Empowering Strategies at Home in the Works of
Nikki Giovanni and Rita Dove

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For Iris, Martín, and Thomas
The stars on my twig
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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the presence of Black women characters in domestic contexts in the early poetry of African American poets Nikki Giovanni and Rita Dove and examines the strategies these women employ, individually and in close relationships, in order to empower themselves and sustain those around them. It provides a joint exploration of the work of two major contemporary poets from a literary and interdisciplinary perspective, mapping instances of the poetic expression of Black feminist politics. The theoretical approach builds on a range of understandings of empowerment, strategy, and the central importance of home in an African American context, as conceptualized primarily in the work of Black feminists, in particular Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks. Structurally, the study follows the cycle of a woman’s life from girlhood to old age. Thus, poems involving the empowerment strategies of girls at home are explored first. They are followed by poems where the domestic lives of adult women and then elderly women are addressed, with a focus on their respective empowering strategies. Discussed last are strategies of empowerment evident in the interactions of (largely) Black women of different generations in poems depicting intergenerational contacts and relationships.

Homeplaces created by Black women have historically been experienced as sheltering African Americans from the perils of the dominant white society and thereby Black women’s domestic experiences have generally been linked to privilege rather than to confinement and victimization. In the poems, when at home, Black women utilize different strategies to assert themselves and each other, implicitly or explicitly, emerging strong and resilient, even though sometimes they may merely derive satisfaction from their poor circumstances. Strong connections to the past and a sense of belonging, partaking in legacies and storytelling, as well as memory,
imagination, dreaming and hiding, are recurring elements of their empowerment processes. However, their enjoyment of loving bonds and their sharing of African-derived knowledges and ways of being emerge as the most significant aspects contributing to their empowerment.

**Keywords**

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This thesis explores the empowering strategies present in primarily the poetry, but also some of the prose writings, of two contemporary African American poets, Nikki Giovanni and Rita Dove. In their work, these two poets highlight the female presence in areas traditionally considered “feminine,” such as the home and the family, as well as in settings outside the house. When Black female poetic characters inhabit domestic spaces and in the relationships they develop there, they often emerge defiant and empowered. The means by which these women empower themselves, and each other, and the forms in which this personal or collective empowerment materializes are, however, neither conventional, nor always obvious. The process of empowerment involves strategic choices and, unexpectedly, these might include the appropriation and exploitation of patriarchal ideas and structures.

Aims and Approach

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1 Throughout my text I capitalize the word “Black” when it refers to the culture, ethnicity, or people of the African diaspora, as in contrast to the lowercase “black” adjective for color. Nevertheless, I have retained the original spelling whenever the word is included in direct quotes of texts by others. See also William Wright’s *Black Intellectuals, Black Cognition, and a Black Aesthetic* (49) and Lori L. Tharps’ “The Case for Black with a capital B.”

2 With the terms patriarchy, patriarchal ideas, or patriarchal structures, I am denoting the systems, ideas or structures through which and in which men, and especially white men, have power.
My aim here is to identify and analyze strategies of empowerment\(^3\) that are employed by Black women\(^4\) in Giovanni’s and Dove’s texts, especially strategies that are defined in relation to, or are developed within a framework of domestic landscapes. I examine how these women make use of strategies that on the one hand are empowering to them, while on the other hand may also be subversive, insofar as they undermine social hierarchies, or traditional gender roles.

My approach involves the exploration of the domestic experiences of Black women, in their specific cultural circumstances, as these are depicted (primarily) in the poems of Giovanni and Dove. Commonplace domestic experiences are foundational for a majority of women, but domesticity has been perceived differently by white and Black feminists. In the field of literary studies, Black feminists have claimed the importance of the domestic sphere, while for white feminists the home is often seen as confining.\(^5\) So while mainstream feminist statements have been informed by the idea of escape from the entrapping domestic space, African American writers/intellectuals have focused on the house and women’s presence in its “private” spaces. This is where personal relations flourish; intimate domestic spaces constitute sites of everyday struggle and resistance rather than culturally marginal areas. For example, bell hooks notes the importance of the task of “making a home,” as a challenge Black women found they had to rise to:

Our mothers, unlike their white counterparts, had to try to make a home in the midst of a racist world that had already sealed our fate, an unequal world waiting to tell us we were inferior, not smart enough, unworthy of love. Against this backdrop where blackness was not lobed, our mothers had the task of making a home. As angels in the house they had to create a domestic

\(^3\) The term is conceptualized below, in the chapter entitled “Theoretical Framework.”

\(^4\) With Black women I usually mean the poetic characters in Giovanni’s and Dove’s works, but, in some cases, by extension, the term also involves real women. Many of the theorists I use conflate, in their texts, the category of real women with that of literary characters.

\(^5\) White feminist poets, like Adrienne Rich, for example, “told of the suffocation of traditional family life,” claiming “the waste of female talent” at home (Hayden 71).
world where resistance to racism was as much a part of the fabric of daily life as making beds and cooking meals. 
(Salvation 35)

For Black women then, the domestic sphere has been a space where feminine empowerment originates within the established (patriarchal) social order, a space of resistance and redefinition. In Black feminism, which informs my critical approach, Patricia Hill Collins highlights how a new consciousness is achieved through the affirmation and rearticulation of “a consciousness that quite often already exists;” it is a new consciousness that relies largely on the infusion of “new meanings” and utilizes the “everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge” of Black women. “[T]his rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African American women and stimulate resistance” (Black Feminist Thought 32).6

Affirmation and rearticulation function in a variety of ways, not all of which are arguably explicit. In this sense, the empowerment of Black women operates on shaky ground: instead of openly challenging the established order and inspiring resistance, their stance could appear as a passive acceptance of this order, or mere preservation and reinforcement of existing principles. Sustaining and nurturing each other, for example, falls within the realm of feminine care, which is traditionally expected from women, while these activities could also prove unexpectedly radical and subversive.

Historically, in the hostile social environments they inhabited, African American women developed numerous strategies of survival and resistance and have managed to prevail in the most adverse circumstances. It is of course relevant that, in African American communities, Black women have been respected for their caregiving status as mothers, othermothers, grandmothers, aunts, daughters, and sisters. In the aftermath of slavery, and as their labor was needed both in the house and outside it, Black women remained prominent and could exercise their authority beyond their households, crossing boundaries and reaching into the territories of communal work, taking their place in church, or in the arts, and sometimes in entertainment.

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6 Hereafter I use the abbreviation BFT for the 2nd edition of the work, which is the edition I generally use, while the 1st edition appears as BFT 1st ed.
Thus, strong women characters at home became broadly respected communal figures.

In literary works, much as in reality, the adoption of conventional female roles by Black women characters can be claimed to have been subversive in the sense that these roles increase and expand rather than stifle their strength, indicating valuable opportunities to transgress patriarchy by means of appropriating it. It is not unlikely that utterly domesticated women, like Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, emerge as powerful figures, centrally positioned and well appreciated in their communities rather than being, as would be expected, marginalized and powerless.

