dwell in the Home of the Brave. In this light, Powers's quilt may be perceived as a predecessor and counterpart of Giovanni's poetry, where memory about painful experiences of black Americans is complemented with respect for and acceptance of America understood as one's own country. Additionally, it is worth quoting in this context Gladys-Marie Fry, who notes that in her quilts Powers frequently pictured Biblical heroes, "usually those who had struggled successfully against overwhelming odds – Noah, Moses, Jonah, and Job" (300).

It must be emphasized that in "Hands: For Mother's Day" patchwork quilts are treated by Giovanni not only as a characteristic form of expression of the creative/ artistic potential of black American women, but also as a figure of their adaptive capabilities to the existing social and cultural hostile conditions: "We survive on patches…scraps…the leftovers from a materially richer culture." The poet puts stress on the fact that quilting is an art that springs from want and lack, from necessity to depend on meager resources, but also from determination, affirmation of foresight and prudence, and the specific heroism of everyday survival.

Furthermore, in Giovanni's poems bedspreads and quilts, materially just objects sewn together from scraps of used-up and discarded fabrics, become and remain powerful signs of emotional support, a sense of safety, and an expression of love. This dimension comes to the fore in a poem "The Wrong Kitchen" (*BFAC* 3), a moving if bitter recollection from childhood that to some extent revises the Arcadian picture of growing up from Giovanni's 'signiture poem' "Nikki-Rosa" written at the beginning of her literary career:

> The arguments the slaps the chairs
> banging against the wall
> the pleas to please stop
> would disappear under quilts aired
> in fresh air

Taking all the above-presented observations into consideration, it becomes clear that Giovanni makes deliberate use of the fact that patchwork quilts made by black women are on the one hand objects of practical use and emotional value, and on the other hand they frequently receive status as objects of art of original composition, symbolic content and precise execution. In this context it is worth remembering that one of the three groundbreaking exhibitions of patchwork quilts that took place at the end of 1970s, an exposition curated by Roland Freeman that presented quilts from Mississippi, was called "More than Just Something to Keep you Warm" (Benberry 291). Giovanni's approach to the subject of quilts is strikingly similar: she appreciates their utilitarian function, and she regularly underlines their emotional and symbolic value for the black community, and especially for African American women. In a poem entitled "What We Miss: A Eulogy" (*QBEP* 10) which, as its subtitle says, has the form of a speech commemorating things and phenomena of the past of specific worth for American blacks, the poet mentions also a longing for communal quilt-making. When she says using the first person plural: "We miss … the quilting bee," she expresses a longing for something which gave the female participants not only an experience of being together in labor and leisure, but also a sense of belonging to a particular cultural community of women making up an extended family.[2]

What is more, such sewing and quilting bees sometimes in the past resulted in social and political activity. Cash (32) informs that before the Civil War both black and white women from the North "used their quilting skills to support moral, political, and reform issues." They sold the products of their skills and hands in bazaars and fairs in order to "raise funds for the Underground Railroad, anti-slavery newspapers, and female anti-slavery societies." A similar phenomenon re-occurred in the 1960s when the black women from The Freedom Quilting Bee, an organization whose constitutive purpose was to save the already almost forgotten art of quilting, energetically participated in activities of the Civil Rights Movement, especially concentrating on providing financial support to women living in the most economically retarded rural areas in America.

It seems to be equally important that quilt-making is frequently interpreted in academic works on this subject as a link with and continuation of

[2] This important function of a *quilting bee* is emphasized also by Marek Gołębiowski, 45-6.

African traditions, in spite of the fact that some scholars also mention the presence of European – e.g. from Wales and the north of England (Benberry 292) and Native American (Wahlmann 68) influences. For example, Fry (301) notes that the narrative quilts made by Powers represent a "distinctly American art form," yet they have "discernible roots in African culture," and their *appliqué* technique connects them with the "tapestries traditionally made by the Fon people of Abomey." A similar view is expressed by Cash (34) who maintains that Powers "was able to work creatively in the American tradition while retaining elements from her African heritage." As a result, the artist attempted to symbolically integrate both cultures, an endeavor found also in Giovanni's work. In a poem entitled "Symphony of the Sphinx" (*QBEP* 20), the author talks about the positive influence that the African past (epitomized by her Great-Grandmother) exercised on a young girl's growing into the American presence represented by the metaphor of learning to count:

> I have to remember Africa each night as I lay me down to sleep The patchwork quilt my Great-Grandmother patched one patch two patches three patches more I learned to count by those patches I learned my numbers by those patches (…) I learned my patience by those patches that clove to each other to keep me warm

The African trace, conspicuous in the patchwork-like character of some of Giovanni's poems from her later volumes, is also connected with the jazz-like (and thus quintessentially American) improvisatory formal features of these poems. As Virginia C. Fowler (111) states, "[b]oth visually and, often, thematically, Giovanni's … lineless form is itself quiltlike… The improvisational quality of this lineless form might also usefully be seen as analogous to jazz." In this way the critic situates Giovanni's poetry in the very nexus of African American creativity.

A similar observation about the interconnection between quilts and jazz and improvisation as their lowest common denominator is made by Maude Southwell Wahlman (69) who says that "through improvisation, [quilts] maintain African principles of multiple patterning, asymmetry, and unpredictable rhythms and tensions similar to those found in other Afro-American arts such as … jazz…" It must be added here that formal African roots of African American quilt-making do not limit in any sense

the thematic content of narrative quilts. The world presented on them may be equally a product of imagination or may be inspired by "Southern rural black culture, and popular American culture shaped by television, magazines, and advertising" (70). A similar presence and the strong influence of American mass culture, with emphasis on pop music and food can be easily found in Giovanni's poems from *Blues: For All the Changes* and *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* collections.

A careful reading of Giovanni's turn of the 20th century poems leads to a conclusion that, by concentrating on the motif of quilt-making, the author of *Those Who Ride The Night Winds* deliberately testifies to black cultural specificity and promotes the idea of the polyphony of voices of black women as commentators on African American social and cultural reality. Hence, the striking connections with the work of such quilt-makers as Keckley and Powers. Additionally, by achieving a strong saturation of blackness in this area, the poet – by extension – celebrates American diversity and the idea of pluralistic universalism.

II. Poetry from a Shoebox: On Cooking, Food, and Going to Mars

Visible in the art of patchwork-making, a jazz-like openness to a variety of ethnic influences and free mixing of traditional folk heritage with elements taken from contemporary popular culture finds its expression also in the eclectic character of African American cuisine. In Giovanni's later collections: *Blues For All the Changes* (1999), *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* (2002), *Acolytes* (2007), and *Bicycles* (2009) there are many poems in which appear the motif of preparing and eating meals. Undoubtedly, in those later volumes, the poet suggests that quilting, black music, and black cuisine taken together provide a foundation for survival – not only in a strictly biological, but also in a cultural sense, emphasizing African American identity and the poet's appetite for blackness. Only in this context can the formal and thematic components of her writing be understood and appreciated. She says, only half-jokingly, equalizing black (soul) food and poetry:

> We need food for the Soul
> We need poetry…We deserve poetry
> We owe it to ourselves to re-create ourselves. (*A* 35)

This section of the chapter discusses Giovanni's poetry as a form of emphasizing the unique black experiencing of America and of an intentional strengthening of the bond between generations of black women, who have been marginalized within the official discursive practices in the United States. And once again, it must be repeated that the poet's standpoint should be seen as *womanist*. By eschewing academic aporias, her 'soul food poems from a shoebox' can also be perceived as a move towards 'saying it like it is,' and an urgent need for linkage among black women experiencing America from the standpoint of a wild zone group.

All three forms of African American art(ing) with their sense of improvisation become tightly interwoven in a half-bitter, half-jocular poem entitled "Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea" which compares a possible future trip to Mars to the Middle Passage. In Giovanni's presentation both experiences are linked by two things: the vastness of space traveled through and the absolute strangeness of the environment arrived at. Reminding the reader that the ancestors of modern African Americans experienced a sort of journey "to another planet," the poet says that NASA experts should consult black Americans how to overcome a great fear of the unknown and cope with a sense of loneliness and alienation. They should also ask them: "How were you able to decide you were human even when everything said you were not…How did you find the comfort in the face of the improbable to make the world you came to your world" (*QBP* 4). Giovanni provides the answer on behalf of her people, pointing at the fundamental role of music and food as a basis of survival in how hostile whatsoever conditions:

> … you will need a song…take some Billie Holiday for the sad days and Charlie Parker for the happy ones but always keep at least one good Spiritual for comfort… You will need a slice or two of meatloaf and if you can manage it some fried chicken in a shoebox with a nice moist lemon pound cake…a bottle of beer because no one should go that far without a beer (*QBP* 4)

Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker are not only two giants of jazz, but they stand for the quintessence of melancholy and of elemental spontaneity respectively. Together with spirituals, they represent the full spectrum of African American musical expression. It should be emphasized that Giovanni does not use any examples of African songs and music which were brought to the New World by slaves, but refers to more contemporary examples, although rooted in older traditions. The music, whose lowest common denominator is the blues, stands here for food for the soul. At times the poet even erases the border between food and music. For example in "Boiled Blues" Giovanni admits: "I like my blues boiled with a few tears" (*B* 83), and then moves on to paraphrase the blues poet Langston Hughes by adding: "But I ate well and grew" (*B* 85).

Yet the above-quoted longer passage argues that equally important for survival in a foreign environment is food in the literal sense: unsophisticated, rich in calories and, above all, familiar and evoking home. A brief comment seems to be needed on the phrase "some fried chicken in a shoebox". In *The Black Family Dinner Quilt Cookbook*, which is illustrated with pictures of patchwork quilts and combines recipes with food anecdotes pertaining to events involving activists of various organizations that worked towards a better life for African Americans, there is a story about Dr. Dorothy I. Height, President of the National Council of Negro Women. An anonymous witness recalls that when Dr. Height had come to the South from New York for the first time in the early sixties, being hungry on arrival she had to eat a "poor little meal out of a shoe box" (18) since the rules of segregation did not allow blacks to eat in the railway station restaurant. As a result, the President experienced the standard way of eating by the blacks under Jim Crow: "That's what a lot of Negroes did when they had to travel in the South and knew that they'd want to eat something."(18) So during the trip to Mars, Giovanni proposes making use of a simple and well-practiced way of surviving in a hostile and inhumane environment.

We should also notice a striking, though apparently coincidental, similarity between the structure of Giovanni's volumes and the structure of *The Black Family Dinner Quilt Cookbook* which is characterized by Sally Bishop Shigley as a "nexus of recipes and quilts and memories and nutrition", which reminds us that "possibility and hope and power lie within the patchwork of mind, body, heart, and head that makes up all women."(315) Arguably, Giovanni has the same purpose: to give her ordinary women

readers a sense of belonging to a larger group in which racial-and-gender consciousness is conspicuously foregrounded. Simultaneously, this sense of belonging is almost mythical in its inclusiveness as here we can find no discrimination against women because of differences of age, education or social class.

Giovanni places culinary references with a full awareness of their group-binding character. This awareness is testified to by her own version of the folk tale of Stone Soup, included in "Redfish, Eels, and Heidi," where the poet also talks a lot about her eating preferences:

> And then there was Stone Soup. Everybody liked to read that story as if the old beggars got away with something but I always thought they showed the village how to share. The stone started to boil when they asked for a few potatoes, then a couple of turnips, then maybe a piece of meat if some was available and just a little bit of milk and by golly if we had some bread this would be a feast! And everyone was happy. Which when we allow our better selves to emerge is always the case. (*QBP* 106)

Giovanni openly shifts the stress away from the common conviction that the beggars who were cooking the Stone Soup cheated the villagers to a suggestion that they gave the villagers a rare opportunity to cook *together* in a jam-session-like manner and enjoy the result, which points at her intention to perceive cooking as a symbol of sharing not only food but, above all, wisdom. This sort of cooperation results in "allow[ing] our better selves to emerge."

In many poems from the volumes discussed here, we find enumerations of meals prepared and eaten on various occasions, as well as without particular occasion, together with family and friends, and recipes for specific dishes. They appear especially frequently in many poems pertaining to the poet's private life – for example: "The Faith of a Mustard Seed," "Truth-telling," "Be My Baby," "Sunday," "The Things We Love About Winter" (in *Blues: For All the Changes*); "I Always Think of Meatloaf," "Blackberry Cobbler," "Redfish, Eels, and Heidi" (in *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea*); "My Grandmother," "The Old Ladies Give a Party," "The Most Wonderful Soup in the World", "Indulge", "The Best Ever Midnight Snack" (in *Acolytes*); "So Enchanted With You," "No Translations," "Twirling" (in *Bicycles*). Both the

sheer number of these poems and their content testify to the importance of the theme of eating for Giovanni – a popular or even populist poet who simultaneously highlights her black identity and racial and gender consciousness. It would not make sense to discuss all of them. Nonetheless, it is worth stressing the fact that these poems link with a specific African American cultural phenomenon known as "heritage food," i. e. food with African roots completed by Southern cuisine and Indian, Caribbean, and French traditions. The quintessence of "heritage food" is "soul food" defined by Lauren Swann as "food made with feeling and care" (200), which means that it is as much "food with soul" as "food for the soul." In this context, the title of a cookbook by Ruth Gaskins published in 1968 *Every Good Negro Cook Starts with Two Basic Ingredients: A Good Heart and a Light Hand* seems to be strikingly significant. Certain constants especially count here: good intentions, emotional involvement, and a sense of improvisation, not just the professional skills of *nouvelle cuisine* type that serve to satisfy the palate of even the most fastidious gourmet-client. Swann explains the phenomenon of soul food in such words:

> As slaves, African Americans were not permitted to learn how to read or write, so they cooked not from recipes but 'by knowing', giving strong credence to the essence of 'soul food'. Slaves had virtually no control or choice in life, so cooking became a way to express feeling, share love, and nurture family and friends. Meals were a time for sharing common feelings of happiness and sorrow. Food was comfort while in bondage, and because they could control cooking, it was one of their few real pleasures, a way to feel free. (200)

Apparently, belonging thoroughly to the sphere of privacy, cooking meals and eating them together simultaneously took on political meaning, as they determined a space of freedom and resistance within the culinary wild zone. It provides a clear analogy with the approach to writing poetry by Giovanni and those other black female poets who never accepted a compromise with 'white' rules for practicing high art. Such a metaphorical understanding of preparing and eating soul food by black Americans is not surprising, as it is coded within their culture. Shigley quotes Charles Camp, who did research on the role of food in American culture, observing that "ordinary people understand and employ the symbolic and cultural dimen-

sions of food in their everyday affairs," turning it into, to use Shigley's nomenclature, "an important part of community mythmaking" (316). A book such as *The Black Family Dinner Quilt Cookbook* allows the thesis to be put forth that this sort of awareness becomes even more striking in the case of minorities historically discriminated against.

Giovanni's later poems may be treated as an exemplification of this thesis. It is also worth noting that the author of *Acolytes* emphasizes the role of women in passing on and sustaining the symbolic heritage inherent in food itself and in cooking it. Reading her food-poems, similarly to reading her quilt-poems, makes it more clear how ordinary women have used, as Shigley puts it, "the discourses available to them to make profound and effective statements" (316). Giovanni does not separate African American culinary heritage as a whole from her individual family tradition in this sphere, yet in her case as a rule passing it on goes down the matrilineal route. A good example of this claim is provided by a poem entitled "I Always Think of Meatloaf", in which Giovanni describes in detail the process of making meatloaf, referring both to her childhood memories and her present experiences:

> I wanted Meatloaf. I always think of Meatloaf when I want a comfort food.
>
> My Grandmother did not like Meatloaf so it became an elegant presentation when she cooked it. In her day, even to my rememberance, you could go to the butcher and purchase a piece of round steak. The butcher would grind it for you on the spot and Grandmother always had a couple of pork chops ground with it. (…)
>
> The meat is cold so your hand will get cold while you mix so be sure to keep a little running water on warm to get the color back in your fingers. When the egg and beef are well mixed but not overtly so, add your spices (…), onions and peppers. I cheat (…) and go to the freezer department of my local supermarket and purchase frozen peppers in a bag. I sauté them in olive oil while I do my egg and meat mixing. I add them to the bowl just before the spices. I still turn it by hand, however. (*QBP* 16-17)

All the subsequent steps mentioned in the text of preparing the meat for the meatloaf and the right way of cooking it are concluded by the final sentence in the text that reads: "My grandmother taught me that." Another striking thing in the text is the lack of any deep philosophical reflection on 'meatiness' itself, which, as argued by Jolanta Brach-Czaina, can be part of the experience of a person who knows what it means to "touch raw meat. Hold it in one's hands. Squeeze it. Let it come out between one's fingers" (161; trans. J. K.) According to the philosopher direct contact with meat can lead towards probing into the essence of "elementary facts" (162; trans. J. K.) such as death, killing, and suffering, without elevating them to some spiritual level. Her essay "The Metaphysics of Meat" can be perceived as a useful negative context for understanding Giovanni's poem in the sense that it allows us to comprehend the fact that the poet treats preparing the meat dish as a ritual of love taken as an elementary fact – both love of the grandmother to her granddaughter in the past and of the granddaughter to her late grandmother at present. The meatloaf serves the purpose of confirming a sense of safety – it is referred to as a "comfort food," but the safety seems to be derived not from the dish itself, but from the recipe how to make it inherited from the grandmother. Moreover, coming into the familial culinary tradition does not determine its slavish imitation and repetition – the visit in the supermarket in order to "purchase frozen peppers in a bag" does not equal betrayal of her grandmother's heritage, but adapting of it to contemporary conditions and customs, which proves that the heritage is truly living. As Shigley puts it, "the soul food or heritage recipes" become, together with "more updated dishes[,] … essential components in the 'canon' of African American cooking" (317).

Another significant feature of the tradition of soul food, which – as has been already mentioned – dates back to the times of slavery, is that many dishes were made from scraps and leftovers from the white master's table. As Swann emphasizes, "slaves cooked with their whole heart, doing their best with sparse ingredients" (201). Here comes the subject of the essence of black functioning in America, which is also highlighted in Giovanni's quilt-poem "Hands: For Mother's Day." According to the author this functioning demands affirmation of survival by transforming the experience of want and privation into the experience of love and care, and "taking that which nobody wants and not only loving it…not only seeing its worth… but making it lovable…and intrinsically worthwhile." (*TWRNW* 17) Such a

metamorphosis of scraps and leftovers into an expression of love becomes the theme of the poem "The Most Wonderful Soup in the World," whose opening stresses the significance of soup in the African American diet: "Soup, where I come from, is sacred…the food of the gods…the most wonderful thing on Earth to eat because it is so hard to make."(*A* 87) Half-jokingly the poet informs us that "[t]he key to this soup is courage," as the soup is not made from a recipe but must be the result of improvisation, of cooking from intuition, "from knowing," as real soul food should be. The ingredients taken into consideration (surely sticking to the rule of "a good heart and a light hand") are leftovers gathered and kept in jars. The poet enumerates them carefully:

> I would keep a little snippet of whatever we ate. At first it was potatoes (…) Then it was a bit of the roast, a bit of the chicken, a snippet of the pork chops. There were green things: green beans, greens, okra because I eat okra at least once a week, asparagus. My jar was filling up. There were squashes: zucchini, yellow squash, the squash with the neck. Eggplant, turnips, parsnips. We looked around at the end of the month and the jar was almost full. Let's make soup we said almost simultaneously. (*A* 88)

The approach to cooking presented in the above-quoted passage differs fundamentally from that of "a materially richer culture," which reveals its roots in the motto inherited from the times of slavery, that nothing must be wasted. It is also worth noticing the collective character of cooking the soup in the poem, and that only women participate in it – in the text there are mentioned: the poet's late grandmother, mother, and sister. In a way characteristic of Giovanni's poetry in general, the consciousness of race is inseparably intertwined with the consciousness of gender of womanist provenance.

