

Contemporary Black American Women Poets: Resisting Sexual Violence

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While recreating the textures of their own and other black women's lives in their works, contemporary African-American women poets often play the roles of social critics and revisionist historians. As such, they try to keep alive the memory of the black American female experience, to reveal some of its ignored or suppressed aspects, and to address certain problems related to it. One of the problems on which they focus in their poems is the sexual abuse of black females, originating in pre-colonial African communities and aggravated by violent transplantation to the New World where they became the chattels of European settlers. This essay deals with the way these poets have reflected this problem in their texts. The poems selected for discussion cover a period of almost thirty years (1963-1991) and are written by ten contemporary African-American women, all of whom see themselves as inheritors of a legacy of violence which they do not deserve. While presenting scenes of sexual abuse, these poets frequently suggest its ideological, socio-political and economic causes, and stress its brutalizing effects on the victims. Moreover, they challenge the stereotypical images of black women as inferior, sexually promiscuous and morally fallen creatures, images created and perpetuated by the women's oppressors to justify the colonization of their bodies and minds. (Note 1)

I. The Remote Past

In poems which refer to the historical past (colonialism in Africa, the slave trade and the shaping years of the American Republic) Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Alice Walker, Rita Dove, June Jordan and Lucille Clifton blame the white man's racism, sexism and greed, for African girls' and women's devaluation as human beings and their consequent economic and sexual exploitation. Certain poems go further back and hint at the black woman's oppression in African patriarchal societies as well. In "Riders to the Blood-Red Wrath," for instance, a long poem paying tribute to the Freedom Riders in the American South and to other supporters of the black American liberation struggle in the early 1960s, Brooks traces the roots of her race's suffering in the slave trade. (Note 2) She presents the Africans' violent loss of home and culture and their transplantation to America

through the eyes of an adult male of royal descent. Her speaker remembers and boasts about pre-colonial African wealth, his own class privileges, and his power over wild nature and his women. Brooks adopts the traditional black American myth of pre-colonial Africa as Paradise. Yet, her speaker's self-portrait as a powerful leader who had the "right to raid the sun, consult the moon,/Nod to [his] princesses or split them open" (117, 5th st.) ironically reveals the fact that Africa was an upper-class male paradise in which male-female relationships were based on male domination and frequent violence. Among the unpleasant things he remembers during his life as a slave in America is the sexual abuse of African women during the transatlantic passage:

And I remember blazing dementias
Aboard such trade as maddens any man.
. . . The mate and captain fragrantly reviewed
The fragrant hold and presently began
Their retching rampage among their luminous
Black pudding, among the guttural chained slime:
Half fainting from their love affair with fetors
That pledged a haughty allegiance for all time.
(117, 6th stanza)

The images "luminous black pudding" and "guttural chained slime," used to define the African women, vividly convey the women's complete dehumanization after their enslavement. These same images, as well as the reference to the men as "half-fainting from their love-affair with fetors" and to their rape of the slaves as "retching rampage," also expose the white men's bestiality and thus undermine the Eurocentric concept of white racial superiority (religious, moral, intellectual, etc.) over "primitive" Africans, which justified the latter's enslavement by the former. The speaker's memories help to link past abuses with contemporary ones and prove the necessity for black Americans' struggle against the continuing colonization of their race in 1960s USA, which is presented as "Calvary" (117, 118), in contrast to pre-colonial Africa remembered as Paradise.

A later poem which deals with the interrelated themes of cultural displacement, bondage and violence is "Linkage (for Phillis Wheatley)," in *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* by Giovanni. This poet recreates the transatlantic passage and slave auction scenes in the USA through the eyes of a little African girl who later became the first important black American poet, Phyllis Wheatley. Giovanni tries to imagine "what would a little/girl think . . . leaving Senegal . . . for that which had no name/. . . and when one was obtained . . . no place for her . . ." (25, 1st unit). Using a series of rhetorical questions, the poet explores the meaning of the slave auction experience for the displaced girl. She simultaneously suggests the dehumanizing effect of this experience. For Wheatley is reduced to a passive object of male gaze and desire, an object one can sell or buy :

Eyes . . . they say . . . are the mirror . . . of the soul . . . a reflection
. . . of the spirit . . . an informer . . . to reality . . . What do you
see . . . if you are a little Black girl . . . standing on a stage
. . . waiting to be purchased . . . Is there kindness . . . concern
. . . compassion . . . in the faces examining you . . . Do your eyes
show . . . or other eyes acknowledge . . . that you . . . dusky
. . . naked of clothes and tongue . . . stripped of the protection
of Gods . . . and countrymen . . . are Human . . . Do you see those
who purchase . . . or those who sold . . . Do you see those who
grab at you . . . or those who refused to shield you . . . Are you
grateful to be bought . . . or sold . . . What would you think
. . . of a people . . . who allowed . . . nay encouraged . . . abetted
. . . regaled . . . in your chains . . . (25-26, part of 4th unit)