The poems of Giovanni and Dove are intriguing from the above perspectives because they present a variety of instances where Black female empowerment occurs, often quietly and in ordinary circumstances, in the domestic sphere and in the interpersonal connections developed there, which is nonetheless distinctly subversive and unsettles patriarchal structures. Admittedly, neither of the poets is a pronounced feminist figure and their work lacks clear feminist focus. Still, my analysis shows that there are unmistakable aspects of Black feminism in the poetic representation of conventional daily practices and domestic relationships of African American women.

**Scope, Delimitation, Principles for Selecting Primary Material**

In Giovanni’s and Dove’s poetry, homeplaces provide the structural setting for empowerment. In my analysis, I consider the ways in which the female poetic characters relate to their domestic milieus and how they appropriate them in empowering ways. I see strategies of empowerment as structured on a double assertion: the insistence on the part of the women to acknowledge activities usually seen as trivial and insignificant, and their inclination to identify and appreciate the positive effects of practices that are generally viewed as limiting. Another way of understanding this is seeing it as “an opportunity [created] out of a constraint,” as Barbara Christian puts it in a comment on Paule Marshall’s “Poets in the Kitchen” (*BFC* xiii). In
these poems, I find that the position of the female characters tends to be elevated by daily experience, through commitment to the human connection, in the performance of chores, through the care of the body and of children. Even leisure and daydreaming are honored as valid activities.

My critical approach is from a feminist perspective that acknowledges the specificity of the experience of Black women as doubly marginalized. Taking Collins’ ideas about empowerment as a point of departure, I explore the dimensions of Black women’s domestic life as exposed by Giovanni and Dove, a process which sometimes requires more general historical observations and commentary. My analysis of the literary material involves the use of a variety of works, including works of fiction and autobiographies, which are likely to contain personal views or subjective opinions of Black women, along with theoretical viewpoints. I include, for instance, statements from other African American writers, such as Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks, who refer to their personal experience of Black womanhood, rather than presenting their views directly in relation to literature. However, these constitute legitimate research material within Black feminism, according to Collins (BFT 32-33). Moreover, the literary texts are not seen in isolation; since both Giovanni and Dove have produced other kinds of texts along with their poetry, information provided there often helps to illuminate contexts and ideas in the poems. For example, both poets have written about houses/domestic spaces in essays, and their perspectives cannot be ignored here.

My analysis occurs on different levels and is rendered from various perspectives. The two writers’ lives and politics come into view via their expressed opinions, and provide in turn useful context for some of the poems. The ideological standpoints of Giovanni and Dove, as shaped by their personal experiences and expressed in their various poetic voices and themes, are the backdrop to the empowerment of their female poetic characters: domestic space and personal relationships are arguably choices on the part of the writers first, and thereafter become sources of inspiration and affirmation for these female figures. In a similar manner, the close reading of individual poems is enhanced through the consideration of relevant cultural and socio-historical issues specific to the Black individual
experience and Black communal life. The historical background, especially the role of slavery, segregation, and the Civil Rights movement constitute much more than a backdrop to the poems insofar as they have influenced the way Black women perceive and picture themselves and those around them on a fundamental level.

Paying closer attention to these poets’ selection of topics, and examining mainly, but not exclusively, texts that deal with domestic concerns and personal relationships, reveals instances of underlying feminist awareness. I explore poems where domesticity is accentuated, but also other poems that include occasional references to houses or include domestic scenes. While their individual subject matter focus is different, these poems arguably signal how important the domestic theme is. Consequently and more specifically, I map the range of concrete instances from daily life and the parts of women’s existence that have generally been ignored based on their ordinariness, and thus assumed triviality.

In terms of delimitation, my analysis leaves out elaborations on a number of Black issues that are not central to my argument. Psychological processes of self-defining and identity construction are one example. I am primarily interested in the empowerment that individual Black women achieve in what Collins would define as the communal context and tend to assume that self-affirmation precedes, or is a prerequisite to, the move towards more conscious cultural affirmation—a stage in which a kind of alternative feminist awareness is discernible. Moreover, I avoid dealing with blackness in terms of racial aesthetics as I am more concerned with how blackness affects African American women. Similarly, body image and sexuality, as well as the dynamics of romantic/heterosexual relationships with men, although mentioned in some poems, are also generally outside my scope. Regarding interpersonal connections, I avoid privileging the stereotypical mother-child relationship in particular; I view motherhood as part of a broader mothering/othermothering and kin tradition as prevalent within African American culture. Furthermore, the dynamics of work beyond housework as well as (non-literary) art, especially blues, although they occasionally relate to the domestic

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7 In both Giovanni's and Dove's work there is a traceable thematic shift towards personal matters over time.
sphere and influence close relationships, are not examined extensively because they do not constitute inherently domestic activities. Finally, since class issues are not foregrounded by the poets, a class perspective is not defining in my analysis of the poems.

Giovanni and Dove are contemporary writers who have written and published extensively and who continue to write. I primarily examine the early part of their work and secondarily their critical/autobiographical material, such as Giovanni’s *Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being a Black Poet* (1971) and *Racism 101* (1994) and Dove’s *The Poet’s World* (1995). Out of the published collections of the two poets, four works appear to have a parallel trajectory: *My House* (1972) and *The Women and the Men* (1975; with poems previously published privately in *Re: Creation*) by Giovanni, and *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980) and *Thomas and Beulah* (1986; awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1987) by Dove. With several poems thematically aligned to those in *Thomas and Beulah*, Dove’s *Museum* (1983) and *Grace Notes* (1989) are also of some relevance. These collections include the greatest concentration of poems about women’s domestic life, which constitutes the core of my research.

Notably, the abovementioned works appeared early in the writing careers of the two poets and roughly within a twenty-five-year period, from 1970, when the publication of *Black Feeling Black Talk/Black Judgement* (1970) signaled the beginning of Giovanni’s career, up to the time when Dove was serving as Poet Laureate of

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8 Class matters may be discernible throughout the work of the two poets, and in some poems poverty is central; but Giovanni and Dove do not generally engage in problematizing issues of class. Instead, they either focus on similarities that cut through class distinctions, or give expression to middle class perspectives.

9 With a couple of exceptions, Giovanni’s poetry for young children and her numerous shorter articles on various social issues remain in the background of my study and so do critical reviews by both Giovanni and Dove of other writers’ texts, including Dove’s weekly contributions to *The Washington Post* (Jan 2000-Jan 2002), their editorial works, and their recordings.

10 The first poems by Giovanni, *Black Feeling Black Talk* and *Black Judgment*, were published privately in 1968, and it was not until 1970 that they appeared together in one volume published by Morrow.
the United States (her term ended in 1995). By the mid-1990s both poets had produced a substantial body of work, including, I would argue, their most important poetry. In fact, both Giovanni and Dove started to look back at their lives as poets and started publishing collections of their earlier poems: Dove’s *Selected Poems* appeared in 1993 while *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni, 1968–1995* came in 1996. The poetry published after this period includes poems that thematically largely fall outside the scope of my study, as Black women’s domestic life is focused upon more rarely.