It could seem that by writing about women who prepare food, the poet sends them back to the kitchen, reducing them to the stereotypical feminine role of cooks/feeders of their family, a role women have been to some extent freed from by the feminist movement. Yet, it would be rash to jump to this conclusion and to perceive the feminist attitude to traditional feminine roles in such a one-sided way. Susan J. Leonardi – a feminist critic who discusses food in literature by women – labels cooking an "almost proto-

typical female activity" (131), and does so not in order to sustain existing stereotypes, but with the purpose of demonstrating how this domain may contribute to building a sense of bonding and strength among women. A similar point is made by Harriet Blodgett who aptly notices that

> [f]eminism since the 1960s has significantly impacted the use of food imagery [in literature], for besides encouraging realistic, recognizable literary versions of female life in place of sentimental stereotypes, it has inspired vociferous complaints about woman's traditional role as purveyor of food yet also directly and indirectly championed her nurturing abilities. (263)

In this case the word 'nurturing' must be understood in both a literal and metaphorical sense. The latter unquestionably dominates within the field of black feminism and in literature written by African American women.

Implementing the motif of cooking Giovanni willingly underscores the vital role of women for the functioning of the African American community, as well as affirms their – to use Harriett Blodgett's apt term – "nurturing abilities" in physical and psychological meanings. In Giovanni's poems, women, when they cook and feed, offer not only food, but above all a sense of transgenerational identity and physiological memory of their own roots. In the poem "Symphony of the Sphinx" an important part of knowledge of 'what is Africa to me' has been assimilated not verbally but by the taste of okra that is a permanent ingredient of the home diet:

> Those bits of ham or roast beef or the skin of baked chicken and onions and carrots and cabbage and cloves of garlic and church and club and cabaret and salt and okra to bind the stew
>
> If it wouldn't be for okra maybe Africa wouldn't mean the same thing (*QBEP* 19-20)

The insertion of the words "church and club and cabaret" into the list of ingredients for stew made from various bits and leftovers reveals Giovanni's attempt to treat food as an element that binds her community on the spiritual and symbolic level. A similar role in the dish is played by okra. Okra is a vegetable of African origin whose characteristic feature is its slimy

stickiness that glues the dish together and positively affects digestion. The emphasis put on okra's culinary function may be interpreted as Giovanni's intention to give this staple ingredient of African diet a role in binding the black community together.

Another interesting culinary metaphor can be found in a brief reflection on the black revolution of the 1960s and 1970s placed in the poem "The Faith of a Mustard Seed." Arguably, in this case it is used for the purpose of revealing a lack of sense of real community in the activities of radicals who turned their back on tradition and who marginalized women:

> I like my generation for trying to hold these truths self-evident. I like us for using the weapons we had. I like us for holding on and even now we continue to share what we hope and know what we wish.
>
> And if we just could have found a way to keep the barbecue warm, the chitterlings cleaned and frozen, the pork steaks pounded and the beer on ice we might have gone just that much further.(…) (*BFAC* 13-14)

This passage demonstrates that in Giovanni's understanding food is invested with a certain ideological and political potential. Moreover, the poet underlines its anti-doctrinaire character. In her view food has an obvious function to remove strict divisions and rigidly established categories in her community. Its role is to make people come and *be together*, not just unite and *do something* for a particular cause.

Such an attitude toward the question of food has serious significance for Giovanni's ambition to bring black women close together, disregarding differences between them such as social status, age, and education. By entering the kitchen with her poems and by including recipes for heritage food in her texts, the author of *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* proves that the presence of an educated woman and poet in the kitchen is not an anachronism, and is as natural and positive as a housewife's leaving the kitchen and entering the public sphere. It can be interpreted as a gesture of refusal to embrace the binary oppositions that force individual women to choose between two extremes, which – as a result – leads to lack of understanding and solidarity between them. Patricia Yaeger mentions a similar need to cross the barriers set up by the strict rules of functioning within the pa-

triarchal system, and reject too the unequivocal placement of women in language by contesting the opposition between silence and full acceptance of patriarchal norms. The scholar puts emphasis on the possibility of using the "happy tongue" which is free from the necessity of placing itself in the existing categories decreed by the power of (patriarchal) tradition. By using a 'happy tongue of the kitchen,' Giovanni removes the apparently obvious divisions between women, and establishes a space of communication and freedom.

Ethel Morgan Smith underlines the fact that Giovanni's poetry is as deeply rooted in African American culture as food. The critic says that "[t]he offering of food is the teaching and practice of family and feeling. Food is about tolerance and how we relate to each other, and therefore, how we relate to ourselves" (174). A similar aspect of food is pointed out by Mary Anne Schofield who understands it as a "metaphoric matrix, a language that allows us a way to get at the uncertainty, the ineffable qualities of life" (1). For Giovanni food and poetry are inseparable as they both express black women's identity and creativity. In the poem "Paint Me Like I Am" Giovanni goes so far as to define poetry as a linguistic form of soul food, as a 'nourishment' that all black Americans need, a staple diet that allows them to sustain their energy and thanks to which they can trespass their personal limitations: "We need food for the Soul / We need poetry… We deserve poetry / We owe it to ourselves to re-create ourselves". (A 35). Hence, in her recent output the art of poetry approaches a state of cooking, and both writing and preparing meals become simultaneously means of expressing black experience and an appetite for blackness.

In the six subsequent volumes of poetry, from her 1983 collection *Those Who Ride The Night Winds* to the latest 2009 *Bicycles: Love Poems*, Giovanni has managed to create a poetic patchwork, with mutually complementary components: commemoration of outstanding African Americans; frequent reference to social and political events (historical and contemporary) important from the black perspective; a motif of patchworks; and culinary motifs. Sharing her directly expressed personal views and concentrating on her private experiences, Giovanni remains a poet of revolutionary origins, in the sense of being involved in public matters concerning black Americans and affirming their positive identity which springs out of a readiness for mutual support. The author of *Blues: For all the Changes* represents this support mainly through the metaphors of patchwork-making and prepar-

ing soul food dishes. As a result, she brings to the surface of discourse the importance of the presence, activity, and creativity of black women, remaining one of them and expressing their truth. This fundamentally womanist standpoint confirms that Giovanni speaks in an authentic voice of the wild zone.

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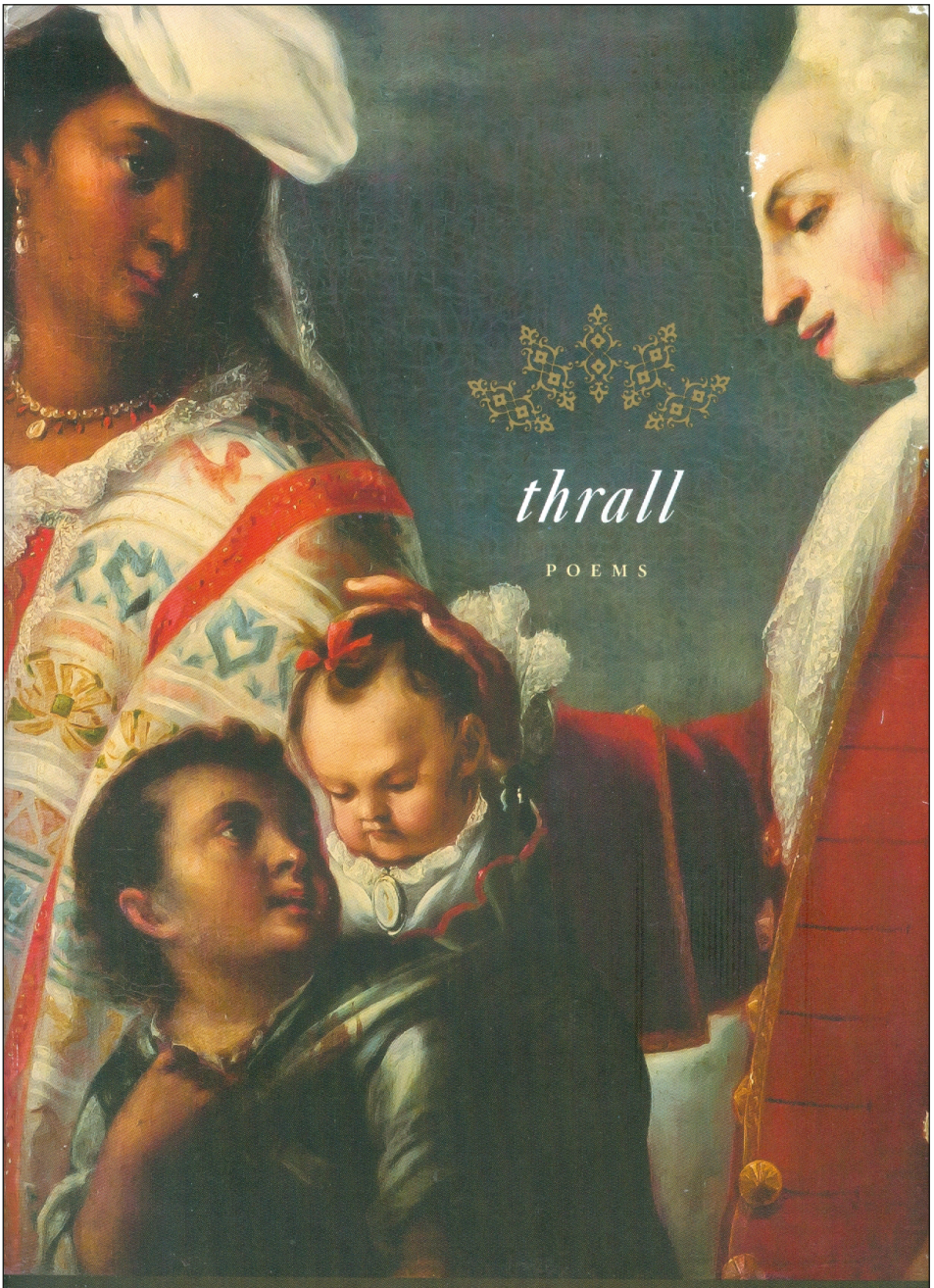

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POEMS

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Chapter Four

Homeward Dove: Nomadism, Rita Dove's "World"-Travelling and "unfamiliar neighborhoods"

Moving through changing sceneries – in geographical/spatial, cultural, and intellectual terms – is a constant strategy in Rita Dove's exploration of various 'worlds' and her own identity as a poet of the post-Black Aesthetic generation. Her poetic journeys have always been simultaneously outward- and inward-oriented: the movement in space has been accompanied and complemented by the movement of thought, and by acute awareness of her position as a subject molded by such categories as gender, race, class, education, and age. Dove's literal and metaphorical *nomadism* allows her to borrow and assemble her poetic material across seemingly rigid categories, and work towards the "legitimate universal" which, in George Kent's (112) formulation, is a function of one's experience. Thus, Dove can be perceived as Trey Ellis's "cultural mulatto" – a black artist "educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures" who can "navigate easily in the white world" (Ellis 235) represented in her poems by Europe with its history, culture, and art. Even though Malin Pereira (2003: 94) suggests that in Dove's poetry "[u]ndergirding all is cosmopolitanism," which frees the black poet from entrapment in a narrowly defined black landscape (e.g. the ghetto which stands for home), it would be interesting to complement this observation with Maria Lugones's concept of "*world*"-*travelling* which refers to friendly visiting of the experiential space(s) of the Other(s). Interestingly, among the "worlds" that Dove "travel[s] to lovingly" (Lugones 17) are old black "*unfamiliar* neighborhoods" (Dove 1999: 88; italics mine), a phrase that points out that her homecoming(s) are essentially different from those demanded by black revolutionary poets of the 1960s/70s such as Sonia Sanchez. As Dove states directly in "QE2. Transatlantic Crossing. Third Day," a poem which skillfully uses the trope of the Middle Passage, "I'd go home if I knew where to get off" (85).

This chapter locates Dove's poetry at the nexus of the above-mentioned categories. It focuses on the question of changing landscapes in her poetry while underscoring her powerful instinct for homewardness, and their functional connection with her redefinition of the identity and role of a black poet of the post-Black Arts Movement generation.

In the brief poem "*Wake*," which is part of a sequence forming "A Suite for Augustus," a personal section in Dove's debut collection *The Yellow House on the Corner*, the female persona states: "My heart, shy mulatto, wanders toward / The salt-edged contours of rock and sand / That stretch ahead into darkness" (Dove 1993: 25). Taken as a confession, these words express Dove's longing to venture into new territories, confronting unfamiliar landscapes, being lured by the endlessness of experiences promised by new vistas waiting in the fascinating darkness on the horizon. In the context of a clearly romantic relationship between the speaker and Augustus, the next line: "But you stand in the way," can be understood as a realization of the limitations represented by a permanent relationship that the young female subject is not yet ready for. Instead of settling down, she chooses to follow her desire to wander. However, this statement should not be read merely in a narrowly personal manner since Augustus is not only the persona's lover but also a US soldier stationed in the Middle East and happy to move up in the military ranks, as clarified by "*Back,*" the poem which comes immediately after "*Wake*". The solidity of this figure represents an obstacle on the way to poetic-cum-personal development; walking past him becomes a necessary step towards self-definition.

In this way Dove problematises her human-and-poetic position, emphasizing both self-awareness as a black woman who 'just in time' saves herself from being trapped in a love plot and Americanness (symbolized by Augustus), associated with colonizing the world by military control and economic exploitation of its natural resources. For him Kuwait equals career: "Down / through columns of khaki and ribbons, / escorted at night.../ You think: how far I've come," whereas she – as we remember – remains mesmerized by "[t]he salt-edged contours of rock and sand" (Dove 1993: 26), completely useless from a pragmatic point of view, and longs for "darkness" which gains an additional *racial* meaning as it is wandered toward by the poet's "heart" referred to as a "shy mulatto." In contrast with Augustus's certainty and, to use Marilyn Frye's (1983) term, his masculinist/capitalist-cum-military "arrogant perception" of the world, the result of which

is reduction of the metaphysical desert landscape into merely "the radiance / of oil fields" (Dove 26), the female persona prefers a non-intrusive exploration of the world, whose pre-condition is 'shyness' and emotional involvement.

It must also be noticed that the speaker refers to her heart not only as "shy" (which excludes any possibility of conquering and exploiting other lands or lands of Other(s), suggesting gentleness, sensitivity, and respect for the object of perception but not timidity, let alone fear), but also as "mulatto," which brings to mind the concept of "cultural mulatto" launched by Trey Ellis in his New Black Aesthetic manifesto. As Ellis (235), who classifies himself in this category, puts it:

> a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world... We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white or black people....Today's cultural mulattoes echo those 'tragic mulattoes' critic Sterling Brown wrote about in the Thirties only when they too forget they are wholly black.

Even though Ellis's proud announcement of the rich complexity of his cultural mulatto experience and enthusiastic expansionism is checked by Dove's strategy of 'shyness,' she too combines an exploration of the "multi-racial mix of cultures" with a constant awareness that as a person and poet she is "wholly black." It seems that for Dove-the-cultural-mulatto her natural habitat is a constantly changing landscape, the moving through of which allows her not only to discover the world, but also to comprehend and actively reshape her identity, so as to avoid entrapment in the cage of the narrowly defined category of blackness forged by luminaries of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. Her personal and artistic freedom is achieved through intellectual confrontation with the experiences of other people – experiences which occurred at different times in history in various, frequently distant, places in Europe, Asia, North Africa, and North America. This strategy protects her from the black solipsism of the earlier generation, and simultaneously makes her acutely aware of subtle aspects of her own personal/poetic identity resulting from the interaction between specific categories such as gender, race, class, education, and age. It is dif-

ficult to resist the impression that her movement in space, and the fluidity of experience that it generates, allows Dove to rebel against the concept of blackness as a strict, predominant, and self-explanatory category defining African American identity, anchoring it within the limits of what Baraka calls *home*: the *black* ghetto, *black* history, *black* culture, *black* ideology and *black* (self-) awareness. Simultaneously, her blackness becomes liberated as a result of this constant confrontation with other experiences and, in consequence, gives her freedom enough to revisit the old black neighborhoods.

Dove's collections of poetry abound with references to various geographical sites and places – almost without exception mentioned by name – all over the globe: Paris, Versailles, Florence, Siena, Rome, Munich, Willendorf, Delft, Tunisia, China, Alexandria, Argos, Corinth, Damascus, Jerusalem, Eastern Europe, Dominican Republic, Washington D.C., New England, Kentucky, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana to mention just a few locations actually visited by the poet or travelled to in imagination. Also, sometimes the very titles of her individual poems emphasize movement, changing places, being in a state of transition and impermanence: "The Transport of Slaves From Maryland to Mississippi," "Early Morning on the Tel Aviv-Haifa Freeway," "The Sahara Bus Trip," "Corduroy Road," "On the Road to Damascus," "On the Bus with Rosa Parks," "QE2. Transatlantic Crossing. Third Day." Thus, Dove creates a poetic unquiet-spirit persona who does not wish to take root and remain situated or fixed in one place, and who simultaneously chooses strongly culturally-coded locations for her poetic peregrinations. In this sense she chooses to function as, to use Ross Posnock's (12) term, a black "world citizen," and also – by erudite implementation in her references to, and materials borrowed from, a range of cultures – follow the "cosmopolitan" path within the African American literary and intellectual tradition (e.g., DuBois, Locke, Hurston, Ellison, Baldwin, Hayden).

