

Meditations on “Mecca”:

Gwendolyn Brooks and the Responsibilities of the Black Poet

In the spring of 1967, Gwendolyn Brooks attended the second Fisk University Black Writer’s Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. The times were famously tumultuous: the Tet offensive and the U.S. response had escalated the Vietnam War; the Watts riots ravaged Los Angeles; the worst race riots in U.S. history left 43 dead in Detroit. The Black Panther Party had been founded and Amiri Baraka and others had begun the Black Arts Movement. Just one year later, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy would be assassinated, and Medgar Evers and Malcolm X had already been shot down. At the first Fisk Black Writer’s Conference in 1966, black writers defining the aims for a new black awareness clashed with Brooks’s contemporary, the poet Robert Hayden.¹ Those writers wanted work that “promote[d] an aesthetic that furthered the cause of black revolution;”² it is hard to imagine not needing to respond to the country’s ambient urgency. Hayden insisted that, when it came to his writing, he was a poet first and black, second. In 1978, he re-stated his view:

To put it succinctly, I feel that Afro-American poets ought to be looked at as poets first, if that’s what they truly are. And as one of them I dare to hope that if my work means anything, if it’s any good at all, it’s going to have a human impact, not a narrowly racial or ethnic or political and overspecialized impact.³

The battle for the eloquent words of black writers to further the cause for black dignity and civil rights was, once again, on.

Brooks was at this point already a highly acclaimed author, having won the Pulitzer Prize for Annie Allen in 1949 and published five books of poems and a novel. She was fifty years old. But despite her stature, the 1967 Fisk conference signaled her grand rebirth of consciousness. In

her autobiography, Report from Part One, Brooks wrote:

I — who have “gone the gamut” from an almost angry rejection of my dark skin by some of my brainwashed brothers and sisters to a surprised queenhood in the new black sun — am qualified to enter at least the kindergarten of new consciousness now. New consciousness and trudge-toward-progress.

I have hopes for myself.⁴

Those moving words “I have hopes for myself” show us a writer who is open to the urgent cries of younger writers in trying times. But this moment also offers an opportunity to consider how public or communal pressures on a writer can dramatically affect the choices he or she makes in a career and in the writing itself. The 1968 volume In the Mecca would be Brooks’s last book with the mainstream publishers Harper and Row. After this, she would publish all of her books with black houses, and her poetic voice would be more consciously calibrated to an audience that would presumably understand her on street corners and in taverns as well as in universities and recital halls.

As with so many young readers, I first encountered Gwendolyn Brooks’s work when I was a child — I found “We Real Cool” in an anthology. Then as now, the poem’s tautness and economy thrilled and amazed me, along with the repetitions and sense of sound. As an older reader with aspirations to write poetry herself, it was the Brooks of The Bean Eaters and A Street in Bronzeville who took my breath away: her specialized vocabulary, the magic imbued in kitchenettes, cabbage and beans; the strange diction that could belong to no one else; the utter economy and tensile strength of each line; the words I didn’t know like “thaumaturgic” juxtaposed remarkably in the same stanza with “black and boisterous” and “bastard roses” in the very same poem where she rhymes “crescendo-comes” with “hecatombs,” “banshee. Gets” and

“vinaigrettes,” “ribbonize” and “terrifies,” “tra la la” and “cinema.”⁵ If such wild and unexpected curiosities were possible in her language, then anything might be possible for me. No seaweedy, carbuncled constructions I might pull from the wrack and ruin of my imagination would be off-limits in poems. No music was too strange for poetry in the path Miss Brooks had cleared. And I revered the way that from her earliest work she was clearly committed to honoring the small details of “ordinary” lives and of seeking the plain beauty in surroundings that others would ignore. It would be some years before I would think about the poems that I loved in the context of the times and pressures under which they were written.

Langston Hughes’s 1926 essay “The Negro Writer and the Racial Mountain” offers perennially resonant words naming necessary freedoms for black artists. This anthem bears quoting at length:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.⁶

Black writers well know the perils of white racism and racist judgments against us and our work. That is a straightforward, if unpleasant, navigation for any African-American. But we are also, as ever, faced with judgments and injunctions from within that our work should perform a certain service as well as say and not say what is empowering or embarrassing to “the race” at large. The pressure on creative work can be intense for artists who belong to groups still struggling for their fair shake in society. The challenges to be published and heard, let alone to write well, lead to the understandable conclusion that every word counts, and that those who wish for much for the race would also wish their words could further the cause, however controversially that cause

might be defined.

