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Poetry from a Shoebox: Cooking, Food and Black American Experience in Nikki Giovanni's Poetry

Food and cooking are conspicuously frequent motifs in Nikki Giovanni's later poetry. Implemented as central metaphors in her work, they add to the diversity of black experience and allow the poet to reflect on the physical and cultural survival of African Americans within an oppressive white order—thus, they testify to the black experience of America.

Visible in the art of patchwork-making, a jazz-like openness to a variety of ethnic influences and free mixing of traditional folk heritage with elements taken from contemporary popular culture finds its expression also in the eclectic character of African American cuisine. In Giovanni's later collections: *Blues For All the Changes* (1999), *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* (2002), *Acolytes* (2007), and *Bicycles* (2009), there are many poems which feature the motif of preparing and eating meals. Undoubtedly, the poet suggests that quilting, black music and black cuisine, taken together, provide a foundation for survival—not only in a strictly biological, but also in a cultural sense, emphasizing African American identity and the poet's appetite for blackness. Only in this context can the formal and thematic components of her writing be understood and appreciated. She writes: "We need food for the Soul / We need poetry... We deserve poetry / We owe it to ourselves to re-create ourselves" (*Acolytes* 35).

This paper discusses Giovanni's poetry as a form of emphasizing the unique black experience of America and of an intentional strengthening of the bond between generations of black women, who have been marginalized within the official discursive practices in the United States. Arguably, Giovanni's standpoint should be seen as *womanist*. By eschewing academic aporias, her "soul food poems from a shoebox" can also be perceived as a move towards "saying it like it is," and an urgent need for linkage among black women experiencing America as a wild zone group.¹

¹ The concept of the wild zone was borrowed by Craig Werner from Elaine Showalter's feminist reflections for the purpose of research into African American literature in order to demonstrate the position of the experience of the black community in relation to the language of the dominant white majority, the language sanctioning itself as a universal language. Werner shows how the experience of a group marginalized polit-

Blues, quilting and cooking as forms of African American art, with their sense of improvisation, become tightly interwoven in a half-bitter, half-jocular poem entitled “Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea,” which compares a possible future trip to Mars and the Middle Passage. In Giovanni’s presentation, both experiences are linked by two things: the vastness of space traveled through and the absolute strangeness of the environment arrived at. Reminding the reader that the ancestors of modern African Americans experienced a sort of a journey “to another planet,” the poet says that NASA experts should consult with black Americans on how to overcome a great fear of the unknown and cope with a sense of loneliness and alienation. They should also ask: “How were you able to decide you were human even when everything said you were not... How did you find the comfort in the face of the improbable to make the world you came to your world” (*Quilting* 4). Giovanni provides the answer on behalf of her people, pointing out a fundamental role of music and food as a basis of survival in conditions however hostile:

you will need a song... take some Billie Holiday for the sad days and Charlie Parker for the happy ones but always keep at least one good Spiritual for comfort... You will need a slice or two of meatloaf and if you can manage it some fried chicken in a shoebox with a nice moist lemon pound cake... a bottle of beer because no one should go that far without a beer (*Quilting* 4)

Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker are not only two giants of jazz, but they stand for the quintessence of melancholy and of elemental spontaneity, respectively. Together with spirituals, they represent the full spectrum of African American musical expression. It should be emphasized that Giovanni does not use any examples of African songs and music brought to the New World by slaves, but refers to more contemporary examples, although rooted in older traditions. The music, whose lowest common denominator is the blues, stands here for food of the soul. At times the poet even erases the border between

ically, economically, socially or sexually, which involves individual experiences of its members and finds its expression in this group’s “dialect,” is not allowed to enter the level of discourse that affects the shape and character of the language of a given culture. The critic claims that instead of taking into consideration a variety of experiences, which would be characteristic of an ideal pluralistic culture, in American culture we deal with a situation where a pseudo-universal dominant language, being essentially “the dialect of the dominant group” (62), i.e. of white heterosexual men holding power, imposes on minority groups and their individual members its own rules of expression of experience. As a result, any kind of experience incompatible with the norms of the dominant language must be recognized as trivial, unimportant, irrelevant, narrow, abnormal, sick, not-pertaining-to-us etc. In this way, a marginalized twilight language zone is constituted—in Werner’s presentation, this is the wild zone where experience incompatible with the norm is expressed. The official language, hostile to extending the space of publicly expressed experiences to include those insisting on their own integrity, generates a solipsistic culture which, by its nature, prevents the Other from entering the field of discourse.

food and music. For example, in “Boiled Blues” Giovanni admits: “I like my blues boiled with a few tears” (*Bicycles* 83), and then moves on to paraphrase the blues poet Langston Hughes by adding: “But I ate well and grew” (*Bicycles* 85).

