



## The Prosaic Soul of Nikki Giovanni

By Nikki Giovanni  
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For the first time, here is the collected prose of Nikki Giovanni.

### Questions for Discussion

*Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being a Black Poet* Nominated for the National Book Award, this is a journey both private and public through the trials and triumphs of 1960s America.

1. Giovanni says, "The older I get, the more dependent I am on other people for my safety." In what ways do we become more dependent? Or as we age, do we just become more aware of our dependence? What are Giovanni's views on aging and death?

2. Giovanni writes about going back to Knoxville as an adult and seeing massive changes. "Completely wiped out. Assassinated." Describe your home town and what it feels like to go back to it as an adult. What are the changes? How is it the same?

3. "It is un-American not to fight," writes Giovanni. Do you believe this is true? Does this apply to the United States as a country as well as the individual? Do you believe the four-year-old Giovanni beat up her sisters' eight-year-old tormentors or do you think her memory has embellished the event? What are your experiences with a younger, spunkier sibling being protective of a more reserved older one? What do you remember from age four? Was her mother right in allowing her to get beat up once? Was Giovanni as misunderstood as she says she was? Do you believe it is the nature of a poet or any artist to be misunderstood on some level?

4. When Giovanni's father moved to Knoxville for college, "all he saw were crackers & friendly crackers, mean crackers, liberal crackers, conservative crackers, dumb crackers, smart crackers, and just all kinds of crackers, some of whom, much to his surprise, were Black crackers." How does Giovanni use the word "cracker" here? What does she mean by it? What was the racial climate and historical context that would drive him to say this?

5. Discuss Giovanni's statement, "Black people are the natural rulers of the world." Why does she believe that? Do you believe that race determines the contributions a person can make to the world, i.e. Asians are better at math or Africans are better athletes? What sort of historical context (i.e. first human remains and leading ancient societies first appearing in Africa) is the basis for this statement? Do you take it literally or is it the poet's dramatic and literary license?

6. After college, Giovanni applies for welfare and has a well-thought-out justification for it. Do you agree with her rationale? Did this story change your opinion of Giovanni? How? Discuss Giovanni's relationship with her parents at this juncture. What would it be like to parent a child like Giovanni? And what would your experience being Giovanni's child be like?

7. Giovanni believes that "the honkie's whole sex thing is tied up to land." Discuss what she means by this. Also discuss the sexual history between blacks and whites in America. What is the climate of interracial dating and marriage and sexual relations like today?

8. Is Giovanni's use of "honkie," "nigger," "cracker," and other racial slur words helpful to her arguments or does it hurt them? Rap music is often criticized for using these words and more. Does it hurt society? Or by making them mainstream, does it take away their power? Could a white writer use these words the way Giovanni does and still get respect? Given that this book was written in the wake of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, how does this color your experience reading these racially charged words? What are your thoughts on poets and some rap artists using these words as a form of rebellion and empowerment?

*Sacred Cows and Other Edibles* Winner of the Ohioana Library Award, these fresh and wryly humorous essays explore some of America's lofty institutions and the poet's pivotal life experiences.

1. Giovanni writes that Blacks are "the consummate consumers," and that this is what the country needs in order to stay economically sound. Do you agree with her? Do statements like this perpetuate stereotypes? If so, how? Are any ethnic or particular groups of people consummate "anything?" Are there other groups considered backbones of the economy?

2. Are you surprised by Giovanni's stands on handicap parking and seatbelts? Do you agree that these matters should be an individual's choice? Should smoking be left up to the individual? Why or why not? What are some issues today that you would like to see stronger or weaker laws on?

3. Giovanni urges, "Make ignorance a choice, not an excuse or a defense" by paying librarians and teachers double their current salaries and run schools 24 hours a day, among other ideas. What would the world be like if these changes were implemented? Why do you think the education industry has traditionally been one of the lowest-paying in America? To what degree is Giovanni's language meant to be taken literally or more metaphorically?

4. Giovanni asks, "What is the difference between Bob Guccione and the other old pimps who make up the Miss America pageant? What is the difference between how any of them are using women to earn their living?" Are there any differences? If so, what are they?

5. Giovanni has no problem with a white illustrator on the children's book *Jake and the Honeybunch*, a Black folktale. Do you agree with her? After reading the other essays and learning Giovanni's beliefs about black and white people and the intersection of art and politics, are you surprised by her position? What are your thoughts on Eminem or other white artists who have been accused of appropriating Black art forms?

