

# Bidding Adieu to a Pioneering Poet of Racial Grievance

By Bruce Bawer

I first encountered Nikki Giovanni, who died on Monday at the age of 81, in the [pages](#) of the 1973 edition of the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*. It was the mid-1970s, and I was an undergraduate English major, and that thick blue paperback was the textbook for one of my classes.

Arranged in chronological order by the birth date of the poet, it began with works by Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Thomas Hardy (who would become my favorite poet) and moved on through dozens of others, ranging from William Butler Yeats and Robert Frost (both of whom I loved) to William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound (both of whom left me cold), and ended with two poets born in 1943: Nikki Giovanni and James Tate.

Tate, who died in 2015, was just fine. But Giovanni? Well, she was my introduction to the Black Arts Movement, which was then a decade or so old. The anthology – I still have my half-century-old copy, which is lying open on the desk in front of me – contains three of Giovanni's poems, prefaced by a nearly page-long introduction.



Nikki Giovanni circa 1980 (Portrait by Elsa Dorfman, Wikimedia Commons)

“Nikki Giovanni,” it begins, “is very clear about whom she writes for and what she writes about, and she says so with care and intimidating directness. She writes out of the experience of a black American woman, and she is willing to share that experience only with those who recognize it as their own. White readers are warned away.”

In short, whites are not welcome. Nowadays we’re used to this kind of thinking – the word for which is racism – on the part of black entertainers and race hustlers. But in the 1970s it was still a relatively new phenomenon. Indeed, Giovanni’s desire to be read only by people in her own demographic was the very opposite of the attitude toward literature and race that had previously been voiced by black writers and thinkers. *The Souls of Black Folk*, the 1903 [book](#) by W.E.B. Du Bois, the author, intellectual, and pioneering black civil-rights advocate, contains a famous passage about the fact that great literature knows no color, and no color line:

*I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out of the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed Earth and the tracery of stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension.*

These are stirring sentences, and they express a beautiful sentiment. It was, of course, such thinking on the part of both black and white Americans that helped our country move beyond the era of racial segregation and prejudice. But Nikki Giovanni wasn’t having it.

“Nikki-Rosa” (1969), the first Giovanni poem in the *Norton Anthology*, begins with a flat-out declaration of radical differentness: “childhood remembrances are always a drag / if you’re Black.” Why a drag? Because, she explains, “if you

become famous or something / they never talk about how happy you were." Giovanni goes on to describe, rather affectingly, a childhood lived in poverty – "you got your bath from one of those / big tubs that folk in chicago barbecue in" – but redeemed by love: "everybody is together and you / and your sister have happy birthdays and very good christmasses."

Now, this is a poem, I would submit, to which anyone who grew up poor but happy could relate. It's not about being black. It's about being a famous person who grew up poor. But for Giovanni, race is all: "and I really hope no white person ever has cause / to write about me / because they never understand / Black love is Black wealth." Black, black, black. Got that? Black!

Another early [poem](#), "The Great Pax Whitie" (1968), doesn't just push white people away, it's full of raw racial rage: "In the beginning was the word / And the word was / Death / And the word was nigger / And the word was death to all niggers." But the rage here is directed not just at whites but at capitalism ("Lot's wife is now a product of the Morton company") and at America ("Where war became peace / And genocide patriotism").

Giovanni equates the Nazis' Holocaust with America's involvement in the Korean War and attributes both to capitalistic motives: "And they barbecued six million / To raise the price of beef / And crossed the 38th parallel / To control the price of rice." And just for good measure, she brings in the assassinations of JFK and Martin Luther King, Jr.: "So the great white prince / Was shot like a nigger in texas... / While our nigger in memphis / was shot like their prince in dallas." It's an awful poem – a shrill, shallow, sloppy, stupid mishmash of Allen Ginsberg and Amiri Baraka, a grab-bag of stale 1960s slogans, a would-be *statement* punctuated with words intended to shock.

Not all of Giovanni's poems are so racially charged. Yes, her

first two poetry collections, both published in 1968, were entitled *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk* and *Black Judgement*; but over the ensuing decades, her work mellowed – for the most part, anyway. To be sure, she continued to posture occasionally as a rebel, a malcontent, and an ally of thugs, but more often she chose to rejoice in blackness without banging away about whitey.

Her 2002 poem “BLK History Month,” which begins as follows, might have been written by Maya Angelou: “If Black History Month is not / viable then wind does not / carry the seeds and drop them / on fertile ground / rain does not / dampen the land / and encourage the seeds / to root.” And her 2009 inaugural [poem](#) for Barack Obama might have been written by, well, pretty much any third-rate rapper: “I’m Barack Obama / And I’m here to say: / I’m President / Of the USA.” (No kidding – that’s really the first stanza, and take my word for it, the rest of the poem isn’t any better.)

Like many other black writers, artists, and activists of the 1960s and 70s who were part of the Black Power and/or Black Arts Movement and who made their names by depicting themselves as estranged from the white man’s world – and, in some cases, as openly hostile to honkies – Giovanni ended up having a successful career in the academy, spending 35 years as a professor at Virginia Tech.

Also like many other blacks who proclaimed their alienation from white people, she was, throughout her career, showered by white people with awards: While still in her twenties, she was named Woman of the Year by both *Mademoiselle* and *Ladies’ Home Journal* and her website [lists](#) honorary degrees from no fewer than 27 different colleges.

Yes, she actually listed them on her website. She was proud of her laurels. Her website also includes a brief autobiographical [sketch](#) in which she brags: “I have been awarded an unprecedented 7 NAACP Image Awards which makes me

very very proud. I have been nominated for a Grammy; been a finalist for the National Book Award. I am very proud to have authored 3 New York Times and Los Angeles Times Best Sellers, highly unusual for a poet. I am a University Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech.”

In 2020, she even published a poem, “Biography,” in which she [boasts](#): “There is a plaque / In Lincoln Heights / Where I went / To school / And a Plaque / In Knoxville / Across the street / Where my grandparents lived.”

Notice something about this poem? It’s not much of a poem. It’s broken up into lines, and that’s about it. She capitalizes “plaque” in one line but not in another. Does this have any significance? I doubt it. I think such inconsistencies are part and parcel of the offhand manner that characterizes all of her work.

Indeed, politics entirely aside, to read through Giovanni’s *oeuvre* is, most of all, to become increasingly frustrated at the dull, dreary, deadening sameness of it all – the meager intellectual content, the banal assertions of the vital importance of racial identity, the addled doses of generic nostalgia (“I always like summer / best / you can eat fresh corn / from daddy’s garden / and okra / and greens / and cabbage / and lots of / barbecue”).

To eschew rhyme and meter is one thing; but, for heaven’s sake, it’s possible for even the freest of free verse to contain striking, memorable lines – familiar sentiments articulated in a fresh and surprising manner that opens one’s eyes and is pleasing to one’s ears. But that wasn’t Giovanni’s bag. It’s almost as if she was determined to avoid expressing anything in a remotely arresting way – as if extreme plainness were some kind of religion or a guarantor of emotional authenticity. Alas, it isn’t.

Perusing Nikki Giovanni’s poetry, one can’t help wondering how

long it will continue to be read in an era that seems finally, perhaps, to be moving beyond the obsession with identity politics that made her famous.

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