Yet the above-quoted longer passage argues that equally important for survival in a foreign environment is food in the literal sense: unsophisticated, rich in calories and, above all, familiar and evoking home. The phrase “some fried chicken in a shoebox” calls for a word of comment. In *The Black Family Dinner Quilt Cookbook*, which is illustrated with pictures of patchwork quilts and combines recipes with food anecdotes about events involving activists of various organizations that worked towards a better life for African Americans, there is a story about Dr. Dorothy I. Height, President of the National Council of Negro Women. An anonymous witness recalls that when Dr. Height had come to the South from New York for the first time in the early 60s, being hungry upon arrival, she had to eat a “poor little meal out of a shoe box” (18), since the rules of segregation did not allow blacks to eat in the railway station restaurant. As a result, the President experienced blacks’ standard way of eating under Jim Crow: “That’s what a lot of Negroes did when they had to travel in the South and knew that they’d want to eat something” (18). Thus, during the trip to Mars, Giovanni proposes making use of a simple and well-practiced way of surviving in a hostile and inhumane environment.

We should also notice a striking, though apparently coincidental, similarity between the structure of Giovanni’s volumes and the structure of *The Black Family Dinner Quilt Cookbook*, characterized by Sally Bishop Shigley as a “nexus of recipes and quilts and memories and nutrition,” which reminds us that “possibility and hope and power lie within the patchwork of mind, body, heart, and head that makes up all women” (315). Arguably, Giovanni has the same purpose: to give her ordinary women readers a sense of belonging to a larger group in which racial-and-gender consciousness is conspicuously foregrounded. Simultaneously, this sense of belonging is almost mythical in its inclusiveness as here we can find no discrimination against women because of differences in age, education or social class.

Giovanni deploys culinary references with a full awareness of their group-binding character. This awareness is expressed in her own version of the folk tale of Stone Soup, included in “Redfish, Eels, and Heidi,” where the poet also talks at length about her eating preferences:

And then there was Stone Soup. Everybody liked to read that story as if the old beggars got away with something but I always thought they showed the village how to share. The stone started to boil when they asked for a few potatoes, then a couple of turnips, then maybe a piece of meat if some was available and just a little bit of

milk and by golly if we had some bread this would be a feast! And everyone was happy. Which when we allow our better selves to emerge is always the case. (*Quilting* 106)

Giovanni openly shifts the stress away from the common conviction that the beggars, who were cooking the Stone Soup, cheated the villagers by making them believe that they had a rare opportunity to cook *together* in a jam-session-like manner and to enjoy the result, which points to her intention to perceive cooking as a symbol of sharing not only food but, above all, wisdom. This sort of cooperation results in “allow[ing] our better selves to emerge.”

In many poems from the volumes discussed here, we find enumerations of meals prepared and eaten on various occasions, as well as without a particular occasion, together with family and friends, and recipes for specific dishes. They appear with noticeable frequency in many poems pertaining to the poet’s private life, for example: “The Faith of a Mustard Seed”, “Truth-telling”, “Be My Baby”, “Sunday”, “The Things We Love About Winter” (in *Blues*); “I Always Think of Meatloaf”, “Blackberry Cobbler”, “Red-fish, Eels, and Heidi” (in *Quilting*); “My Grandmother”, “The Old Ladies Give a Party”, “The Most Wonderful Soup in the World”, “Indulge”, “The Best Ever Midnight Snack” (in *Acolytes*); “So Enchanted With You”, “No Translations”, “Twirling” (in *Bicycles*). Both the sheer number of these poems and their content testify to the importance of the theme of eating for Giovanni, a popular or even populist poet who simultaneously highlights her black identity as well as racial and gender consciousness. It would not make sense to discuss all of these poems. Nonetheless, it is worth stressing the fact that they are linked with a specific African American cultural phenomenon known as “heritage food”, i.e. food with African roots, enhanced by the Southern cuisine and the Indian, Caribbean, and French traditions. The quintessence of “heritage food” is “soul food”, defined by Lauren Swann as “food made with feeling and care” (200), which means that it is as much “food with soul” as “food for the soul.” In this context, the title of a cookbook by Ruth Gaskins published in 1968—*Every Good Negro Cook Starts with Two Basic Ingredients: A Good Heart and a Light Hand*—seems to be particularly significant. Certain constant elements especially matter here: good intentions, emotional involvement and a sense of improvisation, not just the professional skills of a *nouvelle cuisine* type that serve to satisfy the palate of even the most fastidious gourmet-client. Swann explains the phenomenon of soul food in these words:

As slaves, African Americans were not permitted to learn how to read or write, so they cooked not from recipes but ‘by knowing’, giving strong credence to the essence

of 'soul food.' Slaves had virtually no control or choice in life, so cooking became a way to express feeling, share love and nurture family and friends. Meals were a time for sharing common feelings of happiness and sorrow. Food was comfort while in bondage, and because they could control cooking, it was one of their few real pleasures, a way to feel free. (200)

Apparently, belonging wholly to the sphere of privacy, cooking meals and eating them with the loved ones simultaneously took on a political meaning by delineating a space of freedom and resistance within the culinary wild zone. This clearly corresponds with the approach to poetry-writing assumed by Giovanni and those other black female poets who never accepted a compromise with "white" rules of practicing high art. Such a metaphorical understanding of preparing and eating soul food by black Americans is not surprising, as it is coded within their culture. Shigley quotes Charles Camp, who researched the role of food in American culture and observed that "ordinary people understand and employ the symbolic and cultural dimensions of food in their everyday affairs," turning it, in Shigley's words, into "an important part of community mythmaking" (316). A book like *The Black Family Dinner Quilt Cookbook* substantiates the thesis that this sort of awareness becomes even more striking in the case of minorities that had been exposed to discrimination.

Giovanni's later poems may be treated as an exemplification of this thesis. It is also worth noticing that the author of *Acolytes* emphasizes the role of women in passing on and sustaining the symbolic heritage inherent in food and cooking. Reading her food-poems the way one reads her quilt-poems makes it more apparent how ordinary women have used, as Shigley puts it, "the discourses available to them to make profound and effective statements" (316). Giovanni does not separate African American culinary heritage as a whole from her individual family tradition in this sphere, yet in her case, as a rule, passing it on occurs via the matrilineal route. A good example of this can be found in the poem "I Always Think of Meatloaf," in which Giovanni describes in detail the process of preparing the eponymous dish, referring both to her childhood memories and her present experiences:

I wanted Meatloaf. I always think of Meatloaf when I want a comfort food.

My Grandmother did not like Meatloaf so it became an elegant presentation when she cooked it. In her day, even to my remembrance, you could go to the butcher and purchase a piece of round steak. The butcher would grind it for you on the spot and Grandmother always had a couple of pork chops ground with it...

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The meat is cold so your hand will get cold while you mix so be sure to keep a little running water on warm to get the color back in your fingers. When the egg and beef are well mixed but not overtly so, add your spices... onions and peppers. I cheat... and go to the freezer department of my local supermarket and purchase frozen peppers in a bag. I sauté them in olive oil while I do my egg and meat mixing. I add them to the bowl just before the spices. I still turn it by hand, however. (*Quilting* 16-17)

The presentation of the subsequent steps mentioned in the text—preparing the meat for the meatloaf and the right way of cooking it—reaches a conclusion in the final sentence that reads: “My grandmother taught me that.” Another striking aspect is the lack of any deep philosophical reflection about “meatiness” itself, which, as argued by Jolanta Brach-Czaina, can be part of the experience of a person who knows what it means to “touch raw meat. Hold it in one’s hands. Squeeze it. Let it come out between one’s fingers” (161; trans. J. K.). According to the philosopher, touching meat can lead to probing into the essence of “elementary facts” (162; trans. J. K.), such as death, killing, and suffering, without elevating them onto any spiritual level. Her essay “The Metaphysics of Meat” can be perceived as a useful negative context for understanding Giovanni’s poem in the sense that it allows us to see that the poet treats the preparation of the meat dish as a ritual of love, understood as an elementary fact: both the grandmother’s love for her granddaughter in the past and the granddaughter’s love for her late grandmother at present. The meatloaf strengthens the sense of safety—it is referred to as a “comfort food,” but the safety seems to be derived not from the dish itself, but from the recipe for it inherited from the grandmother. Moreover, joining the familial culinary tradition does not entail slavish imitation and repetition; the granddaughter’s visit in the supermarket to “purchase frozen peppers in a bag” does not signify a betrayal of her grandmother’s heritage, but the ability to adapt it to contemporary conditions and customs, which proves that the heritage truly lasts. As Shigley puts it, “the soul food or heritage recipes” become, together with “more updated dishes... essential components in the ‘canon’ of African American cooking” (317).