Dove's critics and commentators have noticed the poet's almost compulsive strategy of perpetual travel through a physical/cultural landscape. And as she herself says in the poem "Early Morning on the Tel Aviv-Haifa Freeway," noticing discreet manifestations of intense horror and beauty of the world around her, "We should stop / but drive on" (Dove 1993: 124), the critics often speak about *nomadism* as an essential quality in her works. Nonetheless, they ascribe different meanings to this term: Ekaterini Geor-

goudaki (1991) and Therese Steffen (1997) talk about *displacement*, *exile,* and *migrating* in their respective discussions of Dove's *ouevre*, whereas Malin Pereira takes a somewhat separate and more precise view, emphasizing the fact that these are not categories resulting from one's free choice, but are determined by external circumstances. The latter critic acutely points out that the exile is not only "forever displaced" but also "in a sense 'countryless,'" while the migrant changes one location for another and is "often fixed in a lower class" (Dove 2003: 95) – surely not categories that apply to Dove. Pereira chooses to use Rosi Braidotti's (22) conceptualization of the term *nomad* which "does not stand for homelessness or compulsive displacement; it is rather a figuration for the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity". For Braidotti, *nomadism* is not merely the practice of moving from place to place, but rather a

> theoretical figuration for contemporary subjectivity – out of the phallocentric vision of the subject [that represents a] situated, postmodern, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject.... This subject can also be described as postmodern/industrial/colonial, depending on one's locations. In so far as axes of differentiation such as class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and others intersect and interact with each other in the constitution of subjectivity, the notion of the nomad refers to the simultaneous occurrence of many of these at once. (1,4)

Such an understanding of *nomadism* applies perfectly to Dove's way of speaking and probing the world in her poetry – and not only in the case of her mature poetry as claimed by Pereira, since Dove from her very first volume has spoken 'in tongues' as a black, American, mother, lover, daughter and granddaughter, erudite writer, artist, traveler, conference participant, etc., always negotiating with herself and the world the position from which she speaks. Statistically, she is most frequently concerned with various aspects of female experience that become available to her not only from everyday personal and professional occurrences, but also through confrontation with the fates of individual women ranging from historical figures like Fiametta, Boccaccio's beloved muse, speaking in despair about the plague; Catherine of Alexandria, who rebuked the emperor Galerius Valerius Maximinus and was condemned to be broken on the wheel; Cath-

erine of Siena, who received stigmata and became politically and socially active; Tou Wan from ancient China, who without open complaint accepts her inferior position as a woman and wife; Nestor's wife, talking about her loneliness; Claudette Colvin, the first person to resist segregated buses in Montgomery, Alabama; and Rasha the black Dove – a circus artist painted by Christian Shad; to Dove's grandmother, whose life story is presented in the "Canary in Bloom" section of *Thomas and Beulah*; a slave woman Pamela and her unsuccessful attempt to run away from a plantation; a house slave hearing her sister being raped; a slave Belinda, petitioning the "honorable Senate and House / of Representatives of this Country" to sever the "Binds of Tyranny" for blacks (Dove 1993: 28); to the mythological Demeter and Persephone whose story is retold in the reality of contemporary Paris. Thus, it seems to be only partially true that Dove "speaks with the authority of an artist who claims the world's civilizations as her rightful heritage" (Georgoudaki, 1991b: 430). The poet herself goes further than that by giving voice to women so different from herself: by relating their fates without idealizing them, she deliberately and consistently alters the cultural landscape she travels through while simultaneously and continuously redefining her own identity in the process.

Confrontation with 'otherness' without being morally judgmental does not only concern Dove's poems about women. An identical approach can be seen in the case of the male characters she confronts in her works – including the dictator of the Dominican Republic Rafael Trujillo, who in 1937 "ordered 20,000 blacks killed because they could not pronounce the letter 'r' in *perejil*, the Spanish word for parsley" (1993: 136). In "Parsley" Dove attempts to reconstruct his thought processes along with his covert motivation for ordering the slaughter, yet she does so not in order to explain, let alone excuse the murderer, but in order to try to understand.

Thus, Dove's nomadism and movement through changing cultural landscapes turns out to be less an attempt to keep a poetic travelogue and more an epistemological strategy. Without it, no serious – or even real – understanding can take place, a decided contrast to the attitudes advocated by her immediate poetic predecessors, Black Arts Movement activists like Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti, who demanded from African American poets that they, to use Robert Stepto's (167) terms, 'immerse' in black culture rather than 'ascend' toward white artistic standards and norms like the 'integrationists' Robert Hayden or Melvin Tolson, choosing black par-

ticularity and cultural separatism over the so-called 'universality' of human experience. Nomadism allows Dove not only to avoid black parochialism, but also to discover and represent the relational character of human experience, working towards what George Kent calls the "legitimate universalism" which, as has been already said, is a function of one's experience rather than internalised intellectual constructs and assumptions. In this aspect it can be interpreted as a version of Maria Lugones's "'world'-travelling," presented by her as an efficient way of knowing oneself and knowing others.

The feminist philosopher Lugones distinguishes two types of "worlds" and the two types of travel they determine: "[t]here are 'worlds' we enter at our own risk, 'worlds' that have agon [in Roger Caillois' sense of the term], conquest, and arrogance as the main ingredients in their ethos.... But there are 'worlds' that we can travel to lovingly and travelling to them is part of loving at least some of their inhabitants" (17). Lugones extends Hegel's concept that "self-recognition requires other subjects" by disagreeing with him that "it requires tension or hostility." She maintains that "travelling to someone's 'world' is a way of identifying with them...because by travelling to their 'world' we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*. Only when we have travelled to each others' 'worlds' we are fully subjects to each other" (17).

Among the worlds that Dove "travel[s] to lovingly" are the old black "unfamiliar neighborhoods," a phrase that points out that her *homecoming(s)* are markedly and intentionally different from those of Black Arts Movement poets of the 1960s/70s such as Sonia Sanchez. As demonstrated in chapter two, the latter poet in her manifesto-poem "Homecoming" (9) talks about two chronologically separate kinds of homecoming. The first one was visiting home after being away for a longer period of time during her studies in college, when she discovers her own estrangement from the place – she perceives her return as done "tourist style." The second return that the poem talks about is the result of a mature decision ("now woman"). It also requires leaving behind the white intellectual world represented here by "freudian dreams" and "the newspapers." The persona rejects this world as generating a false picture of black reality: "i have learned it / ain't like they say / in the newspapers." Thus, for Sanchez there existed only an either-or choice, an attitude characteristic of the Black Aesthetic period: the truly black artist rejects white discourse, merges with the black community and serves its spiritual and ideological needs. In Dove's poems, however,

such regular returns are always treated with ambiguity and sometimes even with self-distancing (often ironic), which nonetheless does not erase love or any sense of belonging to the place. The most striking examples are provided by poems such as "'Teach Us to Number Our Days,'" "Nigger Song: An Odyssey," "Shakespeare Say," "QE2. Transatlantic Crossing. Third Day" and "The Pond, Porch-View: Six P.M., Early Spring."

The poem entitled "Teach Us to Number Our Days'" sketches a depressing picture of the ghetto landscape:

> In the old neighborhood, each funeral parlor
> is more elaborate than the last.
> The alleys smell of cops, pistols bumping their thighs,
> each chamber steeled with a slim blue bullet.
>
> Low-rent balconies stacked to the sky.
> A boy plays tic-tac-to on a moon
> crossed by TV antennae… (Dove 1993: 13)

This is a dreary landscape of hopelessness, with everpresent violence and death, permeated by a claustrophobic atmosphere ("Low-rent balconies stacked to the sky") enhanced by the motif of imprisonment ("a moon / crossed by TV antennae"). Dove's poem evokes the subject matter and atmosphere of Sonia Sanchez's "Bubba" (1984: 55-58) which relates the story of the poet's sensitive young schoolfriend, an artistic soul Bubba who, trapped in ghetto life with its lack of any prospects, becomes a drug addict who finally ends his life by jumping off a roof. Nevertheless, unlike Sanchez's short story-poem, Dove's is no didactic 'consciousness raising' text, but a disinterested statement of hard facts. In consequence, it should come as no surprise that "Teach Us to Number Our Days" is followed by "Nigger Song: An Odyssey" whose theme is the impossibility or even illusion of escape out of this place:

> We six pile in, the engine churning ink:
> We ride into the night.
> Past factories, past graveyards
> And the broken eyes of windows, we ride
> Into the grey-green nigger night.
> …

Weeds clutch at the wheels;
We laugh and swerve away, veering
…
The green smoke sizzling on our tongues...

In the nigger night, thick with the smell of cabbages,
Nothing can catch us.
Laughter spills like gin from glasses,
And "yeah" we whisper, "yeah"
We croon, "yeah." (Dove 1993: 14)

As Pereira (59-60) claims, this poem "seems a next-generation response to being set free from the black arts movement.... This generation is free... to 'swerve away' from the restrictions of the past, although the weeds 'clutch at the wheels,' free to go straight into the heart of blackness, the green again connoting the potential for growth." It must be pointed out that such an interpretation results from the critic's somewhat arbitrary decision to pair the poem with "Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, In a Dream" (Dove 1993: 12). However, placed after "Teach Us to Number Our Days" with its bleak ghettoscape, it appears to treat more with the ironic impossibility of leaving home even in a situation when black youth are free from the necessity to obey the artistic and ideological proscriptions of their elder brothas and sistuhs. The poem is replete with references to intoxication and altered states of consciousness: "the grey-green...night," "weeds", "the green smoke sizzling on our tongues", "[l]aughter spilling like gin from glasses," suggesting that Dove may here be confronting her own suspicion or even anxiety that, in spite of her generation's freedom from ideological obligations, escaping the ghetto is still only an illusion since the joyride ends at the point of departure: "we ride / Into the gray-green nigger night. / … / thick with the smell of cabbages," in whose context the proud and arrogant statement "[n]othing can catch us" sounds tainted with irony and ignorance. Especially that the stench of cooked cabbage slightly evokes Gwendolyn Brook's poem "kitchenette building," in which a first person plural subject observes somewhat soberly:

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound, not strong
Like "rent," "feeding a wife," "satisfying a man."

> But could a dream sent up through onion fumes
> Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
> And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,
> Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Brooks seems to imply that black dreams are earthbound, whereas Dove's poem suggests at least the possibility of a youthful and careless attempt to flee from whatever anchors one in the drab reality of the ghetto, "past factories, past graveyards / And the broken eyes of windows." Brooks's poem is a thirteen-line-long sonnet written in a world where sonnets fear to tread – not in "some untrodden regions of [the] mind" or "somewhere else," but in the reality of want, deprivation, and "dream[s] deferred" where, as Amiri Baraka puts it in "Jitterbugs," "your ass" is. Here there is no poetic space, no time for perfecting the fourteen lines when the body hopes to get in the bath in order to relax ("We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it"). Dove's lyric maintains cautiously that the blind, half-conscious drive "into the night," even if its end is predictable, is a necessity for the younger generation in order to achieve a state of desired cosmopolitanism. Yet, the escape ride is accompanied by uncertainty and even fear, as the last two lines suggest: "And 'yeah' we whisper, 'yeah' / We croon, 'yeah.'" The whispering and crooning have a taste of uncertain hesitation and of giving oneself courage. The poem seems to say that there is no escape but navigating a long way back home – hence the subtitle: "An Odyssey."

Nevertheless, the most disquieting thing in Dove's lyric is the usage of the word "nigger" - in its title, and twice in the text of the poem. On the one hand it could imply that all naïve dream-rides "into the grey-green nigger night" turn into self-delusions as there is no getting away from the ghetto, no matter what, where the phrase the "nigger night" stands for safety and predictability, and is innocent by default. That is the condition on which we can take seriously the poet's explanation of her intentions in an interview with Therese Steffen, where she says that her concern was "to redeem the word, to reimagine it as a black concept" ("Darker Face" 108). On the other hand, the problem with the 'N word' still remains a challenge to readers – not only does it not need redemption as a "black concept" (since it was already reimagined that way by jazz musicians who sometimes used it as a term of endearment or a compliment on another cat's skillful musicianship), but also because it provokes strong reactions of protest against its

assumed racism. One such reaction came from Alice Walker, who refused to read her own poems, placed in the same anthology, at a book promotion, to which Dove responded promptly, defending her artistic freedom. Dove says in an interview with Steffen:

> Alice objected to the use of the word "nigger," even by a black writer. I wrote her a letter explaining my philosophy about the word.... She responded with a polite, dignified letter in which she acknowledged my right to use whatever words I choose but argued we [i.e. black people] should not use such words in the company of white people. My immediate reaction was: "No one's going to put me in that kind of cage–not whites, not blacks, not even myself. I am trying to make the best poem I possibly can, a poem that will defy whatever nefarious purposes people may want to use it for." So in spite of my precautions, the very thing I feared – being called to task by the Black Arts Movement – happened early in my career. ("Darker Face" 108, 112)

Her using the word "cage" suggests an imprisonment in narrowly defined uniform roles based on a juxtaposition of black vs. white, individual vs. community, proper vs. improper, etc. Nonetheless, it also represents some space, a space that limits opportunities rather than broadens horizons.

The theme of homecoming has appeared regularly in Dove's subsequent collections of poetry. Its importance and discreet centrality in the output of the author of *Thomas and Beulah* becomes evident when Dove opens her 1993 *Selected Poems* with an "Introduction" that contains a long poem "In the Old Neighborhood" (Dove 1993: xxii-xxvi), describing her visit home for her sister's wedding after a longer absence. The poem's mood is far from joyful and affirmative (unlike that of Nikki Giovanni's childhood and home poems, "Nikki-Rosa" for instance): the central image being a recollection of a starling "caught in the blades" (Dove 1993: xxv) of an attic fan. Here Dove clearly makes an allusion to her bird-surname, choosing for herself as a poet and person the role of a homing pigeon – a bird that regularly flies long distances away from home but always returns to the nest.

"In the Old Neighborhood" received an interesting and insightful response from the critics. Peter Erickson questions the merely documentary character of the poem, arguing that its surface (i.e., the sister's wedding)

functions only as a pretext and creates an opportunity for the persona/ Dove to dive into deep reflections on the racial stereotypes in her poetic career. This line of interpretation based on the sequence of images evoking blackness oppressed by whiteness (black-gloved raccoons, the Moor of Venice, a white rock sitting on a black lawn, Dakar, and the poet's father's sense of failure) discreetly yet consistently demonstrates how race, as a cultural force that pretends to be a natural force, has affected Dove's creativity and sensitivity towards her own blackness. The conclusion of Erickson's interpretation of the poem is reached through a reference to the striking similarity of Dove's "In the Old Neighborhood" to Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "Sympathy," with its motif of a caged bird which also can be understood, through Dove's "outlandish parody," as an "exploration of problematic inheritance" (Erickson 97).

Malin Pereira extends Erickson's field of undercurrent references, noting that the "poem elaborates a general tension between cages and freedoms" (110). Moreover, the cages and freedoms are interdependent, as "what cages one often constitutes an occasion for freedom," freedoms referred to as "loopholes" (110). Read from this perspective, the poem reveals its deeper layer of meaning as a series of apparently insignificant events which, one after another, form an oppressive force constituted of world literature classics, newspaper articles her father wants her to read, food rituals, and her parents' interventions in her life. At the moment of the visit she stands in her mother's kitchen, the epitome of a "dutiful daughter" (Dove 1993: xxii), "whole again whole again now" (xxiv), becoming aware that the "names [in the newspapers] [are] as / unreal as the future, even now" (xxiii). Pereira concludes that in the poem "the speaker refuses to privilege Dove's adult globetrotting life as being more real than her childhood" (111). Yet one cage or "cubbyhole" is not accompanied by a corresponding freedom - the one of the fan which ensnares a starling, as if the poet is drawing a parallel between the bird caught and killed by the blades of the fan and herself – both the child she remembers and the adult poet. "*At least I 'm not the one*," she says to herself together with the others. But the question which comes immediately after the moment of relief which reads "Who could guess it would be / a bird with no song, / no plumage worth stopping for?" (xxv) not only corresponds to Dunbar's lines from "Sympathy" ("I know why the caged bird sings, ah me, / When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore"), but also refers to the questions Dove asks directly in the introduction to

her *Selected Poems*, the questions she calls "ultimate – and ultimately unanswerable...: How does where I come from determine where I've ended up? Why I am what I am and not what I thought I'd be? What did I think I'd be? Where do I reside most completely?" (xxi). Having put forward those fundamentally essential questions for a writer, Dove concludes by saying that "In the Old Neighborhood" is a poem "about the old neighborhood – its physical topography as well as the spiritual and aesthetic terrain" (112). The words "topography" and "terrain" suggest travelling and discovery-cum-exploration of a new world even though this world is one's childhood home.

Nonetheless, this homewardness of Dove's poetic "world"-travelling has its price in anxiety and uncertainty, which seem to serve as a pre-condition for a sense of belonging to a particular black location. Characteristically, the poet deals with them either by adopting someone else's voice or by assuming an ironic tone when speaking in the first person singular. They come forward most conspicuously in "Shakespeare Say," "QE2. Transatlantic Crossing. Third Day" and "The Pond, Porch-View: Six P.M., Early Spring."

The first poem maintains a subtle dialogue with Langston Hughes's "The Weary Blues," sometimes regarded as the first consciously and intentionally written blues-poem ever, and with Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith" (even the abundance of "s" sounds in the title connect Dove's and Brooks's poems). It concentrates on the experience of Champion Jack Dupree, a black blues singer who extensively toured Europe, staying away from home for extended periods of time. Yet his style of clothing, despite the fact that it apparently is cosmopolitan ("a tan walking suit / with a flag on the pocket," "with / a diamond studded / ear") should bring to the reader's mind Satin-Legs Smith, a blues and jazz lover, in whose wardrobe there are "wonder-suits in yellow and in wine" (Brooks, 171). Thus, his sartorial code anchors Dupree in the old neighborhood, Satin-Legs Smith's natural environment. Also, both are *flaneurs*, although Satin-Legs can wander around the familiar streets only on Sundays, whereas Champion does it permanently, and in unfamiliar neighborhoods, wherever he performs. Like Hughes's weary pianist-character, Dove's (1993: 89) Dupree is tired and even exhausted, yet still capable of investing his heart and soul in the music he performs:

He drums the piano wood,
crowing.
…
poor me
poor me
I keep on drifting
like a ship out on the sea

Like Hughes's pianist "with his ebony hands on each ivory key," which suggests the claiming of Western white culture's heritage by a black musician, Dupree "*drums* the piano wood" (emphasis mine), a reminder that the piano belongs to the family of percussive instruments of African origin. Thus, from his strictly musical perspective, black music's home is in Africa. The song that he hums to himself (the excerpt in italics) contains a twice repeated self-mocking phrase "*poor me*," followed by the image of a ship drifting on the sea. "Poor me" may suggest his own trials and tribulations, but also may refer to the experience of an archetypal black person transported across the Atlantic to Americas. The metaphor of the ship is quite ambiguous, as it obviously makes a connection with the capture and enslavement of black Africans, and with the futility of their efforts to rebel and sail back home to Africa (a reference to the *Amistad* echoes in the word "drifting"). Nonetheless, since Frederick Douglas's autobiography, in black imagination a ship is also related to the idea of freedom and the possibility of a return to home. At that moment Dupree faces a choice between the cosmopolitan lifestyle he has led so far, whose essential feature is impermanence, and going back home to the South, where his mother's wisdoms would take care of him.