Brooks's In the Mecca offers a meditation on the role of art and the artist during troubled times filled with philosophical and strategic challenges for black communities. The recurrent figure of the black poet in the book suggests that Brooks was wrangling with questions of the utility of poetry to a larger community's struggle. She labored on the book's centerpiece poem "In the Mecca" for some thirty years after working as a young woman for a "spiritual advisor" named Dr. E.N. French who sold charms and potions in the Mecca apartment building on the South Side of Chicago. Brooks is a master of the shorter lyric; at some 2000 lines, "In the Mecca" is the longest poem she has ever published, and it represents a clear turning point in her work and in her ongoing consideration of the role and responsibility of black poets in their communities.

Though an epic, "In the Mecca" is composed of linked portraits and as such is continuous with Brooks's earlier work. From her first volume in 1945, A Street In Bronzeville, Brooks has shown herself to be the consummate portraitist, moving through loved and familiar black communities with a gimlet eye. She creates galleries of individuals who together make up a community. A Street begins in media res: "But in the crowding darkness not a word did they say." Something else has just been said "offstage" that this line counters. 1940's black Chicago was the subject of much sociological inquiry, what poet Robert Hayden would call "the riot squad of statistics"⁷ that so often describes black life. Brooks's work illuminates many of the people and stories behind narrow, shopworn characterizations of the black urban poor. "A" street is singular, specific, though unnamed; "in Bronzeville" is named, yet mythical. Like "Harlem" the name signifies more than simply the streets it bounds.

Brooks's relationship to the urban Negro realism of the 'forties best seen in Richard
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Wright's Native Son (also set in Chicago) and Ann Petry's The Street is discernable. But Brooks's poetry made a space for something beyond realism as we see in her magnificent "kitchenette building":

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Grayed in and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound, not strong
Like "rent," "feeding a wife," "satisfying a man."

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.⁸

The first lines, "We are things," suggests a people at war with the dehumanization of sociology and poverty who nonetheless constitute themselves as a community, a "we." In the world of this poem, there is no fissure in the day for dreams. "We wonder" and "we think," but we do not have time, "not for a minute," to dream. "Dream" is never a verb in this poem. But "dream" is also the only word Brooks repeats and the word that lingers in the reader's mouth after the poem is done. She lets her readers experience the high notes of "white" and "violet" before declining into the earthbound, stolid, round vowels of fried "potatoes." We may end with the humble tuber, but "hope" is still the poem's last verb, even if only for "lukewarm water." When a starkly sociological approach to "the Negro problem" was the order of the day even in some black circles, it was bold of Brooks to name the imagination as a site worth tending, to honor the space of the dulce to go along with the utile.

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The characters in “In the Mecca” are linked through the geography of living in the Mecca apartment building at the time of a great tragedy which unfolds as the poem progresses.

Brooks’s choice of epic to tell this community’s tragic tale is particularly effective. The lack of aeration — the poem is not sectioned — emphasizes the claustrophobia of the world Brooks portrays. At some moments the poem feels pasted together, with set pieces that are not quite sure of why they are where they are in the poem, or why they are in the poem at all. But if we return to our earlier model of the Brooks poem as the community slice of life at any given moment, we can see that you could open any door in the building (any section or stanza) at any time and find anything; anything except what is most dearly sought, that is, the missing girl-child “Pepita” who, in the grisly end, we learn “never went to kindergarten.../never learned that black is not beloved.”⁹

But that puts us ahead of the story in the poem. “In the Mecca” begins with epigraphs about the ironically-named Mecca apartment building, once a showplace, now decrepit. No one knows how many live there, and danger lurks within. Brooks quotes one Russ Meek in her last epigraph: “There comes a time when what has been can never be again.” We first encounter Mrs. Sallie, a “low-brown butterball” with an apartment full of children surviving on hamhocks and “a spoon of sweet potato.” St. Julia is parodied for her excessive credence in God: “...He’s the comfort/and wine and picallilli for my soul./He hunts me up the coffee for my cup./Oh how I love that Lord.” Prophet Williams is the “spiritual advisor” “who reeks/with lust for his disciples” as he peddles potions to the Meccans. There is Way-out Morgan who “smacks sweet his lips and adds another gun/and listens to Blackness stern and blunt and beautiful,/organ-rich Blackness telling a terrible story.” And there is great-great Gram who is still remembering slavery, providing a historical long view and example of the persistence of community memory.