Another significant feature of the tradition of soul food, which, as has already been mentioned, dates back to the times of slavery, is the fact that many dishes were made from scraps and leftovers from the white master’s table. As Swann emphasizes, “slaves cooked with their whole heart, doing their best with sparse ingredients” (201). Here arises the subject of the essence of black functioning in America, which is also highlighted in Giovanni’s quilt-poem “Hands: For Mother’s Day.” According to the poet, this functioning demands affirmation of survival by transforming the experience of want and privation into the experience of love and care, and “taking that which nobody wants and not

only loving it... not only seeing its worth... but making it lovable... and intrinsically worthwhile" (*Those Who Ride* 17). This metamorphosis of the image of scraps and leftovers into an expression of love is a theme in the poem "The Most Wonderful Soup in the World," whose opening stresses the significance of soup in the African American diet: "Soup, where I come from, is sacred...the food of the gods... the most wonderful thing on Earth to eat because it is so hard to make" (*Acolytes* 87). Half-jokingly, the poet informs us that "[t]he key to this soup is courage," as the soup is not made on the basis of a recipe but must be a result of improvisation, of cooking from intuition, "from knowing," just as the real soul food should be. The possible ingredients (surely in accordance with the rule of "a good heart and a light hand") are leftovers gathered and kept in jars. The poet enumerates them carefully:

I would keep a little snippet of whatever we ate. At first it was potatoes... Then it was a bit of the roast, a bit of the chicken, a snippet of the pork chops. There were green things: green beans, greens, okra because I eat okra at least once a week, asparagus. My jar was filling up. There were squashes: zucchini, yellow squash, the squash with the neck. Eggplant, turnips, parsnips. We looked around at the end of the month and the jar was almost full. Let's make soup we said almost simultaneously. (*Acolytes* 88)

The approach to cooking as presented in the above-quoted passage differs fundamentally from that of "a materially richer culture," as emphasized by the motto, dating from the times of slavery, that nothing must be wasted. It is also worth pointing out the collective character of cooking the soup in the poem and the women's exclusive participation in it: the text mentions the poet's late grandmother, mother, and sister. In a way characteristic of Giovanni's poetry in general, the consciousness of race is intertwined with consciousness of gender marked by its womanist provenance.

It could seem that, by writing about women who prepare food, the poet sends them back to the kitchen, reducing them to the stereotypical feminine role of the cooks / feeders of their family, the role from which women have been to some extent freed by the feminist movement. Yet, it would be rash to jump to this conclusion and to perceive the feminist attitude to traditional feminine roles in such a one-sided way. Susan J. Leonardi, a feminist critic who discusses food in literature by women, labels cooking an "almost prototypical female activity" (131), and does so not in order to sustain existing stereotypes, but with the purpose of demonstrating how this domain may contribute to building a sense of bonding and strength among women. A similar point is made by Harriet Blodgett, who aptly notices that

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[f]eminism since the 1960s has significantly impacted the use of food imagery [in literature], for besides encouraging realistic, recognizable literary versions of female life in place of sentimental stereotypes, it has inspired vociferous complaints about woman's traditional role as purveyor of food yet also directly and indirectly championed her nurturing abilities. (263)

In this case the word "nurturing" must be understood in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. The latter unquestionably dominates within the field of black feminism and in literature written by African American women.