The Two Poets

The works of Giovanni and Dove exemplify the diversity of artistic attitudes and perspectives contained in African American poetry. Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems differ greatly at first glance, specifically in terms of language and style. At the risk of generalizing, one could claim that they constitute completely different kinds of poetry. The differences are traced in the poetic diction of the two poets’ verse whereby Giovanni’s poems are popular while Dove’s are more academic. These differences have ideological implications as well, which are due to the poets having been shaped differently in the political context they experienced at the beginning of their respective writing careers.

Civil Rights political activism had reached its height in the late 1960s, when Giovanni started publishing her work, and she came to be considered one of the most influential writers of the Black Arts Movement, along with Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Haki R.

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11 A notable event that took place near the end of this period was The Furious Flower Conference at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, in late September 1994, which was the first major convention of African American writers since the 60s. It was the inaugural conference of a series, followed by a second one in 2004 and a third, dedicated to Dove, in 2014.

12 The Black Arts Movement was formed in 1967 following a Fisk University conference. The Black Aesthetic is an umbrella term for a number of definitions of the movement’s position in relation to art in general and literature in particular: the motto “black is beautiful” is central, art is expected to concentrate on the Black cultural experience, and moving beyond aesthetics and individuality, it is to inspire
Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), and Sonia Sanchez (W. W. Cook 705). But the Black Arts Movement had lost its socio-political impact when Dove entered the literary scene, almost a decade later. Dove has spoken about a sense of “self-awareness,” “self-confidence” and “pride” that she felt while in college and recognized the value of not having to fight the battles of the previous generation (Taleb-Khyar 353) and not feeling obligated to serve “the Black cause” or “the female cause” (Taleb-Khyar 364). She has also stated that her generation of Black Americans “could take a sabbatical from their collective psyche and try to explore who [they] were on an individual basis” (354). Commonly, Dove is presumed to be an advocate for assimilation, writing in a high literary language, applying strict lyrical forms, and sometimes even using high culture references.13 In contrast, Giovanni is perceived as a separatist, writing in Black vernacular and keeping Black issues at the core of her work, though, at times, quite uncritical to racial essentialism.14

However, beyond the stylistic level, the poems of Giovanni and Dove share common aspects and similarities that can be traced especially in their thematic choices. They write about adolescence, adulthood, seduction and love, motherhood, old age and death, as well as travels, historical figures and events. This commonality is not surprising as the two poets share cultural experiences. Giovanni and Dove have a common cultural heritage, rather similar socio-economic backgrounds, and, being Black women, they share a double consciousness perspective. Although their worldviews differ,

social change. According to Ron Karenga, one of the main theorists of the movement, Black Art must be collective art and it should promote revolution (W. W. Cook 676). See, however, the discussion in this section of Evie Shockley’s reconsideration of the Black Aesthetic in Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry (2011).

13 Dove rewrites, for example, the Demeter and Persephone myth in Motherhood and the Oedipus saga in The Darker Face of the Earth, putting them in new settings and involving Black poetic characters.

14 Even in a larger literary context, Steffen traces a slow move away from Black Arts separatism, as exemplified in the poetry of Giovanni, towards assimilation, as detected in Dove’s work. Focusing on literary criticism, Steffen maps the transition to an acceptance of “a plurality of theoretical approaches,” developed by theorists like Houston A. Baker, Jr., Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Hazel Carby and bell hooks, whose critical standpoints appeared in significant publications from the early 1970s to the 1990s (Crossing Color 9-12).
especially the ways that they position themselves ideologically in relation to perceptions of blackness\textsuperscript{15}—their views present some similarities but are not consistently similar.

Giovanni’s rejection of the Black Aesthetic imperatives and her ideological deviation from Black Arts Movement, where her early poetry originated, resulted in a turn towards personal verse. Giovanni was initially very militant and her poems served the racial liberation cause in both theme and form, and constituted an emphatic example of the Black Aesthetic: “can you kill nigger / Huh?” (“The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro [For Peppe, Who Will Ultimately Judge Our Efforts]” in Black Feeling, Black Talk). Giovanni, however, saw that within the Black Arts Movement there had been “a tendency to look at the Black experience too narrowly” (\textit{Gemini} 106), and she gradually embraced the aesthetics more than the ideology of the movement (W. W. Cook 705). Consequently, she did not hesitate to focus on the personal; for her, explorations of personal experience were not inconsistent with explorations of blackness, a legitimate part of the mandate of the Black Arts Movement.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, while, according to the Black Aesthetic, poetry should avoid personal feeling and should function as collective art with a special purpose (W. W. Cook 676), Giovanni wrote about the love of oneself and Black love that she considered necessary for the Black community. “Nikki-Rosa” from \textit{Black Judgement} (BFBT 58-59), one of her early personal poems, celebrates the importance of this love: “Black love is Black wealth.” Nevertheless, even when she emphasized individuality, it was within the overall frame of blackness; her verse about love is distinctly about “Black” love, love for “people who look like us / who think like us / who want to love us” (“A Very Simple Wish” \textit{WM} np). In addition, while gender issues came to

\textsuperscript{15}My definition of blackness here includes people with darker skin pigmentation or people who identify themselves as Blacks, referring thus also to a mindset and cultural positioning that does not endow privilege within wider social settings. For a discussion of the different ways in which Giovanni and Dove view their blackness, and how it influences their work, see my paper “Black Aesthetic and Beyond: Aesthetics and Ideology in the Poetry of Nikki Giovanni and Rita Dove.”

\textsuperscript{16}According to Virginia C. Fowler, “[o]ne of the charges frequently made by Giovanni’s detractors is that, after she achieved success with her early volumes, she abandoned Black revolutionary concerns and wrote about personal issues only” (\textit{Nikki Giovanni} 27).
occupy more and more space in her work, they never became more essential than race for Giovanni, which is implied in how she chose to define herself: “I am a Black American poet. I am female” (*Racism* 181).

Dove, who emerged as a poet about a decade after Giovanni, remained uninfluenced by the Black Aesthetic and her verse bears testimony to her engagement, through explorations of individual fates, in a wide variety of cultural, geographic and historical areas. Dove’s attitude towards racial issues has been relaxed, which could be a result of her cosmopolitanism,17 but also reflects the changed socio-political climate in which she found herself writing: Dove experienced a “literary freedom” (Steffen, *Crossing Color* 9) that materialized in a preoccupation with matters beyond race, an interest in a large variety of themes. For Dove, the wider scope of her thematic choices does not involve a rejection of her African American identity. On the contrary, Dove points to the relevance of her experience and the (underlying) role it plays in her choice of themes while she also identifies some kind of ethical imperative to engage all aspects of her humanity toward representations of life “in all its complexities” (Lloyd 22). As Malin Pereira notes, Dove’s work moves beyond “the aesthetics and black cultural nationalism of the black arts movement, not blackness” (*Cosmopolitanism* 10).18 Dove has placed focus on the experience of individuals in particular circumstances and sought to promote the individuality of her poetic characters. As Lynn Keller observes, this puts Dove in line with other African American women poets who salvage the stories of their ancestry by “endowing those characters with the individualized, unstereotyped subjectivity denied them in white-dominated traditions” (104). And similarly to Giovanni, Dove has remarked that she sees herself firstly as “a poet,” then additionally a “black poet,” and a “woman poet” (Vendler, “Interview” 488).