When caught in winter in Munich (Rita Dove also lived in Germany for a few years) he moans to himself:

my home's in Louisiana,
my voice is wrong,
I'm broke and can't hold
my piss;
my mother told me
there'd be days like this. (Dove 1993: 91)

It must be emphasized, however, that the musician's complaints are made with full awareness that "even the mistakes / sound like jazz" (90), which means that they are a necessary part of his blues identity, essential for his artistic creativity. Being broke, ill, in bad singing form, experiencing alienation and isolation far away from the home talked about with ironic distance, all allow Dupree to maintain his authenticity on stage. The reference to the inability to "hold [his] piss" brings into the poem an element of folksy, dry, self-mocking sense of humour. It also evokes home, a motif enhanced by the fact that Dupree recalls what his mother said when warning against her son's choice of career as a blues musician who would spend his life in a state of permanent instability and quasi-homelessness. Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that a quasi-homelessness does not equal cosmopolitanism, as the latter encompasses the idea that, equipped with a plethora of tools and skills to decode various cultural codes, you make yourself at home and, by extension, quite comfortable everywhere. Whereas homelessness is ontologically an entirely negative state of being, which always results from a series of unfortunate events and disasters and never from choice.

In her poem entitled "QE2. Transatlantic Crossing. Third Day" (1999: 84-5), another work that draws on the ship metaphor, Dove herself reveals a similar paradox connected with *travelling in the "world"* of blackness rather than living in it:

> Here I float on the lap of existence. Each night
> I put this body into its sleeve of dark water with no more
>
> than a teardrop of ecstasy, a thimbleful of ache.
> And that, friends, is the difference–
> I can't erase an ache I never had.
> Not even my own grandmother would pity me;
> instead she'd suck her teeth at the sorry sight
> of some Negro actually looking for misery.
>
> well, I'd go home if I knew where to get off.

Significantly, the Middle Passage cannot be experienced second-hand or as a simulation of the historical experience of transported slaves in an act

of creative imagination (except for the trance-like spiritual embodiments as described in the chapter on Sonia Sanchez), and when an attempt is made to pretend it can, it results in nothing more than mediocre, pathetic emotions: "a teardrop of ecstasy, a thimbleful of ache." "World"-travelling, which becomes nothing more than "float[ing] on the lap of existence" and turns into "actually *looking for* misery," ends in the speaker's disorientation and confusion concerning the question of where home is and where her journey ends.

As a result, Dove's subject is caught in a permanent movement whose result is, on one hand, the defamiliarization of black "neighborhoods" and on the other, disappointment mixed with resignation to the possibility that the journey has come to its end 'right here, right now.' This point is made perfectly clear, even though – characteristic of Dove – slightly ironically, in "The Pond, Porch-View: Six P.M., Early Spring," the poem closing her 1999 collection titled *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*:

> Where I'm now
> is more like riding on a bus
> through unfamiliar neighborhoods–
> chair in recline, the view chopped square
> and dimming quick. I know
> I vowed I'd get off
> somewhere grand; like that dear goose
> come honking down
> from Canada, I tried to end up anyplace but here.
> who am I kidding? Here I am.

Nevertheless, if the irony of this excerpt is interpreted as a device screening the speaker's relief revealed in the final short statement "Here I am," we can conclude that Dove perceives her poetic nomadism and her homecoming(s) not in terms of antinomy but dialectic (in the Hegelian sense of the term). Contrary to being mutually exclusive, the two terms, which organise Dove's understanding of the role of an African American poet of the post-Black Arts Movement generation, function as mutually complementary opposites necessary for successful "world"-travelling based on constant departures from home and returns back to the old black – forever unfamiliar – neighborhoods.

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Chapter Five

"[T]he Memory of ... Home" or, against the "treachery of nostalgia": Natasha Trethewey's Deconstructive Reconstructions of the Past

> "Nostalgia (from *nostos*–return home, and *algia*–longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's fantasy." (Svetlana Boym, xiii)

Race and its close relationship with history and memory/historiography have always been both unavoidable and controversial issues in the United States. The philosophical and sociological analyses of their functioning in American history and the influence they have had on the country's social dynamics prove that race and memory/historiography are not so much a biological reality and the unquestionable truth respectively as two interconnected, pragmatic ideological constructs that have allowed the maintenance of asymmetrical power relationships between white Americans and so-called "people of color," particularly African Americans. Both race and history have also received much attention from writers in the United States – both black and white, who have tackled them directly or reflected symbolically, defended them as an essential components of group identity or deconstructed them in order to expose their arbitrariness and frequently oppressive nature. Arguably, Natasha Trethewey – one of the most important contemporary American poets – confronts the issue of race on three different, though inseparable, levels: personal, artistic/formal, and one pertaining to the history of the American nation as well as the history of memory/historiography.

Since her publishing debut, on the threshold of a new century and millennium, Natasha Trethewey has become one of the most distinguished and appreciated living American poets. She has published four volumes of poetry: *Domestic Work* (2000), *Belloq's Ophelia* (2002), *Native Guard* (2006), and *Thrall* (2012), establishing her reputation as a formally skillful and intellectually profound artist. Her first collection of poems was the winner of the 1999 Cave Canem Poetry Prize, awarded annually for the best first collection of poetry by an African American writer, and the recipient of two other local, Southern prizes; in 2007 her *Native Guard* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, arguably the most prestigious poetic distinction in the United States, promoting Trethewey to the level of national recognition. The publication of her latest volume, *Thrall*, came at the moment when its author was nominated for the post of Poet Laureate Consultant of Poetry to the Library of Congress, the highest institutional position for a poet in America, and the collection's high artistic and, let me use an unfashionable word, *moral* value apparently contributed to her appointment for a second term. Equally important, albeit slightly overshadowed by her poetry, is Trethewey's only prose work, *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2010).

Trethewey has been unanimously highly praised by critics for the verbal discipline, linguistic elegance, and formal sophistication of her poems, which range from rhymed and unrhymed sonnets, via blues, to ghazal. The poet's conspicuous skill in the implementation of such well-established genres, which come from various traditions and have their own complex histories, and the striking clarity and control of language used for the purpose of making direct comments on external (i.e. non-verbal) reality and for communicating ideas, anchor her verse in the apparently anti-experimental, non-avant-garde, non-elitist, "traditional" current within American poetry. The word "traditional," however, should not be treated as synonymous with "conservative," as Trethewey's *ouevre* is characterized by both ingenuity and inventiveness in terms of her attitude to revered poetic forms, and insightfulness and uncompromised ideological clarity in terms of her observations and comments.

Simultaneously, Trethewey's artistic strategy seems to be a perfect example of the realisation of Jonathan Holden's prediction made in 1991, i.e. that American poetry, then locked in a cul-de-sac of elitism and self-refer-

entiality, must return to the tasks it performed before the Modernist breakthrough. Holden (59-60) assumes that

> [t]he changes in American poetry will be in the domain of 'subject matter,' of content ... ; and one could...almost predict what the subject matter will be. It will consist of the very material that [contemporary academic criticism] dismisses as the 'verse essay': 'discursiveness,' stories and ideas, many of them explicitly moral... – in sum didactic subject matter, together with imaginative rhetorical tactics to give this material dramatic force, without being preachy or pedantic.

The critic believes that in order to "enlarge the estate of [American] poetry," poets must not continue to stay in the ivory tower of words and demonstrate a disregard for the needs of their potential audience, who "want poetry with a 'message'". Thus, in spite of the predominant poetic practice and widespread opinion among the academic guardians of purity that didacticism contaminates poetry, there is – according to Holden – a longing on the side of the readers for poetry that offers them ethical guidance and moral involvement, as well as for poetry that tells humanly engaging stories and touches upon profoundly human issues. Meeting both of those expectations leads to a reintegration of the poet with the community. Nowhere are these issues as strictly connected as in Trethewey's digging the motif of home, which turns into a nostalgic drive in her poetry.

In *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation on the Mississippi Gulf Coast* (2010), a book-length essay-reportage on the aftermath of the 2005 hurricane in the Gulf Coast region and its – especially black – population, in which deeply personal reflections are neatly intertwined with ecological, historical, and cultural analyses, Natasha Tretheway recalls a peculiar situation that happened to her on an occasion when she went shopping with her grandmother. They met her grandmother's friend, also in the company of her granddaughter, whom the old woman introduced first by her nickname, but quickly adding the girl's real name. As the poet reports, her grandma, "a proud woman – not to be outdone – replied, 'Well, Tasha's name is really *Nostalgia*,' drawing the syllables out to make the name seem more exotic. I was embarrassed and immediately corrected her.... Perhaps she was trying to say Natalya, the formal version, in Russian, to which Natasha is the diminutive.... But my grandmother's misnomer is compelling...; she

was onto something when she called me out with it" (62). As a result, the recollection of that occurrence provokes a more general and profound reflection. As Trethewey (63) says:

> I think of Hegel again: "When we turn to survey the past, the first thing we see is nothing but ruins." The *first* thing we see. The fears for the future, expressed by the people I spoke with on the coast, are driven by the very real landscape of ruin and by environmental and economic realities associated with development, but they are driven by nostalgia too. When we imagine a future in which the places of our past no longer exist, we see *ruins*. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in my own relationship to the memory of my home.

Here Trethewey emphasizes the intimate connection she observes between her personal recollections of her lost home and the collective sense of tragedy, loss, and uncertainty about the future experienced by the people whose lives have been overturned by the hurricane. Even though Trethewey talks about the sense of loss apparently in terms of space ("ruins," "the places... no longer exist," "my home"), the poet perceives those lost places in essential relation to transformation and time ("a future," "the past"), which makes her poetic-historical undertakings as oriented towards mutability (which allows questioning the past) rather than towards respect for the great monuments of history (which would equal petrification of the past). Simultaneously she points at nostalgia as a mechanism that can activate and to a large extent determine both the ways of experiencing the past and the attitude to the future.

In this chapter I argue that – as the two italicized words in the excerpt above (i.e. *first* and *ruin*) suggest – in Tretheway's work a deeper survey of the past does not stop at what is initially seen. On the contrary, it requires taking another step, a move away from an amorous relation with the past and based on narration as an act of imagination and will that, arguably, consists in reflection on and exploration of the *ruins* by individual memory combined with historical research, with an implied acceptance of the finality of the fact that "the places of our past no longer exist" and cannot be restored. I want to briefly explore how Trethewey's deconstructive reconstructions of the past function within two separate realms: the personal, which is dedicated to a rethinking of the poet's emotional-cum-intellectual

relationship with her father Eric Trethewey, a poet and amateur historian; and the historical, which confronts the history of the South, and especially the Civil War, from a black perspective, and also reflects on the relationship between Natasha Trethewey, as a poet from the South, with the Fugitive Poets and their Agrarian ideology. Obviously, these realms are closely interrelated and sometimes even inseparable, but what is most important from the point of view of this article, their apprehension depends on how Trethewey understands the notion of nostalgia.

The motif of longing for homecoming combined with a sense of the inaccessibility of the past – both personal and historical – occurs regularly in Trethewey's poems, whose persona, arguably, can usually be treated as identical with the poet herself. In "Prodigal," for instance, the speaker initially defines herself as "a daughter of this place" (*BK* 79), only to realize that now she has come back to "the old neighborhood" as "a pilgrim" who does not belong anymore in this place – she only "*wanted* to say I *see*, / not I *watch*" (*BK* 81; former italics mine). Having asked rhetorically: "What is home but a cradle / of the past?" Trethewey concludes calmly yet with barely concealed pain that despite the fact that she "spoke...a native tongue," "[t]oo long gone, [she's] found / [her] key in the lock of the old house / will not turn – a narrative of rust" (*BK* 79). All this suggests not only that for her, separation from home has created a longing, a longing quintessentially insatiable that resists linguistic operations to unlock the past. A similar Heraclitean theme – of the impossibility of return to a place, even one thought of as home, because of the flow of time – appears in the poem "Theories of Time and Space" which opens Trethewey's 2006 Pulitzer Prize winning collection *Native Guard*.

The poem's separate position and the fact that it precedes the first part of the volume makes it an introductory poem that prepares the ground and sets up a spatiotemporal and intellectual frame for the rest of the collection: profoundly intimate poems dealing with the tragic death and memory of Trethewey's mother, philosophical meditations and revisionistic poems on the history of the South, and autobiographical poems about childhood, growing-up, and the mixed-race identity of the poet herself. The beginning of the poem, and thus the collection, reads: "You can get there from here, though / there's no going home. / Everywhere you go will be somewhere / you've never been. ..." (*NG* 1) Nonetheless, such impossibility does not reduce the nostalgic desire itself and cannot be taken at face value – hence

the persona proposes to make an experiment to see for herself: "Try this:" she says, and gives herself (and the reader) directions: "head south on Mississippi 49, one-/ by-one mile markers ticking off / another minute of your life. Follow this to / ... / the pier at Gulfport where / riggings of shrimp boats are loose stitches / in the sky threatening rain. Cross over / the man-made beach, 26 miles of sand / dumped on the mangrove swamp..." (1). But it is also conspicuous that the intensity and precision of those recollections goes together with their striking selectiveness and fragmentariness – the "tome of memory" she brings with herself contains a number of "random blank pages" (1). The only attainable certainty is left to the mechanical ways of preserving the past: "On the dock / where you board the boat to Ship Island, / someone will take your picture: / the photograph – who you were – / will be waiting when you return" (1). Or is it?

In "Mythology," a poem from the fifth collection *Thrall*, a sequence of three dreams gives the persona access to the deeper layers of the past which so far have remained obscured by the mythological tales told Trethewey by her father when she was a girl, becoming at the same time a confrontation with the dangers of nostalgia as a means of manipulating and distorting the truth. Unlike the three dreams themselves which, like dreams in general, veil reality in often bizarre images and fantasies and express latent emotions indirectly and metaphorically ("Here is the past come back / as metaphor" (*T* 41)), the poem deals not so much with the past as with the power of nostalgia openly and directly: its first part/dream is called "Nostos" (a Homeric word meaning homecoming), while the word "longing" (*algia* in Greek) appears in part 2; the subsequent parts of the sequence are based on three carefully selected clear references to Homer's *Odyssey* – the cyclops, Cetus-like Scylla, and the Sirens, respectively; the word "nostalgia" itself is used in part 3 when Trethewey says:

> In this dream I am driving
> a car, strapped to my seat
>
> like Odysseus to the mast,
> my father calling to me
>
> from the back – luring me
> to a past that never was. This

is the treachery of nostalgia.
This is the moment before

a ship could crash onto the rocks,
the car's back wheels tip over

a cliff. ...

If Boym (XIII) identifies nostalgia not only as a "sentiment of loss and displacement" but also a "romance with one's fantasy," Trethewey points out that a third possibility exists: a romance with *someone else's* fantasy, in this case her father's. Such a modification of the latter part of Boym's insightful distinction makes Trethewey's relationship with the past almost incestuous in character, which seems to perfectly agree with the poet's intention, as the powerful erotic undertones of Odysseus's contact with the Sirens are strikingly obvious. In Homer's story, Odysseus, in order to hear the song of the Sirens whose seductive power is irresistible, asks his crew to plug their ears with wax, tie him to the mast, and not release him when the ship is passing the Sirens, no matter how much he might beg for it. In this way the king of Ithaca satisfies his curiosity (and partly his appetite for sensual pleasure) but, by using a cunning trick, saves himself from the consequences that would lead to his utter destruction.

In Trethewey's poem the persona, mesmerized by her "father's voice" finds herself uncertain and fragmented. Her self splits into several roles, considering the performance of simultaneous mutually exclusive actions as if debating whether, in order to avoid the catastrophe, she should resist temptation or surrender to it: "Steering, I must be / the crew, my ears deaf / to the sound of my father's voice; / I must be the captive listener / cleaving to his words" (*T* 43-44). However, distinguishing between the "sound of [the] voice" and "his words" the persona declares that she is going to resist the erotic (located in the materiality of the voice) but wishes she were arrested by the wisdom of the message (which apparently is doubtful). Eventually, a third possibility appears, as she says: "I must be / singing this song to myself" (*T* 44), which suggests achieving independence from her father's pernicious influence and gaining complete control over her own life.

The most conspicuous feature of all the dreams is the motif of immobility and the entrapment of the poet, and her need to act against "the treach-

ery of nostalgia" in order to release herself from the burden of "a past that never was," symbolized by myths of confrontation with and the necessity to overcome monsters. The setting of the first part of "Mythology" is "the dark night of childhood" with the father telling young Natasha "giant and flame" bedside stories, this time "reciting / the trials of Odysseus," among which there is *his* favorite story about Polyphemus ("Always / he begins with the Cyclops"), whose giant presence looms in the way to the "light at the cave's mouth / bright as knowledge" (*T* 41). In "Questions Posed by the Dream," the second poem in the sequence, the persona, "a girl again," enters her family house at night with "everyone sleeping" to confront the past that takes the shape of a "figure / formed – as if it had risen from the Gulf / – of the crushed shells that paved / our driveway." The image refers to the Odyssey again as it evokes the Cetus-like Scylla, a motif which is enhanced in the unanswered question that closes the poem: "Why is it here blocking the dark passage / to my father's bookshelves, his many books?" (42) It is essential to notice that in both cases the monstrous presence, arising from the stories told by the persona's father, represents a force responsible for keeping her in darkness and an obstacle to her gaining access to impartial knowledge, intellectual freedom, and enlightenment. The phrases "cave's mouth" in "Nostos" and "that long hallway" in "Questions Posed by the Dream" suggest metaphorically a process of being (re)born as an independent person, capable of critical thinking and deconstructive access to her father's library, situated – let me repeat – "at the other end" of "that long hallway," "that dark passage."

Since, as revealed in "Mythology," her father's controlling tales – both the ancient myths he selects for telling young Natasha " as if / to ease [her] into sleep" (*T* 41) and the narratives of a personal and historical "past that never was" – are identified in "Siren" as "the treachery of nostalgia" (as opposed to nostalgia as a means of deep reflection), it is quite important to briefly refer to Svetlana Boym's distinction between two kinds of nostalgia: "restorative" and "reflective." A few quotations from the critic's work clarify the difference between them:

> [Restorative] nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiratory theories. Restorative

> nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and time." (41)
>
> "The past for the restorative nostalgic is a value for the present. The past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot... Reflective nostalgia is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude." (49)
>
> "Restorative nostalgia evokes national past and future, reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory... they can use the same triggers of memory and symbols, the same Proustian madeleine pastry, but tell different stories about it." (49)
>
> "Nostalgia of the first type gravitates toward collective pictorial symbols.... Nostalgia of the second type is more oriented toward an individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself. (49)

Needless to say, in the context of Boym's observations, the abovementioned examples from Trethewey's work demonstrate that her father's attitude to the past has a restorative dominant, whereas her own tends towards reflective nostalgia. Nowhere is this juxtaposition more striking than in their arguments about the history of the South preserved in material form in her father's "many books" that represent the official version of the past owned by the dominant group, a version that excluded other perspectives (such as African American versions of American history), regarding them as marginal. Trethewey's access to her "father's bookshelves" turns out to be simultaneously deconstructive and reconstructive as explained by the poet, in a conversation with Rosemary Magee (Hall 28):

> My father and I had debates about Jefferson for years. Because my father, like many of us, sees Jefferson as such a hero, it was really hard to also see his shortcomings, to integrate into who he was these things that are less attractive, things from *Notes on the State of Virginia* and ongoing. But once Annette Gordon-Reed started publishing and winning the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for her books, I started sending them to my father every Christmas so that

> I could prove to him that I had won this argument about Jefferson. Now he wants to act as if he never said those things, and yet he did. But it's all about ideology in a lot of ways.[1]

To remain within the frame of allusions to the Odyssey, it can be pointed out that Gordon-Reed's books played the role of Trojan Horse since the daughter's gift to her father allows her to win the argument. As Trethewey explains, however, it was not just her private victory: their "conversation … is deeply personal but also very public – not just a conversation for father and daughter, but a conversation for Americans about race …" (28). Even if the "same triggers of memory" and the same "collective … symbols" are used (such as Thomas Jefferson), we can say that – to refer back to Trethewey's words from *Beyond Katrina* quoted above – nostalgia-driven fears for the future may move in two opposite ways: towards a future in which an indisputable, conservative, and exclusive vision of history prevails, or towards a future founded on deconstructive-cum-integrative work in the archives which attempts to reconstruct the reality, rather than the monuments, of the past (which is precisely what Gordon-Reed did). Obviously, the Trojan Horse subterfuge is not the major strategy implemented by the poet – at the very end of the poem "Nostos" Odysseus prepares himself to move out of Polyphemus's cave toward the light "honing a pencil-sharp stake," an allusion to the act of writing as a release from bondage and reaching for freedom.