Although Giovanni's speaker disapproves of chattel slavery, she explores its possible advantages for a young African girl like Phyllis. As the poem suggests, Wheatley's American experience was painful but it gave her the chance to become educated. Thus, she "chose poetry . . . as others choose prostitution . . . to express her/dismay . . ." (26) and "with Pen . . . rather/than body . . . Leading herself . . . and therefore her people/. . . from bondage" (27) to freedom. The poem also refers to the enslaved girls'/women's "remembered horrors" (27) of their victimization by African tribal customs, such as "clitorectomies . . . infibulations/. . . women beaten" (26), (Note 3) as well as to their unhealthy living conditions ("children hungry . . . garbage heaping . . . open sewers"), and to the "dark . . . murky world" (26) of superstitions and magic they left behind. Thus, in contrast to Brooks, Giovanni subverts the black American myth of pre-colonial Africa as Paradise. Moreover, by linking Wheatley's and other black female children's abuse in the past slaveholding society with black and white children's prostitution as well as with women's "bondage" in marriage in our time, Giovanni enhances her social criticism and broadens the meaning of the word "slavery":

The block . . . that little
Black girls . . . stood upon . . . is the same block . . . they now
walk . . . with little white boys and girls . . . selling themselves
. . . to the adequate . . . bidder . . . (25)

. . . Little white boys . . . stalking Park Avenue . . . little white
girls . . . on the Minnesota Strip . . . are also slaves . . . to the
uncaring . . . of a nation . . . (26)

. . . Women are considered complete . . . when they marry
. . . We have done . . . it is considered . . . our duty . . . when
we safely deliver a person from the bondage of Father . . . to the
bondage of duty . . . and husband . . . from house slaves who read
and write . . . to housewives who have time for neither . . . (27) (Note 4)

In the quoted passages and in other parts of the poem Giovanni accuses American society of indifference, hypocrisy and cruelty. She particularly criticizes those political and religious leaders who publicly condemn women's and children's abuse, yet privately support it: "What do the children think . . . in their evening quest . . . /of those who from platform and pulpit . . . deride their condition/. . . yet purchase their service" (27). Thus, like Brooks, she challenges the Eurocentric myth of America as Promised Land, i.e., a land of freedom, equality, prosperity, happiness, etc. for all its inhabitants.

Two of the techniques that Giovanni uses to subvert the public discourse which has perpetuated the myths of Africa and America are a "lineless" form--her stanzas look like prose paragraphs--and frequent ellipses. As Virginia C. Fowler remarks, Giovanni's lineless form and omission of words question the truthfulness of the public rhetoric of absolutes and certainty, and show our limited access to knowledge and truth (109). Giovanni's heavy use of ellipses which break the flow of her thoughts in each line also conveys, in my opinion, the fragmentation of consciousness and the gaps of communication existing in a society divided by race, gender, class and other factors.

Alice Walker, Rita Dove, June Jordan and Lucille Clifton also deal with the complete colonization of the black woman's body and consciousness after her enslavement by the white man, but they do not refer to her earlier status in Africa, as Brooks and Giovanni do. Instead, they focus on the white man's role in her calculated debasement and exploitation as a sex object and laborer. For instance, Walker's speaker in "Early Losses: A Requiem" (*Good Night*) laments her reduction to a sex object, which started during the transatlantic passage, when she was "'saved'/for sport among/the sailors" (28) of the ship that carried her to the USA. The image of the girl's body being "opened with each tearing/lunge" (28) conveys the painful experience of her repeated rape by the white crew. Her complete loss of control over her body is also indicated by the references to a) her enforced feeding, which aims at making her "a likely wench" who will be "sold for a price" (28) in the New World slave markets; and b) the branding of her neck and thigh "with hot irons" by the white "savages" (29) who claim her ownership. In another poem, "The Right to Life" (*Her Blue Body*), Walker directly accuses the white man of having "ruled over the black woman's/womb" for 400 years and systematically profited from her sexual abuse: (Note 5)

..... Like their
enslaved mothers and grandmothers before them, these
black women were sacrificed to the profit the white man
could make from harnessing their bodies and their
children's bodies to the cotton gin.

What can the white man say to the black woman?

