

THE POETRY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN: MAKING CULTURAL DIFFERENCE MEANINGFUL

"It is always a struggle to get diversity recognized and respected. Recent artists have not turned back from that in the land of the free and the home of the brave."

(Glen Close. On accepting her 1995 EMI award)

I

For a non-African-American to speak of black American literature must always seem a presumption, and I am aware of what I risk. For, the work is often coded and culture bound to discourage appropriation. In the aftermath of the 60s, many modern African-American artists made the pointed political move of turning away from addressing and entertaining the dominant white community, and began to compose or perform primarily for their own ethnic group.¹ Some of these strategies of exclusion, or esoteric signification are evident in the modern jazz of John Coltrane or Dizzie Gillespie, in the tap dance routines of Sammy Davis Jr., or in the novels of Toni Morrison. That awareness predicated my selection of writers, and therefore, this discussion excludes the work of a number of vastly radical and tremendously challenging African-American women poets such as Audre Lorde, Sonya Sanchez, Alice Walker, among others. Although the poems of Maya Angelou, Lucille Clifton, Nikki Giovanni, and Gwendoline Brooks are referred to here, they are by no means completely representative of African-American Women's writing which is extremely diverse. There is also the risk that my selection of writing may lead to the assumption that *these* particular texts are "transparent", because in the kind of reading I attempt here, which is to speak about the work the poem may do when released into our world, there may be the inevitable "valorization of the social and polemical functions of Black literature" with insufficient attention to close textual analyses.² I do attempt, however, symptomatic readings of the poems, though the poets themselves, may like Salman Rushdie or Prufrock say, "but that is not what I meant at all"; therefore, I dare say, I occupy a nebulous and uncertain space in order to speak of African-American women's poetry.

¹. Marge Piercy and Dick Lourie, "Tom Eliot Meets The Hulk at Little Big Horn: The Political Economy of Poetry", *Literature in Revolution*, ed., George Abbott White and Charles Newman (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972) p. 81.

². Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (ed.) "Criticism in the Jungle", *Black Literature & Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1984) p. 5 - 6.

The poetry of African-American women is necessarily a dissident poetry--dissident for the purpose of making their different socio-cultural and historical experience meaningful. Some of this poetry does not quite harmonize with the traditional stuff read in English departments. It is not cool, it is controversial, and one cannot deliver any talk of such dissidence in a deodorized or sanitized way. I have, perforce therefore, to meet the challenge of speaking of subjects which in our particular Asian contexts may well be, at most taboo and repressed, or at least, looked upon with disfavour. It is, however, in positing their difference, specificity, and diversity that these poems enable an alternate tradition, a tradition, which now in its second wave can claim to speak for the new America and so proclaim the hope for unity in diversity. Speaking for the new American, however, and attempting to forge such unity are not without cost. My comments on the poem "On the Pulse of Morning" read by Maya Angelou at Bill Clinton's presidential inauguration are directed towards reckoning that cost, by suggesting how radicalism is undermined in the political project of integrating African-Americans into the mainstream.

II

Because these poems from the margins of the canon challenge it and afford an ironic re-thinking of history and literature, they throw into crisis or problematize entrenched liberal humanist ideology of the literary establishment, an ideology reinforced by the work of the great Modernists at the turn of the century. The poetry is interventionist and iconoclastic (though not anarchist) denying the validity of the Modernist enterprise aptly termed the "supreme fictions" by Wallace Stevens a major American modernist. In demonstrating how the poetry of African-American women subvert, challenge, and politicize issues of gender, race, and class while simultaneously, foregrounding, and thus emphasising literature's use as an ideological tool, I maintain that it, therefore, makes overt what is covert in mainstream literature. Moreover, Black women's struggle to open up a public space in the literary arena has resulted in broadening the concept of literature itself: many literary conventions to do with the "proper" and the "normative" in terms of language, subjects and standards are problematized in the poetry of African-American women.

Rooted in the particular, in the specificity of the socio-historical and cultural milieu of the underclass, the poems are marked also by the difference of race and/or gender. They are the poems of a constituency limited to a time and place. Gwendoline Brooks' poems "Kitchenette Building", or "The Lovers of the Poor"--from which I cite excerpts below--articulate the conditions of the constituency and class insularity.