The clash between these two nostalgic attitudes (corresponding to restorative and reflective nostalgia, respectively) leads to a scalpel-sharp analysis of the neatly interwoven combination of personal, discursive, and historical complexities of race carried out in the poem titled "Enlightenment" from Trethewey's fifth collection *Thrall*, where looking at Gilbert Stuart's portrait of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello[2] serves as the point of departure for deconstructing the issue of race in America. The poem begins with an insightful observation on the painterly technique used in the picture – the

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[1] The books meant here are: *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy* (University of Virginia Press, 1997) and *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2008).

[2] The painting referred to in the poem is the portrait of Thomas Jefferson painted in 1805 by Gilbert Stuart, which is on permanent display at Monticello. It can be seen on the Monticello official website page: http://www.monticello.org/site/house-and-gardens/jefferson-portrait-gilbert-stuart-painting

persona states that the author of the Declaration of Independence is "rendered two-toned: / his forehead white with illumination – / a lit bulb – the rest of his face in shadow, / darkened as if the artist meant to contrast / his bright knowledge, its dark subtext." The use of the phrase "as if" suggests a possibility combined with lack of certainty whether the painter really meant to achieve such a symbolic effect, but leaves no doubt that the persona herself intends to interpret the juxtaposition of light and shadow in this manner. The reader must also not overlook the potentially ironic overtone of the words and phrases pointing at Jefferson's rationalism and wisdom emanating from his powerful intellect, symbolized by "his forehead *white* with illumination" and, for apparently comic effect, compared to "a lit bulb", which establishes the speaker's conspicuously non-idolatrous, even slightly disrespectful attitude toward the Founding Father. This strategy serves the purpose of getting at the "*dark* subtext" of his "*bright* knowledge" (my italics), exposing the Janus face of the Enlightenment, whose great ideals (liberty, fraternity, and equality) stand next to a pseudo-scientific codification of racial difference, also reflected in the contradictions of Jefferson's private life.

The poem immediately brings this "*dark* subtext" into the light for scrutiny: "By 1805, when Jefferson sat for the portrait, / he was already linked to an affair / with his slave;" a statement which subtly introduces another subtext – that Monticello was not only the neoclassical residence of the third President of the United States, but also a plantation where he kept his slaves. The slave referred to in the poem was Sally Hemings, who had a long-lasting relationship with her owner and gave birth to six children of his. Nonetheless, Jefferson's fatherhood of Hemings' children was questioned for many years by some historians, a debate known as the Jefferson-Hemings controversy. In Trethewey's poem the issue is clearly resolved as the persona states that Jefferson had an intimate relationship with Hemings.

At this point, however, the poem becomes deeply personal. After the initial ekphrastic-cum-interpretative statements, the perspective shifts away from the seemingly general to the openly particular, signaled by the appearance of the personal "I" (clearly identifiable as the poet herself) and her recollection of another visit to Monticello made years before, also with her father. Trethewey remembers that her father, like those historians who

questioned Jefferson's fatherhood of Hemings' children, attempted to preserve an idealized image of the President:

> The first time I saw the painting, I listened
> as my father explained the contradictions:
>
> how Jefferson hated slavery, though – *out*
> *of necessity*, my father said – had to own
> slaves; that his moral philosophy meant
>
> he could not have fathered those children:
> *would have been impossible*, my father said.

In the past the persona-young Natasha was placed at the receiving end of the debate: "I'd follow my father from book / to book, gathering citations, listen". She remembers having been educated and enlightened by her father's erudition and skillful rhetoric; rhetoric which, by clever choice of phrases and subtle implementation of the third conditional, effectively concealed its manipulative power and enforced the speaker's own vision of history, pre-empting any possibility to respond. In retrospect Trethewey perceives this father-daughter / teacher-pupil relationship as a sort of mental-and-emotional entrapment for both of them: "When I think of this now, / I see how the past holds us captive, / its beautiful ruin etched on the mind's eye".

Nevertheless, "[t]hat was years ago," and the present-day persona-adult child Trethewey notices how much matters have changed within those years, within the public as well as her personal dimensions. In the former category she notices that the previously nameless slave Thomas Jefferson had an affair with is now mentioned by name and has become part of the official history the Monticello tour guide shares with the visitors:

> Now, we take in how much has changed:
> talk of Sally Hemings, someone asking,
>
> *How white was she?* – parsing the fractions
> as if to name what made her worthy
> of Jefferson's attentions: a near-white,
>
> quadroon mistress, not a plain black slave.

Simultaneously, the question "*How white was she?*" asked by a visitor demonstrates that thinking along the color line is deeply instilled in the American (sub)conscious. The spontaneous – and apparently innocuous – application of the one-drop rule, by which, in the past, the American system of real racism classified any person with even 1/64th African ancestry as black and thus inferior (also legally), suggests that in fact not so much has changed at the level of private discourse, where "parsing the fractions" still serves as an instinctual and useful way to measure a person's value. In the eyes of the visitor, Sally Hemings' "near-white[ness]", her being a "quadroon [i.e. only one quarter black] mistress", makes her absolutely superior to a "plain black slave", which seems to make "Jefferson's attentions" more understandable and, perhaps, excusable as if their (sexual) relationship was equal. As a digression it is worth quoting Stephanie Coontz (xix) who, discussing what she calls the "nostalgia trap" in research into the history of the American family, mentions the Jefferson-Hemings controversy as a context for the Monica Lewinsky scandal and points out that "some historians seemed to be more shocked that the author of the Declaration of Independence had sex with Sally Hemings than by the fact that he *owned* her," which in the scholar's opinion "testifies to the staying power of the truncated definitions of morality."

This chillingly pseudo-scientific, precise racial categorisation of the Founding Father's mistress as a mixed-race person carries for Trethewey some profoundly personal meanings, as she herself is a mixed-race person whose mother was black and father white. That is another subtext discovered by the new persona during the second visit to Monticello:

> I did not know then the subtext
> of our story, that my father could imagine
> Jefferson's words made flesh in my flesh –
>
> *the improvement of the blacks in body*
> *and mind, in the first instance of their mixture*
> *with the whites* – or that my father could believe
> he's made me *better*. (…)

In an interview with Magee, Trethewey talks about her need to revise Jefferson's intellectual and moral heritage concerning his concept of race and attitude toward slavery on both public and personal levels. She mentions a "sentence in a letter by [him] that scholars in many ways have intentionally left out", a sentence which puts in a different light "his decision to keep slaves" (27) and does not allow the maintenance of the "out of necessity" option. As the poet observes, it "became quite a money-making venture that made him think, 'Maybe I should keep them instead.' That changes the narrative of how we've thought about his being troubled about slavery" (27), the narrative that also her father had promoted. But, as the quotation above shows, there is also a strong intimate aspect in Trethewey's revising of Jefferson's influence – the possibility that her own father, in his fascination with Jefferson as a hero, could have thought about his mixed-race daughter in racist terms borrowed from *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Gaining this awareness becomes equal with the poet's personal enlightenment.

As demonstrated above, the poem shows that uncritical belief in American traditional ideals, characteristic to the standpoint founded on restorative nostalgia, a belief that for decades affected the work of historians, leads to fabrication of the desired past and generates a specific discourse to support and enhance it. As Coontz (xiii) says, "[n]ostalgia for a safer, more placid past fosters historical amnesia..., deforming our understanding of what is and is not new," an observation which corresponds to Michael Kammen's claim that "[n]ostalgia...is essentially history without guilt. Heritage is something that suffuses us with pride rather than shame" (xvi). Boym comments that "[n]ostalgia in this sense is an abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure" (xvi). Such an attitude is exposed in Trethewey's "Southern History" (*NG* 38), a poem based on a personal memory of a series of senior-year history lessons on slavery, during which the class watched *Gone with the Wind* (according to the teacher: "*a true account of how things were back then*") and the teacher quoted from a textbook which promoted the idea of the 'happy slave' ("*Before the war, they were happy /.../ The slaves were clothed, fed, / and better off under the master's care*"). As the persona-Trethewey puts it, it was all "a lie / my teacher guarded", but immediately she places herself in the position of a passive accomplice by adding: "Silent, so did I," taking her share of responsibility for maintenance of a one-sided, romanticized, idealized, and completely false vision of the history of the South. Nevertheless,

what should strike us in this almost deceptively simple poem is the fact that the personal responsibility of its teenage-persona is juxtaposed with the ethical irresponsibility of institutions and authorities.

In her reflections on the phenomenon of nostalgia, Boym (xv) also observes that nostalgia "goes beyond individual psychology" as "[i]n broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition." Arguably, such an approach is conspicuous in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, a famous and influential collection of essays on the culture of the South by writers (the so-called Fugitive Poets) and historians who identified themselves as Southern Agrarians, and whose intellectual project was dedicated to a defense of the values of traditional rural society in the South against modernization. (I mention the Agrarians here since they appear as a group in "Pastoral," another dream-poem by Trethewey, which I will refer to a bit later.)

The abovementioned obliteration of history, turning it into a private and collective mythology, permeates the volume in a number of ways, but it is most striking in the approach the twelve authors take on slavery and the black presence in Southern history. In most of the essays these issues are either completely avoided and made nonexistent or mentioned in a most cursory manner or romanticized in *Gone with the Wind* fashion. However, there are two interesting exceptions: Robert Penn Warren's defense of segregation and Frank Lawrence Owsley's explication of the racial contexts and results of the Civil War. It is worth quoting an extract from the latter to see the extremes of tendentiousness present in Agrarian discourse and their view of Southern history:

> [A]fter the military surrender at Appomattox there ensued a peace unique in history.... For ten years the South, already ruined by the loss of nearly $2,000,000,000 invested in slaves, with its land worthless, its cattle and stock gone, its houses burned, was turned over to the three million of former slaves, some of whom could still remember the taste of human flesh and the bulk of them three generations removed from cannibalism. These half-savage blacks were armed. Their passions were roused against their former masters by savage political leaders... who advocated the confiscation of all Southern

> lands for the benefit of the negroes, and the extermination, if need be, of the Southern white population. Not only were the blacks armed; they were upheld and incited by garrisons of Northern soldiers..., and at length they were given the ballot while their former masters were disarmed and, to a large extent, disfranchised. For ten years ex-slaves, led by carpetbaggers and scalawags, continued the pillages of war... (62-63)

When writing these words, Owsley was a professor of history at Vanderbilt University. Whereas *I'll Take My Stand* as a whole can be perceived as a clear example of the "treachery of nostalgia,"[3] Owsley's essay proves to what extent it may involve an intentional distortion of history. As Boym (16) points out, "[t]he rapid pace of industrialization and modernization increased the intensity of people's longing for the slower rhythms of the past, for continuity, social cohesion and tradition. Yet this...obsession with the past reveals an abyss of forgetting and takes place in inverse proportion to its actual preservation." It seems that restorative nostalgia (clearly we are dealing with such in the case of the Agrarian approach to the past) must be founded on selective amnesia.

The extract from Owsley's essay also demonstrates that restorative nostalgia tends to be expressed in a tone that is both solemn and hysterical in its righteousness, which agrees with another difference observed by Boym: "Restorative nostalgia takes itself dead seriously. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, can be ironic and humorous" (49). The latter is the case with Trethewey's "Pastoral" (*NG* 35), an unrhymed sonnet relating the poet's dream in which she poses for a group photograph together with the Fugitive Poets. They are lining up in front of the "photographer's backdrop" with a pastoral scenery painted upon it when drinks are being served: "a lush pasture, green, full of soft-eyed cows / lowing, a chant that sounds like *no, no*. *Yes*, / I say to the glass of bourbon I'm offered." Hidden behind the backdrop is the "skyline of Atlanta"; the "drone of bulldozers" drowns Robert Penn Warren's voice. Using such ironic juxtapositions, Trethewey exposes the sentimental, naïve, and kitschy aspects of the Agrarians' nostalgic idealizations of the South and their rejection of technological progress. At

[3] In the opening essay in the collection John Crowe Ransom emphasizes the role of nostalgia for remembering the past – ("Reconstructed but Unregenerate." 6)

the end of the poem, however, the issue of race is introduced – which suddenly gives the poem's irony a darker and profoundly serious tinge:

> *Say "race,"* the photographer croons. I'm in
> blackface again when the flash freezes us.
> *My father's white*, I tell them, *and rural.*
> *You don't hate the South?* they ask. *You don't hate it?*

The word "race," used by the crooning photographer as a means to raise the corners of the mouth as if in a relaxed smile, reveals how falsified and shallow the perception of the issue of blacks as "happy slaves" or "half-savage cannibals" was. Then the paradoxes of the principle of the one-drop rule are signaled by the reference to race as masquerade ("blackface") and persona-Trethewey's family background ("*My father's white...and rural*" which also implies that her mother is not, a statement that could have been made by any of Sally Hemings' children). The complexity of the poet's relationship with the South is emphasized in the question repeated twice with anxiety at the end of the poem: "*You don't hate the South?… You don't hate it?*". This question is a paraphrase of a question asked to Quentin Compson at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*, but unlike Quentin, Trethewey does not answer it.

Does Natasha Trethewey hate the South? Judging by the attention she has paid to its history and racial reality in her poetry, the answer must be both affirmative and negative. Far from glorifying the traditional South in the manner of the Agrarians, her poetry exhibits a profound personal-yet-civil interest in the South as a social and cultural phenomenon, but with an intention to overthrow its myths, correct its falsities, expose its lies and concealments, reveal the truth, and restore justice. Thematically her poetry is determined by her Southern identity – "I was fated to Mississippi," she said at a meeting with her readers at Emory University in 2011 (Hall 7). In this respect she brings to mind Seamus Heaney, whose influence and impact on her own work Trethewey herself recognises when she praises the Irish Nobel laureate not only for his uncompromising "pursuit of beauty and truth, but also justice" and for his "grappling with the difficult history and hardships of his homeland," which she perceives as identical with her own "calling to make sense of my South, with its terrible beauty, its violent and troubled past" (Hall 7).

This stance finds its fullest manifestation in "Native Guard," a brief sonnet cycle which consists of ten unrhymed poems that represent irregular entries in a journal written during the Civil War by a black soldier in the Union Army. The entries are dated from "November 1862" (when all three regiments of the Louisiana Native Guards, which consisted of men who had been slaves before enlisting, were mustered into service) to "1865" when the name of the black troops was changed into the Corps d'Afrique, "words that take the *native* / from our claim" (29), a comment which points at the process of marginalization and even erasure of black participation in the Civil War.[4]

The purpose of the "Native Guard" cycle is to a large extent didactic: to uncover and regain the part of history which had been as if *intentionally* forgotten and *institutionally* extracted from American national memory. Trethewey reveals that her discovery of those "unknown" facts and events was a matter of sheer coincidence in spite of her interest in history and the fact that they had taken place close to her home:

> I'd been going out to Ship Island – where the Louisiana Native Guards were stationed off the coast of my hometown – for years with my grandmother. It wasn't mentioned in the park ranger's tour that these black soldiers had been stationed there, that they were Union soldiers, guarding Confederate prisoners. I found out quite accidentally. I was talking to my grandmother in a restaurant, and a woman overheard our conversation. She said, "I think there's something else you need to know about the Ship Island." I assumed she was a schoolteacher or librarian, but she was more like a guardian angel because she told me this thing that sent me to the Gulfport public library. That's where I started." (Magee 22)

What followed was a careful historical research carried out by the author at the Library of Congress and in MARBL (Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library) at Emory University, where she studied historical documents, Civil War letters included. In this respect Trethewey follows in the footsteps of Robert Hayden, an earlier black poet who declared that he

[4] Such erasure can be strongly noticed in the politics of the Civil War monuments both in the South and the North. See: Kirk Savage.

wrote partly to correct misunderstandings about African American history. Trethewey explains her poetic-didactic mission in the following way:

> I am constantly met with people who have no idea that nearly 200,000 African Americans fought in the Civil War on the side of the Union. People think that African Americans were passive recipients of benevolence on the part of the Union and the president, and not that they took up arms to help push the country closer to realizing its ideals in the Constitution. Even as historians write about this and give lectures, some lay people have no idea. Can a poem help to fill in some of the gaps in that kind of erasure? Perhaps." (Magee 21)

The "Native Guard" cycle opens and ends with the statement "Truth be told" which, as Nagueyalti Warren (88) explains, is "an idiomatic expression in African American vernacular" used by people "when what they say is likely to be challenged or denied". The positioning of the statement emphasizes an intention to reveal the truth and restore justice in an act of communication with the reader, attempted both by the Native Guard persona and Natasha Trethewey herself. This intention is consistently enhanced throughout the sequence. The epigraph of "Native Guard" is a quotation from a speech known as "Address at the Grave of the Unknown Dead," delivered by Frederick Douglass in Arlington, Virginia in 1871: "If this war is to be forgotten, I ask in the name of all things sacred what shall men remember?" (*NG* 25), a rhetorical question that points at the need to sustain public memory since it can turn out to be surprisingly short.

Yet weakness of memory lies not only in its brevity but also in its selectivity and tendency to distort the past when memory is driven by the "treachery of nostalgia" that determines representation of that past, a phenomenon which can be counteracted only by recording events on the spot. The guard-persona declares: "I now use ink / to keep record, a closed book, not the lure / of memory – flawed, changeful – that dulls the lash / for the master, sharpens it for the slave" (25). The idea of the necessity to complement the official historical record and "fill in some of the gaps" with the missing black presence and experience is also symbolically reflected in the fact that the persona makes his entries in a white man's journal, writing over the "original" record: "this journal, near full / with someone else's words, overlapped now, / crosshatched beneath mine. On every page, his

story intersecting with my own" (26). Thus strong emphasis is placed on the inseparability of truth and justice, and on communicating them as the writer's ethical duty, the most important purpose of writing itself.