We see him lined up, on Saturday nights, century
after century, to make the black mother, who must sell
her body to feed her children, go down on her knees
to him. (443)

In "The House Slave" (*The Yellow House*), Dove presents her view of black oppression and white profit from it in a less polemical way than Walker. Her young speaker contrasts the leisurely lives of her white master and mistress with the hard labor imposed upon her sister and the other field slaves. The latter start working before daylight, under the overseer's whip, while "their mistress sleeps like an ivory toothpick/and Massa dreams of asses, rum and slave-funk." The house slave weeps for her people's cruel fate (33). (Note 6)

Jordan and Clifton choose another strategy to protest against the black woman's continuing oppression in the young American nation formed after a bloody struggle for freedom. They attack the white man's belief in his racial and sexual superiority by challenging the public images of two famous founding fathers of the American Republic, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. In their own references to Washington and Jefferson, the poets underline the gap between the two leaders' high religious and political ideals expressed in public and their unchristian and undemocratic treatment of women slaves in private. For example, in "Cameo No. II" (*Things*), calls Washington "George the father hypocrite" (115) and presents him as an

aristocratic raider at the vulnerable
slavegirl bed

Americanus Rex
Secretus Blanco-Bronco-Night-Time-Sex

the father of this country
leading privileges of rape and run (116)

Clifton also makes an ironic reference to the gap between Jefferson's public statements and his private actions, in her poem "monticello" (*Good Woman*). Although Jefferson stressed in America's Declaration of Independence from British colonial rule that "all men are created equal," and included "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" among the "inalienable rights" (*Norton* 729) endowed to human beings by their Creator, he himself was a big plantation (Monticello) owner and a slaveholder. Like other slave owners, he used black women slaves as field-workers, slave-breeders, and objects of sexual pleasure. As an introduction to the poem, Clifton informs the reader that several of black Sally Hemmings's children had "bright red hair" (126). Then she laconically writes in the poem:

God declares no independence.
here come sons

from this black sally
branded with jefferson hair. (126)

II. The Twentieth Century

In most of the previous texts reconstructing the period of the Africans' enslavement, the focus is on (1) the white man's failure to recognize black girls'/women's humanity because of his racist and sexist prejudices and his greed for money; and (2) the consequent creation and maintenance of a pattern of sexual domination and violence in white male and black female relationships. In poems which recreate the twentieth century African-American female experience and which often draw material from the poets' lives, there is, however, a growing concern with black girls' and women's continuing abuse not only by white men, their historical enemies, but also by black men, their racial brothers. As the historians John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss correctly point out, contemporary black women writers undertake the "special role in voicing the long-suppressed feelings of women about the insensitivity, neglect, and abuse they had suffered at the hands of their menfolk" (427). For obvious reasons, poems dealing with such issues are more emotionally charged. A good example is Audre Lorde's "Need" (*Chosen Poems*) in which she assumes the role of witness to the black man's sexual crimes and of spokesperson for his victims whose "blood is shed into silence" (111)⁷ because of society's indifference. In her chant-like poem, the repetition of the image of blood emphasizes the waste of black lives and the failure of love in a social environment divided by sexism and racism:

Dead Black women haunt the black maled streets
paying the cities' secret and familiar tithes of blood
burn blood beat blood cut blood
seven year old child rape victim blood blood
of a sodomized grandmother blood blood
on the hands of my brother blood
and his blood clotting in the teeth of strangers
as women we were meant to bleed
but not this useless blood
(112, 4th stanza)

June Jordan similarly plays the role of witness in "Unrecorded Agonies," in which she refers to the death of a 19-year-old black woman who was gang-raped on a Brooklyn roof and then thrown off "screaming but inaudible," a young woman whose "unrecorded, unremembered murder joined her to the legions of black women whose demise, whose violated bodies never lead to" (12) any political or legislative action.⁸

Yet black females are not exposed to danger only when they are in public places. As the following poems illustrate, young girls often face even greater danger of

sexual assault in their own homes. For example, Tinsel Marie in Brooks's "The Coora Flower" (*Children*) feels insecure around her mother's new lover: " So a Man will be in the house./I must watch myself./ I must not dare to sleep" (1). (Note 9) Five-year-old Merle, the speaker in Brooks's "Uncle Seagram" (*Children*), is sexually harassed by her own alcoholic uncle. Brooks presents the little girl's premature initiation to male lust and the resulting loss of her trust in and love for one of her supposed protectors:

When we look at TV
my uncle picks me to sit on his lap.
As I sit, he gets hard in the middle.
I squirm, but he keeps me, and kisses my ear.

I am not even a girl.

Once, when I went to the bathroom,
my uncle noticed, came in, shut the door,
put his long white tongue in my ear,
and whispered "We're Best Friends, and Family,
and we know to keep Secrets."

My uncle likes me too much. I am worried.