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17 I am using the term in the same sense as Malin Pereira in *Rita Dove’s Cosmopolitanism* (2003). Pereira theorizes around the concept of “cosmopolitan,” while establishing her key claim, namely that Dove is a cosmopolitan when it comes to the poet’s “general attitude about her poetic identity and position in both the tradition and the contemporary period” (4).

18 Dove’s standpoints have gradually changed and her early lax take on race politics has shifted towards a more polemical stance. I discuss these changes in my paper “Aesthetics versus Politics in American Poetry: The Implications of the Helen Vendler versus Rita Dove Controversy.”
However, how Giovanni is situated in relation to the Black Arts Movement is currently under revision in connection to recent reexaminations of the movement’s Black Aesthetic imperatives and the implications these have had for the inclusion, or neglect, of the work of different poets. Looking at the literary culture in which the movement’s poets operated, which includes the format, material production, and distribution of Black poetic texts as well as its broader cultural history setting, Howard Ramsby notes that Giovanni was almost unique in achieving popularity and national acclaim, appealing to diverse audiences and with her poetry still in print. Obviously, the little critical attention Giovanni received is at odds with her iconic status. Ramsby highlights the poet’s “striking independence,” that she distanced herself from the “most visible political groups and grassroots organizations” of the movement and even collaborated with a mainstream publisher, along with views that her verse did not reach up to “certain criteria of literary sophistication” as contributing to her being relegated to “the margins of academic discourse” (8).

Nevertheless, Keith Leonard sees Giovanni among those “peripheral to the movement’s urban centers” who contributed to transforming “the narrow, closed, and divisive masculinist Black Nationalist subject into a more bohemian, open-ended and inclusive version predicated on intimacy rather than on masculinized self-assertion” (620).

Similarly, engaging in a reconfiguration of familiar understandings of the Black Aesthetic, Evie Shockley suggests that perhaps Giovanni’s lesser critical acclaim was due to the strong (divisive) critical lens of the Black Arts Movement and that this may have come in the way of Giovanni and Dove being viewed as aligned enough to be considered together—something which has not happened, as I discuss in the next section. Shockley accounts for the evolution of African American poetic expression in the last century, pointing to the restrictions of the movement especially regarding poets being expected to “draw solely upon African and African American speech, music, folklore, and history for subject matter” (5). She also problematizes the masculinizing theorizing that characterized the movement, calling instead attention to the contested nature and the plurality of its aesthetics since as early as the mid-60s and the importance of the subjectivity of African American poets, adding that the interconnectedness between aesthetics and politics in African
American poetry has never ceased to matter. Within the parameters of a more fluid conceptualization of Black Aesthetics (196), involving the definition of the poet’s subjectivity as “the subjectivity produced by the experience of identifying or being interpolated as ‘black’ in the U.S.—actively working out a poetics in the context of a racist society” (9) and a broadening of the poetic spectrum to accommodate complexity and nuances, the work of Giovanni and Dove may indeed appear closer to one another.

What unites the two poets meaningfully in the perspective of my approach is that having renounced prescriptions and ignored imperatives about how to write under different circumstances, they both made thematic choices that involved manifestations of the personhood of Black women at home. Ignoring the Black Arts mandate, Giovanni has foregrounded the intimacies of private life and concerns that would be seen as irrelevant, uninteresting, or improper in a collective Black perspective. Dove, acknowledging the hybridity of her cultural heritage, has navigated a broad field of poetic themes, and explored the individuality and humanity of Black people and people in other cultural contexts. Dove has always stressed the importance of the personal as “ultimately what is most important to us,” and has noted that the personal and the political are not separated by any kind of line, but merge (Lloyd 1). This is certainly a position that applies for Giovanni as well.

The attention Giovanni and Dove pay to the personal is significant from a Black feminist perspective. The foregrounding of the lives of Black female poetic characters at home and portrayals of commonplace routines and encounters reveal instances where, often contrary to appearances, these women find ways to empower themselves and each other. In general, poetry is expected to be intimate. In the context of blackness, the personal, however, proves subversive and by extension political.

**Previous Scholarship**

Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems have been highly anthologized throughout their writing careers and attracted the attention of scholars.
However, the analysis of texts by Giovanni and Dove in juxtaposition has not been done. The poems of Giovanni and Dove have nonetheless regularly appeared in the same anthologies, especially since the mid-90s, and information about the poets and their work can nowadays be found side by side in several anthologies and on numerous literary websites. In Ekaterini Georgoudaki’s *Race, Gender, and Class Perspectives* (1991), for example, Giovanni and Dove are among the five African American poets whose work is examined, while in Michael R. Strickland’s *African-American Poets* (1996), they are two of the ten “outstanding” African American poets introduced. More recently, Giovanni and Dove were among a handful of writers/poets who gathered to celebrate Toni Morrison at the Furious Flower Poetry Center (2013). Still, the two poets have hardly ever been paired and critically examined. To my knowledge, with the exception of a short, largely descriptive paper by Jennifer Walters (2000), titled “Nikki Giovanni and Rita Dove: Poets Redefining” which focuses mainly on biographical elements, no particular critical attention has been paid to the texts of Giovanni and Dove in combination.\(^\text{19}\)

There are, of course, numerous all-inclusive encyclopedia entries on the work of these two poets as well as tree monographs on each, which will be discussed below. There are also a few dissertations where the poetry of either Giovanni or Dove is considered from various perspectives and within different disciplines, usually along with the work of other writers/poets.


\(^{19}\) Curiously, a photograph of Giovanni appeared on Facebook on Nov. 30, 2016, and was followed by one of Dove later on the same day. Both poets had been photographed (two days earlier and only a few hours apart) by B A. Van Sise, as a part of his (work in progress) project on “America’s most notable poets.” In a private communication, Van Sise mentioned that Giovanni has a poem about Dove in her coming poetry volume (Van Sise).
Giovanni’s evolution as a poet in the first part of her writing career. In *Nikki Giovanni* (1992), Fowler provides, through close readings, a survey of Giovanni’s poetry, taking into account biographical information as well as an exploration of the musical and socio-political influences that shaped her poetry. Giovanni’s universality is focused on but also the orality of her verse. In the most recent *Nikki Giovanni: A Literary Biography* (2013), Fowler again examines Giovanni’s poetry through a biographical perspective including information she has retrieved from speaking with the poet’s friends and relatives. Two chapters from Fowler’s biography on Giovanni are pertinent to my approach; the one is on grandmothers, the other on the kitchen. In “To ‘Be Warm all the Time’ the Importance of Grandmothers,” Fowler claims that all grandmother figures in Giovanni’s work are based on her own maternal grandmother (21) but she does not examine any of these figures; she focuses on Giovanni’s essays instead. “Running the Kitchen, Standing the Heat,” the essay’s title is inspired by a line in Giovanni’s poem “My House” and highlights the domestic. According to Fowler, Giovanni acknowledges the kitchen as a central space, as is the family room, but also the garage (182).

Two other works that deserve to be mentioned are *Nikki Giovanni in the Classroom* (1999) by Carol Jago and *Nikki Giovanni, Poet of the People* (2000) by Judith Pinkerton Josephson. The first is a practical text helpful to teachers, or students, an introduction to Giovanni’s poetry, while the second is a biography addressing young readers.

