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"cause it's my house:" African American Women and Domestic Empowerment

In the introduction to *Black Sister: Poetry by Black American Women, 1746-1980*, Erlene Stetson notes that for Black women "the house is – and has been – more than a symbol for identity or family; historically, having a house of one's own has been an economically difficult, if not impossible, goal to achieve" (xxiii). According to Angela Y. Davis, "domestic life took on an exaggerated importance in the social life of slaves" since it provided "the only space where they could truly experience themselves as human beings" (16-17). And the cultural critic bell hooks notes: "We could not love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that 'homeplace,' most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits" (42). As part of the impact the historical experience of slavery had on African Americans, the house came to signify a different meaning for Black women than it does for white women.

During the Slavery era, Black women were denied the right to a house, as they were generally disadvantaged in their eligibility to achieve True Womanhood. The "cult of true womanhood," was the dominating ideology, which before the Civil War shaped the rules according to which women qualified or disqualified as women (Carby 21-23). The feminist historian Barbara Welter, points out "four cardinal virtues" which could guarantee the woman happiness and power and which were "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (quoted in Carby 23). It should be kept in mind that the emergence of two separate spheres, the public and political masculine sphere and the private and emotional feminine one, in the eighteenth century, had by the early nineteenth century established a new symbolic order. Modern domesticity, as Nancy Armstrong notes, was established "as the only haven from the trials of a heartless economic world," and thereafter followed the increased establishment of domestic norms for women (159). These norms were usually restrictive and confining. But Black women did not ever become "debased by their domestic functions" in the way white women were (Davis 17) because they usually had to work just as hard as their men did. Since they were not placed on "a domestic pedestal" (Carby 27), domestic chores far from implied weakness or inferiority in their case. Moreover, because "they suffered a grueling equality" at work, they also enjoyed some kind of equality at home (Davis 230, 18-19; Collins 49).[1] At a time when the alienating institution of slavery

[1] Both Davis (18-19) and Carby (39) note how such specific Black household conditions gave rise to stereotypes of Black female supremacy and the consequent subordination of the Black male.

far from granted "private" domestic spaces that could function as shelters, housework, being a part of family life, was a source of achievement; it was experienced as meaningful and more rewarding than anything else the slaves had to perform. In their provisional and tenuous households, housekeeping was directly linked to survival and thus it could hardly be considered unessential. Besides the burdens of housekeeping then, slave women would generally enjoy domestic space as a privilege.

How Black women perceived the house, after emancipation, was related to their perception of the idea of domesticity. This was in turn defined by the particular way in which their wage work intersected with their family life, as the majority of them had to take poorly paid jobs and work long hours in order to survive.[2] As domestic workers, which was soon to become the main occupation for Black working women (Collins 54-55; Davis 93), their experiences in relation to domestic space were different from those of white women since they generally occupied different parts of the house: the kitchen and the parlor. Thus the woman who worked for wages was separated from "the True Woman who reigned on the pedestal of her front parlor without a hair out of place" (Askeland 795). Interestingly, black domestic workers could move between public and private domestic space. They then experienced "domesticity" from two different perspectives, that of the exploited worker, who was often expected to ensure the comfort and see to the needs of her white employer's family, and that of the frustrated wife and mother who usually failed to attend to her own family's needs. Often it was only after a long day's work in a white woman's kitchen, "that space of Otherness, which stripped [them] of dignity and personal power" (hooks 46) that Black women could run their own home. But because they were obliged to work outside their house, much like when they were enslaved, Davis claims that housekeeping never really became the "central focus" of Black women's lives and they thus evaded the victimization inflicted upon those white women who stayed at home (230-231).