I do not like my uncle anymore.
(7, 2nd half of poem)

Not only uncles but also fathers appear threatening in some texts. As Alicia S. Ostriker remarks, "Sexuality and violence often lie behind women's accusations of the father" (130). (Note10) In her poem "Born That Way" (*I Shall Not*), for example, Maya Angelou blames a black teenager's prostitution on her "childhood whoring" with her "fondler" father who bought her things in exchange for kisses, rubbings, etc. and thus "fitted her/for deceit" (24). In No. 2 of her "shapeshifter poems" (*Next*), Clifton also wonders "who is there to protect" the "prettylittlegirl" (78) from her father's hands, and in the poem "To my friend, jerina" (*Quilting*) her young speaker states:

listen,
when i found there was no safety
in my father's house
i knew there was none anywhere. (55) (Note 11)

One of the most outrageous incest cases is reported by Lorde in "Chain" (*Black Unicorn*):

Two girls, fifteen and sixteen, were sent to foster homes, because they had borne children by their natural father. Later, they petitioned the New York courts to be returned to their parents, who, the girls said, loved them. And the courts did so. (22)

After quoting this news item without commenting on it, Lorde recreates the story in her poem. In an imaginary dialogue with a mother figure, Lorde makes the girls explain how their father coerced them into having sexual intercourse with him:

but he said if we did it then
we would be his
good children if we did it
then he would love us
(23, II, 3rd stanza)

Lorde also points out the girls' consequent confusion about their identities and their relationships with each of their parents and with the children they bore by their father:

Am I his daughter or girlfriend
am I your child or your rival
you wish to be gone from his bed?
Here is your granddaughter mother
give us your blessing before I sleep
(24, II, 4th stanza) (Note 12)

In addition to the sexual exploitation of black girls and teenagers, the sexual harassment and rape of adult black women in contemporary American society is a frequent poetic theme. Some of the political poems written by black American women poets in the late 1960s and early 1970s voiced a strong protest against the tendency among several black male nationalists of that period to devalue, subordinate and sexually exploit their racial sisters, although these same men preached liberation from racial oppression. A good example is Lorde's "Hard Love Rock # II" (*Chosen Poems*) in which she first questions the black men's ability to improve the condition of their race "by slogans/by rhetorical pricks" (76-77), (Note 13) and then she sarcastically refers to the men's frequent distortion of the popular slogan "Black is beautiful" as an excuse to satisfy their lust. Her female speaker expresses her anger against this distortion and the sexism it hides:

Black is
not beautiful baby
beautiful baby beautiful
lets do it again
It is

not
being screwed twice
at the same time
from on top
as well as
from my side.
(77, last two stanzas)

Also, in a poem ironically entitled "Memorial. 3. rev pimps" (*Homecoming*) and addressed to black women, Sonia Sanchez urges them to put an end to their sexual exploitation by black men who have been concealing their lust and sexism underneath their nationalist masks and thus abusing black women, instead of resisting together the abuses inflicted on their race by white society, as revolutionary writers of the 1960s such as Frantz Fanon urged them to do. Sanchez employs several four-letter words to shock her female readers and thus make them react against their exploitation. Besides, she conveys the lack of cohesion and order in the black community, through the use of fragmented words ("re/vo/lution/ary"); uneven lines; indentation; grammatical violations; and a vertical, rhythmical structure: (Note 14)

hey.
 Sisters
 git yr/blk/asses
 out of that re/
 volution/
 ary's
 bed.
 that ain't no revolutionary
 thing com/munal
 fuck/ing
 ain't nothing political
 bout fucking.
 that's a white/
 thing u doing Sisters.
 and that so/
 called/brother there
 screwing u in tune to
 fanon
 and fanon
 and fanon
 ain't no re
 vo/lution/
 ary
 (31, 1st part of poem)

Sanchez deals as well, in the 1980s, with the black woman's continuing sexual harassment by white men in her poem "style no. 1" (*Under a Soprano Sky*). She presents her male character as a dirty old man, an "old dude, red as his car" (91, 5th sect.), who disrupts the woman's night walk by honking the horn of his car, inviting her to have some fun with him, and pulling his penis out of his pants. Sanchez chooses to create a "bad" black woman, i.e., an assertive person who is neither tempted nor intimidated by the white man's advances, a woman proud of coming "from a long line of rough mamas" (91). Like "mama Dixon," a "big/loud friend of

the family, who stunned [them] with her curses and liquor" (91), the woman flings all kinds of verbal insults at the dirty old man until she reduces him to nothing:

motha fucka. you even offend the night i said. you look like an old mole coming out of its hole. take yo slimy fat ole ass home. fo you get what's coming to you. and yo generation. ask yo mama to skin you. that is if you ever had one cuz anybody ugly as you couldna been born. (91)

