

ARTICLE

The Life, Legacy, and Letters of Poet and Friend Nikki Giovanni

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Abstract

Poet Nikki Giovanni's death rocked scholarly and literary communities. The occasion of her 9 December 2024 death has prompted reflections on the life and legacy across genres and decades. As others write and talk about Giovanni from a purely "scholarly" angle analyzing her body of work, I offer here a glimpse into Nikki Giovanni the person who loved Black people and who welcomed me into her life and friend circle. I punctuate my essay with references to her poetry but mostly underscore her generosity, compassion, and human kindness infused into her creative expressions. Nikki was a poet's poet beloved by many. Those who leaned into her wit, her unadulterated truth-telling about US racism, Black love, and Black self-love found in her life and work a refuge from worlds that deny, erase, and devalue. She elevated and amplified Black people and Black women specifically and humanity more broadly.

Keywords: legacy; Nikki Giovanni; poetry; letters

When a family member announced to me that Nikki Giovanni had just died, the news stopped me in my tracks. I forgot what I was doing in the garage. Stunned and knowing Nikki as I did, I thought first that the November 2024 re-election of Donald Trump had literally killed her. For her, he personified the worst that is humanity. She did not mince words. Our friendship¹ began before her unfiltered public grievances with Trump.

As a naïve undergraduate English major taking a poetry class, I was advised by my instructor to write to Ms. Giovanni about my class project on her volume *My House*.² I wrote to many addresses I found in my research since famous folks don't usually have a single easily accessible address, not really expecting to hear from her. In my letter, I unashamedly asked her to tell me about her poems in this volume:

1 July 1980

Dear Ms. Giovanni,

I am a senior English major at West Georgia College, Carrollton, Georgia, enrolled in Modern Poetry. In the class, each student has been asked to choose a modern,

¹ In addition to this current essay, I have done one print media interview (Bordow 2024), one radio interview (Dingman 2024), and one op-ed piece (Lester 2025) about my friendship with Nikki Giovanni.

² Giovanni 1972.

twentieth-century poet or poetess, to investigate. Since some of your works were presented in the textbook *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, and since my sister, a student at Savannah State College, Savannah, finds your work nothing short of delight, I anxiously and excitedly selected your *My House* volume as my focus of concentration. Hence, I would appreciate any comments that might assist me in interpreting, understanding, and analyzing your poetry. I would especially appreciate any personal comments on tone, language, common themes and their motivation, and poetic techniques which make your poetry “stand out” among other modern poets and poetesses of today. Please Rush!

The naivety and audacity – one might say arrogance – of my youthfulness oozed. Months went by and I never heard from her – several letters returned to me for failed delivery – until I received a handwritten brown and cream heavy stock note card with her photo on it. Her 19 September 1980 handwritten letter (Figure 1) reads:

19 September 1980

Dear Neal Lester –

Sorry this is so late. My father had a stroke & he not been in NYC very much. Hope you haven't graduated! are hope you have. which ever is better for you.

He no insight on my poetry. This is a bio list and a few comments by others.

Hope you'll forgive me if he stung you out. Sorry of course, but the student you are you care through with flying colors! Right!!!

M. Giovanni

Figure 1. First handwritten letter from Nikki Giovanni to Neal Lester (19 September 1980).

Dear Neal Lester–

Sorry this is so late. My father had a stroke & I've not been in NYC very much. Hope you haven't graduated! Or hope you have. Which-even is better for you.

I've no insights on my poetry. This is a bio list and a few comments by others.

Hope you'll forgive me if I've strong you out. Though of course, by the student you are you came through with flying colors! Right!!!

Nikki Giovanni

That she apologizes to me for not responding earlier and offers such encouragement says much about her generosity as a person. Responding within three months was also pretty remarkable. When I wrote to poet/ playwright tozake shange, shange's handwritten response came exactly nine months after my initial letters sent in multiple directions to her.

I had read about Nikki's mother's husband Gus' stroke in an *Essence* article before receiving her note.³ In my final paragraph of that revised undergraduate paper later for a 1983 graduate course, I wrote these prophetic words as I now in 2024 reflect on her life and work on this occasion of her death: "All of Giovanni's poetry in *My House* is about love – romantic love between a Black woman and a Black man, the tender love of a mother for her child, or a brotherly-sisterly love she wants for Black people and ultimately for all people... The casual stroll through *My House* is the poet's ability ... to reveal the true working not only of a stimulated intellect, but more importantly of a throbbing heart."⁴ That began my connection with Giovanni, and our friendship grew thereafter.