The otherwise so limiting role of a housewife for white women, in fact acquired an empowering dimension for many Black women as for them, the process of gaining access to the privileges of domesticity involved their development of strategies of empowerment. Some women, recognizing how important housekeeping was for the Black community and not having to fear that their work would be devalued when unpaid, "withdrew from both field labor and domestic service" to concentrate on the domestic duties in their own households. Their aim was to "strengthen the political and economic position of their families" by contributing with their valuable labor to their homes instead of being exploited by the whites (Collins 54-

[2] For a detailed discussion on Black women's work see Sharon Harley's "Reclaiming Public Voice and the Study of Black Women's Work" (especially 191-198).

55). However, the last thing expected from Black women in a white society, which widely profited from their low salary labor, was to dedicate themselves to their own households. So for those who could afford to make this kind of individual choice, the decision to stay at home came to mean resistance against racial oppression rather than "a form of exploitation by men" (Collins 44). Choosing to defend and enhance their families in this way, Black women asserted themselves, while challenging the hostile racist society around them. And even if the task of "making homeplace" was delegated to women as a result of sexism, according to hooks, they managed to elevate this role: "they took this conventional role and expanded it to include caring for one another, for children, for black men, in ways that elevated our spirits, that kept us from despair, that taught some of us to be revolutionaries able to struggle for freedom" (42-44). Black women, by embracing their responsibilities as homemakers, succeeded in creating households that simultaneously functioned as spaces of affirmation, support and resistance. Thus, they contributed to a "remarkable re-visioning of both woman's role and the idea of 'home'" (hooks 45), as well as exposed the existence of subversive powers contained in domesticity as prescribed by white patriarchy.

Moreover, for Black women, situating themselves in the house and embracing its responsibilities hardly meant isolation or subordination because the Black community usually exhibited fluidity rather than a split between the public and the private spheres. As Collins emphasizes, the historical experience of African-American women was under the influence of alternative definitions of family and community, which kept chancing, with both Black family and community structures being transformed due to migration and urbanization in this century and especially in the post-World War II era (Collins 47-49, 53, 55, 58-59). But although the work/family relationship underwent dramatic changes and the gradual stratification of Black community by social class eventually brought the erosion of extended family networks, in the most recent years (Collins 2nd ed. 59, 63-64), it can still be claimed that historically, Black women experienced an enlarged domestic sphere, one encompassing "a broad range of kin and community relations beyond the nuclear family household" (Collins 49). In Black segregated communities, where survival depended on communal efforts, there were no rigid boundaries separating different households. The family, extended as it was, often coincided or was equated with the community. Thus Black women did not find themselves excluded by putting themselves in the center of the family; they found themselves in the center of the community as well. Although urbanization produced a division of physical space into female and male space, denoting "households and churches" as "female arenas," whereby women's communal role became mostly focused around the church (Collins 55, 58), they could still enjoy a great degree of privilege. Harley asserts that "[f]or the masses of Black women, opportunities for social status existed outside the labor market–in their family, community and organizational and church lives, though not totally unrelated to their income-producing activities" (196).

The house then gradually became an open site of empowerment for Black women. In Black women's literature there are several examples of such houses. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, 124 constitutes initially an open "cheerful, buzzing house. [. . .] Where not one but two pots shimmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long. Strangers rested while children tried on their shoes. Messages were left there, for whoever needed them was sure to stop in one day soon" (86-87). Obviously, this kind of "domestic" space is not exclusively private but can also be public. Besides, when a house's limits are so porous, movement into public space is effortless and thus the house ceases to confine. In Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," the women move out to the yard, which is "not just a yard. It is like an extended living room." With its walls collapsed, the living room becomes a yard open to everybody: "When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with tiny, irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come into the house" (78). hook's concept "homeplace" corresponds to such both communal and domestic spaces, where private and public life overlap.