Additionally there are a few dissertations, two or three of which were published as books before 1985. These works focus on Giovanni as a Black Arts poet, or her impact as a woman poet, her poetry in an Appalachian perspective, her humor, spiritual influences, and resistance via the erotic. Two dissertations deal with grandparents/grandmothers and the communication of spiritual values by grandmothers and othermothers, but they are written in the fields of education and theology. These scholarly works, however, give validity to some of my own perspectives concerning the importance of the elderly and the transmission of knowledge from the old to the young in Giovanni’s poetry. However, I have not found them to have any
concrete relevance to my analysis of female empowerment, which is why I have opted not to list them here.

Regarding Dove, Helen Vendler drew attention to Dove’s early work in *The Given and the Made: Recent American Poets* (1995) and *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* (1995). However, Vendler’s analysis is marked with controversy, particularly because she found Dove’s literary strengths to be linked to what she saw as an absence of attention to race in Dove’s poems. Vendler has more recently severely criticized Dove for her editorial work on *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century American Poetry* (2011), and her consistently problematic recent arguments solidify her early introduction of Dove as controversial. In my analysis, I have used Vendler’s views to enlarge the context of my critical inquiry.

In addition, there are three monographs on Dove’s work, where her poetry is discussed extensively, a collection of interviews by the poet, as well as a special issue of *Callaloo* (vol. 31:3 Summer 2008). The monographs are *Crossing Color: Transcultural Space and Place in Rita Dove’s Poetry Fiction and Drama* (2001) by Therese Steffen, *Cosmopolitanism* (2003) by Malin Pereira, and *Understanding Rita Dove* (2006) by Pat Righelato. Steffen’s and Pereira’s approaches are rather similar. Both highlight Dove’s crossing cultural boundaries; the difference is that Steffen covers a broader spectrum of Dove’s poetry while Pereira focuses on the poet’s development from work to work. Righelato’s book lacks a specific argumentative line and approaches the poetry collections according to their thematic and stylistic features. Righelato’s readings involve cultural and historical information and tend to apply a gender perspective. The volume of interviews by Dove, *Conversations with Rita Dove* (2003), was edited by Earl G. Ingersoll and includes interviews from the period 1985-2002, which, like in Giovanni’s case, cover the early stages of the poet’s career.

Overall, there is more published research on Dove than on Giovanni, including dissertations and articles. Dove’s transcendence of race, her aesthetics, her poetic language/rhetoric, her revisiting and revising/rewriting classic myths, her poetry as social discourse, her interest in history and autobiography, music, dance, and spirituality

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20 This is perhaps because Dove is considered more of an academic poet in contrast to Giovanni who is more popular due to her accessible vernacular style.
have been focused upon. The critical focus of the dissertations written on Dove’s work is quite different to that of my study. Of the published articles and book chapters, some offer analyses that are relevant, though their perspectives usually differ. In *The Poetics of Enclosure: American Women Poets from Dickinson to Dove* (2002) by Lesley Wheeler, for example, there is a chapter on Dove entitled “The House Expands.” Wheeler examines some of Dove’s poems that are of interest to the themes I deal with. Although she notes Dove’s ambivalence towards the house, Wheeler’s claim is rather that the image of the house represents enclosure. In the short essay “The Yellow House on the Corner and Beyond: Rita Dove on the edge of Domesticity,” in *Power and Possibility: Essays, Reviews, and Interviews* (2007), Elisabeth Alexander examines Dove’s first three poetry collections. Domestic spaces in relation to the women who inhabit them are discussed and Alexander traces the movement to the outside as enabled by a poetic character’s mind. However, to my knowledge, none of the critical works on Dove focuses on empowerment when considering specific poems.

In a broader perspective, the aspects I examine in my thesis, namely the operation of strategies of empowerment in domestic contexts, have not been dealt with in relation to contemporary American women’s poetry or African American poetry. While discussions of empowerment take place within other disciplines and (everyday) resistance is often focused on within feminism and in Black studies, they are often policy related. Some of these theoretical viewpoints are of interest to my critical approach and I consider them in my “Theoretical Framework” chapter below.

Regarding the house and women’s experience of domesticity, there have been several works discussing them in specific cultural and historical locations and in diverse literatures, including African American literature and Southern literature. For example, scholars like Amy Kaplan, Jane Tompkins, and Mary Ryan have extensively focused on American domesticity in the texts of 19th-century women. Additionally, there are critical texts on domestic life and work in, for example, the literature of British, Indian, and New Zealand women writers, while in contemporary American literature there are studies on Chicana and African American women’s domesticity. Some of the
works that provide context for my analysis are presented in the chapter “Theoretical Framework.”

A number of volumes include approaches to domestic spaces and housework from different viewpoints. Combining materialist feminism and theories of race, Christina Hunter Felix’ approach in *Domesticity, Home and the Culture of the Everyday in four American Twentieth-century Novels* (1995), where she examines, among others, Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, suggests that the home is a site that is subversive and contains possibilities for creativity, resistance, and celebration. In *The Broom Closet: Secret Meanings of Domesticity in Postfeminist Novels* by Louise Erdrich, Mary Gordon, Toni Morrison, Marge Piercy, Jane Smiley, and Amy Tan (1999), Jeannette Batz Cooperman discusses domestic work and homemaking in the texts of contemporary American women authors. Constante González Groba explores domesticity, particularly in Southern literature, including Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1932) and Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” (1973), in *On their own Premises: Southern Women Writers and the Homeplace* (2008, in Spanish). He identifies prisonlike homes where women lack self-determination, but also claims some homeplaces provide room for self-affirmation and communion among women. Still, he argues for similarities in the perception of home by women in different eras and circumstances, which, in my view, would unavoidably involve an oversimplification of the historic features of female experience. In *Burning Down the House: Home in African American Literature* (2005) Valerie Sweeney Prince deals with the home via what she calls the blues matrix in classical African American novels, examining Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975). Another volume about domesticity in literary texts is *Stirring the Pot: The Kitchen and Domesticity in the Fiction of Southern Women* (2008) by Laura Sloan Patterson, where the chapter “‘No Place Like and No Place but Home:’ Domestic Resistance in Toni Morrison’s Paradise, Jazz and Love” again discusses Morrison’s texts. Another similar study is “Representations of Space in Toni Morrison’s Love, Paradise and A Mercy” (2011), an MA thesis by Bethan Court, where home is instead linked to healing.

The only text where I have seen domesticity partially linked to empowerment (and also partly linked to oppression) is an MA thesis
entitled “The Representation of Domesticity in Z. N. Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God* and A Walker’s *The Color Purple*” (2012) by Ghada Sari. Sari sees two kinds of women in domestic spaces, those who are obedient or submissive and those who are reactive. The docile women Sari examines develop and seek their independence. Sari thus traces domesticity as oppressive but also as a means to empowerment and finally a state to be celebrated. My perspectives obviously intersect with Sari’s. However, my emphasis is more on concrete ways to empowerment rather than women’s submissive or reactive status.²¹

Lastly, useful explorations of the meanings of different parts of the house, such as the kitchen and the porch, for example, in an African American or broader context, can sometimes be found in works from other disciplines. *Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture* (2001) by Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon is one such work theorizing the porch in a (Southern) cultural perspective that informs my critical approach.