If we accept Jordan's view in her book of essays, *Civil Wars* that (1) standard English in the USA is used as a calculated, political display of the white power to control and eliminate the powerless (65) as well as to cancel their name, history, etc. (69); and that (2) black English carries the black survivor's consciousness (69), then we can consider the use of the black American idiom and of obscene language by the persona in Sanchez's poem above as a political action against her linguistic and sexual control by the mainstream society represented by the old man in the poem. Charged with strong emotions, the woman's non-standard English manages to resist and eventually eradicate the dominant language and the Anglo-Saxon male-centered values it carries. (Note 15)

In other poems, however, especially those focusing on rape, the dominant language and values prevail. Most of the rape poems discussed in this essay were written by June Jordan, a survivor of this sexual crime. In "The Rationale, or, She Drove Me Crazy" (*Passion*) Jordan presents with irony the mentality prevailing in male-dominated societies that rape is a crime of passion usually caused by the victim. In this view, any woman who walks alone, especially at night, is asking for trouble, because her mere presence is a provocation for passing men. If she looks "foreign," "sexy," and "fast," as the woman mentioned in the poem does, then the provocation increases. When, therefore, a man loses his control and rapes her, it's her fault--his aggressive behavior is considered normal. (Note 16) The speaker in "The Rationale" is the rapist who, arrested for stealing a Porsche, is addressing the court. According to Ostriker, "we cannot tell the difference between an unattended woman getting raped and a Porsche on the street getting stolen" (130). Ostriker's observation is accurate. For, the language that the rapist uses to describe the woman and how he "forced her open" can also describe the car and how he broke into it. Yet, the difference lies in the value that a capitalist patriarchal society attaches to the car and the woman. The man is arrested again for the theft of somebody's expensive car and will certainly be sentenced for violating property laws. There is no indication in the poem, however, that he will be sentenced for the rape. This is because the woman, who is also considered an object and is treated as such, has no male "owner." It is not accidental that Jordan does not give the woman the chance to speak about her rape and the rapist. The woman's silence suggests her subordinate socio-political position, which does not allow her to define herself and her experience in her own terms, i.e., outside the male text and male norms: (Note 17)

I looked all around to see where her
owner/where the man in her life could
probably be. But no show. She was out.
By herself. On the street:
As fine, as ready to go as anythin you could
ever possibly want to see so
I checked out myself: what's this?
Then I lost my control; I couldn't resist.
What did she expect? She looked foreign
besides and small and sexy
and fast
by the curb. So I lost my control and
I forced her open and I entered
her body and I poured myself
into her
pumpin for all I was worth
wild as I was
when you caught me

third time apprehended
for the theft of a Porsche.
(11-12, 2nd half of poem)

In "Poem about my Rights" (*Passion*), Jordan speaks more directly about the political nature of rape, and reveals the interconnection of racist, sexist and economic factors. At first the speaker protests against the multiple obstacles, rejections and dangers she has faced because of her difference from those in power. She then parallels the sexual and other abuses she has suffered as a black woman in the USA, with the "rape" of African countries (military invasions, African leaders' assassinations, economic exploitation by multi-national corporations, etc.) by the forces of neo-colonialism. (Note 18) She concludes that she has paid a high price for her difference, but, instead of feeling defeated, she asserts her determination to retain her identity and to fight back against her oppressors: (Note 19)

I have been raped
be-
cause I have been wrong the wrong sex the wrong age
the wrong skin the wrong nose the wrong hair the
wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic
the wrong sartorial I
I have been the meaning of rape
I have been the problem everyone seeks to
eliminate by forced
penetration with or without the evidence of slime and/
but let this be unmistakable this poem
is not consent I do not consent
.....
I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name
My name is my own my own my own
and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this

but I can tell you that from now on my resistance
my simple and daily and nightly self-determination
may very well cost you your life (89)

In *Civil Wars*, Jordan states that rape maims and desecrates a woman's right to self-determination (148). In the following rape poems, "Case in Point," "Rape Is Not a Poem," and "Poem from Taped Testimony," which sound more personal and autobiographical than "The Rationale" and "Poem about my Rights," she focuses on the experience of rape and its traumatic effects on the survivor. As a response to an older woman friend's comment that "there is no silence peculiar/to the female," the speaker in "Case in Point" (*Passion*) declares that she has "something to say/about female silence" (13). She then connects silence with her being raped, the first time by a white man and the most recent by "a blackman actually/head of the local NAACP" (13). Jordan's matter of fact harsh language, in her detailed description of the second rape, strengthens the sarcastic tone of her poem and skillfully conveys the black woman's vulnerability and humiliation in a racist/sexist society in which, as Ostriker suggests, "the power to speak may rest not only on economic, political, and legal power but on ordinary physical strength" (69):

Today is 2 weeks after the fact
of that man straddling
his knees either side of my chest
his hairy arm and powerful left hand
forcing my arms and my hands over my head
flat to the pillow while he rammed
what he described as his quote big dick
unquote into my mouth
and shouted out: "D'ya want to swallow
my big dick; well, do ya?"

