



Nikki Giovanni

Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea
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on writing:

It's always a bit intimidating to try to tell how I write since I, like most writers, I think, am not at all sure that I do what I do in the way that I think I do it. In other words, I was always told not to look a gift horse in the mouth....

I'm not sure I have any moral or political compulsions. I have habits.... There seems to be no limit to the ends of racism in this country. I'm totally convinced that any Black women who consciously circled the earth, let alone landed on another planet, would have a very different view of the heavens as well as the meagerness of earth. I think Black people, and Black Americans especially, are the only people to really view earth from its proper perspective since we have no land that we can in any historical way call our own. I think at this bisection of time and space we are the only ones uniquely prepared to accept life on another planet. I believe the poets are the proper people to send since we see love and beauty in the blooming of the Black community; power in a people whose only power has been the truth. Maybe that's a compulsion. I like to tell the truth as I see it. I hope others do the same. That's why literature is so important. We cannot possibly leave it to history as a discipline nor to sociology nor science nor economics to tell the story of our people....

I would hope each and every woman who ever thought she wanted to write would at least give it a try. It's not a ladder that we're climbing, it's literature we're producing, and there will always be someone to read it. The difference between young Black women and young Black men, as I see it, is that young Black men don't feel they will lose face if they say they want to write whereas young Black women aren't at all too sure that writing isn't too aggressive. What you hear a lot is: Can you write and be a good wife too? That's not exactly the question but that's what it amounts to. And the answer is probably no. Writing is a tough mistress, according to the men who've written about it, and I would submit it's no easier a paramour. But I'm not the best woman to ask about the blending of art and traditional married life because I think traditional married life is for traditional people. Or as they say in the Daily Ohio Lottery, "If you got it, go get it." I really don't think life is about the I-could-have-beens. I could have been a professional baseball player but I met your mother; I could have been a professional dancer but my mother didn't want me to go to New York; or any variation of the theme. Life is only about the I-tried-to-do. I don't mind the failure but I can't imagine that I'd forgive myself if I didn't try. I don't have a life-style, I have a life. And I've made it a point not to analyze myself. I'll tell a story or confess a weakness but who I really am keeps surprising me. There's so much to learn about the species. I think it's foolish to determine what your life will be before you've even had a chance to live it....

I like to think that if truth has any bearing on art, my poetry and prose is art because it's truthful. I say that while recognizing that every time a truth is learned a new thesis, synthesis, antithesis is set in motion. I like to think I've grown and changed in the last decade. How else could I ask people to read my work or listen to me?... We who are writers live always in the three time zones: past, present, and future. We pay respect to them all as we share an idea. I loved my profession well before I joined it. I have always been a lover of books and the ideas they contain. Sometimes I think it is easy for we who write to forget that that is only half the process; someone must read. Now someone will say, "See, you have to cater to the audience!" But it's been my reading of history and understanding of politics that there is an audience for everything... Someone said in the next century everybody will be famous for fifteen minutes. Who cares? We live now. As best we can. And we encourage others. We write, because we believe that the human spirit cannot be tamed and should not be trained.

(Excerpted from Nikki Giovanni, *Sacred Cows...and Other Edibles*)