**Chapter Outline**

In the first chapter “Theoretical Framework: Black Women at Home, the Locus of Contradiction and the Articulation of New Knowledge,” I present the theoretical field within which my research lies and provide definitions of terms. I outline the evolution of Black feminism and discuss Black feminist thought, the critical perspective I employ in my analysis, as theorized by Collins. I also discuss the concepts “strategy of empowerment” and domesticity, which are at the core of my approach and explore the meaning(s) of house and home in an African American context. The meanings of home for Black women is central to my argument and I examine these meanings. I pursue the idea that for Black women the notion of home as a private (safe) space has been shifting, as have the understandings about what home represents in general, especially in contrast to what is perceived as

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²¹ Sari’s text has not been published in full length and I have examined the part that is available.
public space (again in an African American context). The house is important for Black women in a different way than for white women. Instead of being viewed as a place of confinement, it is often a privileged setting where the recognition of domestic creativity offers self-affirmation and leads to empowerment. I consider the roles Black women have had within the domestic sphere and in their surrounding African American community and discuss how they relate to domestic space as well as how they exploit it to discover or re-discover strategies of empowerment.

The second chapter, “Domestic Spaces in Nikki Giovanni and Rita Dove,” includes an exploration of how Giovanni and Dove perceive domestic spaces. More specifically, it deals with the liminality of houses in the works of the two poets. By exploring different kinds of “houses,” historically or geographically, Giovanni and Dove manage to blur the limits of the house, which has commonly been considered a “sheltered ‘feminine’ space” (Askeland 786) and has consequently been associated with women’s alleged inferiority. The two poets affirm rather than dismiss the importance of the domestic sphere and its domestic responsibilities. They celebrate, for instance, rather than hope to escape the kitchen, by highlighting how the cooking that takes place there is culturally vital. To them, the house, instead of symbolizing female exclusion, subjugation, victimization, or exploitation, becomes a field of resistance, a space of self-acknowledgement, or a site where Black women claim positions of authority.

In the third chapter, “Everyday and Imagined: Empowered Girlhood at Home,” I explore the experience of growing up and the sexual maturing of girls and adolescents who still inhabit the homes of their parents/grandparents and measure their domestic existence and their aspirations against the experience of adult women around them. Enjoying largely sheltered lives, even though their homes might lack in material assets, these girls are allowed to partake in the commonplace pleasures of childhood and adolescence. They engage in solitude or daydreams, build alliances with peers, or communicate with inspirational older women. Their lives are idyllic, but when the realities of adulthood begin to catch up with them, they find ways to prevail and emerge empowered in their circumstances.
In “Survival and Empowerment of Adult Women at Home,” the fourth chapter, I view empowerment as linked to survival. As the circumstances of adult women are already set, they strive for ways to enjoy them, or accept them, or perhaps they imagine escaping them. Their strategies of empowerment are similar to those used by girls, namely hiding, or daydreaming, or communicating with other women, or remembering; the difference is that adult women cannot simply evade their lived realities and their responsibilities. Instead, they resist their situation by taking control of whichever aspect of their lives they can. They also seek to adjust their attitudes and endure often mundane routines trying to elicit from them eventual rewards. Above all, they generally exhibit an awareness of their state and their role in relation to others as well as show an ability to transcend the limiting, or less rewarding, parts of their experience.

In the fifth chapter, “Ancestral Figures: Empowered Elderly Women at Home,” I examine the presence of mature women in the domestic sphere, sometimes withdrawn and comfortable among their possessions, yet sometimes dynamic and communicating essential ways of being. These women are links to the past and, via memory, to the experience of slavery. They thus provide sources of ancestral wisdom and inspiration for younger women.

In the sixth chapter, “Inspiring Ancestors, Strategic Communications,” I focus on the connection between the old and the young, mainly through the influential role older women have in relation to the younger women around them. The ostensibly unimportant lives of elderly women, in mundane interiors and domesticized neighborhoods, often emerge as an invaluable source of alternative definitions and perspectives, which have an affirmative and empowering function. However, the old do not always have an impact on the young; there are poems where the elderly are instead on the receiving end of insights offered by the changing times younger women and girls experience.

The age division in my chapters is employed to facilitate the structure of my thesis and is thereby not meant to provide absolute boundaries between childhood and youth, youth and adulthood, and adulthood and old age. In fact, the stages of life these chapters are meant to cover are likely to overlap. For example, it is difficult to decide when an adolescent girl is a woman, if, as Dove’s grandmother,
Beulah, is engaged to be married early, or, an older woman relative might be viewed as inspiring while she is not old enough to be counted among the elderly. Nevertheless, I find the organization of the poems into thematic categories related to age groups useful, specifically because it enables an analysis of women’s lives through the consequent changes in female experience.

Lastly, in my conclusion, “Implicit Knowledges and the Difference Love Makes” I consider the empowerment of Black women in the light of two elements which emerge in my analysis of Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems, namely the implicit knowledges Black women share and the loving relationships they partake in. The subversive in Black women’s strategies of empowerment involves, I believe, the employment of subtle and non-mainstream ways of knowing as well as the gratification received from experiencing love.22

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22 According to Martha Nussbaum, “[Love] is no one thing at all, but a complex way of being with another person, a deliberate yielding to uncontrollable influences. There are no necessary and sufficient conditions, and no certainty” (quoted in Leonard 620).
In this chapter, I give the theoretical framework of my study. My approach involves the presentation of relevant theoretical perspectives as well as sketching the historical context pertaining to the key ideas of my analysis. As an introductory note, I should mention that my theorization of concepts like “strategy” and “empowerment” has been entrenched in scholarly work from fields other than the literary since straightforward applications of these ideas in literature do not exist. Important to note is also how understandings of “home” and “domesticity” in an African American context are inherently dynamic and in flux and, accordingly, the definitions of the corresponding concepts are fluid. I wish to claim the ambiguity of these terms along with the fluidity of the ideas they (are meant to) signify and the tensions that may ensue as useful and strengthening to my argumentation as they offer spaces/margins for subversion.

Black Feminist Criticism, “Black Feminist Thought”

Black feminism, with its emphasis on race as experienced in African American contexts, provides a fitting theoretical framework for the examination of the portrayal of Black women in literature. Ultimately, Black feminist criticism resists a unified definition but a short historical overview may help to map some of its most distinctive characteristics. Following this overview, I elaborate on some of the theoretical viewpoints of Patricia Hill Collins due to their particular
relevance to my thesis; Collins is the scholar who has specifically theorized Black female empowerment.

“Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” an essay penned by Barbara Smith in 1977, is thought to have signaled the beginning of Black feminist literary criticism/theory writing (Roberts 532). Smith called for a “viable, autonomous Black feminist movement” to open needed space where “the exploration of Black women’s lives and the creation of consciously Black woman-identified art” (158) could take place. As the founder of Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press (1980), Smith then edited major works featuring Black women’s writings, among others *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (1982) and *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983).