When I was Dean of Humanities at Arizona State University (ASU), one of our investors invited Nikki to be the keynoter for the 2011 Annual Jonathan and Maxine Marshall Distinguished Lecture.⁵ As lead College administrator for that lectureship activity, I had dinner with Nikki and selected others before the evening event. At dinner, we connected immediately. She was funny, witty, and quite the jester. When I introduced her at the keynote event that evening, I publicly offered the example of my naïve undergraduate inquiry above, and she laughed that she doesn't do social media or email but that we could become pen pals. That we did for years, resurrecting the lost art of letter writing that only my deceased mom and grandmother and I had shared. I hold Nikki's handwritten letters, holiday cards, and brief note cards in highest esteem and reflect upon each and every one of them with great fondness.

What I first remember about Nikki's 2011 keynote, "The Compassion, The Courage, The Challenge of Poetry," was the Friday night on-campus sold out venue with folks sitting in aisles, violating all manner of building safety protocol. I had never seen so many non-white attendees at a non-sporting campus event. I was so excited about what I had witnessed as a first on our campus that I dashed off an email to our university president celebrating the event success. About her lively presentation, I remember most that she had in the palms of her hands fully engaged the lively multicultural and multigenerational audience joyfully singing Motown classics like Smokey Robinson in unison. What a communal sound that was to behold! She was like a stand-up comic riffing off seemingly anything political and social. She was unapologetic and authentic, and the audience loved her! It was a Friday night house party. Shortly after her visit, the host investors – an adult son and his mother – and I met at

³ Stokes 1981.

⁴ Neal A. Lester, course paper for English 258, Vanderbilt University, 29 April 1983.

⁵ Giovanni, 2011; see also Lewis 2011.

their home to simply read Nikki's poetry aloud from her then new volume *Bicycles: Love Poems*.⁶ Such joy and celebrations we each individually and together experienced merely speaking our breaths into her words while still soaring high on her visit.

In 2012, Nikki invited me to bring students to a celebration of Toni Morrison, whose son had just died. Nikki said that Toni needed to be hugged by the world to which she had given so much. Two ASU students, a community member, and I went to Virginia Tech University – Nikki's teaching home university – and attended the star-studded literary event, "'Sheer Good Fortune': Celebrating Toni Morrison" (16 October 2012), which was a who's who in the literary world and beyond – all friends of Nikki and Toni – including scholars, authors, and artists, all there to celebrate Morrison and Nikki.⁷ I cherish the pre-event dinner with Morrison wherein Nikki sat me at the table with Toni, later admitting in a 21 June 2017 card:

Speaking of memories, I remember seating you next to Toni Morrison because she likes good looking men! She was pleased... When I watch the weather I think or perhaps worry about you and yours. I just can't wait until we see Impeachment so we can all deal with the weather on Earth... Is this country crazy or what? ... Much love, Nikki.

Hundreds of folks who came to celebrate Toni Morrison were also there to celebrate our love for Nikki. In a holiday card to me postmarked 11 December 2015, she wrote:

A lot of folks were upset that I sat you at Toni's table, so I paid no attention. Thank you for allowing our friendship to be strong enough to trust. I am gaining weight and had to get another swimsuit. Happy Holidays, Much love, Nikki.

As Founding Director,⁸ I invited Nikki back to ASU in September 2014 for another keynote. This time, I hosted her solo: we did a photo shoot with photographer Rebecca Ross and ate unremarkable food at a downtown Tempe restaurant to which we could walk from my campus office. As we walked and talked, she admitted having recent memory issues, saying that bacteria had gotten into her brain from unclean shower water. She was intellectually alert but repeating herself as though saying some things for the first time. She even accompanied me to a Project Humanities community sharing event, "Celebrate Maya [Angelou]" (17 September 2014) who died on 28 May 2014. As she sat through community members sharing what Angelou's life and work meant to them, she nodded a lot from her cross-country travel exhaustion. That flight trip from Christiansburg to Roanoke to Charlotte to Phoenix is a day's work. Yet she persisted, and on the way back to her hotel, she chuckled secretly, having caught much of the public sharing: "Maya fancied herself a good cook, but she was never as good as she thought she was." Before she left for the airport the next day after her contractual work, she patiently signed and dated all fourteen of the books by her that I had accumulated over the years. Each is addressed to me personally.

