

The NMW Profile
~ Of our Poetry Judge for Contest 28, Summer 2009 ~

Nikki Giovanni's
'Roots of anger...' and healing
reach deep into Appalachia and the South

By Jack Neely

Editor's Note: Following the deadliest peacetime shootings by a single gunman in United States history, Monday, April 16, 2007, on the campus of Virginia Tech—32 dead, many others wounded—a name from the storied Sixties suddenly gained new currency. A poem Nikki Giovanni read at a convocation there went viral. T-shirts bore her words, 'We are Virginia Tech.' Articles across America focused on her, and an appearance on the PBS series, Bill Moyers' Journal, followed. Oh, and did I mention she served as an NMW poetry judge in 2009? Not that she'd been living in obscurity. The author of more than a dozen books is a fixture on Oprah's list of 25 living legends, and has been credited with nurturing the roots of hip-hop. Most long ago forgot that decades back her name struck fear in many, due to her association with the Black Panthers and her often scathing writings. She is regarded with rather more equanimity these days. Writer Jack Neely penned two articles about Giovanni for Knoxville's MetroPulse magazine around the time of the Virginia Tech massacre. With some updates and other editorial changes, we combined them into the article below. ~ D.W.

Nikki Giovanni was flying home from a conference in San Francisco on Monday, April 16, 2007, when her plane was delayed by high winds in Raleigh, and re-routed to Charlotte. When she finally touched down in Blacksburg, VA, just after noon, young college students onboard began opening their phones and laptops.

"You know how they do," said Giovanni. "And they were saying, 'My God, there's been a shooting at Virginia Tech!' And we thought, oh, too bad. Then they said 21 people are dead. We thought that must be a mistake. That it must be one or two people. Of course, it kept going higher and higher through the afternoon."

A Distinguished Professor, Giovanni has been at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University—better known as Virginia Tech—for over 20 years.

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“All the country’s calling in, offering prayers and thoughts,” she said the day after the shootings. “It’s lovely, it really is.”

Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, about 200 miles northeast of her birthplace in Knoxville, TN, is an intimate campus.

“We’re 2,600 acres, but you literally can walk from one end to the other in 10 minutes. I can, and I’m not even in shape.”

She was preparing remarks for a memorial convocation on Tuesday afternoon.

As we spoke, some arrangements were still up in the air, and the campus was in a stir with post-shooting security, but also pre-presidential security.

“The president and his people will be here; I’ll do what I’m asked to do,” Giovanni said.

She wrote a poem with the theme, “‘We are Virginia Tech.’ It’s not a great poem, but I wanted people to know we need to be here.”

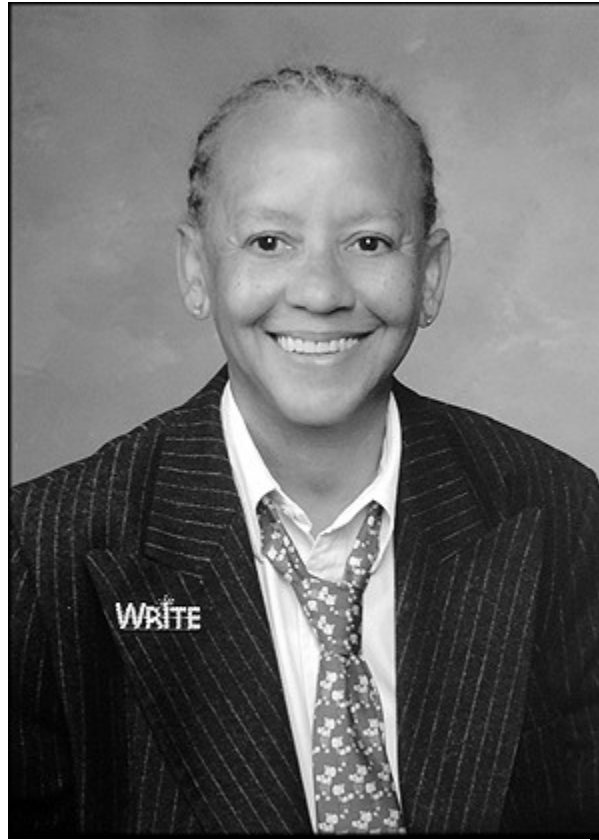
During her talk at the Tennessee Theatre in Knoxville three weeks earlier, Giovanni, who had recently buried her mother and her sister, spoke about the nature of grief, and expressed her frustration with America’s mourning practices, which struck her as naïve.

The day after the shooting, she seemed disappointed that Virginia Tech had chosen to close the campus for a week.