Trethewey implements historical research as a means to resist nostalgic memory and arrive at a 'fuller version' of national history. In the "Native Guard" cycle the poet introduces a sequence of "rediscovered events" connected with African American participation in the Civil War, using several recently published historical books, not so much as inspiration but as sources of objective information, which provide a context in which the eye-witness perspective of the sequence is grounded.[5]

Even though, as mentioned above, the point of departure for her research was the case of Ship Island, Mississippi, where the Fort Massachusetts prison camp for Confederate soldiers – "military convicts and prisoners of war" (47) – was maintained by the 2nd Regiment of the Louisiana Native Guards, the experiences and events the black guard's journal entries register allow us to think that, metaphorically speaking, the lash could not have been sharper for the black soldiers.

The sonnets / journal entries refer not only to black soldiers' experiences of regular, routine discrimination in the Union Army, but also to tragic events on a larger scale that reveal the essential monstrosity and evil present in racism. The former category includes for instance such things as being given meagre provisions (compared to white soldiers') and harder physical tasks ("we dig trenches, haul burdens for the army no less heavy / than before... /... Half rations make our work / familiar still") which is also reflected in discrimination on the linguistic level: "we're called supply units – / not infantry"; "I heard the colonel call it / *nigger work*" (25). The latter category includes three preposterously cruel events that happened to the Louisiana Native Guards at Pascagoula, Port Hudson and Fort Pillow, facts which had not been necessarily emphasized in books on Civil War history.

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[5] The historical books used in the sequence and listed in "Notes" are: David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American History*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2001; James G. Hollandsworth, *The Louisiana Native Guards: The Black Military Experience During the Civil War.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995; John Cimprich, "The Fort Pillow Massacre: Assessing the Evidence." Black Soldiers in Blue: African-American Troops in the Civil War Era. Ed. by John David Smith. Capel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002; and *Thank God My Regiment an African One: The Civil War Diary by Colonel Nathan W. Daniels*. Ed. by C. P. Weaver, Baton Rouge: Lousiana State University Press, 1998.

In the entry dated "April 1863" the persona reports matter-of-factly: "Today we buried / the last of our dead from Pascagoula, / and those who died retreating to our ship – / white sailors in blue firing upon us / as if we were the enemy" (28). As explained by Trethewey in the "Notes" section, this extract refers to the retreat of black troops outnumbered by the Confederates near Pascagoula, Mississippi, when "white Union troops on board the gunboat Jackson fired directly at them and not at oncoming Confederates" (48), killing and wounding several black soldiers. The commander of the black regiment Colonel Nathan W. Daniels called it "*an unfortunate incident*," and added that "*their names shall deck the page of history*" (28). His words appear unchanged in Trethewey's poem, only to make a link with the next entry dated "June 1863" which the persona opens with the following reflection: "Some names shall deck the page of history / as it is written on stone. Some will not" (28). This stoical remark introduces the Port Hudson incident: "Yesterday, word came of colored troops, dead / on the battlefield at Port Hudson; how / General Banks was heard to say *I have / no dead there*, and left them, unclaimed" (28). Drawing on information found in James G. Hollandsworth's book, Trethewey explains in the note to this poem: "During the battle of Port Hudson in May 1863, General Nathaniel P. Banks requested a truce to locate the wounded Union soldiers and bury the dead. His troops, however, ignored the area where the Native Guards had fought, leaving these men unclaimed. When Colonel Shelby, a Confederate officer, asked permission to bury the putrefying bodies in front of the lines, Banks refused, saying that he had no dead in that area" (48). By making the black soldiers physically nonexistent, General Banks removed them also from the discourse of commemoration. Seen from this perspective, Trethewey's poem restores them to public memory and the awareness of "lay people," extending the work of historians. Motivated by the "Truth be told" principle, the persona says: "I'm told / it's best to spare most detail, but I know / there are things which must be accounted for" (29), another statement that can be classified as coming also from Trethewey herself. Among these things there is "slaughter under the white flag of surrender – / black massacre at Fort Pillow" (29) – a Union garrison to the north of Memphis, which was taken by Confederates in April 1864. The Confederates ignored "several individual attempts by the black troops to surrender, and 'an indiscriminate slaughter followed' in which Colonel Na-

than Bedford Forrest (later, founder of the Ku Klux Klan) ordered the black troops to be 'shot down like dogs'" (49).

If, to quote Boym again, restorative nostalgia perceives the past not as a "duration but a perfect snapshot," Trethewey counteracts it by introducing into her reflection on the South a "historical and individual time" perspective. Inserting into the "Native Guard" cycle information from historical books and library archives, she resists and rejects accepting the widespread version of the past petrified in historical monuments and monuments of history as closed and complete. The "perfect snapshot" metaphor is especially applicable here as many of Trethewey's poems pertain to photographs from the past, both her personal and national past. Commenting on the role of photographs to provide her with "a given image from which to depart in [her] thinking about what had happened" she says that she has always been interested in not only what is in the picture, but also "[w]hat's being cropped out" (Magee, 19). Her poem "Photograph: Ice Storm, 1971" (*NG* 10) may serve as a good illustration of this point:

> Why remember anything
> but the wonder of those few days,
>
> the iced trees, each leaf in its glassy case?
> The picture we took that first morning,
> the frontyard a beautiful, strange place –
>
> why on the back has someone made a list
> of our names, the date, the event: nothing
> of what's inside – mother, stepfather's fist?

In her famous comment on photography, Susan Sontag (23) maintains that "the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses... In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand." It must be pointed out that in Trethewey's poem "what's inside" the house is outside the picture, cropped out. Looking at the photograph from Trethewey's childhood we do not see "the rough edge of beauty": "power lines down, food rotting / in the refrigerator," "the tired

face of a woman, suffering," "mother, stepfather's fist." In short, the sense of entrapment, oppression, hopelessness, and household violence (which led to the murder of the poet's mother by her second husband) are not there in the picture. Instead the photograph preserves and passes on an image of the past "made luminous by the camera's eye" (10), an image which would lure the uninformed viewer into a vicarious longing for going back home, returning in memory to the "good ol' days," if the persona-narrator/ the poet herself did not tell us otherwise.

By introducing a black presence in and black perspective on American history, and by creating her individual narratives of the past, alternative or complementary to those sustained by tradition and memory-controlling devices such as photographic images, inherited stories and myths, the present Poet Laureate of the United States digs deep into her personal memory and the historical and cultural memory of her nation. Natasha Trethewey's deconstructive reconstructions of the past (both of her family and the South) are designed as acting against what she identifies as "the treachery of nostalgia," arguably a major obstacle on the way towards beauty, truth, and justice. The reader's prize and gain from the poet's refusal to be lured "to a past that never was" is what Boym calls the "perpetual [...] deferring [of] homecoming itself" (49).

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Chapter Six

(In)Visible Citizen in the Home of the Brave. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*

Claudia Rankine's *Citizen. An American Lyric* (2014) is a profoundly disturbing work, because of both its subject matter and the original formal way(s) its message is communicated. The book demonstrates how deeply inculcated are race-thinking and acting-upon-race in the attitudes and everyday personal, social, and institutional practice of contemporary Americans, and how prejudice against blacks manifests itself in situations ranging from governmental neglect of the black-and-poor victims of Katrina; to bias directed at the rich-yet-black in professional sport (Serena Williams, Zinedine Zidane); to hate crime, routine police profiling and brutality, mindless verbal violence encountered on a daily basis; to even more unobtrusive forms of racist micro-agressions taking place in the openness of the public forum and within the closeness of private life. The result is a prose-poetic-visual art tapestry, whose purpose is to problematize the notion of "citizenship" in America today, and its (in)visibility, which dares – through its extensive implementation of the apostrophe (the "lyric-*You*" in place of an expected lyrical *I*) and other innovative strategies (e.g. intermedial transactions) – to raise the question about the ineradicability of racist attitudes in the United States. Moreover, *Citizen* explores those issues in an emotionally controlled manner (something always appreciated by academic criticism), yet manages to strongly affect its readers on the level of their emotional responses.

Rankine's book, regarded as a successful "artistic representation of the American *zeitgeist*" and, arguably, a Condition of America prose poem which reveals racism in its legion forms in the Home of the Brave, has been the winner of the 2014 National Book Critics Circle Award (Poetry) and that same year's finalist of the NBCC in the category of "Criticism," which suggests a recognizable degree of its "genre indeterminacy" (Shockley). Reviews of *Citizen* tend to call its components (and quite rightly) "essays,"

"lyric essays," "prose narratives," "stories," and "prose representations" significantly more often than "poems" or "prose poems" even when the volume as a whole is referred to as "poetry" (Shockley). What is more, its connections with the visual arts has been disregarded almost completely. Evie Shockley points out that her Black Poetry course students spontaneously observed that "*It's not like poetry," which they meant as a compliment* rather than criticism, emphasizing the striking legibility of Rankine's text. What they specifically and powerfully responded to in *Citizen*, in comparison to the many other works they studied together as part of the course, was an "unmediated access to a recognizable truth"(Shockley).

I'm far from saying that the students are right in their indirect rejection of most of present poetic production (especially written in the mode of the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E school) as "inaccessible" and in consequence useless, yet I find it symptomatic that drawing attention to the book's "unconventionality as poetry" largely serves the purpose to "signal its accessibility as prose" (Shockley). In other words: "the qualities that mark *Citizen* as 'experimental' poetry are precisely the qualities that make it inviting, despite its disturbing subject matter, to a generally poetry-phobic public" (Shockley). Rankine seems to have found a formally effective way to capture and communicate the black experience of racism in contemporary America by separating her prose poems from the present standard of sophisticated linguistic complexity. *Citizen* challenges currently circulating critical categories in many respects. It is formally inventive and technically experimental in an 'average reader'-friendly manner, situating itself a world apart from the "poetics of interruption and illegibility" (Davidson, 602) by foregrounding its own communicative and affective functions. By communicating its message directly, it is almost a poem with a purpose, openly didactic in its intention – it is not a coincidence that its last sentence reads: "It was a lesson."

It is as if we are back to the 1980s' debate run under the banners of New Formalism and New Narrativism as to how poetry can regain the attention of the reading public and how to make it matter. As Shockley observes, "the book's reception seems fundamentally linked to its perceived transparency" which "makes this poem's presentation of white supremacist ideology ... so much clearer, more shocking, or more unavoidable, even in the eyes of poetry's devotees, than the legions of poems that black poets have composed in this vein during the century of the color line and in the decade

and a half of this new century." A similar view is expressed by Marjorie Perloff:

> What does it mean to be a black citizen in the US of the early twenty-first century? Claudia Rankine's brilliant, terse, and parabolic prose poems have a shock value *rarely found in poetry*. These tales of everyday life – whether the narrator's or the lives of young black men like Trayvon Martin and James Craig Anderson – dwell on the most normal exteriors and the most ordinary of daily situations so as to expose what is really there: a racism so guarded and carefully masked as to make it all the more insidious. [italics mine]

I'd like to emphasize Perloff's phrase "rarely found in poetry" in spite of the fact that this quotation appears in the blurb, where exaggerated praise is a norm. What the critic means by that is that Rankine seems to have found a formally effective way to capture and communicate the black experience of racism in contemporary America by separating her prose poems from the present standard of sophisticated linguistic complexity.

Nevertheless, Rankine makes categories travel in *Citizen*. The subtitle emphasizes *Citizen*'s belonging in the generic tradition of the lyric despite the fact that the lyrical I remains almost non-existent here; instead, the poem draws on extensive implementation of apostrophe. Also the phrase "American lyric" situates Rankine's book outside of the well-established categories of African American lyrical poetry whose essential feature is its close connection with black musical forms, especially the blues. It can be classified as a prose-poem essay or a narrative prose-poem, which anchors itself within the poetic 'conservative' trend identified as "new narrativism." The book's sociological orientation and emphasis on poetic form's and language's capacities to inform, instruct, emotionally move, and morally engage the reader, go together with activating more 'conventionally experimental' strategies as it merges the verbal, visual, and performance arts, using photographs, TV programs, film frames, "situation videos," installations, and conceptual art. In the second subchapter I am going to take a selective look at the volume's formal inventiveness in these respects. Now, I would like to discuss the notion of black citizenship and visibility, which is a subject directly related to the idea of home, and its limitations dictated by evergreen racism.

I. Citizenship and Black (In)Visibility

As Lauren Berlant (36-38) states:

> [C]itizenship is a relation among strangers who learn to feel it as a common identity based on shared historical, legal, or familial connection to a geopolitical space. Many institutional and social practices are aimed at inducing a visceral identification of personal identity with nationality. In the United States, this has often involved the orchestration of fantasies about the promise of the state and the nation to cultivate and protect a consensually recognized ideal of the "good life".... This training in politicized intimacy has also served as a way of turning political boundaries into visceral, emotional, and seemingly hardwired responses of "insiders" to "outsiders." Thus we can say that citizenship's legal architecture manifests itself and is continually reshaped in the space of transactions between intimates and strangers. ...This shaping of the political experience of citizens and noncitizens has been a focus of much recent scholarship and political struggle. These discussions contest the term *citizenship* in various ways: *cultural citizenship* describes the histories of subordinated groups within the nation-state that might not be covered by official legal or political narratives …; *consumer citizenship* designates contemporary practices of social belonging and political pacification in the United States; *sexual citizenship* references the ongoing struggle to gain full legal rights for gendered and sexual minorities; and *global citizenship* describes a project of deriving a concept of justice from linkages among people on a transnational or global scale …The histories of racial and sexual standing in the United States provide the clearest examples of the uneven access to the full benefits of citizenship.

Rankine probes under the facade of the middle-class and academic norms, standards, and fantasies in order to see what is understood by a "consensually recognized ideal of the 'good life,'" how it is cultivated and protected, and why some groups of people receive "access to the full benefits of citizenship" whereas others do not. These questions are asked indirectly and always in the context of still existing racist practices in their multiple forms, ordinariness, and banality. The poet confronts the reader with the everyday reality of the post-affirmative-action world of supposed

political correctness, clumsily practiced by the people involved. As Rob Bryan puts it, "[h]er setting is not the blighted inner-city ghetto or the prison, but the manicured lawns of white suburbia and the genteel interactions of the academy." Among them there are two accounts of situations involving credit cards:

> The man at the cash register wants to know if you think your card will work. If this is his routine, he didn't use it on the friend who went before you. As she picks up her bag, she looks to see what you will say. She says nothing. You want her to say something – both as witness and as a friend. She is not you; her silence says so. Because you are watching all this take place even as you participate in it, you say nothing as well. Come over here with me, your eyes say. Why on earth would she? The man behind the register returns your card and places the sandwich and Pellegrino in a bag, which you take from the counter. What is wrong with you? This question gets stuck in your dreams. (54)

> When the waitress hands your friend the card she took from you, you laugh and ask what else her privilege gets her? Oh, my perfect life, she answers. Then you both are laughing so hard, everyone in the restaurant smiles. (Rankine, 148)

These two situations point at the apparently unconscious, instinctual, and somehow "routine" exclusion of even upper middle-class black Americans from "consumer citizenship," a category which we would expect to designate one of the most color-blind "contemporary practices of social belonging". Simultaneously, they serve as a means of "political pacification in the United States." Yet, in both cases the credit card becomes a sort of magical object that grants or denies access to the "white good life," called by Laurent Berlant the "snow-globe fantasy ... (which insists that black subjects have good manners and remain convenient)" (8), the "perfect life" not only of consumerism, but of personhood, suddenly awakening political awareness of the submerged racial criteria of inclusion and exclusion.

The situations quoted above also reveal two mutually dependent aspects of racism. The "cash register" story demonstrates that racism is something that puts its human targets at a disadvantage (since they are "visible"), whereas the "restaurant" vignette emphasizes "white privilege" as a

discreet yet fundamental component of racial asymmetry in America (here the black subject is "invisible"). This pendulum effect is well-explored and explained by Peggy McIntosh who defines "white privilege" as an "invisible package of unearned assets that I [as a white person] can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions ...." McIntosh provides a list of forty-six "special circumstances and conditions" white people experience even though they didn't earn them but have been "made to feel are [theirs] by birth, by citizenship, and by virtue of being a conscientious law-abiding 'normal' person of goodwill." Point 13 on the list reads: "Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance that I am financially reliable" (20).

The credit card anecdotes share this function with a visiting card incident described by W. E. B. Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk*, who recalls an experience of being rejected on racial grounds in "the early days of [his] rollicking boyhood... away in the hills of New England," when "it dawned upon [him] with a certain suddenness that [he] was different from the others." DuBois relates how, together with other children at school, he participated in an exchange of "gorgeous visiting cards," an exchange which was merry until "one girl, a tall newcomer, refused his card,– refused it peremptorily, with a glance." Jonathan Flatley acutely interprets the girl's rejection of the young Du Bois as "a body blow that knocked [him] out of the light of personhood, back into a more uncertain, shadowy realm of bodily positivity in which neither citizenship nor self-(mis)recognition are available" (129). This uncertainty is also present in Rankine's *you's* expectation of their friend's reaction and disappointment that there is none, as well as in the "[w]hat is wrong with you" question that "gets stuck in [their] dreams."

Although Rankine's prose-poem (micro)aggression stories achieve their full effect in terms of emotional impact on the reader through accumulation, I refer here only to a few, carefully selected examples:

> You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed; he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there.

> You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having.… (10)

> A woman you do not know wants to join you for lunch. You are visiting her campus. In the café you both order the Caesar salad. This overlap is not the beginning of anything because she immediately points out that she, her father, her grandfather, and you, all attended the same college. She wanted her son to go there as well, but because of the affirmative action or minority something – she is not sure what they are calling it these days and weren't they supposed to get rid of it? - her son wasn't accepted. You are not sure if you are meant to apologize for this failure of your alma mater's legacy program; instead you asked where he ended up. The prestigious school she mentions doesn't seem to assuage her irritation. This exchange, in effect, ends your lunch. (13)

These two vignettes pertain to situations in which the speaker/persona is treated as a trusted "insider"–in both cases you's race is ignored by her interlocutors (unless we assume that she is insulted on purpose and out of malice). It seems that she is taken into their confidence since her professional and social position as well as education make her "white" in their eyes. It must mean, for instance, that her academic colleagues define her identity through the category of class rather than race, as if choosing not to see her blackness, "forgetting" about it or suspending this knowledge, which results in hurting her deeply – in the former situation the speaker, when she arrives home, sits in her car for some time, and her reaction is commented on as a case of John Henryism – "the medical term ... for people exposed to stresses stemming from racism" (11), while in the latter she loses her appetite.