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Brooks presents these characters and many others, until the upper-case crisis of the poem: “WHERE PEPITA BE?” One of Mrs. Sallie’s children has gone missing. The mother searches from apartment to apartment; no one has seen the girl, most are indifferent, and it turns out that “Beneath [Jamaican Edward’s] cot/a little woman lies in dust with roaches,” murdered. The poem ends, its conclusions echoed later in the book:

And they are constrained. All are constrained.
and there is no thinking of grapes or gold
or of any wicked sweetness and they ride
upon fright and remorse and their stomachs
are rags or grit.

The character of Alfred, Mecca-dweller and would-be poet, is a key to considering Brooks’s thinking on the role of poetry in times of communal crisis. At first glimpse Alfred is exultant from the labors of poetry-writing:

To create! To create! To bend with the tight intentness
over the neat detail, come to
a terrified standstill of the heart, then shiver,
then rush — successfully —
at that rebuking thing, that obstinate and
recalcitrant little beast, the phrase!
To have the joy of deciding — successfully —
how stuffs can be compounded or sifted out
and emphasized; what the importance are;
what coats in which to wrap things.

Brooks then abruptly informs us, “Alfred is un-/talented. Knows.” The excitement of struggling to craft verse is undercut by Alfred’s artistic impotence. While Mrs. Sallie is frantic to find Pepita, Alfred is busy mooning over the work of the Senegalese poet and politician Leopold Sedar Senghor who, despite the wisdom of his words is imagined “in Europe rootless and lonely.” Alfred rhapsodizes, “To be a red bush!/In the West Virginia autumn” in the midst of the chaos that is the decaying Mecca building, the building standing in for the country that is literally

burning and falling apart and for the black community that has no choice but somehow hold together. In the drama of the poem, the little girl is the hope of Negro tomorrow, the “little seed” who is missing in the warrens of the Mecca. “No, Alfred has not seen Pepita Smith,” Brooks writes, “But he (who might have been a poet-king)/Can speak superbly of the line of Leopold.” Dead Pepita speaks in memoriam, and her poetry is utterly useless: “‘I touch’ — she said once — ‘petals of a rose./A silky feeling through me goes.’ ”

The black nationalist poet Don L. Lee (now known as Haki Madhubuti) makes a mysterious but instrumental appearance in the poem. Among residents he is the lone non-Meccan. Lee serves as a foil to insignificant Alfred:

Don Lee wants
not a various America.
Don Lee wants
a new nation
under nothing;
andwants/
new art and anthem; will
want a new music screaming in the sun.

Lee’s section is lean and clean and imagines a contemporary black poetry that is “new,” relevant, and can move people to “music” and “screaming” at all that demands outrage. This seems like a refusal of the pre-1967 Brooks in favor of the new Brooks with hopes for herself and her work. Yet there is something about Brooks’s treatment of Alfred that saddens me. His exultant love of poetry itself and veneration of the sweat of the craft feels familiar and exciting, a pleasure I know myself and wish for others. It is that joy and struggle that is the work of writing. Context is of course all-important, and Brooks has placed Alfred’s exaltations in the midst of far more urgent matters indeed. He is certainly a rather silly man. But I wanted Brooks to transform him into a poet-hero, perhaps by his finding in the words of the poets he has read something that offers

direction or succor to the community as it struggles through the crisis of Pepita. Poetry can have and does have that function and possibility, just as there are also many poets who lose themselves in stardust while the world falls apart around them, or, worse still, who claim themselves exempt from the responsibilities of citizenship — to tend to one's community, to turn some portion of one's energies and talents to the good of that community — in the name of the apolitical sanctity that they believe is the domain of poetry.