In employing the motif of cooking, Giovanni underscores the vital role of women in the functioning of the African American community as well as affirms their, to use Harriett Blodgett's term, "nurturing abilities" in its physical and psychological meanings. In Giovanni's poems, women, when they cook and feed, offer not only food, but above all a sense of transgenerational identity and physiological memory of their own roots. In the poem "Symphony of the Sphinx," an important part of knowledge of "what is Africa to me" has been acquired not through words, but through the taste of okra, which is a permanent ingredient of the home diet:

Those bits of ham or roast beef or the skin of baked chicken and onions and carrots and cabbage and cloves of garlic and church and club and cabaret and salt and okra to bind the stew.

If it wouldn't be for okra maybe Africa wouldn't mean the same thing. (*Quilting* 19-20)

The inclusion of "church and club and cabaret" in the list of ingredients for stew made from various bits and leftovers reveals Giovanni's attempt to treat food as an element that binds her community on the spiritual and symbolic level. A similar role in the dish itself is ascribed to okra, a vegetable of African origin whose characteristic feature is a slimy stickiness that glues the dish together and positively affects digestion. The emphasis put on okra's culinary function may be interpreted as Giovanni's intention to give this staple ingredient of African diet a role in binding the black community together.

I like my generation for trying to hold these truths self-evident. I like us for using the weapons we had. I like us for holding on and even now we continue to share what we hope and know what we wish.

And if we just could have found a way to keep the barbecue warm, the chitterlings cleaned and frozen, the pork steaks pounded and the beer on ice we might have gone just that much further. (*Blues* 13-14)

This passage demonstrates that, in Giovanni's understanding, food is invested with a certain ideological and political potential. Moreover, the poet underlines its anti-doctrinaire character. In her view, food removes strict divisions and rigid categories in her community. Its role is to make people come and *be together*, not just unite and *do something* for a particular cause.

Such an idea of food has great significance for Giovanni's ambition to bring black women close together, regardless of differences among them. By evoking the space of the kitchen and by including recipes for heritage food in her texts, the author of *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea* proves that the presence of an educated woman and poet in the kitchen is not an anachronism, and it is as natural and positive as a housewife leaving the kitchen and entering the public sphere. In turn, this signifies a refusal to accept binary oppositions that force women to choose between two extremes, which, as a result, leads to a lack of understanding and solidarity among them. Patricia Yaeger mentions a similar necessity to overcome the barriers set up by the strict rules of functioning within the patriarchal system and to reject the way in which female experience has been codified in language. Yaeger puts emphasis on using a "happy tongue" which easily transcends the existing categories decreed by the power of the (patriarchal) tradition (1-33). By using the "happy tongue of the kitchen," Giovanni removes the apparently obvious divisions between women and establishes a space of freedom and communication.

Ethel Morgan Smith points out that Giovanni's poetry is as deeply rooted in African American culture as food: "[t]he offering of food is the teaching and practice of family and feeling. Food is about tolerance and how we relate to each other, and therefore, how we relate to ourselves" (174). In a like vein, Mary Anne Schofield describes food as a "metaphoric matrix, a language that allows us a way to get at the uncertainty, the ineffable qualities of life" (1). For Giovanni, food and poetry are inseparable as they both express black women's identity and creativity. In the poem "Paint Me Like I Am," Giovanni goes as far as to define poetry as a linguistic form of soul food, a "nourishment" that all black Americans need, a staple diet that allows them to sustain their energy and thanks to which they can transcend their personal limitations: "We need food for the Soul / We need poetry... We deserve poetry / We owe it to ourselves to re-create ourselves" (*Acolytes* 35). Accordingly, in her recent output, the art of poetry becomes virtually tantamount to the art of cooking in expressing black experience and the appetite for blackness.

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In her six volumes of poetry, from the 1983 collection *Those Who Ride the Night Winds* to the latest 2009 *Bicycles: Love Poems*, Giovanni has managed to create a poetic patchwork with a set of complementary components: the commemoration of outstanding African Americans, the evocation of social and political events (historical and contemporary) important from the black perspective, the employment of the motifs of quilting and cooking. Expressing her personal views and talking about her private experiences, Giovanni remains a poet of revolutionary origins in the sense that she is invariably concerned with the public issues that affect the situation of black Americans and seeks the affirmation of their positive identity which springs from the readiness for mutual support. Giovanni herself offers such a support in her poems mainly through the metaphors of patchwork-making and preparing soul food dishes. As a result, she brings to the surface of discourse the importance of black women's presence, activity and creativity. This fundamentally womanist standpoint confirms that Giovanni speaks in an authentic voice of the wild zone.

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