“They say, ‘We’re giving you time for grieving, but it’s going to take more than a week. For now, we need to get back to routine.’

“That’s the only way we can heal.”

In a previous decade, the idea that Nikki Giovanni might appear



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in public in her hometown of Knoxville, Tennessee, to speak to a mixed-race audience, might have prompted the governor to send the National Guard to take positions outside the auditorium, in full riot gear. She was one of the most controversial voices of a controversial generation, a small woman with a big agenda to bring down the corrupt white

establishment and ennoble the oppressed, even to the point of militancy. With the possible exception of some musicians, she may have been the last radical poet anyone paid much attention to.

In recent years, Giovanni has sometimes been the main attraction at the Tennessee Theatre, Knoxville's grandest auditorium. When she was a child, she and her family were never allowed in to even see the rococo interior of the 1928 movie palace. She never saw it until she was in her forties, when she appeared with Republican then-Governor Lamar Alexander in a historical "Homecoming" celebration.

She had a good look around the theater and its amenities and had a revelation about the segregationist mindset. "Of course they don't want you to be in here," she thought. "They don't want you to see it's not as shabby as any place else! Back then, white toilets were always clean; black toilets were always dirty."

But then she laughs. "With integration, of course, all toilets are dirty."

In her mid-60s, the creative-writing teacher at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg has a gentle, sometimes whimsical *affect*. She's a big Hokies fan, and prior to the shootings was probably best known to a young generation as an author of children's books, like *Rosa*, her illustrated biography of Civil Rights heroine Rosa Parks; *Lincoln and Douglass: An American Friendship*, about the slain president's relationship to the escaped slave—and author—Frederick Douglass; the jazz story *Genie In the Jar*; and several collections of poetry for children, including *The Sun Is So Quiet*. She edited a collection of other poets called *Hip Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry with a Beat*, a bestseller in 2008.

Not to mention a slim but vivid volume from 1994 called *Knoxville, Tennessee*, which children across the country know as a



Jack Neely takes a stroll through Knoxville, TN, where Nikki Giovanni was born.

warm picture-book about a black girl enjoying the summer with her grandmother. The text, however, was originally a free-verse poem about her childhood home as she had known it, published in one of her first collections. Making a children's book of the modern poem was her editor's idea; "If you're a writer," Giovanni said, "the answer to everything is *yes*."

But there was a time, about 45 years ago—in fact when "Knoxville, Tennessee" was first published as a poem—when the name Nikki Giovanni could cut like a razor. It sent chills up the spines of honkies everywhere.

She was one of the uncompromising figures that made the Sixties memorable. Her early books, *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk*, and *Black Judgment*, were barrages of African-American outrage in Beat-like free verse, poems with titles like "Black Separatism," "The Great Pax Whitie" and "Ugly Honkies."

They expressed specific bitterness toward the white leadership and encouragement for militant groups like the Black Panthers. In her poems, she spoke of "the inevitability of revolution," and often with violent imagery, encouraged armed defiance. Though some of her poems questioned Martin Luther King's nonviolent tactics, she was bitter about his death, which prompted a 1968 prose poem that opened, "What can I, a poor Black woman, do to destroy America?... There is one answer—I can kill."

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Her poems were radical and often harsh, but struck a chord in their time, and were remarkably popular. Some have called her the most-read poet of her generation. When she spoke in big nightclubs in New York, she drew standing-room-only crowds of would-be revolutionaries.

By the end of the 1960s, though, when she was still in her mid-20s, she had completed her most famously scathing work. After she became a single mother—deliberately—her work softened and, to some minds, deepened. Her 2007 book, *On My Journey Now*, is a gentle, conversational examination of spirituals as a sort of soundtrack of the black American experience. But you can still hear some of the passion of the old Nikki in her words. Her last collection, *Bicycles: Love Poems*, (2009), meditations on the subject of love, is framed by reflections on her experiences at Virginia Tech during the fatal shootings. She knew the gunman, Seung Hui Cho, and expressed concern about the violent tone of his writings, to school administrators many months before the shootings.

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If anyone's life is ever stereotypical, Nikki Giovanni's has not been. In one of her early poems, "Nikki-Rosa," she seems aware of her reputation. But she also seems annoyed at the assumptions readers made about her own background. At the end of it, she forecasts that white writers will misunderstand the roots of her anger: "... they'll / probably talk about my hard childhood / and never understand that / all the while I was quite happy." (Remarkably, the nostalgic poem that appeared as the text of the 1990s children's book, *Knoxville, Tennessee*, first appeared as free verse in the mostly scathingly political collection, *Black Judgment*.)