The rest of the book forms a crucial follow-up to the long opening poem. In it, the figure of the poet and the role of the poem are developed and then redeemed. The poet is more explicitly Brooks herself, in the midst of a black community offering words that both mark the times and gain her a place amongst her people. The second section is called "After Mecca," and the first poem is "Boy Breaking Glass." The boy cries, "I shall create! If not a note, a hole./If not an overture, a desecration." The occasional poems "The Chicago Picasso" and "The Wall" commemorate events that took place two weeks apart in Chicago in August, 1967, one downtown — the dedication of a Picasso statue to the city — and the other on the city's black South Side — the dedication of "The Wall of Respect," a mural with portraits of black heroes. "All worship" [emphasis mine] at "The Wall:"

I mount the rattling wood. Walter
says, "She is good," says, "She
our Sister is." In front of me
hundreds of faces, red-brown, brown, black, ivory,
yield me hot trust, their yea and their Announcement
that they are ready to rile the high-flung ground.

The black community is shown multitudinous and varied but nonetheless unified and, crucially, embracing of the poet, Brooks herself, whose contribution is useful and welcomed. Her poetry has been explicitly accepted and has helped the people become "ready to rile." The last stanza is

a single line, “And we sing.” The poem and the event have helped reunify the community which is so shattered at the end of “In the Mecca;” there is a choral voice and a self-articulation as “we,” which is certainly the first step in understanding oneself as part of a larger whole with common aims. The audience is not passive like the downtown audience at the Chicago Picasso dedication: “(Seiji Ozawa leads the Symphony./The Mayor smiles./And 50,000 See.)” The downtowners are parenthetical here and make no noise, joyful or otherwise. Brooks is no stranger to commemorative, occasional poems, having written prefatory, tributary poems to her brother, father, and black war heroes. But the act of writing in tribute and on occasion assumes greater meaning and context after a black community has been shown in urgent need of reparation.

But the “we” is never without its complications and shortfalls. The same community of black poets who embraced Brooks and took her to a new stage of black consciousness was brutally judgmental of Robert Hayden. Yet his 1970 collection Words in the Mourning Time presents some striking points of comparison to In the Mecca. Just a few months after Brooks’s poems for the Chicago Picasso and the Wall of Respect, Hayden delivered an occasional poem, “And All the Atoms Cry Aloud,” just up Lake Michigan in Chicago for the Baha’i centennial. In Words Hayden mourns the country’s racial woes as he mourns the Vietnam War. Both poet’s books include Malcolm X poems. Hayden’s Malcolm is a great man because of his spiritual salvation rather than racial deeds or rhetoric. “El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz” concludes: “He fell upon his face before/Allah the raceless in whose/ blazing Oneness all were one. He rose renewed renamed, became/much more than there was time for him to be.”¹⁰ In Brooks’s Malcolm X poem in In the Mecca it is Malcolm’s black “maleness” that makes “us” “gasp” and characterizes him as someone to be revered, followed, and admired. Hayden, a devout Baha’i, is

always interested in the spiritual strivings and human links that he believes invite transcendence and liberation. Brooks closes In the Mecca with two “sermons” addressed to “[m]y people, black and black,” an audience Hayden would neither name nor presume. In “The Second Sermon on the Warpland” Brooks writes: “This is the urgency. Live!/and have your blooming in the noise of the whirlwind.” Though she may think of the book’s final words as evidence of her move toward a new understanding of her voice and responsibility as a black poet, she sounded similar notes in 1949 to end her book Annie Allen: “...Rise./Let us combine. There are no magic or elves/Or timely godmothers to guide us. We are lost, must/Wizard a track through our own screaming weed.”¹¹ The two authors’ common concerns circa 1970 are worth noting because at the time Brooks might have been seen as the “blacker” poet and Hayden as the “spiritualist,” neither characterization being completely accurate.