This Mesa Arts Center event, "An Evening with Nikki Giovanni" (13 February 2014), included a pre-event reception with investors and supporters, her reading her poetry and interacting with the audience (Figure 2).⁹ She was in her element, playful and joking at every turn; demonstrating an accessibility and fondness for strangers who quickly became family and

⁶ Giovanni 2009.

⁷ "'Sheer Good Fortune': Celebrating Toni Morrison" 2012.

⁸ See <https://projecthumanities.asu.edu/>.

⁹ See "Project Humanities Features Evening with Renowned Poet Nikki Giovanni" 2014.

community. When she and I sat down for our one-on-one conversation (Figure 3) on the topic that brought her to Phoenix, I posed this overarching question: “Are we losing our humanity?” Her immediate response was: “When did we ever have it? This history of this country is full of examples of inhumanity from its very start.” She stopped me in my tracks. I then moved differently into our public conversation. At the book signing, thereafter, many



Figure 2. Neal A. Lester and Nikki Giovanni embrace at pre-event reception, Mesa Arts Center (Mesa, AZ), 13 February 2014. Photo Credit: ASU Project Humanities.



Figure 3. Neal A. Lester in conversation with Nikki Giovanni about “Are we losing our humanity?” Mesa Arts Center (Mesa, AZ), 13 February 2014. Photo Credit: ASU Project Humanities.



Figure 4. Event attendees posing for picture at book signing with Nikki Giovanni and Neal A. Lester as Giovanni shows her “Thug Life” lower arm tattoo. Mesa Arts Center (Mesa, AZ), 13 February 2014. Photo Credit: ASU Project Humanities.

of the millennial Black attendees elevated her already high street cred when she proudly displayed and talked about her Tupac ‘Thug Life’ tattoo (Figure 4).¹⁰

When Nikki learned that I did a research talk on the race and gender politics of hair, Nikki and Ginney Fowler, Nikki’s assistant and wife, invited me in October 2015 to lecture at Virginia Tech University where they both taught. She and Ginney picked me up from the airport in Nikki’s sports convertible and drove me to the campus hotel. The next day, I witnessed Nikki teaching her creative writing course with humor and wit. That evening, I gave a presentation to receptive students, and the next day, Nikki and Ginney invited me to their home. They both explained that they don’t invite everyone into their home – another honor with profound gravity. Lots of fruit trees, a fishpond, and unsurprisingly books – mostly first editions – everywhere. Inside their home, I saw that Nikki collected hippos. Once back in Phoenix from the visit, I sent her a couple of small animals for her collection. Her thank you came in a handwritten note on 10 January 2016:

Dear Neal—I can’t believe I didn’t thank you for the hippo and giraffe. Thank you so much. ... Hope all is going well with you. I watch the weather to see that you’re not drowning or being muddled away. If you need a place to lay your head you and yours are always welcome here. Much love, Nikki.

She and I continued to write each other, nothing profound or earthshattering; just notes to say “hi” and to stay in touch. She consistently referenced Arizona weather, hoping that my family and I would be okay in the summer heat and in the monsoon floodings: “I watch your weather to see if Arizona is burning or flooding. Glad to know you all are all right” (card to author on 14 February 2022).

¹⁰ Giovanni 2008 includes Tupac Shakur’s poem “The Rose that Grew from Concrete” in her edited volume *Hip Hop Speaks to Children: A Celebration of Poetry with a Beat* (50). On the book’s accompanying disk, Giovanni reads Shakur’s poem (track 29).