He was being rhetorical.
My silence was peculiar
to the female. (13)

In Jordan's rape poems, black and white American men's sexism and their particular contempt for the black woman cut across racial boundaries. She conveys this contempt more openly in "Rape Is Not a Poem" (*Passion*) in which she portrays the rapist as an acquaintance of the speaker's. He stopped by to say hello and raped her before leaving, thus violating her trust, her hospitality and the privacy of her home. The poet employs metaphor to convey the effects of rape on the woman's body and psyche. Like the insensitive visitors of a garden, mentioned in the opening lines, who first admired the beautiful colors and smells of the flowers and then "stamped upon and tore apart/the garden," the man crashed the speaker's body and feelings (79). (Note 20) To his "contempt" she responds with "hatred" (80) and she bitterly concludes:

there is nothing left but the drippings
of power and
a consummate wreck of tenderness/I
want to know:
Is this what you call
Only Natural? (80)

In "Rape Is Not a Poem" and other texts, Jordan stresses the firmly rooted tradition of violence in racial and sexual relationships, as well as the lack of state support to rape victims in the USA, that are factors which encourage men to abuse women. (Note 21) In her "Poem from Taped Testimony" (*Naming*), for example, the raped speaker is confronted with the irony that the man who represents justice in town is the rapist's brother, and she declares that this coincidence is not unusual. Social mechanisms which secure male privilege and control are everywhere. The speaker proposes, therefore, individual resistance as the only means of survival left to women:

..... when you turn around
for help or the punishment of these people
where can you go I mean I was raped six
years ago by one of them who was good he told me
with a rifle and he raped me and his
brother was the judge in town and so forth all
of them have brothers all over town there
are so many of them everywhere you go so
either you become the routine
setup
or you have to figure out
some self-defense (VI, 156)

The lack of social protection and the need for women of color to develop their own skills in self-defense are also pointed out by Jayne Cortez in "Rape" (*Firespitter*). Her speaker refers to two survivors, a hispanic (Inez) and a black woman (Joanne). The latter was raped by a white policeman, which was not unusual. (Note 22) Like Jordan, Cortez provides factual details of both rapes to stress the physical violence as well as the insults and humiliations the two women suffered. Since the rapists declared war on the women's bodies and lives, her speaker says, the women are justified in defending themselves, and even killing their rapists while doing so-- Inez kills her rapist with a rifle and Joanne with an ice-pick. The poem boldly celebrates the women's final victory. Like Jordan, Cortez deliberately omits punctuation, and employs vulgar expressions and four-letter words in order to shock her readers, oblige them to recognize the obscene nature of rape, and possibly move them to action against this crime:

And what was Joanne supposed to do for
the man who declared war on her life

Was she supposed to tongue his encrusted toilet stool lips
suck the numbers off of his tin badge
choke on his clap trap balls
squeeze on his nub of rotten maggots and
sing god bless america thank you for fucking my life away

This being wartime for Joanne
she did what a defense department will do in times of war
and when the piss drinking shit sniffing guard said
I'm gonna make you wish you were dead black bitch come here
Joanne came down with an ice pick in
the swat freak mother fucker's chest
yes in the fat neck of that racist policeman
Joanne did the dance of the ice picks and once again
from coast to coast
house to house
we celebrated day of the dead rapist punk
and just what the fuck else were we supposed to do
(31, 2nd half of poem) (Note 23)

In conclusion, we should point out that the use of obscene language by Cortez, Sanchez, Lorde, and Jordan shows the four poets' deliberate escape from and resistance against conventional concepts of what constitutes proper "poetic" and "lady-like" language.²⁴ It is also part of their technique of shock treatment which aims at sensitizing their readers to the issues they discuss. The revisionist use of gendered and racial imagery, as well as the use of the black American idiom, ellipses, fragmented words/lines, and the violation of punctuation, grammar and syntax in several texts discussed in this essay enable the black women poets to undermine the power of the official rhetoric, to question the validity of mainstream accounts of African-American history, and to effectively tell their own truths about the black woman's nature and experience. As truth-tellers, they reveal the ideological, socio-political, and economic factors which have historically contributed to the devaluation of the black woman as a human being and have trapped her in the position of the victim of male sexual/racial politics. Thus, the poets challenge the cultural myth of paradise connected with both America and pre-colonial Africa. They also subvert the prevailing stereotype of the black woman as the hot mama who invited her sexual abuse, and they show the brutalizing effects of such continuous abuse on her body and consciousness. Through their severe criticism and their revisionist strategies the ten poets resist oppression, reclaim the black American woman's control of her colonized body, life, and speech, and advocate the need for the creation of a truly egalitarian and more humane society with greater respect for all its members.