In the poetry of Black women, the domestic sphere does not seem to have clear limits since the "house" itself seems to comprise a number of ideas: it is an intersected site of the past and the present, a site of guilt, duty, obsession, but also care, affection, love. This is how Stetson comments on the wide use of the house as a metaphor there:

> The house represents the historic quest by Black women for homes of their own—apart from the house of slavery, the common house of bondage, the house of the patriarchy. The house embodies women's search for place and belonging and for a whole and complete identity, as well as representing the historical house that was so difficult to get. In addition the house is a symbol for place—heaven, haven, home, the heart, women's estate, the earthly tenement, the hearth—and for region—Africa, the West Indies, America, Asia, the North, the South. (xxii)

A house, which evading its common physical dimensions can metaphorically incorporate anything as the above, could hardly be associated with the inferiority of those who dwell in it. When "house" expands into such a wide range of areas (both abstract and concrete), its "domestic spaces" are likely to be far too spacious to form the kind of "sheltered 'feminine' space," which Lori Askeland finds the house to be (786). Worth mentioning here is Askeland's inquiry into the meaning of the word "house" in contrast to that of the word "domain." Using Arthur C. Danto's reflections on the linguistic roots of the words, Askeland discusses the

difference between the word "house" as related to "hide, shelter, conceal, cover" and "domain" derived from the Latin *domus* and evoking "rulership, ownership, mastery, power" (786).

A distinction between the public and the private domain has not been clear-cut for Black women, due to their specific historical experience, which deprived from all forms of power while rendering them the objects of rulership, ownership, and mastery. When it came to survival, Black women could not count on their house to function as a safer shelter than for example the woods while in general they had to count on the involvement, the aid and/or the support of other members of the Black community in order to cope. Still, moving through collapsed boundaries of usually non-separate public/private spheres they developed individual strengths. The house, being important for them in a different way than for white women, functioned as a source of empowerment offering them space for both self and communal affirmation.

In the texts of Black women writers then, the desire for a house or the lingering about its "private" spaces, can hardly be taken as a symptom of a limited perspective or the writer's narrow scope; on the contrary, I suggest that focusing on the domestic sphere has a significant empowering function. In "Paradoxes and Dilemmas, the Woman as Writer," Margaret Atwood highlights how reviewers habitually perceive domestic themes differently in the work of male and female authors: "when a man writes about things like doing the dishes, it's realism; when a woman does, it's unfortunate feminine genetic limitation" (105). Nikki Giovanni makes a similar comment in *Sacred Cows . . . And Other Edibles*, pointing out that "[w]hen women write about the reality of our lives, it's called dull; when white men write their lives, it's called heroic" (33). Although they risk that their choices may be viewed as trivial and dull, Black women writers keep focusing quite extensively on what takes place in and around domestic milieus, and insist on exploring domestic experience, which certainly indicates the great importance these themes have for Black women, but also challenges, and one might claim defies, the meaning of set perceptions about this kind of writing. In this light, texts dealing with the experiences of women at home, whether they are clearly inspiring or not, may be seen as subversive and potentially empowering.

In the work of the African American poet Nikki Giovanni the house and its "private" spaces signify an important position. While the poet often "steps out" of the house, she refuses to abandon it and the concerns around it, affirming rather than dismissing their importance. Giovanni celebrates rather than tries to escape conventional, or not so conventional, domestic spheres. The house offers space for peace and self-assertion while opening towards the outside world, and thus hardly ever becomes claustrophobic. Most often, instead of being a place of confinement and discouraging isolation it is a privileged site where the recognition of domestic creativity

enables empowerment.

Giovanni further examines whether women enjoy being at home or not, as well as how their daily domestic experience affects their own lives along with the lives of those around them. In fact, when the house is in the foreground, it is usually in relation to the life of the women: they are the ones who occupy its rooms while the men are elsewhere. As hooks points out, "houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls" (41). The poet highlights and even makes attempts to elevate the domestic role of women by emphasizing the function of the house as a point of reference, but also by showing its importance in keeping people together.[3]

In Giovanni's poems the female poetic personas move in and around domestic space; but instead of feeling confined or desperate to escape, these women seem eager to explore their domestic privileges and often take advantage of them to carve out positions of authority for themselves. Even though they might occupy conventional feminine territories, or play traditional roles, these poetic personas seldom convey the image of vulnerable, helpless, passive and therefore inferior domesticated women. In many poems they actually appear purposeful and strong. They claim rather than question or doubt the importance of their position in the house; they also eagerly relate to domestic milieus and appropriate these in affirming and empowering ways. In my opinion, their strategies of empowerment are structured on a double assertion: the insistence on the part of the women to recognize activities usually seen as trivial and insignificant, and their appreciation of the positive effects of practices that may be experienced as limiting. In Giovanni's poems, I find that the position of the female personas tend to be elevated as daily experience, the commitment to human connection, the performance of chores, the care of the body, the care of children, and even leisure and daydreaming gain validity.