In 1980, Deborah E. McDowell noted the exclusion of Black women writers in the critical works by white women scholars and Black male scholars in her “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism” (153). McDowell located the rise of Black feminist criticism in the recognition by Black women that the experiences of white men and women and Black men were considered “normative,” whereas their own experiences were viewed as “deviant;” but she admitted that there is “no concrete definition” of Black feminist criticism (154). She proceeded to review Smith’s work, from her own perspective as an aesthetics-oriented scholar and an advocate of “rigorous textual analysis” (156), who doubted the overall feasibility, or use of mixing feminist aesthetics with political activism (155). Instead, McDowell advocated contextual approaches to Black women’s literature (156), naming the identification of “thematic and imagistic commonalities” as one of the “most urgent tasks” of Black feminist critics (157). Suggesting the centrality of Black women’s literature in order to move towards the articulation of a “Black feminist aesthetic” she noted the imperative for Black feminist critics to engage in the specificity of Black women writers’ language to describe how they “employ literary devices in a distinct way” and how they “create their own mythic structures” (158).

McDowell’s hybrid style, combining broad realist and imagist perspectives, was followed by Hazel Carby’s more historically oriented approach. In *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), Carby addressed the
manner in which Black women intellectuals made “political as well as literary interventions in the social formations in which they lived” (7), which followed a literary history outlook and focused on the transformation of dominant womanhood ideologies. Carby resisted the notion of “American sisterhood” (6) as connecting Black and white women, but was also critical of what she saw as Smith’s essentialism and claim of a common language and experiences among Black women. Black feminist criticism was now to be “regarded critically as a problem and not a solution, as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradiction” (15). Carby problematized the reduction of Black feminist criticism to “an experiential relationship” existing among Black women as critics and writers representing “Black women’s reality” (16) and called for a historically specific analysis of race, class, and gender as integral to the theorization of Black women’s experiences (17-19).

Barbara Christian, whose “The Race for Theory” first appeared in Cultural Critique 6 (Spring 1987), argued that it is “presumptuous . . . to invent a theory of how we ought to read” and advocated reading “the works of our writers in our various ways and remain[ing] open to the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race, and gender in the literature” (276). In other words, Christian drew attention to the interlocking qualities of several characteristic aspects of Black literature by women and favored the individual perspective of Black women critics, as well as a plurality of methods generated by these critics’ personal experience.²³

Patricia Hill Collins’ Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment (1991 and 2000), follows, I would argue, the direction of both Christian and Carby. Even though Collins’ background is in the social sciences (and her text is at times policy-oriented), she remains an acclaimed scholar in the field of Black feminist literary studies, mainly due to the contribution she made with her extensive theorizing on what she calls Black feminist thought.²⁴ Like Carby, Collins acknowledges that

²³ Christian’s work was criticized by Carby and her contribution was belittled. However, Christian’s approach was quite ahead of her time; her landmark essay is still relevant in discussions of intersectionality (Nash 463, May 20).

²⁴ For an insightful discussion of the difference between theory and thought and the merits of moving from theory to thought, see Nash 461-463.
Black feminist thought contains diverse and often contradictory meanings (BFT 21); nevertheless, in 1991, she attempted to define it, or at least frame it as a theoretical concept:

Black feminist thought consists of theories or specialized thought produced by African-American women intellectuals designed to express a Black women’s standpoint. The dimensions of this standpoint include the presence of characteristic core themes, the diversity of Black women’s experience in encountering these core themes, the varying expressions of Black women’s Afrocenric feminist consciousness regarding the core themes and their experiences with them, and the interdependence of Black women’s experiences, consciousness and actions. This specialized thought should aim to infuse Black women’s experiences and everyday thought with new meaning by rearticulating the interdependence of Black women’s experiences and consciousness. (BFT 1st ed. 32)²⁵

The core themes here are “a legacy of struggle,” “the interlocking nature of race, gender and class oppression,” the need to replace degraded images of Black women with “self-defined images,” the (political) activism of Black women, and sexual politics (BFT 1st ed. 22-23). Additional core themes include work, family, and motherhood (BFT 251).

Putting Black feminist thought in a sociohistorical perspective, Collins connects the historical presence of African American women in the U.S to their lived everyday realities, claiming that they yield new knowledge. She links this knowledge to individual and collective empowerment, activism and, in a larger perspective, social change. Collins speaks of “African-derived ideas,” which since slavery have been foundational of “the rules of a distinctive Black American civil society” and which later, with the ghettoization and urbanization of African Americans, contributed to solidifying “a distinctive ethos” in

²⁵ While this definition is missing from the revised 2nd edition of the volume, it is reprinted broadly elsewhere, for example in Nicholson (1997), Moxley Rouse (2004), Castañeda and Campbell (2006), McCann and Kim (2013), and remains relevant today.
Black civil society, regarding language and religion, as well as family and community. She notes that these “Black oppositional knowledges” were both hidden from the whites and suppressed by them and “remained subjugated.” She also emphasizes the contribution of women in the construction and reconstruction of these knowledges in their mother/othermother, teacher and churchwomen roles in Black rural and urban communities, since their ideas “about the meaning of Black womanhood” were based on their “lived experiences.” Expressed collectively, Black women’s own definitions allowed them to “refashion African-influenced conceptions of self and community;” consequently, the involvement of Black women in shaping African American culture “fostered distinctively Black and women-centered worldviews” (BFT 10).

A distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought, according to Collins, is the contribution of Black women intellectuals, who, with their specialized knowledge, join the larger group of Black women and their knowledges in a “dialogical” relationship. Thus, knowledge may be of two types, which are “interdependent.” On the one hand, there is the “commonplace, taken-for-granted knowledge” shared in Black women’s everyday lives, which is based on ideas they partake in “on an informal, daily basis” regarding, for example, hair styling, the qualities of “good” Black men, as well as “strategies for dealing with White folk, and skills of how to ‘get over.’” On the other hand, there is the knowledge produced by emerging Black women “experts or specialists,” whose theories “facilitate the expression of a Black woman’s standpoint.” As a result, in Collins’ view, Black feminist thought expresses the “taken-for-granted knowledge” of African American women but it may simultaneously transform their consciousness and in effect change them (BFT 33-34).

Within Black feminist thought, Collins’ approach is quite straightforward. She examines different parts of Black women’s lives, addressing their oppression as well as their struggle and empowerment; but her approach also involves the reinforcement of personal perspectives of Black women intellectuals. Along with

26 Regarding Black women’s efforts for self-definition, Collins speaks further of a “knowledge of self” which is constructed and originates in “the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black women’s survival” (BFT 100).
family, she explores the dynamics governing motherhood, sexuality, personal relationships, community engagement, and work and offers examples either from real life or from literature that illustrate the resilience of Black women in dire circumstances, mapping how they manage to resist, assert themselves, and prevail in different spheres.  
Throughout, Collins draws upon the texts of activist theorists like Audre Lorde and bell hooks, who write from very specific, often autobiographical, viewpoints, establishing the legitimacy of using the specificity of personal experience as a critical standpoint. Similarly, in her theorization of empowerment, which I discuss below, Collins refers also to the views of Giovanni.  