Both cases may be classified as peculiar instances of black invisibility. Peculiar, because in these two and similar tales told in the volume we find neither the Ellisonian involuntary "innate or inherent invisibility" enforced on black subjects by the dominant society that "refuse[s] to recognize [their] humanity" nor a self-imposed "mask-wearing" – "the conscious adoption of a false identity which hides and may eventually usurp the true identity beneath" (Lieber 87). Here invisibility results from the fact

that from the point of view of her interlocutors, lyric-*You*'s racial identity is cancelled by her class/professional identity. Thus, a question which preserves the one-drop rule attitude may be asked here: "How white is she?"[1] Her race turns out to be a result of the linguistic racist practices of her interlocutors. Arguably, the core of this racial imaginary in the volume is a permanent oscillation between black invisibility and hypervisibility, which remains one of the key tropes in critical reflection on African American literature from Dunbar to DuBois to Baraka, with Ralph Ellison giving it the most powerful expression in his *Invisible Man*.

Two vignettes in which the persona makes appointments through the phone (at the bank and with a therapist) provide proper exemplification on the topic:

At the end of a brief phone conversation, you tell the manager you are speaking with that you will come by his office to sign the form. When you arrive and announce yourself, he blurts out, I didn't know you were black!

> I didn't mean to say that, he then says.
>
> Aloud, you say.
>
> You didn't mean to say that aloud.
>
> Your transaction goes swiftly after that. (44)

> The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients. You walk down a path bordered on both sides with deer grass and rosemary to the gate, which turns out to be locked.
>
> At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top

[1] The question appears in Natasha Trethewey's poem entitled "Enlightenment" where it refers to Sally Hemings, a light-skinned black slave who had a long-lasting relationship with her owner Thomas Jefferson and gave birth to his six children. Trethewey heard this question asked during her visit at Monticello.

> of her lungs, Get away from my house. What are you doing in my yard?
>
> It's as if a wounded Doberman pincher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry.
>
> I am so sorry, so, so sorry. (18)

In both situations the *you* is accepted on the phone *as a client*, but at the same time treated not seriously enough or even aggressively rejected when met face to face *as a black*. One not acquainted with the insidiousness of racism must be astonished at the peculiarity of such reactions as they are utterly irrational, especially from a strictly practical point of view (the manager and the shrink may lose their clients). However, these must not be regarded as merely individual reactions, but as culturally-programmed responses to people of different skin color. In her essay entitled "The Whiteness Question" (2005), Linda Alcoff argues that "whiteness" is inseparable from the denigration, reification, repudiation, and subjection of those who are perceived as non-white, and makes a claim that "the very genealogy of whiteness was entwined from the beginning with a racial hierarchy, which can be found in every major cultural narrative ..." (217). The neighbor vignette illustrates this point even more clearly, especially because of its ending that touches on a question of the limits/limitations of availability of American citizenship, apparently differently construed for whites and blacks who live in the United States:

> Your friend is speaking to your neighbor when you arrive home. The four police cars are gone. Your neighbor has apologized to your friend and is now apologizing to you. Feeling somewhat responsible for the actions of your neighbor, you clumsily tell your friend that the next time he wants to talk on the phone he should just go in the backyard. He looks at you a long minute before saying he can speak on the phone wherever he wants. Yes, of course, you say. Yes, of course. (15)

Apparently black citizenship is fiction which does not work in practice, since the color line still serves as a litmus paper test for its effectiveness. The scapegoat is unavoidably a black guy. It could be a friend who came to babysit and was making a phone call in front of the house or Henry Louis Gates Jr. who was unlocking the door to his own house after jogging in the evening – both were taken for burglars, and alarmed neighbours called the police.

Nonetheless, *Citizen*'s refined and discreet intertextuality (the above-mentioned echo of DuBois in the credit card anecdotes, the train episode entitled "Making Room" in part VI has an undertaste of Baraka's *Dutchman*, and implementation of the pronoun *you* immediately evokes Auden's "Refugee Blues") is not limited to literary works. The collection of vignettes documenting cases of racist microaggressions in parts one and three of the volume also interacts with Adrian Piper's calling cards, a conceptual art project from mid-1980s. Piper, a very light-skinned black woman, whenever racially discriminatory comments were made in her presence, would distribute cards announcing "I am black" with a brief explanation of her reason for doing so. Like Piper's conceptual work, Rankine's *Citizen*, as Catherine Wagner puts it, "insistently returns to scenes in which a distressing racial imaginary erupts into polite ordinary life" and consistently "theatricalize[s] interaction, drawing attention to all participants' positions in the social field," becoming interventions into the socio-political here and now. However, there are also two striking differences between them: first, the racial identity of the addressed *you* in *Citizen* is assumed rather than stated (with very few exceptions), whereas Piper's cards' purpose was to reveal it from the very start; and second, Piper's work establishes an identification of the physical body of a person giving out the cards and the moral first-person subject who demonstrates their will through and in the discourse ("I am black"), whereas Rankine implements the pronoun *you* which does not refer to any concrete person in her text and demonstrates how that *you* is constructed in those situations against their will. This textual strategy is related to Judith Butler's concept of "addressability" directly mentioned in *Citizen*:

> [S]omeone asks the philosopher … what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being

> addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this.
>
> For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person. After considering Butler's remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present. … (49)

"Addressability," as a quasi-Levinasian philosophical notion which establishes a profoundly ethical relationship between the two people who participate in a situation that involves one who addresses and the other who is addressed, is fully explored by Butler in her *Precarious Life*, where she states:

> The structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept that we address not only others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails. More emphatically, however, what binds us morally has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid; this impingement by the other's address constitutes us first and foremost against our will or, perhaps put more appropriately, prior to the formation of our will. So if we think that moral authority is about finding one's will and standing by it, stamping one's name upon one's will, it may be that we miss the very mode by which moral demands are relayed. That is, we miss the situation of being addressed, the demand that comes from elsewhere, sometimes a nameless elsewhere, by which our obligations are articulated and pressed upon us. (130)

There can be identified two levels of "addressability" in *Citizen*: *you* addressed as the target or, more often, untargeted recipient of racist comments and remarks which are not necessarily directed at them in the situations presented in the form of vignettes; and *you* as an "addressee within the text," addressed by the persona/narrator (Rankine supposedly includes herself in this category). Simply put: *you* is everybody who recognizes her/his own experience in situations involving racism on the receiving end;

the category does not apply only to African Americans, at least theoretically. The strategy of using the "lyric-*You*" allows Rankine to achieve a "full-throated polyvocality – in the sense that Mae Henderson theorizes the term – that thrusts every reader into the position of speaker and addressee simultaneously" (Shockley). Moreover, even though in most vignettes the racial identities of the participants remain unspoken, at the same time they are somehow absolutely clear. Obviously, a black reader will identify her/himself with the *You-as-the-addressee* of a racist remark or gesture (as in both credit card anecdotes, for instance), whereas the emotional situation of a white reader is more complex as they have to "choose" between two kinds of "discomfort": either they respond positively to the address and vicariously experience what it means to be a "black citizen in the US of the early 21st century" or allow the address to fail and "reject the invitation of the lyric-*You* and remain white-identified" (Shockley) and, by extension, guilty of committing microaggressions. In this way Rankine achieves the same goal as Piper did with her calling cards – she confronts the white reader with present-day American racial positioning and demonstrates how it affects individuals on the level of personhood and citizenship.

Similarly, the visual works which appear throughout *Citizen*, even though frequently only tangentially connected with the immediate text and without direct captioning, support and enhance the act of "speaking truth to power" and simultaneously reveal the limitations of the verbal communicability of this truth. In a conversation with Laurent Berlant, Rankine's intention of using the images in and *together with* her text becomes clarified. The author explains:

> I was attracted to images engaged in conversation with an incoherence...in the world. They were placed in the text where I thought silence was needed, but I wasn't interested in making the silence feel empty or effortless the way a blank page would....The tangential relation of the images with the text, in a sense, mimics a form of "the public." They are related and can be taken in, but, at times, are hardly touching, or they come up in a different context elsewhere in the text, before or after they appear.

But silence does not necessarily mean a gap in communication. It does not stand for no message at all. Silence may, of course, speak volumes, it

can be for instance a sound of accusation, a sign of resistance, or a scream of helplessness. Berlant responds to Rankine's words with an observation which clarifies this point:

> I had wondered whether you thought something like that—that the images in *Citizen* could show what was exhausting/unbearable to witness once more in speech about the ordinary violence and world-shaping activity of American racism. A desperate desire is at work there for *something* to be self-evident, the force of which would change a situation. But *Citizen* lives meditatively enraged in a world where truth cannot be *spoken* to a structure. (*BOMB*)

Thus, in joining the persuasive and informative forces of a verbal poetic narrative, an overtly didactic purpose to educate, morally remind, as well as to emotionally affect readers in order to "make something happen," is activated by Rankine in *Citizen*. Yet the poet operates in a world where, in terms of race, nothing seems to be self-evident, even the things which we see and hear, and not only those we are told about. Digging into this issue is done through images of an openly visual character, which enable her to transcend the verbal and probe the above-mentioned "incoherence...in the world," and introduce/reveal the surreal aspect of racial reality in the US. The visual components of *Citizen* destabilize this reality in order to make us look at it in a fresh way.

Rankine's challenging the poetic convention of the lyric demonstrate that she is not a dedicated follower of Ezra Pound's demand directed at poets to "make it *new*" (italics mine) at all cost, which has become the doctrine of linguistically-oriented (post)modernists, but instead she launches the idea to "make it *news*," now treating poetry much more sociologically, as a means of giving information based on social analysis, direct communication, and not necessarily verbalized ethical commentary, on the material and socio-political here-and-now, rather than as a discursively abstract or metaphysical phenomenon. Rankine herself says in an interview with Alik Asokan:

> [P]art of my process is archival. I am invested in keeping present the forgotten bodies. This aspect of working, where you bring the dead forward, is crucial to my process. There are all these men and women who have been killed, like James Craig Anderson, that make the

> news for a day or two and many people haven't heard about them. You ask them, and they just haven't heard. When these killings are forgotten, people then begin to say things like, 'that was from Jim Crow,' 'that was from the 50s,' 'this type of thing doesn't happen anymore,' 'you have to admit things are better,' 'things have changed so much.' No—this happened last summer, this happened this summer, this happened in August. I think it is necessary to keep reality present, we all need to be facing the same way; we need to be negotiating the same facts. Then together we can have a sense of how racism stays present, how it stays vigilant, focused on its target.

Citizen's consistent and inventive strategy of increased legibility serves the purpose of regaining/reaching a large audience of readers not so much for the sake of poetry itself as for the urgent task to confront yet again the problem of racism and discrimination. Talking about such grave subjects as discrimination, rejection, and racism in a 'straightforward' manner is now essential – also for poetry – in the face of the profound crisis of the world and its apparent impending ideological and political turning to the right, a right whose recast myths are seducing people who "are not supremacists" but "willingly disconnect themselves from the histories and realities...." As Zygmunt Bauman observes in a recent interview with Jakub Dymek, given on the fifteenth anniversary of the World Trade Center terrorist attack, Klee's/Benjamin's Angel of History is taking now a 180-degree turn. Still moving blindly forward, the Angel escapes not from the "cruelties of the past and atrocities of the present moment," but from the uncertainties of the future. Now, the "'forward' is the past, a dumping site of memories and myths prone to tooling and recasting," and resistant to rational thinking.

Nonetheless, what remains and demands analysis is Rankine's formal inventiveness, whose most striking aspect is mixing a poetic text with the visual arts, which serves in *Citizen* the purpose of "stepping into [the] moment" in order to defamiliarize it, to ask the question: "Did they really say that?" "Did I just hear/see what I think I heard/saw?" Nonetheless, her experimentation with making intermedial transactions and mixing various media is even more daring than the terse style of her poetry. The next subchapter discusses and demonstrates how formal involvement with the visual arts helps serve the purpose of problematizing-cum-stigmatizing racism and making poetry matter within the field of the ongoing public

debate(s). For this purpose I will draw extensively in my discussion on W. J. T. Mitchell's concept of "seeing through race."

II. Talking (about) Race through Visual Arts

The point of departure for Mitchell in his probing into the notion of race at a moment when "[t]he idea that racial identity corresponds to some real substance in the physical world" is thoroughly negated or questioned is the realisation of the fact that "racism persists" (xi), and this persistence takes place in a world in which an acute observer can spot the "dominance of visual images and metaphors in racial discourse" (xiii), a situation which favors seeing over other strategies of understanding. The critic's proposal is to perceive race as a medium, an "'intervening substance' that both enables and obstructs social relationships" (4). He comes forward with an assertion that race "is *both* an illusion *and* a reality that resists critical demolition or replacement by other terms such as ethnicity..." (14). Such a positioning of the category of race as simultaneously a myth, which "has a powerful afterlife that continues to structure perception, experience, and thought" and is "subject to endless interpretation and re-enactment for new historical situations" (22) AND a "political and economic issue" (22), makes it necessary to be cautious not to dismiss it or pretend it is not there, but to analyse it on multiple levels and see it from different angles. Mitchell says in the conclusion that

> race is not merely a content to be mediated, an object to be represented visually or verbally, or a thing to be depicted in a likeness or image, but race is itself a medium in its iconic form – not simply something to be seen, but itself a framework for seeing through (13).
>
> The model of race as a symbolic-imaginary, verbal-visual complex is … not merely a psychological matter, but a public and palpable feature of the material world, of the epistemological and historical field in which knowledge is constructed (20).

Conceptualized in this manner, the "racial medium is … a prothesis that produces invisibility and hypervisibility simultaneously" (13), a "vehi-

cle for *both* fantasy *and* reality" (14). The ontological doubt that pertains to race makes it pointless to choose between the alternatives. Still, it remains a feature of but also a vehicle for reality, which suggests that it is only related to reality in a cause-and-effect fashion, and is not its essential, palpable component.

A similar view was expressed by Donna J. Haraway who wrote that "[r]ace is a fracturing trauma in the body politic of the nation – and in the mortal bodies of its people … Race, at once an uncanny unreality and an inescapable presence, frightens me; and I am not alone in this paralysing historical pathology of body and soul" (213). The philosopher uses the word "uncanny" which corresponds to the term "Unheimlisch," a Freudian concept of domesticity going berserk, of home reality suddenly destabilized, disquieting, and nightmarishly surreal. Haraway's diagnostic intuitions about the duality and (un)reality of the category of race may be perceived as a step forward on the road to Mitchell's daring conceptualizations. Mitchell goes further and supports his reframing race as a medium by applying to it Lacan's "triad of psychological and semiotic 'registers,'" which he modifies by adding to them a fourth element to distinguish between race and racism. Thus, except for the Symbolic (the realm of language, law, negation, and prohibition), the Imaginary (the location of fantasy, images, illusions, and visual non-verbal experiences) and the Real (the wild zone of trauma), to place race as medium on the Lacanian map, as a construct made out of the elements of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, the critic introduces a category that he labels "Reality."

Mitchell's modification of Lacanian categories has a mind-opening effect. Racism as the "brute fact, the bodily reality" (19), a phenomenon from the wild zone of Agambenian "bare life" is situated in the Real. Race, on the other hand, "the derivative term" (19), a "matter of constructed, mediated, represented 'reality' – visible, audible, and legible" (17), disembodied in a profound sense of the word, is relegated by Mitchell to a freshly coined Reality. Mitchell presents the relationship between race and racism in a non-standard way as interdependent and inseparable in a reversed manner, stating that "[r]ace is not the cause of racism but its excuse, alibi, explanation, or reaction formation" (19). Thus, two inferences may be drawn: first, that race is definitely less tangible than it seemed before, and second, that both phenomena are not related in a conventional cause-and-effect manner, where racism depends on the existence of race. His explication makes

it possible for us to see that, on the contrary, race is a product of acts of racism, and only without those acts does it cease to exist and vanishes from sight. Nevertheless, as long as racism is practiced in the real world, race has a subservient role to perform – to justify or rationalise the horrors of racism. To rephrase it through Lacanian categories once again, we may say after Mitchell that "[r]ace is the Symbolic-Imaginary construction of the fragile 'reality' to explain, contain, and manage the Real known as racism …" (19). Mitchell maintains that if we think of race as a medium, as "something we *see through*, like a frame, a window, a screen or a lens, rather than something we *look at*" (xii), we begin to perceive the discreet-yet-stubborn presence of this interfering filter added to our perceptions of the components of the external world. I am going to implement the categories of race/racism as seen by Mitchell in reading Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* with an intention to discuss the poet's explorations of the "insidiousness" of American present-day racism.

The "shock value rarely found in poetry," which determines the power of Rankine's volume, pinpointed by Perloff, excerpted in the back-cover blurb, arguably results from the intuitive realisation that race and the ontological status of "black citizenship" is generated by the horrors of racism represented by "tales of everyday life," which come out of "the most ordinary of daily situations." In this context my key questions read:

1) What is the function given by Rankine to the visual strategies in communicating those ordinary horrors experienced regularly by black people?
2) How do they increase the impact of *Citizen* on the reading public?

How difficult it is for black people in America to separate themselves from "bodily positivity" and gain personhood is illustrated by part II of *Citizen*, which contains an essay on Serena Williams, the tennis superstar who, throughout her career, has regularly experienced discrimination against her from the umpires on the court and from sport commentators on TV. Her story leads Rankine to ask a key question concerning a black body's positivity: "What does a victorious or defeated black woman's body in a historically white space look like?" (25) This question is intertwined in the volume with Zora Neale Hurston's statement "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background," a sentence stenciled on canvas and twinned with another canvas on its left which reads "I do not always feel colored" by Glenn Ligon and reproduced in *Citizen* (52-53).

The tennis court provides just such a "sharp white background" for a black player. In December 2012, soon after Serena was named WTA Player of the Year, the Dane Caroline Wozniacky, a former number one player, parodied Serena at an exhibition match by stuffing padding down her top and up her skirt, "all in good fun" (36). Rankine ironises about the mass-media reaction, asking a rhetorical question: "Racist? CNN wants to know if outrage is the proper response" (36). Not only CNN. For instance, Oliver Brown of *The Telegraph* gives Wozniacky his absolution and finds her impersonation just "a bit silly and sophomoric," adding that "on no sober analysis does it betray a more sinister motive." So no, for sure it is by no means racist, although it may be a "crime against comedy."[2] Undoubtedly, Brown maintains his sobriety throughout his article, rejecting most "radical" standpoints: "Racist! Or so the easily outraged cried. Hyper-sexualising! Or so those with a slightly larger feminist dictionary screamed". The point is that Brown's comments themselves are examples of covert racism and, as such, could be used in *Citizen*, a work which demonstrates that a racist act or comment does not necessarily have to result from intention. To think of Wozniacky's performance as non-racist and non-sexist, one needs to (intentionally?) forget about Saartjie Baartman – the Hottentot Venus' for instance. On the other hand, the parody can even have a positive aspect – doesn't Rankine herself point out, albeit ironically, that "Wozniacky … finally gives the people what they have wanted all along by embodying Serena's attributes while leaving Serena's 'angry nigger exterior' behind"? Here is the "image of smiling blond goodness posing as the best female tennis player of all time" (36).