The poem "My House," the epilogue poem in Giovanni's volume with the same title may serve to illustrate strategies of empowerment as outlined above. Virginia Fowler argues that in *My House* the poet "transforms race and gender into her own sources of power; by embracing them, she converts them from tools of oppression in the hands of others into instruments of liberation in her own" (78). Commenting on the poem, she suggests that Giovanni "insists that gender cannot be used as a tool of oppression or trivialization once she decides to define the world as 'my house'" (77). In fact Fowler sees "My House" as an announcement of Giovanni's "right to make herself at home in the world, to claim it and

[3] In *A Dialogue* Giovanni shows concern about the circumstances where Black men end up battering Black women at home (43, 45). However, she does not explore the issue of domestic violence in her poetry.

order it as she wishes" (74). "My House" may then be seen as an expression of a woman's right to order her experience.

The house in this poem could be seen as a metaphor for the greater world, materializing thus an opening of the private towards the public sphere, but it might also stand for the woman's life, her primarily private world.[4] As I perceive it, Giovanni seeks to focus on the house from angles that reveal private experience as fundamentally important. To achieve this she, however, employs a poetic voice that repeatedly hedges: "does this sound like a silly poem," "does this really sound / like a silly poem" and "i don't know maybe it is / a silly poem." With these, apparently rhetorical hedges, which function as a refrain, the poet challenges the idea that a poem which deals with domestic experience is to be considered less noteworthy or directly insignificant and consequently that domestic experience is trivial and uninteresting.

In addition, the poet contrasts private with public experience while redefining acts of domesticity. According to Juhasz, Giovanni "is integrating private and public; in doing so, politicizing the private, personalizing the public" (169). In the poem, the female poetic persona's actions and thoughts actually imply an equation of the importance of the private to the importance of the public; to her is the act of smiling at old men while enjoying homemade fudge counts as an act of revolution:

> i'm saying it's my house
> and i'll make fudge and call
> it love and touch my lips
> to the chocolate warmth
> and smile at old men and call
> it revolution cause what's real
> is really real (*MH* 68)

This is a revolution, through "human connection and human love" (Fowler 77), whereupon even self-indulgence becomes revolutionary. Giovanni uses "revolution" in several of her poems, as in "Revolutionary Dreams," "Seduction," "My Poem" and "When I Die" and approaches this theme from a variety of perspectives (see Juhasz 168-169, 174). In "A Very Simple Wish," a poem where "revolution" is not addressed directly, she writes:

> i'm always surprised
> that it's easier to stick
> a gun in someone's face
> or a knife in someone's back
> than to touch skin to skin
> anyone whom we like (WM np)

[4] Martha Cook suggests that "Giovanni uses homes and houses to represent the movement toward maturity, symbolized by the movement away from places, homes of one's childhood toward establishing a home for oneself, or an identity as a mature person" (291).

Touching and/or smiling emerge then as quite loaded forms of expression, not reserved to occur exclusively within the span of intimate interpersonal contacts. Giovanni suggests that they may also be valid in enlarged, socio-political contexts, even as a way of enacting a revolution. Such highly unconventional revolutionary acts might be more concrete and real to her poetic persona in "My House" than the black revolution taking place in the streets. They therefore constitute far more exceptional and more radical alternatives than other ways to revolt.