Kitchenette Building

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Greyed in, and gray, "Dream" makes a giddy sound, not strong
Like "rent", "feeding a wife", "satisfying a man."
But could a dream send 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
 Even if we were willing to let it in,
 Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
 Anticipate a message, let it begin?
 We wonder. But not well, not for a minute,
 Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
 We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

The Lovers of the Poor

arrive. The Ladies from the Ladies' Betterment League
 Arrive in the afternoon, the late light slanting
 In diluted gold bars across the boulevard, brag
 of proud, seamed faces with mercy and murder hinting
 Here, there, interrupting, all deep and debonair,
 The pink paint on the innocence of fear;
 Walk in a gingerly manner up the hall,
 Cutting with knives served by their softest care,
 Served by their love, so barbarously fair.
 Whose mothers taught: you'd better not be cruel...

...who are full,
 Sleek, tender-clad, fit, fiftyish, a-glow, all
 Sweetly abortive, hinting at fat fruit,
 Judge it high time that fiftyish fingers felt
 beneath the lovelier planes of enterprise.
 ...Their guild is giving money to the poor,
 The worthy poor. The very very worthy
 And beautiful poor. Perhaps just not too swarthy?
 Perhaps just not too dirty nor too dim
 Nor--passionate...

But it's all so bad
 and entirely too much for them,
 The stench; the urine, cabbage, and dead beans,
 Dead porridges of assorted dusty grains,
 The old smoke, heavy diapers, and, they're told,
 Something called chitterlings...

...Here is a scene for you. The Ladies look,
 In horror, behind a substantial citizeness
 Whose trains clank out across her swollen heart.
 Who, arms akimbo, almost fills a door...

...They own Spode, Lowestoft, Candelabra...
 ...Aubussons and Hattie Carnegie. They winter

In Palm Beach..
 ...Oh squalor,
 This sick four-story hulk, this fibre
 With fissures everywhere
 Why, what are bringings
 Of loathe-love largesse? What shall peril hungers
 So old old, what shall flatter the desolate?
 Tin can, blocked fire escape and chitterlings
 And swaggering seeking youth and the puzzled wreckage
 Of the middle-passage...
 ...And children children children. Heavens
 That was a rat, surely, off there, in the shadows?
 The Ladies from the Ladies
 Betterment League agree it will be better
 To achieve the out air that rights and steadies...
 ...better presently to cater
 To no more possibilities, to get
 Away. Perhaps the money can be posted.
 Perhaps they too may choose another Slum?
 Keeping their scented bodies in the center
 Of the hall as they walk down the hysterical hall,
 They allow their lovely skirts to graze no wall,
 Are off at what they manage of a canter,
 And, resuming all the clues of what they were,
 Try to avoid inhaling the laden air.

This kind of poetry challenges the tradition of the privatized worlds of poets, of upper and middle class domesticity, and instead offers something of the Black experience and history itself. The poems, however, are harnessed towards achieving something more than mere realism. In these poems the black experience is presented as one of alienation of a people transiting from a condition of forced labour into a position of underemployment. These poems make no pretence of illuminating the conditions of that vast abstract entity "man", the subject of the modernist enterprise: the poetry is addressed mainly to a people whose worth has been devalued by a history of slavery and aims at uplifting a marginalized community to be stronger than the forces of their historical conditioning. Therefore, the poets perforce, are militant, their words sharper and clearer than the language that persuaded them that they were "ugly, stupid, and without history".³ I cite below two poems of Lucille Clifton titled "Miss Rosie" and "For the Lame", and refer the reader to Barbara Watkins' poem "I see hard times a comin'" which are poems celebrating struggle and survival, thus redefining the notion of heroism, an archetype of western literature.

³. Marge Piercy, p. 78.

Miss Rosie

When I watch you
wrapped up like garbage
sitting, surrounded by the smell
Of too old potato peels
or
when I watch you
in your old man's shoes
With the little toe cut out
sitting, waiting for your mind
like next week's grocery
I say

when I watch you
you wet brown bag of a woman
who used to be called the Georgia Rose
I stand up
through your destruction
I stand up.

For the Lame

happen you will rise
lift from grounded in a spin
and begin to forget the geography
of fixed things.
happen you will walk past
where you meant to stay,
happen you will wonder at the way
it seemed so marvellous to move.