The black radical with the Italian name was always a paradox to begin with, and her biography is fittingly hard to categorize.

She did grow up partly in the South, where blacks were taught to "learn their place," but her grandmother, Louvenia Watson, was a prominent black community activist, a physically and mentally large woman who was known to spar with powerful whites, including the late demagogue millionaire grocer-broadcaster-politician, Cas Walker, still a legend in this town. Mrs. Watson was a liberal Democrat who supported Adlai Stevenson's campaigns for the presidency.

According to family tradition, her outspokenness, which threatened to get her in trouble in Georgia, was what brought her north to Knoxville.

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But Nikki's granddad, John Brown Watson, was a personally conservative Latin scholar and Eisenhower Republican, a holdover from the days when most blacks still supported the party of Lincoln.

"It was fun to listen to them," Giovanni said of her sparring grandparents. From early on, Nikki was her own person.

Her mother was, by the way, a regional tennis champ; she met her father, Jones Giovanni, on Knoxville College's campus.

Giovanni suspects her mother, under the spell of her Latin-scholar father, was attracted to Jones Giovanni in part because of his exotic name. He was born on the Alabama Gulf Coast. His lineage is obscure, but his daughter assumes they're descended from slaves owned by an Italian slaveowner.

Her father, a college graduate unable to find any but menial work in 1940s Knoxville, determined to move his family north to Cincinnati when Nikki was very young. But they never wholly moved. Her grandmother seemed to exert a gravitational pull. Despite her father's dissatisfactions with segregation in Knoxville, Nikki and her sister returned frequently to spend summers here.

"Knoxville, in many respects, was a haven," she said. "My parents used to fight a lot. I needed to get away."

By 14, she had more or less moved back to Knoxville altogether, attending old Austin High, Knoxville's black high school. She and her grandmother attended Mt. Zion Baptist, which, in pre-urban-renewal days, occupied a large brick chapel on Patton Street, near downtown. It was there that she learned many of the spirituals she discusses in *On My Journey Now*. The first hymn she quotes in the book is, "On My Journey Now, Mt. Zion."

Of her grandmother, she said, "The older she got, the more charming she became. She was an activist at 25, but at 50, it's wisdom."

Her grandmother had diverse interests. Active in a literary club and a garden club, Mrs. Watson was known for her rose garden on Mulvaney, the street more recently renamed Women's Basketball Hall of Fame Drive. But she campaigned for Civil Rights, and against the Jim-Crow poll tax, which effectively kept blacks from voting in many areas. "Not just in town, she was in the NAACP. She went to Myles Horton's school." That was the Highlander Folk School, then in rural Monteagle, Tennessee, where Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks learned tactics of nonviolent resistance.

"Tennessee didn't have some of the sort of problems the deep Southern states had," Giovanni said. "And Knoxville didn't have the sort of problems that Memphis had—or has. We could ride the bus any

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place. I think it's the Appalachian roots for not having that level of segregation."

Segregation certainly existed in Knoxville, and the Watsons and Giovannis lived in a black neighborhood. But Nikki's memories of life on the eastern fringes of downtown are rich and warm. "We'd walk down to Clark's Drugstore to get ice cream, listen to the jukebox. One play for a nickel, six plays for a quarter. We'd pool our money. It's where I first heard Nina Simone," the influential jazz singer and civil-rights activist.

She'd play tennis at Cal Johnson Park. Her grandmother lived right across the street. "In the backyards, there were no fences. It was lovely. Rev. Abram kept ducks. Mrs. Abram would bring us duck eggs.

"Cal Johnson Park had swings. Grandmother would let me go swing until noon. Grandmother would sit up on the porch and watch. There was no sense of danger at all. I'd say, 'Can you see me, Grandmother?'"

"I remember the Gem," the big black theater just down the hill. "The popcorn was good. I don't know why—blacks in a black theater—we didn't serve sweet potatoes. They're quieter than popcorn."

She lived away for a while. By the time Knoxville was desegregating, as a result of demonstrations and civil disobedience from 1960 to '63, Nikki Giovanni was a student at historically black Fisk University in Nashville.

She was shocked when she returned to find so many of her childhood landmarks gone. She expressed her disorientation in her much-anthologized essay, "400 Mulvaney Street." Named for her grandmother's address, it's one of Giovanni's most specific autobiographical pieces. The entire neighborhood was nearly obliterated by Urban Renewal. It's now the general area of Townview Terrace, subsidized apartment complexes. The Gem Theater and the old Mt. Zion Church are now theoretical points along an asphalt expanse known as James White Parkway.