But Giovanni is not alone in viewing the explosiveness and the radical potential contained in domestic experience. In the introduction to *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation,* Doris Betts points out that southern women writers like Giovanni "consider their imagined houses more as daily manifestations of reality than as refuges from reality. The advice in one Eleanor Ross Taylor poem is to 'Stay here where the suffering's homemade, sure to fit'" (7). Toni Cade argues in a similar manner: "If your house ain't in order, you ain't in order. It is so much easier to be out there than right here. The revolution ain't out there. Yet. But it is here. Should be" (quoted in Juhasz 169).

A clear awareness of the importance of the house as feminine space is distinct in this poem: the female speaker claims her house/world with an unmistakable air of determination and does so through images portraying the performance of common domestic chores, like cooking and sewing, which, in a world that prioritizes masculine values, are frequently dismissed as unimportant. As Juhasz notes, the speaker here is "still very much of a woman, using the traditionally female vocabulary of cooking and kitchens [. . .] But this woman is active, not passive: she means, wants, bakes, calls, runs. She orders experience and controls it" (172). Even Fowler highlights the glorified woman in her traditional female role in Giovanni's poem. Yet, she seems to partly slide into indirectly supporting the idea that the woman's actions are less significant, as she writes "*[a]lthough* the actions being described are apparently small and insignificant" and "*[i]ronically*, the poem is constructed of images and metaphors drawn from a female world that is often experienced as limiting and constricting—cooking, quilting, caring for others" (75, 74, italics mine). One might argue that attention is paid to actions and spaces that are supposed to be uninspiring and dull. But the poetic persona does not simply aspire to govern the domestic sphere; she inserts new meanings into her acts:

> i mean it's my house
> and i want to fry pork chops
> and bake sweet potatoes
> and call them yams
> cause i run the kitchen
> and i can stand the heat

i spent all winter in
carpet stores gathering
patches so i could make
a quilt
does this really sound
like a silly poem
i mean i want to keep you
warm

and my windows might be dirty
but it's my house
and if i can't see out sometimes
they can't see in either (*MH* 67-68)

The woman desires what is expected of women to desire (a house and somebody to care for) and she is inclined to perform trivial chores, some particularly in order to please her lover. This seemingly tends to support a conventional view of women. Yet, the speaker's insistence on her role as being the owner of the house, expressed through the emphatic repetition of the word with the possessive pronoun, conveys an important difference in how her function is to be perceived. Because she is the one who decides if and what she wants to accomplish; she has the power to create (food, a quilt, a poem) the right to name (the house, love, a revolution, the poem) and may do both to define her world. If the dirty windows restrict her view of what lies outside this world and thus perhaps isolate her, she acknowledges that they also shield her from undesirable interventions—after all the choice whether to clean the windows or not is ultimately hers.

Neither is her relation to the lover, who is a guest in her house and is the one to whom the poem is dedicated, restrictive: "everybody has some / thing to give and more / important need something to take." An earlier poem, "Seduction" (*BF* 38), illustrates vividly how, while in the house, the poetic persona's relationship to her lover is defined according to primarily *her* desires and is structured in accordance to *her* set of meanings. The man there keeps discussing politics while the woman teases him and slowly removes his clothes. As he is to realize his "state of undresses" she expects him to ask: "'Nikki, / isn't this counterrevolutionary. . . ?'"[5] In "My House" the woman's willingness to please is again not a matter of duty or routine but is rooted in her own sexual pleasure:

i only want to
be there to kiss you
as you want to be kissed
when you need to be kissed
where i want to kiss you
cause its my house
and i plan to live in it

i really need to hug you
when i want to hug you
as you like to hug me (*MH* 67)

The poetic persona in "My House" is comfortable with her experience of what is perceived as a woman's traditionally domestic role as she employs the means by which to achieve liberation on a personal level. Her insistence upon recreating a domestic role instead of attempting to refute her position in the home is crucial. The skills to reorganize the conditions of her situation so as to gain control over what takes place in her house can be identified here as the woman's ability to find potential for empowerment also in the ostensibly limiting confines of domestic experience.

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