Note that poems like "Miss Rosie" are also attempts to include as part of the community the marginals of the margin, to show that these individuals are larger than ordinary lives, to acknowledge the validity of different social experience, *to preserve and make cultural difference meaningful*, for these incorporations strengthen the community. A good example is Nikki Giovanni's "Alabama Poem." Here, Giovanni gives voice to a different type of black character than victimized desolate figures. The poem is so delicately nuanced that even as it implies celebration it eschews romanticization.

Alabama Poem

if trees could talk
 wonder what they'd say
 met an old man
 on the road late afternoon
 hat pulled over to shade
 his eyes
 jacket slumped over his shoulders
 told me "girl my hands seen
 more than all
 them books at tuskegee"

smiled at me
 half waved his hand
 walked on down the dusty road
 met an old woman
 with a corn cob pipe
 "sista" she called to me
 "let me tell you--my feet
 seen more than yo eyes
 ever gonna read"
 smiled at her and kept
 on moving
 gave it a thought and went
 back to the porch
 "i say gal" she called down
 "you a student at the institute?
 better come here and study these feet
 i'm gonna cut a bunion off
 soon i gets up"
 i looked at her
 she laughed at me
 if trees would talk
 wonder what they'd tell me.

Nikki Giovanni's poetry, often, is strong and militant, as in "The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro", which is a poem that gives voice to anger and calls for violence:

Nigger
 Can you kill
 Can you kill
 Can a nigger kill
 Can a nigger kill a honkie
 Can the nigger kill the Man...

The above quoted part from this lengthy poem indicates the nature of the poem, one that the mainstream would find hard to relate to. Marge Piercy has pointed out that if one finds it difficult to read Giovanni, one must stop and consider and appreciate the traumas of black readers who had to try and belong in a culture that consistently did not write for them, marginalized, excluded, ignored, or "treated them as objects". And Piercy adds that

Black poetry often has ritual and magic and drama beating purposefully through. One of the aims of much black poetry is to change the people who read it and who hear it from ashamed niggers into proud, fighting black people...Black poetry aims to create a nation on the spot, to create an "Us" sense in the oppressed, which, at that moment, welds them into a strong force. Repeated rituals of unity and pride help accomplish a strength that the people can carry back to the streets.⁴

I mentioned earlier the difficulty of using sanitized and deodorized language when speaking of a people's poetry. "Portrait of a White Nigger" by Caroline Rodgers and Nikki Giovanni's "The True import of Present Dialogue: Black Vs Negro" testify to the total eschewing of gentility tolerating no slack in the black struggle. These attitudes are echoed in the impatience, satire, criticism, and irony directed at the "Cool Set" in Gwendoline Brooks' "We Real Cool":

We real cool. We
 Left school. We
 Lurk late. We
 Strike straight. We
 Sing sin. We
 Thin gin. We
 Jazz June. We
 Die soon.

Although Black poets may exonerate black people for events in history--see "Admonition" (Clifton) and "What Shall I Give my Children?" (Brooks)--they simultaneously militate against the "cool" or "laid back" attitudes that signify complacency or lethargy.

III

I use the terms Black/African-American interchangeably. In 1990, on TV, I heard a senior African-American observe that when he was little, he got used to being

⁴. Marge Piercy, p. 78.

called a "nigger", sometime later, "colored", in the 60s "black". At the time of speaking he had learned that he was now "African-American" and complained that he was pretty confused. Despite the humorous rendition here, the changing nomenclature highlights the constant vigilance and struggle to un-name the names imposed upon a community that historically were given names by those that owned them, had rights and powers over them. The un-naming and re-naming⁵ is part and parcel of a process of self-empowerment in terms of articulating one's identity as one knows and wants it. Malcolm X, Mohammed Ali, Imamu Baraka and Cat Stevens are the more famous examples. Naming/un-naming can also be a strategy of disempowerment: Maya Angelou in an autobiographical video presentation has spoken of how her ancient grandmother was "unnamed" by young white kids using her first name, when the other black people in the community addressed her by her last name preceded by the title Mrs.⁶ Angelou sees in the act testimony of African-American powerlessness at that historical juncture. She speaks of a similar violation carried out wittingly or unwittingly in those instances when old Black maids in domestic service had to endure their mistresses, young enough to be their grand-daughters, addressing them as "girl". In colonial Ceylon there prevailed a form of addressing males in domestic-type service as "boy", whatever their age: they were servant boys, houseboys, club boys etc. Calling a black male "boy" is definitely a term of insult and denigration and the colonial form of addressing subordinate males as "boy" could not have been too different and it falls into that category of a terminology of power.