"It's the same everywhere... Detroit, Roanoke, Chicago, Minneapolis," she said. "They go to where the blacks live, and say, 'We must build a road through there. Use that piece of land.'"

She said the black community suffered under urban renewal, but one specific demographic suffered more than others:

"You lose the old people," she said. "And whatever the value of the house, you don't get that. And you lose the community. Life is never about a place to live, it's the people you know and who know you."

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Urban renewal forced her grandmother to move to farther East Knoxville; her house and rose garden was landscaped away. In “400 Mulvaney Street,” which originally appeared in her book, *Gemini*, she blames the move on her brokenhearted grandmother’s death in 1969.

At Mrs. Watson’s funeral at Mt. Zion, they had one surprise. “Biggest flower spray was the family’s,” she said. “The second biggest was Cas Walker’s.” The longtime city councilman knew how to make friends of old opponents.

A proposal to re-rename all or part of Women’s Basketball Hall of Fame Drive “Mulvaney Street”—partly inspired by Giovanni’s work set there—probably won’t happen, according to Mayor Bill Haslam. However, he said the city will soon install a historical plaque at the site of her early home.

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On My Journey Home, an impressionistic reflection on the context of the spirituals she’s heard all her life, expresses her fascination with what she sees as the subtexts for well-known spirituals. Giving it a starred review, *Booklist* called it “personal and passionate.” *School Library Journal* remarked, “Giovanni is a poet, and the book has cadence; in tone, it almost reads like the transcript of a speech or a sermon...”

Asked if there’s any particular spiritual that has special meaning to her, she said, “Any given day, my favorite’s going to change.” She remembers the inspiration of the Fisk Jubilee singers, an *a cappella* group that frequently performed when she attended that historically black Nashville college.

“I remember ‘Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.’ And ‘Ain’t got time to die’—it’s so sassy, such a woman’s song—it said, *Get outta my way.*”

She’s particularly intrigued with lyrics from an old slave song, “Everybody talkin’ ‘bout heaven ain’t going there.” Giovanni pictures slaves singing in the balcony of the white masters’ church, specifically about white slaveholders and their complacent preachers.

“Nobody’s gonna say slavery was a good idea. I just want to know if I had been enslaved, how would I handle this. How did you remain sane at the Middle Passage? When you were introduced to the plantation? They had to have found dignity, and they did it when they made the decision to live.

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“Everybody didn’t ride the Underground Railway,” she said, “but over 100,000 did. And if there hadn’t been fugitives, there wouldn’t have been a Fugitive Slave Law.”

She is perhaps achieving through spirituals what another former Knoxvilleian, Alex Haley, did through genealogy and narrative, with his wildly popular book, *Roots*. Giovanni was a close friend of Haley, who spent most of his last decade in Knoxville and Norris.

“When he remarried, I told him,” she affects a mock-whine, “Alex, I was gonna be the next one.”

She admires his big bronze statue, which stands in Haley Heritage Square, near the current location of her old Mt. Olive Baptist Church. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it,” she said. “I told them, if it’s ever missing, check my back yard.”

She’s not one to dwell on her own past, or to belabor her evolution over the last 40 years.

“Yesterday’s radical is today’s prophet,” she said. “If you don’t drop dead first!” Several of her old black-radical allies of the Sixties, the ones she references in her early poems, have not survived. Giovanni suggests the tactics of the Sixties may not be as urgently necessary as they seemed then. “Then it was radical to be antiwar. I think for the most part people today realize war is a bad idea.”

Still, she’s not afraid of controversial ideas, and her words still carry a strong element of a social conscience. She’s still known to cause a stir.

“Next is universal health care,” she said. “And not a school district in America that wouldn’t do well to have a breakfast program. We give kids Ritalin to keep them still. How about a bowl of grits in the morning, then at recess give them a bowl of pinto beans? Of course, it wouldn’t keep the drug companies in business. But I’m not sure they need to stay in business.”

She’s an admirer of the late rapper Tupac Shakur, and brings him up even in her book about spirituals. Rap, she said, “started out to tell the truth, and then it slid into exaggeration. So we went from a legitimate story to braggadocio, which has now run out, because now it’s crazy, because now everybody is a player and everybody is in bed with three women, and it’s like, ‘Oh, come on, now. Where is Tupac when we really need him?’”

She adds, “whatever else Tupac was, he was honest, and we don’t have anybody artistically as honest right now.”

In the book, she compares the best of hip-hop to spirituals, as “a way to stay sane.”

“But I’m not a sociologist,” she laughs. “I’m just a poet.”

Read Nikki Giovanni’s poem, when the girl became a poet, p. 146.