When in 2015 Serena Williams became *Sports Illustrated*'s athlete of the year, the *LA Times* put out a cover for its sports magazine asking the question if Serena Williams deserves sportsperson of the year more than a horse? [the horse in question was Kentucky Derby winner American Pharaoh]. The *LA Times* is the same paper that made *Citizen* one of its books of the year in 2014.

Two important scholarly studies of American racism published in the first decade of the new century: Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism without Racists* (2006) and Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* (2010) painstakingly demonstrate how racism functions today in America. Like both

[2] http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/tennis/9741118/Its-not-racist-but-Caroline-Wozniackis-impersonation-of-Serena-Williams-is-a-crime-against-comedy.html

studies of the stubbornness of racist attitudes held by people who would never call themselves racists, Rankine's *Citizen* says things vital and unpleasant about racial relationships in the US in the 21st century, when, to quote Hortense Spillers's observation, "we are confronted, from time to time, with almost-evidence that the age of the postrace subject is upon us" (379). Rankine's volume provides evidence that despite many changes at the legal and institutional levels, racism in America is as alive and kicking as ever, only its manifestations take less overt forms than in the past.

Citizen describes with precision discrete cases of racist microaggressions which take place regularly in public or semi-private situations collected from the stories told by her friends and acquaintances. Rankine looks behind the veil of middle-class and academic standards and norms, and registers the moments when individuals regularly trespass the new norm. As Rob Bryan puts it, "[h]er setting is not the blighted inner-city ghetto or the prison, but the manicured lawns of white suburbia and the genteel interactions of the academy." To make these sickening cases of racism work more powerfully on her readers, Rankine combines them with the works of the visual arts. Racism in its multifarious forms is the subject of Rankine's book.

The very first image which appears in *Citizen* is a photograph of a place called Jim Crow Road. Rankine uses the strategy of defamiliarization here. In the photograph, an archetypal suburban street strikes us with its disquieting emptiness and somehow sinister whiteness, as if its message was once again: "no blacks, whites only." The name of the deserted street, together with its larger than life appearance in terms of racial encoding: the spotless whiteness of a car parked in the driveway, snow white houses, the blue, cloudless sky, and the shadow of a Stop road sign, bring to mind a freeze frame from, say, *Blue Velvet* and simultaneously make you disbelieve what you see, and suspect that the picture has been photoshopped. But Jim Crow Road exists in the real world – the picture was made in Flowery Branch, Georgia in the year 2007 by photographer Michael David Murphy. Asked about it in an interview, Rankine says that "according to local lore" the road was named "after a James Crow" (*BOMB*), which leaves the question why "James Crow Road" was not good enough without an answer. To make things even more suspicious and uncomfortable for the inhabitants, the surrounding Forsyth County was known for its infamous "sundown town" which, as Murphy claims "existed well until the '80s." It is doubtful

that the people who live in Flowery Branch are white supremacists who find perverted pleasure in the telling name of the road as a nostalgic commemoration of 'them good ole days' "in the gallant South" when "strange trees [bore] strange fruit," yet the sign may be treated as a visible proof that Jim Crow attitudes and practices die hard. That is the reason why in the picture the place is completely deserted. Symbolically the absence of white people communicates the point that nowadays racism exists in the US by itself, without declared believers and defenders, and without support of the ideology of race. Flowery Branch stands here for a place where the "white good American lives" undisturbed in a "white fantasy (which insists that black subjects have good manners and remain convenient)" (BOMB) in practice meaning black invisibility.

Another photograph, this time directly related to the subject of racism, is a picture taken at a lynching, which features in *Citizen* as "Public Lynching. Date: August 30. 1930," although it is better known as the "Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, 1930." The difference between this photo and the original is that the mutilated bodies of the two young blacks were removed from the picture by John Lucas: we can see a group of white people under a tree on whose bough the two black men were hanged. Since the picture was taken in the late evening or even at night, the crowd is lit by the flash whereas the background is pitch black. A middle-aged man is pointing with his tattooed left arm at the bodies which are not there. So his gesture seems surprising and absurd, as if he was asking: where have they gone? In this case Rankine uses the altered photograph to foreground her strategy of "redirecting the gaze on the spectator," which is about "observing the people who would normally not claim racism as their thing." The function of this method is to defamiliarize racist reality in America, to problematize, enhance, and question the viewer's or reader's perception of something which is familiar (or even familial) to the white people who, assumingly, "are not supremacists and yet they will step into this moment, find it funny, and in doing so, they willingly disconnect themselves from the histories and realities of black people and the treatment of black … people in this country" (Rankine in *The Believer*). The altered photograph disturbs the viewer with the inexplicable strangeness of the behavior of the mob in the picture and amusement beaming from their faces, as the reason for their high excitement is unclear. And since most viewers know the original photograph, we suddenly realize how well accustomed we have

become with acts of racism in the forms of objectification and victimization of the black body and the white privilege of spectatorship and entertainment. Here Rankine addresses the white crowd by turning the lens of the camera on them (rather than on the lynched black bodies which were removed from the original picture) and making them hypervisible in their whiteness thrown against a black background.

As Catherine Wagner puts it, Rankine's *Citizen* "insistently returns to scenes in which a distressing racial imaginary erupts into polite ordinary life" and consistently "theatricalize[s] interaction, drawing attention to all participants' positions in the social field," becoming interventions into the socio-political here and now. Arguably, the core of this racial imaginary in the volume is a permanent oscillation between black hypervisibility and invisibility, which remains one of the key tropes in critical reflection on African American literature from Dunbar to DuBois to Baraka, with Ralph Ellison giving it the most powerful expression in his *Invisible Man*. However, the instances of racism in the volume must not be regarded as caused by rational or even individual reactions, but as culturally-programmed responses to people of different skin color.

The insightful presentation of the problem of the hypervisibility of black Americans, connected with invisibility and resulting racism, appears to be the key issue addressed in the Situation videos whose scripts are printed in *Citizen*. Yet, on the Internet we can find their complete text-and-video versions in which the scripts are read out loud in a solemn tone by Rankine, whereas her reading is accompanied by visual materials shot by John Lucas. Four of them are of particular interest as they touch upon various aspects of racism in the world today: ""In Memory of Trayvon Martin," "In Memory of James Craig Anderson," "Stop-and-Frisk," and "Making Room." All four focus on the experience of young black men as targets of various forms of discrimination. Despite the fact that it appears earliest of the four in Rankine's volume, the "Trayvon Martin" and "James Craig Anderson" episodes will be discussed last because of the important role of background music in the former.

In an already mentioned conversation with Rankine, Laurent Berlant talks on the subject of the poet's interest in and reasons for implementation of the visualities in the text and for situating video materials outside the text. She says:

> I had wondered whether you thought something like that – that the images in *Citizen* could show what was exhausting/unbearable to witness once more in speech about the ordinary violence and world-shaping activity of American racism. A desperate desire is at work there for *something* to be self-evident, the force of which would change a situation. But *Citizen* lives meditatively enraged in a world where truth cannot be spoken to a structure. (BOMB)

John Lucas's Situation videos are the clearest attempts within/without the volume of demonstrating the exhausting/unbearable quality and collectively unconscious brutality of racist attitudes and practices in the US. Yet the striking self-evidence of racist practices, as well as the helplessness of changing the world in this respect, make the message communicated in *Citizen* profoundly pessimistic and spiritually paralyzing, especially that rational arguments do not work in confrontation with the social/ political structure which supports white privilege and racism. In this respect Rankine's volume testifies to the fact that America represents a solipsistic society as measured against a theoretical model of ideal pluralistic society by Bateson, and later modified by Craig Werner who argues to the contrary – i.e. that present-day America is a society whose foundations are the oppression and repression of its non-white citizens.

One of the aspects of the co-operation of oppression with repression in keeping blacks in their places is racial positioning and its sub-category: police racial profiling. Martha C. Nussbaum draws our attention to the fact that profiling is probably fair as long as it is done "by age and by type of vehicle...[b]ut when profiling tracks existing social stigma, a grave issue of fairness is raised...since it denies people an important sort of equality before the law on grounds of race" (289). Nussbaum distinguishes between profiling which is "unobjectionable, because it begins from a committed crime and works backward" and a "far more troubling ... kind of profiling that *precedes crime* … using other traits as proxies for (alleged) criminal intent or activity" (288). It is the latter kind of profiling that becomes the topic of "Stop-and-Frisk," the only difference being that the viewers themselves are doing their profiling alongside the traffic police.

That's how it works in the video. In the footage we can see a few young black men in a shop trying on various items of clothes. There are flashing beacons reflected in the shop's windows, and in voiceover we can hear a

report of an arrest on the road. The direct effect of such a juxtaposition of parallel events is that when watching the film we experience some kind of tension, feeling some sort of dread, and expect that in a moment we are going to witness a crime committed by the youngsters in the shop or some of them will be arrested for a crime committed earlier. But nothing of this sort happens, no drama takes place in front of us. Yet we can hear a repeated phrase, over and over like a refrain: "And you are not the guy, and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description" (Rankine 105-109). The *you* is always a young black man, which provides a judgement on this sort of profiling.

The second Situation video I would like to comment on is entitled "Making Room," and concentrates on a train episode in which a young black man is sitting at a window seat, gazing out into the darkness. The text of the script opens with a paragraph that sets up the scene and introduces the topic of racism without mentioning it openly. Moreover, further on there are also no references to the color of the passengers either, as for Rankine race is immaterial, an idea about the body and not the body itself:

> On the train the woman standing makes you understand there are no seats available. And, in fact, there is one. Is the woman getting off at the next stop? No, she would rather stand all the way to Union Station.
>
> The space next to the man is the pause in a conversation you are suddenly rushing to fill. You step quickly over the woman's fear, the fear she shares. You let her have it.
>
> The man doesn't acknowledge you as you sit down because the man knows more about the unoccupied seat than you do. For him, you imagine, it is more like breath than wonder; he has had to think about it so much you wouldn't call it thought. (131)

With no direct reference to the racial identity of the people involved in the situation on the train, Rankine manages to suggest who is who, as it would be thoroughly unbelievable if anyone questioned the colorline divide: the man sitting at the window must be black, the woman standing her racism out is obviously white, whereas the narrator or her *alter ego* – the

lyrical *You*, is also black. Here, like everywhere in Rankine's volume, race functions as "a snow-globe fantasy" (Laurent), a product of imagination that extrapolates white (self-)hatred and embodies it in blackness. However, it is the young man's masculinity that causes the fear of the unoccupied seat, experienced by the white woman, "more like breath than wonder" for him. As Nussbaum (289) argues:

> [t]he stigmatizing of African-American men as criminals is one of the ugliest and most invidious aspects of American racism, closely linked to the racially skewed disenfranchisement of convicted felons .... African-American intellectuals … have written eloquently about the pain and isolation inflicted by society's immediate perception of the black man as criminal ....

The black man on the train experiences pain mixed with shame, which is a result of the isolation he must have been an object of when among white people. In the past, the law would have demanded for him to vacate his seat for the white woman who feels disgust even at the thought (although it cannot be called a thought) of sitting next to a black man. The real problem of the young black man, which results from this very form of racism, is that situations like the one on the train are quite ordinary and common to American interactions in everyday existence rather than an exception to the rule:

> Where he goes the space follows him. If the man left his seat before Union Station you would simply be a person in a seat on the train. You would cease to struggle against the unoccupied seat when where why the space won't lose its meaning. (132)

"The space follows him," wherever he goes, which, translated into black histories and realities (both collective and individual) means that there is no escape from sheer racism and from stigmatization because of skin color and (fictitious) racial identity.

At the end of the script, after the narrator-persona has taken the empty seat and when she sees that another white woman is looking for a seat because she wants to have a place next to her children and asks passengers to switch seats, the narrator-persona experiences a sort of a panic and says:

"You hear but you don't hear. You can't see" (133). The final segment of "Making room" reads: "It's then the man next to you turns to you. And as if from inside your own head you agree that if anyone asks you to move, you'll tell them we are traveling as a family." (133) The family excuse is more than an expression of solidarity with a young black man. It is a sign of bonding with a person of color with another person of color when facing the oppressor.

"In Memory of Trayvon Martin" is another Situation video of interest for me. Its location is again a train, which suggests a necessity for blacks to move on, never find stability or establish a home. The text read by the author does not comment on the very situation we are watching, which may be contrasted with the next Situation video in the volume, entitled "In Memory of James Craig Anderson," where we have Rankine reconstructing the killing of the black man by "just a teen … with straggly blond hair" (94). In her reconstruction she mentions the killer's first name Dedmon, reveals the circumstances of his driving over Anderson on a "hot June day in the twenty-first century," and quotes the ultimately incriminating phrase since Dedmon says: "I ran that nigger over" (94), using the n-word just like that, as a precise phrase to identify his victim, which simultaneously places Anderson's body in the long history of American racism, violence, and brutality. That is the point made by Rankine in the Trayvon Martin video where the phrases she uses pinpoint the causes – if not reasons – of this racism-motivated crime by placing it in "the years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs," all of which "accumulate into the hours inside our lives where we are caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its root our limbs" (89-90). The difference between "In Memory of Trayvon Martin" and the other situation videos discussed in this article is that the background music catches our attention whereas the image is very static. The music played in the background is the double-bass and piano intro to Miles Davis's "So What," the instruments played by Paul Chambers and Bill Evans respectively. Yet, the tune gets stuck after just a few kind of blue notes, and is repeated throughout until the end of the video. Does it mean that racism is insurmountable and is here to stay? Or that black beauty cannot spread its wings in the racist reality of America? So which?

The function in which Rankine in *Citizen* employs photographs and videos is to draw the reader's attention to a social context of racist practices

by taking racism away from the textual reality into the material world, and by creating a strict connection between Lacan's Real of racism and Mitchell's Reality of race. The visual arts demonstrate the mechanism of production of race out of elements taken from the sphere of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, making us see how it combines particles of the socio-historical and the fantastic. *Citizen* manages to provide a multilayered and in-depth poetic/visual analysis of the phenomenon of present-day racism in the US with its "various realities" (Als, blurb) as well as its covert or indirect manifestations which make for its insidiousness. The power of this volume resides in its "capacity to make so many different versions of American life proper to itself, to instruct [American readers] in the depth and variety of [their] participation in a narrative of race that [they] recount and reinstate, even when [they] speak as though it weren't there" (Farmer, blurb). But, as the visual components of the volume demonstrate by turning the reader into a modest eye witness, there is still a racism-generated narrative of race in America.

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Conclusion

The careful reading of poetry of African American women writers, who can be classified as poets of the Black Arts and post-Black Arts Movement, has demonstrated that the motif of home is strongly present in their *ouevre*. Unlike their male colleagues, the six female poets representative of the last half century discussed in this monograph make home a central theme to talk about the experience of black women in its historical and metaphysical dimensions. Nonetheless, their treatments of the motif confront the reader with a wide variety of approaches, bringing to our attention different contexts.

The book begins with the subject of Africa understood not only as a home lost forever (Nikki Giovanni's shattered dreams), but also as a home regained (through the mythological excavations of Audre Lorde), whereas Sonia Sanchez's inspired, trance-like improvisation on the female experience of the Middle Passage problematizes the issue even further as the poet takes a slave ship for a temporary / impermanent home of black women, yet strangely familiar to the realities of plantation slavery with all the violence and brutality that African women experienced in Christian America. This earliest augury of cultural disenfranchisement of and prejudice against black women, whose purpose seems to have been to deprive them of humanity and reduce them to the status of Agambenian "bare life," is taken further in the chapter on Sanchez as a poet of a "wild zone," who does not yield to widespread racism and sexism, but practices a poetic TCB (i.e. taking care of business), meaning first a positivist work in and for her immediate black community, later changing it into a work for humanity by making her poetry a tool for speaking truth to power. To complement the theme of black survival, especially survival of African American women, I dig into Nikki Giovanni's explorations of domesticity in the shape of the rituals and daily routines of cooking and quilting.

At this point I leave the voices of the Black Arts Movement, and move on to discuss the poets who co-created the principles of the New Black Aesthetic with its central voice of a "cultural mulatto" or who just followed those principles. This new turn made it necessary for them to rethink the idea of home and its conceptualizations. Rita Dove serves as an example of a poet who tries to separate herself from everyday black reality and em-

braces the idea of cosmopolitanism as a means of escape from the drabness and hopelessness of black existence, yet always arrives home in the end, returning to "unfamiliar neighborhoods." Natasha Trethewey uses a newly gained black (woman) poet's right to speak for herself rather than be the voice of the black community, dives deep into her family stories and explores her memory, problematizing nostalgia and bringing from the wreck to the surface both her personal and black women's traumas and nightmares. Claudia Rankine in her poetic (re)searching for and of the Home of the Brave concentrates on the phenomenon of black invisibility and hypervisibility, which allow her to expose the ugly mechanisms of present day American racism in order to meditate on the notion of (the availability) of citizenship at home for blacks in the United States.

Zora Neale Hurston in one of her essays entitled "Characteristics of Negro Expression" writes about the impression that a room she "saw in Mobile in which there was an over-stuffed mohair living-room suite, an imitation mahogany bed and chifferobe" made on her, and draws a conclusion which partly applies to my discussion as a metaphor for black women poets' exploration of the idea and implementation of the motif of home. Hurston says that "it indicated the desire for beauty. And decorating a decoration, as in the case of the doily on the gaudy wall pocket, did not seem out of place to the hostess. The feeling back of such an act is that there can never be enough of beauty, let alone too much" (1043). This applies partly since the discussed poets' purpose was and is not merely aesthetic, but ethical, which brings to mind yet another quote, somewhat curtailed, from John Keats: "Beauty is Truth." Because, for the sake of truth, these six poets struggle and write their verse.

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In this book I have used extracts from my articles published earlier with various publishers. The articles or extracts from them have been rethought, extended/shortened and reshaped, and their titles have been altered. These are:

1) "Out of the Past Endlessly Rocking: Audre Lorde's Use of Dahomean Myths." *The American Uses of History: Essays on Public Memory.* Ed. T. Basiuk, S. Kuźma-Markowska and K. Mazur. Frankfurt am Mein: Peter Lang, 2011. 187-198. Print.
2) "Poetry from a Shoebox: Cooking, Food and Black American Experience in Nikki Giovanni's Poetry." *Polish Journal for American Studies* 6 (2012). 73-82. Print.
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4) "Homeward Dove: Nomadism, 'World'-Travelling, and Rita Dove's Homecoming(s)." *Crossroads: A Journal of English Studies* 3 (2013).
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6) "She a BaddDDD Sistuh: Sonia Sanchez as a Wild Zone Poet." *American Wild Zones: Space, Experience, Consciousness.* Ed. J. Kamionowski and J. Partyka, Frankfurt am Mein: Peter Lang, 2016. 183-201. Print.
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8) "'Make It News': Racist (Micro)Agressions, the Lyrical You, and Increased Legibility in Claudia Rankine's *Citizen. An American Lyric*." *Polish Journal for American Studies. Special Issue* 11 (2017). 365-376. Print.