In contemporary American-culture, there seems to be an extreme sensitivity to nomenclature: "international" student has replaced the term "foreign" student and other workers have dignified labels as "janitor", "custodian", "office assistant" (not peon). But the use of polite euphemisms may be a form of social hypocrisy. Marge Piercy has cautioned us as to the downside of this "gentility": "the shock of Americans at four letter

⁵. See Kimberly W. Benston, "I yam what I am: the topos of un(naming) in Afro-American literature" in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. ed., *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, p. 150-172. Benston recounts Malcolm X's dialogue with a black academic: "Brother Professor, do you know what they call a black man with a PhD?" "No what?" "Nigger". With this reply Malcolm is said to be attempting a negation of the class-, race- and title-distinctions bestowed by the superordinate white society, and thereby, trying to divest themselves of imposed naming. The "un-naming" also manifests itself in the adoption of the X, explained as a "mysterious variable [which] is a symbol not of something unnamable but of something unknowable - the inaugural African identity that was usurped during Middle Passage". Benston cites Malcolm X as saying "Mr Muhammad taught that we would keep this "X" until God himself returned and gave us a Holy Name from His own mouth" (p. 153).

⁶. I am thankful to Ranjith Sandanayake and Yvette Ferdinands of Colombo USIS for helping me with the video material.

words in poetry best expresses the profound rudeness felt in a society at calling anything by its right name, a society in which public and private acts of violence and robbery and murder are justified by such names as pacification and stabilization".⁷

IV

Recasting knowledge is always fraught with cultural and political struggle and literature is vastly implicated in the process of constructing and constituting knowledge. African American women's poetry can be considered as attempts to insert texts of oppositional knowledge that subvert, contest, and challenge constructs of knowledge obtained in history as regards the nature, history and lives of African-American people, not only women.

If we take the 18th century poet Phyllis Wheatley who wrote poems of her situation as a slave, we see how the poems reproduce the ideology of the master race. Her work is clearly a construct of knowledge from the perspective of the dominant culture foregrounding hegemonic ideas regarding the subordinate and the dominant. In a 1773 poem that is, itself, proleptic, a poem entitled "On Being Brought From Africa to America", Wheatley implies that the non-Christian and non-white are innately evil and that the colour of the skin is symptomatic of that. This is the epistemology that is inherited, and the poem is a classic example of the way in which "Ethnocentrism and 'logocentrism' are profoundly interrelated in Western discourse."⁸

On Being brought from Africa to America

'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land,
 Taught my benighted soul to understand
 That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too:
 Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
 Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
 "Their colour is a diabolic dye."
 Remember, *Christians, Negroes*, black as *Cain*,
 May be refined, and join the angelic train.

In the contemporary re-writing and reinscribing of texts already written for them, the major task of the women writers has been to speak the African-American gendered subject into being. Black women have often pointed out that they face double jeopardy by belonging simultaneously in two minority groups, blacks and women, and that they are appropriated by the more dominant sectors: by black males in issues of race and by white women in issues of gender, thus marginalised and losing out twice over. Phyllis

⁷. Marge Piercy, p. 87.

⁸. Henry Louis Gates, p. 7.

Wheatley's poem is a good illustration of how the African-American subject was first put into discourse or spoken into being as object or victim needing the intervention of a superior race to rescue him/her from a depraved or savage state.

In reinscribing history, African-American women poets have tried to wrest for themselves subject status quite pointedly by articulating their identity themselves as sexual beings, or by expressing sensuality. These are areas repressed in traditional narratives that stereotyped all women as "madonna or bitch", a phrase coined by Leslie Fiedler. Lucille Clifton's poem "Homage to my Hips" or "To a Dark Moses" evinces just such a spontaneity and freedom to articulate the self:

Homage To My Hips

these hips are big hips.
they need space to
move around in.
they don't fit into little
petty places. these hips
are free hips.
they don't like to be held back.
these hips have never been enslaved,
they go where they want to go
they do what they want to do.
These hips are mighty hips.
i have known them
to put a spell on a man and
spin him like a top!