Notes

1

In "Equality" (*I Shall Not Be Moved*), Maya Angelou protests the black man's acceptance of white images of the black woman, the whore stereotype included: "You announce my ways are wanton,/that I fly from man to man" (12). In "The New House" (*I Shall Not Be Moved*), Angelou also includes "whore, hot tail, thing, it" (34) in the negative labels attached to the black woman. For more information concerning the creation of the hot mama stereotype (passionate, sexually promiscuous and aggressive), see also Roseann P. Bell 168; Saundra Towns; and Patricia Hill Collins 54, 67, 70, 77. I have shortened long book titles, in parenthetical references in the text and in some notes.

2

The poem is included in Brooks's *Selected Poems*. A more thorough interpretation of the poem and its title is made by D. H. Melhem 135-40. See also Ekaterini Georgoudaki 19-20.

3

In "Linkage" Giovanni makes only a passing reference to female genital mutilation in Africa. Alice Walker makes a similar reference in *The Color Purple*, but she deals with this theme more thoroughly in her later novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, and in the journal and film *Warrior Marks*. See also Efua Dorkenoo for a more thorough treatment of the subject.

4

Virginia C. Fowler considers "Linkage" to be one of the finest poems in *Those Who Ride* and as one of Giovanni's most strongly feminist poems (109). Fowler also points out Giovanni's specific and detailed criticisms of American society in "Linkage" and the book, and her focus on race, gender, and even age factors (116).

5

Walker read the poem "The Right to Life: What Can the White Man Say to the Black Woman?" (*Her Blue Body*) at the Pro-Choice/Keep Abortion Legal Rally (*The Mayflower Hotel*, Washington DC., April 8, 1989). She offered the poem "in memory and recognition of our common mother. And to my daughter" (442). In the poem, Walker reminds the white man of the roles of slave-breeder and field-worker he imposed on the black woman slave and the many deaths he consequently caused (447). She also protests both against contemporary anti-abortion laws and forced sterilizations of coloured women in the USA and abroad (444, 446-447), and against the fact that the black woman is still forced to provide cheap labor, in the form of children, for factory/farms and the assembly lines of the white man (445). Among the scholars who discuss black women's double exploitation as sexual objects and laborers are John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. 106, 128, 130, 145; Vivian Gordon 22-23, 29-30; Angela Y. Davis 8; Paula Giddings 37-39; Deborah Gray White 67-69, 98-103, 108, 132, 152-53, 162-65; Maulana Karenga 85, 89; and Patricia Hill Collins 22-23, 48-56, 62-63, 69, 72-78.

6

For further discussion of the poem see Georgoudaki 164-65.

7

The poem "Need: A Choral of Black Women's Voices" was written "for Patricia Cowan and Bobbie Jean Graham and the hundreds of other mangled black women whose nightmares inform my words" (111). Lorde also

condemns woman-hating and the resulting sexual and other violence black males inflict on black women, in *Sister Outsider* 63-65. She discusses in both that book and "Revolutionary Hope" the socio-political factors affecting black men's and women's relationships. See also Delores P. Aldridge for an analysis of such relationships.

8

Also, in Sonia Sanchez's "song no. 2" (*Under a Soprano Sky*), the speaker invites all the "young girls molested at ten" to join her and the black race as they are "rising from the dead," in order to create a better world (80).

9

The protagonist of Maya Angelou's autobiographical first novel *I Know* is sexually harassed (60-63) and finally raped (65-66) by her mother's lover, at the age of eight. The rapist is arrested, tried, sentenced to one year's imprisonment, and released on the same day! (71)

10

Such accusations against fathers and stepfathers appear not only in poems but also in fiction written by black women, such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Audre Lorde's *Zami* and Alice Walker's *Color Purple*.

11

In another poem, "wild blessings" (*Quilting*), Clifton hints also at incestuous father-daughter relations and their disastrous effects on the daughter. Her speaker mentions holding the hand of a man who "emptied into his daughter, the hand/of a girl who threw herself/from a tenement window" (47). Although Clifton does not create a cause and effect relationship between the two incidents, the readers can easily attribute the girl's suicide to incest.

12

Neither Clifton nor Lorde specifies the race of the incest victims. Yet both poets' deep concern with the black woman's plight makes it probable that these young victims are black.