When I asked Nikki in 2015 to endorse our Project Humanities Humanity 101® principles – *compassion, empathy, forgiveness, integrity, kindness, respect, and self-reflection* – to promote our Movement to be better and to do better – she agreed immediately, sending these words:

20 August 2015. As we lift the fog of war to allow the sunshine of peace, it is both a pleasure and a comfort to know Project Humanities is here helping us become better human beings. Life is a good idea. Love and laughter are as much a part of life as tears and mourning. We are human—an emotional two-legged animal. I am so proud of Neal Lester and this Humanities Project. (mailing to author, postmarked 8 September 2015)

She then offered to get Toni Morrison to endorse our Movement, too, and Morrison did soon thereafter! I suspect that Nikki wrote Toni's endorsement text, but Toni did in fact sign the endorsement. Their endorsements are literary royalty, alongside the 14th Dalai Lama's, our first such endorsement.¹¹

When I was putting my edited MLA volume on social justice together between 2017 and 2019, I reached out to Nikki for a piece, not necessarily an essay. Anything from her written expressly for this volume would be a plus. She agreed immediately and insisted on getting contacts for Sonia Sanchez and Angela Y. Davis. Nikki revised her piece a couple of times, voluntarily removing her overtly anti-Trump comments. See her piece, "You Do ... and So Do We" in my edited volume, *Social Justice in Action: Models for Campus and Community*.¹²

Also a children's book author¹³ and editor,¹⁴ essayist,¹⁵ and spoken word performer, Nikki was a people's poet to her people, though not a poet for all people's taste. Unlike her close poet friend Maya Angelou, whose smooth calculatedness marked and measured her words, Nikki was boldly irreverent,¹⁶ belligerent, and revolutionary. Whenever I teach her poems on love,¹⁷ Black love,¹⁸ Black self-love,¹⁹ Black womanhood,²⁰ and Black anger, students and I continually appreciate her truth-telling from a Blackhand side. For those of us who lean into and connect with her words and messages of self-affirmation, she was as bold and uncensored as she was self-deprecating. She loved us – Black people more specifically and humanity more broadly – with all of her heart and soul. She made us laugh and cry. While she demonstrated Black righteous anger at historic domestic terrorism and systemic racism,²¹ she hugged us with her emotional vulnerability and accessibility. Poet ntozake shange says that "quite simply a poem shd fill you up with something/ cd make you swoon, stop in yr tracks, change yr mind, or make it up. A poem shd happen to you like

¹¹ See "ASU Project Humanities Receives Commendation from Dalai Lama" 2014.

¹² Giovanni 2024.

¹³ See Giovanni children's books: *Knoxville, Tennessee* (Giovanni 1994a), *The Girls in the Circle* (Giovanni 2003), and *Rosa* (Giovanni 2005).

¹⁴ See Giovanni 2008.

¹⁵ See Giovanni 1991, 1994b.

¹⁶ See Giovanni 1993.

¹⁷ See Giovanni 1968, 1997.

¹⁸ See Giovanni 1993, 3–5.

¹⁹ See Giovanni 1968, 2017a.

²⁰ See Giovanni 1969.

²¹ See these Giovanni 1968 poems: "The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro" "My Poem," and "For Sandra." See also Giovanni's poem on the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Reflections on April 4, 1968" (1968).



Figure 5. Neal A. Lester and Nikki Giovanni. Photo Credit: Rebecca Ross, September 2014.

cold water or a kiss.”²² For so many who are mourning and will continue to mourn her loss, Nikki Giovanni was indeed poetry in motion. In a slightly revised context, she was, in the lyrical sentiment of Carl Carlton in 1981, “a bad mama jama – just as fine as she could be” (Figure 5).²³

Now that I have had my own good cry²⁴ at the news of Nikki’s death, I can get on with the business of today, reflecting and appreciating her life well lived with grace, passion, honesty, and deep compassion. I knew well that I was not in Nikki’s inner circle of creatives, but she treated me as though I were. I can’t explain why she was willing to invite me into her home and into her life. Our friendship began organically, and her kindness and her big heart allowed me space near her. I am grateful that her piece in my volume is yet another part of her legacy.

I bet she’s in her new ancestral residence trying to find my deceased mom, Johnnie Lee, who was about Nikki’s height and stature and who used to like bragging about herself and her physical prowess: “I’m a little piece of leather, but I’m well put together.” She and Nikki shared that self-confidence boasting that betrayed their small physical builds. My mom and Nikki – though worlds apart in their lives and life choices – are likely together somewhere, sipping champagne and sharing a few laughs about the foolishness of humans thinking that our lives will last forever.

Neal A. Lester, Foundation Professor of English at Arizona State University, is also Founding Director of the multiple award-winning university initiative Project Humanities.

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²² Shange 1977, 72.

²³ Carlton 1981.

²⁴ See Giovanni 2017a, 2017b.

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