6. "There used to be that old expression that you have two strikes against you: one as a Black and two as a woman." Do you believe this is true? Is life more difficult for a Black woman in our society? If so, how? What do you think about Giovanni's response to this statement? How does being a woman &#8212; in your experiences &#8212; support or refute Giovanni's statement?
7. In "The Spiritual Evolution of a Plaintive Message," Giovanni writes that slaves learn that "he can survive, yes, thrive in a system that puts his total being under assault." Discuss how limitations can sometimes bring out hidden strengths. Discuss how oppression can give rise to rebellion, culture, and empowerment. What are some examples?
8. "Our young people are believing that white people control the world .... Black leadership has finally managed to convince the young that it's neither their fault or their responsibility." Do you agree with Giovanni's indictment? What do you see for the future, if this is the case?
9. Giovanni has been dubbed foremother of spoken word and rap artistic endeavors. Do you agree and in what ways is this theory supported or refuted?
10. Giovanni is one of the few poets still popular over several. What other artists have the same legacy and mix the personal, political, and cultural criticism with their art?

*Racism 101* &#8212; This collection of essays contributes a vital and critical chapter to the debate on American national values.

1. What does Giovanni mean by "language is a gift, listening is a responsibility?"
2. "When younger, I actually thought my opinion counted. I have since learned," writes Giovanni. Does Giovanni truly believe her opinion doesn't count? If people believe their opinion doesn't count, what would propel them to fight injustice?
3. In an essay, Giovanni says, "You must do, say, and write that which you believe to be true. What others think can be of no significance." Do you agree with her analysis? What do you believe is the purpose or goal of art? To what degree should the artist think of his/her audience? During the creative process or when it's complete or at all? In the creative process, is your artistic obligation to yourself, family, ancestors, or ethnic group affiliation? One or all or none?
4. What are the differences between racism in the South and the North, according to Giovanni? Have you ever experienced discrimination like Giovanni's sister Gary did? What legacy does the racial humiliation that Black parents have suffered leave for their children? Will the United States ever overcome this legacy? What positive or negative signs do you see toward this?
5. Giovanni has an epiphany that she is considered old when the police officer doesn't give her a ticket. Has another person's perceptions of you ever changed how you thought about yourself? Made you feel stronger or weaker, fatter or thinner, smarter or less intelligent?
6. "How the victim becomes responsible for the behavior of the victimizer is well beyond my understanding," says Giovanni. She proceeds to take W. E. B. Du Bois to task for his elitism, arguing that all people should "be respected for the trials and tribulations they have endured." Do you agree or disagree with her position that the poor and homeless are not responsible for their condition? Why? To what degree is the individual or collective body/organization responsible for society's underprivileged or underserved? How can we remedy these social and class stratifications?
7. "For me, the noun is Black; American is the adjective." Giovanni says she is an American Black. What are the ramifications of that statement? What does she mean by saying this? Discuss the various labels for various ethnic groups over the decades.
8. "I do not have to be a role model, a good person, a credit to the race." What do you think about that statement? Is this true? Even though she says this to prove a point about idealizing a chosen few, do you believe Giovanni is any of these things? To what degree should a person accept or reject a role model status? Exactly what is our cultural or racial obligation?
9. Discuss Giovanni's analysis of Spike Lee, that he "is only good at attacking those parts of the Black community we hold dear: the Black woman, our schools, our music, our neighborhoods, our families, our shining Black princes." Do you agree or disagree with her and why? Do you think Spike Lee's body of work is indicative of a message to Black Americans and America as a whole?

### **About the Author**

When Nikki Giovanni's poems first emerged during the Black Arts Movements in the 1960s, she immediately took a place among the most celebrated and influential poets of the era. Over the span of 30 years, Ms. Giovanni has received over twenty honorary degrees from colleges and universities including, Fisk University, Smith College, Indiana University, Delaware State University, and University of Maryland. Her numerous awards include Woman of the Year from *Ebony*, *Mademoiselle*, *Essence*, and *Ladies Home Journal* magazines, and three NAACP Image Awards for *Love Poems*, *Blues: For All the Changes*, and *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea*. She is also the first recipient of the Rosa Parks Woman of Courage Award and has been nominated for a 2003 Grammy for Best Spoken Word Album.

Nikki Giovanni is the author of more than twenty books of poetry for adults and children including the seminal *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk*, *Black Judgement*, *Re: Creation*, *My House*, *The Women and the Men*, *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day*, *Those Who Ride the Night Winds*, *Love Poems*, *Blues: For All the Changes*, and *Quilting of the Black-Eyed Pea*. Ms. Giovanni is University Distinguished Professor/English at Virginia Tech.