13

First published in 1971, "Hard Love Rock #II" was included among Lorde's poems in *Chosen Poems*, published in 1982. In *Sister Outsider* Lorde also relates how painful it was for her to see, during the Black and Puerto Rican occupation at City College in 1969, "how Black women were being used and abused," that is, "being fucked on tables and under desks" by young black men who claimed "the revolution is here" (97).

14

In her interview with Joy Harjo, Jordan refers to "the vertical poem" which originated in the black poetry of the 1960s, a poem that "does not depend upon or refer to horizontal metrics at all" (65). She also connects truth telling with great poetry (67).

15

Jordan stresses the political nature of language in both *Civil Wars* and *On Call*. In *Civil Wars* she protests the treatment of non-standard English as sub-standard and dangerous, and its eradication. She sees black English as a political fact suffering from political persecution and malice (68). In *On Call* she stresses the need for resistance against the linguistic silence imposed on the various peoples living in the USA, the need to "drown out the official language of the powerful with our own mighty and conflicting voices or we will perish as a people" (36).

16

The tendency to put the blame on the raped woman is also pointed out by Walker in "The Thing Itself" (*Horses*). While referring to her mock-rape by her white husband, Walker's speaker brings to our attention another stereotypical belief, i.e., that "all 'real' women/really/like rape" (61). To prove how wrong this is, she also refers to her great-great-grandmother's actual rape (61-62).

17

Jordan states in *On Call* that the invisibility and silence "of the real and various peoples of our country is a political situation of language" that we must resist (36). She also declares that the USA is not a democratic state with a democratic language; as "we have the language of the powerful that perpetuates that power through the censorship of dissenting views" (31). She dramatizes this censorship through her silenced speaker in "The Rationale."

18

Jordan's "Poem about My Rights" refers to South Africa "penetrating into Namibia penetrating into Angola" (87), to the murders of Nkrumah and Lumumba by the CIA in the 1960s (87), to Exxon Corporation (88), the FBI (88-89), etc. Commenting on Jordan's poem, Davis agrees with her that there is a connection between sexual violence against individual women and neo-colonial violence against coloured peoples and nations (2-3, 11-13). Davis also gives examples of rape as a weapon of political terror in the USA and abroad (9). Jordan similarly includes rape among the weapons of oppression used by USA agents against the people of Central America in *On Call* (60). Jayne Cortez's "For the Brave Young Students in Soweto" (*Mouth on Paper*) deals as well with the theme of colonialism in Africa and America (leaders' assassinations, native populations' poverty and genocide, use of torture to keep natives subjected, etc.). South African whites are called "landstealers, infant killers, rapists and rats" (63), and black women are mentioned as victims of torture and rape (61-62).

19

Sandi Russell points out Jordan's "alarming confrontational stance" in her final "statement about self-determination" in the poem.

20

The visitors blamed the flowers for their own cruel action, as rapists often do: "those flowers?/They were asking for it" (Jordan, *Passion* 79).

21

In her article "The Dance of Revolution," Jordan refers to women's victimization by the "American continuum of gratuitous and savage hostility or neglect," and to the fact that "the ruinous legacy of violence neither shrinks nor fades in the light of another day" (11). She concludes that, despite political protest or private comfort to a victimized friend, "you can neither cure nor overcome the consequences of defilement and contempt ... Horror and rage capsize into bitterness and self-pity" (11).

22

Davis refers to specific cases of black women who were raped by white policemen, their supposed protectors against rape or other criminal assaults (10).

23

In another poem, "If the Drum is a Woman" (*Firespitter*), Cortez protests the sexist stereotypes of female inferiority, docility, etc. and the resulting domination, rejection, desertion, and multiple oppression of the black woman, mentioning rape as one kind of oppression (15). Margaret Walker similarly includes the black woman's sexual abuse ("our sister who is ravished") in her description of black people's misery in the deep South (See "Delta," section II, *For My People* 22). And Giovanni's speaker in "Woman Poem" (*Black Feeling*) complains about the black woman's sexist treatment: "it's a sex object if you're pretty/and no love/or love and no sex if you're fat" (78).

24

Other poems which illustrate black women's violation of social and aesthetic conventions are 1) "turning" (*Good Woman*), in which Clifton celebrates "turning out of the/white cage, turning out of the/lady cage," and finally "turning on in/to my own self" (143); and 2) "The Last M.F." (Songs), in which Carolyn Rodgers challenges the late 1960s black male images of the new Black Womanhood: "a softer self/a more reserved speaking self" who "will listen to Black Men," by repeating the word "muthafucka" which a black woman was not supposed to use in either her "poetry or in any speech" she gave, in order to be respected (37).

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