To a Dark Moses

you are the one
i am lit for.
come with your rod
that twists
and is a serpent.
i am the bush.
i am burning,
i am not consumed.

These poems of Clifton foreground other issues in gender politics as well. In celebrating her hips and singing that fat is beautiful, Clifton challenges conventional societal notions about desirable and undesirable femininity and aesthetic value as regards the female body. The compulsion to straighten hair--by way of an unpleasant process called conking--for many African-Americans of an earlier era was symptomatic of the trauma of accepting other (alien) standards of beauty than those that obtained within the ethnic community. But this was a problem prior to the militant posture politicising that

"black is beautiful", which is an attempt to set unequivocal value on "negritude, the limitations of the notion of "negritude" notwithstanding. In the Lankan context too, I am reminded that even at this time, all the dolls we have for little girls to play with are blonde and blue eyed and pink plastic--the heritage of our colonized past which encouraged the inculcation of Western norms in regard to aesthetic values of beauty even to the extent of impressing that our own ethnic characteristics are lacking and limited and negative.

By rebelling against repression and inhibition, many African-American women writers try to halt or put a break upon the socializing and gendering processes that attempt to inculcate uniformity in how women should "be". They celebrate difference, nurture what Toni Morrison has called "funkiness"⁹ which for black women is the freer expression of passion, sensuality, spontaneity, and the untrammelled, unashamed demonstration and expression of self and difference. And therefore, their poetry can be regarded as liberational, encouraging what Alice Walker calls "Womanist" sensibilities rather than even feminist: feminist is considered to be classist, as emerging from the dominant white women's groups. Some of Lucille Clifton's poems--"To a Dark Moses," "If I Stand at my Window, and "There's a Girl" testify to a radical re-articulation of female sensibility, and simultaneously an articulation of radical "Otherness".

African American women poets, therefore, through their articulation of Otherness, contest and sometimes reject outright the ideology and value system imposed from without by dominant groups. This is very obviously seen in poems that render problematic hegemonic and received ideas of morality. When the absolutes moral/immoral are considered within the particularities and constraints of the immediate class, race, and gender inequities, hegemonic ideas of morality as of immorality are rendered irrelevant and invalidated. Such an insight is possible on reading the two poems on abortion by Lucille Clifton and Gwendoline Brooks, "The Lost Baby Poem," and "The Mother", respectively.

The Lost Baby Poem

the time i dropped your almost body down
down to meet the waters under the city

and run one with the sewage to the sea
what did i know about waters rushing back

what did i know about drowning
or being drowned
you would have been born into winter

⁹. See Susan Willis, "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison," in Henry Louis Gates.

in the year of the disconnected gas
and no car we would have made the thin

walk over Genesee hill into the Canada wind
to watch you slip like ice into strangers' hands
you would have fallen naked as snow into winter

if you were here i could tell you these
and some other things

if i am ever less than a mountain
for your definite brothers and sisters
let the rivers pour over my head

let the sea take me for a spiller
of seas let black men call me a stranger
always for your never named sake.

The Mother

Abortions will not let you forget
Your remember the children you got that you did not get
The damp small pulps with little or no hair,
The singers and workers that never handled the air.
You will never neglect or beat
Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.
You will never wind up the sucking-thumb...

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my
dim killed children.
I have contracted. I have eased
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.....

If I stole your births and your names,
Your straight baby tears and your games,

If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not deliberate
Though why should I whine,
Whine that the crime was other than mine
Since anyhow you are dead.
Or rather, or instead,
You were never made...
Believe me, I loved you all.

From the insights afforded by these poems in regard to the question of Abortion and morality, then, what we might ask is whether it is just or even possible to impose absolute standards across the board for all, and to ask also as to whose moral rightnesses are being imposed at the expense of whom.

From the perspective of a radical feminism, however, these poems are self-defeating and counter productive to gender struggles in feminist politics, because they reinforce hallowed and essentialist notions regarding women in traditional patriarchal literary traditions. And, therefore, in a sense, the poets' seeming rejection of the hegemonic ideology and value system is fraught with a sense of contradiction. But, on the other hand, the poems articulate a certain tragic reality in terms of woman as underclass subject and as a socially constituted being, two conditions that cannot simply be wished away.