The expectations placed on black poets by a larger public are one thing. The demands of one’s own people — however vexing it can be to draw parameters around that populace — have always been another. What does the race want from its poets? Different and usually unpredictable things, in my experience, and often nothing but the particular vision a particular poet has to offer. Who is “the race,” anyway? Yes, there are literary schools and establishments, but certainly no central committee deciding who is “in” and who is “out.” Calibrating these influences is close to impossible, inevitably imprecise, and draining of good energy from the work of writing poetry.

But I am sure I am not alone in wanting my own work to be useful, to find a voice which speaks to people and communities beyond myself. I have seen my work overpraised by narrow-minded white critics who seem relieved that some of my references and formal choices are familiar to their own cultural milieu. I have seen my work criticized small-mindedly by more

than one black woman elder poets—the same poets I imagined would be pleased by it. Many audiences I read to are mostly segregated; I’ve been greeted with silences both appalled and appreciative by white audiences, been met with suspicious stares and raucous love by black audiences. I’ve been left out of anthologies and gatherings where I felt I should have been included and included where I felt like my work couldn’t possibly belong. I am most often surprised by who finds and appreciates my work, and for what reasons. I believe that poetry readers are largely eclectic and single-minded.

But the love that has meant the most, I have to say, has come from the black communities who I feel “get it” on myriad levels, who see what I am trying to do with words and with message, who see that, by speaking for myself in as true and articulate a voice as I can muster – regardless of what line I think that voices tows — perhaps my words might mean something for someone else. I do not seek their approval when I write, but it pleases me when it comes, to echo Hughes.

When students have asked me about the difficulties of writing poems that may reveal delicate family matters, I always tell them to write the poem and worry about who reads it later, to bring forth that which calls from within and separate that act from the matter of a poem’s public life. I do not consider it a betrayal of my muse to say there are a few poems that I might write but not attempt to publish (today) because I felt they would cause harm to that amorphous group called black people, poems that might perpetuate dangerous stereotypes if taken drastically out of context. How many African-Americans have modified what and where we say or do because we think it would reflect badly on “the race”? These considerations do not make us prudish. They do mean that there are familiar issues and degrees of self-censorship that we are faced with because of our history.

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What does all this have to do with In the Mecca? The book has taught me that none of us lives outside of historical moments or quotidian pressures and concerns. The historical challenge to understand context in which the elders of our tradition had to labor to make their voices heard is unusually pointed for black writers, and thinking about 1967, Brooks, and Hayden helps us do so.

Before the famous paragraph from “The Negro Writer and the Racial Mountain” that opens this essay, Hughes wrote something else that bears consideration. “An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly,” he wrote, “but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose.” Brooks never feared or shirked what she fervently believed was her responsibility; that sense of responsibility shaped her very aesthetic. Few poets walk with such integrity. Brooks’s career at this juncture reminds us that the matter of listening to the muse, of being utterly “free to choose,” is always interrupted by larger concerns that can at times come to constitute the muse’s voice. Whether those concerns are catalysts, straightjackets, or something in between is open to debate.

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¹ James C. Hall’s wonderful book Mercy, Mercy Me: African-American Culture and the American Sixties (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) offers a much more detailed account and analysis of the skirmishes at that conference. He points out that the poet Melvin Tolson was ironically the one who criticized Hayden most sharply, ironic because Tolson was Hayden’s age peer (rather than a member of a younger, presumably more rebellious generation) and was then and is still considered by many to be an esoteric poet whose work does not speak

directly to timely “black” concerns.

2. The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature, General eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977, p. 1498.
3. Robert Hayden, "How It Strikes a Contemporary": Reflections on Poetry and the Role of the Poet," in his Collected Prose. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1984, p. 9.
4. Gwendolyn Brooks, Report from Part One. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972, p. 86.
5. From "Annie Allen" in Annie Allen. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949.
6. Gates and McKay, 1271.
7. Gates and McKay, 1501.
8. Gwendolyn Brooks, A Street In Bronzeville. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishing, 1945, p. 2.
9. Gwendolyn Brooks, In the Mecca. New York: Harper & Row, 1968, p.12. All subsequent quotations will be made from this edition.
10. Robert Hayden, Words in the Mourning Time. New York: October Press, 1971.
11. Gwendolyn Brooks, Annie Allen. New York, Harper & Brothers, 1949, p.60.