V

Except in the time of enslavement when dissimulation was a strategic necessity for survival, African-Americans, since then, have rarely dissimulated their political intent in poetry. The Negro spiritual did not dare articulate discontent, or the burdens of life in slavery, except in so far as to look to another life after death. The modern writers are determined to combat inequities and continue the struggle in their own time and place. They have had, perforce, to write against the grain of what constituted mainstream poetry included in the western canon. Maya Angelou's poetry draws from the oral traditions of the spirituals, incorporating other oral forms such as the dozens, Rap, oral techniques of the black sermons, church ritual and so on. Her poem "And Still I rise" is in the voice of a militant marginal. The note of optimism, the call and response technique of the black church practice and the religious fervour of church ritual is manifest in this poem, the same strategies that Jessie Jackson used to powerful effect in his political campaigning.

And Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
 With your bitter, twisted lies,
 You may trod me in the very dirt
 But still, like dust, I'll rise

Does my sassiness upset you?
 Why are you beset with gloom?
 'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
 Pumping in my living room...

...

You may shoot me with your words,
 You may cut me with your eyes,

You may kill with your hatefulness,
But still, like air I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm the black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

This poem encapsulates the idea of re-writing an oppositional history to the one that's already been written: it speaks of the fighting spirit of the African-American subject, articulates her sexiness, her "sassiness" and her racial heritage--"gifts of her ancestors." Above all, the speaker zooms in on the right of the Afro-American to dream, to realize her own American dream which is also the realization of the dreams of her ancestors in slavery. This poem is strongly rooted in the oral tradition of African-American poetry, as is the poem "Black hopscotch."

It is interesting, however, that Angelou's long poem "On the Pulse of Morning" written for President Clinton's presidential inauguration, shows affiliation not to the black tradition of poetry, but to the mainstream Whitmanesque tradition. This affiliation is evinced in her own cataloguing, naming, and inclusion of the different groups in the style of Walt Whitman. Whitman sometimes seen as a "patriarch of American poetry" or referred to as the "American Adam", wrote an inclusive poetry. He was one of the first poets to sing in *Leaves of Grass*, in "The Song of Myself" on behalf of all Americans, seeing unity in the diverse groups that constituted the whole and so, legitimized them as American subjects. The editorial essay on Whitman in *The Norton*

*Anthology of Modern Poetry*¹⁰ cites that

Whitman as experimental poet aligned himself with the great social and political experiment of American democracy. His was a new style...necessitated by new theories, new themes...and forced upon us for American purposes.

Above all, Maya Angelou's poem written at the inception of a democratic regime, suggests that she is speaking, in a sense, for the establishment, for "American purposes" and therefore, this filiation is perhaps politically correct. But, the suppression here, of the strong African-American voice, tradition, and rhythms that characterized her other work is somewhat troubling as that suppression or effacement suggests the ways in which the radical "Otherness" of Black-American voices may be undermined in poetry oriented towards the political project of integrating into the mainstream. For, such effacement could be the price paid for the honour of inclusion, the honour of being called upon to sing for and of America, an honour that demands compromises. I am also reminded of the only other poem recited at just such an awesome moment, the inauguration of the Kennedy Presidency. The poem is "The Gift Outright" read by Robert Frost, but his version of history speaks for and of only the English-Americans, obliterating from the text of history multitudes of Other-Americans. These two poems inaugurating new political regimes in US history are themselves symptomatic of effacements that still seem to be the cost of speaking for American purposes and the price of daring to dream the American dream. For, "On the Pulse of Morning" exemplifying the notion of the US as "melting pot of identity" forges a commonality with the mainstream "The Gift Outright", thereby obliterating the classed, raced, and gendered specificities and distinctions that operated in the poetry of African-American women.

In the case of Maya Angelou's poem, this troubling effacement could be recuperatively interpreted as an enactment of a necessary and generous holding back of ethnic or "racial" claims, a momentary stay of difference to effect the cultural bonding of all of the different groups that are called upon to participate in the renewal and so effect and so perform the unity in diversity. Only the other day, on accepting her 1995 EMI award, actor Glen Close pointed out that "It is always a struggle to get diversity recognized and respected. Recent artists have not turned back from that in the land of the free and the home of the brave." I am sure she would agree that this struggle for these recent artists was and had been admirably and courageously initiated by African American Women Poets.

LILAMANI DE SILVA

¹⁰. Ellman and O'Clair, editorial essay in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, New York & London: W.W.Norton, 1973 p. 22.