Collins argues that Black feminist thought is important as a critical theory, especially as it operates on two levels, shedding light on the lives of Black women and on the broader social contexts they inhabit. Analytical focus on the specific experiences of women provides “fresh insights on the prevailing concepts, paradigms, and epistemologies of this worldview and on its Feminist and Afrocentric critiques” (BFT 1st ed. 10). As an example, Collins points out that Black women’s experiences in the U.S. have defied the understanding of “work in the public sphere [as] juxtaposed to family obligations in the private sphere” rendering these categories meaningless (BFT 228). The analysis of the position of women in the Black family not only offers information about their experience, but also exposes the prevailing definition of the concept “family” as insufficient, or restrictive (BFT 1st ed. 223). Furthermore, in the case of Black women, “unofficial, private and seemingly invisible spheres of social life and organization” may be equally important to “public, official, visible political activity” (BFT 202). After all, the activism of Black women within their families is inseparable from their community activism as othermothers, as the wider Black community is often perceived as “family” (BFT 210). These insights of course complicate

27 Collins makes analytical references to Maud Martha, Gwendolyn Brooks’ character from the novel with the same title (1953), see (BFT 92, 118, 198).
28 Giovanni is more of an activist theorist than Dove, in my view. However, following the controversy surrounding the publication of her edited anthology The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century American Poetry (2011), Dove has become more outspoken, if only within the field of literary studies.
the distinction between the private and the public as separate spheres, as I suggest in my discussion of the domestic below.

Collins asserts that taking into account race, class, gender, and sexuality as “mutually constructing systems of oppression” and using what she calls “intersectional paradigms” yield understandings regarding the links between knowledge and empowerment (BFT 227, 286). Via the “paradigm of intersecting oppressions” as well as women’s “agency” within them, Black feminist thought “reconceptualises the social relations of domination and resistance” and, moreover, contributes epistemologically to the discussion regarding “the power dynamics that underlie what counts as knowledge” (BFT 229, 273). The new knowledge generated by Black women contains subversive elements in that it operates as a departure from the concrete and the particular (their lived experience) towards the universal, rather than the other way round. Subordinate groups can be empowered by “new knowledge” about their experiences and even more so when they partake in “new ways of knowing” which enable them to define their reality themselves (BFT 1st ed. 222).

Collins’ theorization of Black feminist thought informs my own critical approach, most specifically with regard to the emphasis on “everyday lived experience” (BFT 275) along with the suggestion that there are sources and strategies of empowerment rooted in alternative definitions of power, and which challenge established forms of power relations. Due to their suppression in larger social contexts with their “White-male-controlled institutions,” Black women’s ideas have been channeled where they could manifest themselves, namely in music and literature, but, significantly, also in “daily conversations, and everyday behaviour” which came to constitute “important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness” (BFT 251-252). The

29 “Intersectional paradigms” in particular give rise to alternative interpretations of the experiences of Black women and show “how domination is organized” (BFT 227). Collins was one of the first scholars to use the term intersectional, solidifying the importance of the theory of intersectionality as launched by legal studies scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 (U of Chicago Legal Forum 138–167).

30 Collins sees Black feminist thought as “subjugated knowledge” (BFT 251), the knowledge of a subordinate group, explaining that because authority was denied to Black women, they created and validated knowledge via alternative processes (BFT 252, 254).
latter of these “locations” are at the core of my approach while the former figure peripherally. Ultimately, locating and examining the “alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge” that have been used by subordinated Black women (BFT 252) is the main aim of my thesis.

Strategies of Empowerment

In my use of the phrase “strategies of empowerment,” I am alluding to the multiple ways that Black women realize their own strengths and abilities and reaffirm themselves, revise existing definitions of their role and act against patriarchy. The term is used by Collins (and Giovanni) in a variety of ways in different contexts with broad implications. Regarding Black women, strategy and empowerment are generally linked (as are resistance and empowerment). In my discussion of these terms, although I explore each part of the concept separately, the aim of strategy is usually empowerment, and empowerment is achieved via strategies.

Empowered ways of being (behaviors, attitudes, and actions) and empowering insights are sometimes described without the mention of the word strategy. For example, Giovanni lists an array of strategic actions Black Americans have used in dire circumstances:

If we can’t drive, we will invent walks and the world will envy the dexterity of our feet. If we can’t have ham, we will boil chitterlings; if we are given rotten peaches, we will make cobblers; if given scraps, we will make quilts; take away our drums, and we will clap our hands. We prove the human spirit will prevail. We will take what we have to make what we need. We need confidence in our knowledge of who we are. (Racism 154-155)

Giovanni shows here that Black people have not simply accepted the limitations in their lives. Instead, they found ways to surpass them creatively, finding in the process pride and belonging.
Similarly, Collins accounts for the core strategy of Black women’s activism without identifying it as a strategy. To ensure group survival, she notes, women strive to “create Black female spheres of influence within existing social structures. This dimension may not directly challenge oppressive structures because, in many cases, direct confrontation is neither preferred nor possible.” If, in other words, social structures that often exclude or victimize them are what Black women “have,” instead of acting openly rebellious and confrontational, they try to reach what they “need,” namely to survive, by remaining within and navigating these structures to their advantage. The “spheres of influence” that they create within the broader social texture function in terms of “resist[ing] oppressive structures by undermining them” (BFT 204), and they arguably manifest a strategic approach. Collins talks about the “crafting of political strategies” on a subsequent stage in relation to Black women’s spheres of influence, but does not see the very creation of these spheres as strategic (BFT 204) as I do.

*Black Feminist Thought* is speckled with examples of covert or otherwise non-conventional ways Black women choose to behave in order to resist or survive through circumvention, but which are not defined as outright strategies. Collins notes how a domestic worker “wryly announces, ‘if they tell me something and I know I ain’t going to do it, I don’t tell them. I just go on and don’t do it’” (BFT 98); or, how women, in the safe spaces among them, “resist by creating their own self-definitions and self-valuations” sustaining “an independent consciousness as a sphere of freedom,” while they simultaneously “pretend to be mules and mammies” (BFT 205). She also describes how domestic workers conserve and rely on an existing “alternative, African-influenced value system” to guard their integrity as “worthwhile individuals in a devalued occupation” (BFT 207). From my perspective, when Black women come to value themselves differently than others view them while they do not consistently openly reject how they are perceived, their stance is strategic.

Without focusing on strategy as a cornerstone concept, Collins further names strategies as linked to self, change, and empowerment and identifies strategic actions or attitudes on three levels, the first of which involves direct and concrete action. It involves how, motivated by a desire “to bring about change,” Black women employed
strategies of resistance like “withdrawing from postemancipation
agricultural work in order to return their labor to their families,
ostensibly conforming to the deference rituals of domestic work,
protesting male bias in African-American organizations, or creating
the progressive art of women’s blues” (BFT 117-119). Obviously,
when change, or relief, is expected, even if this expectation is subtle,
one could see various concrete actions—like refraining from acting or
questioning and refusing to comply with expectations, or creating
art—as strategies.

Secondly, Collins mentions strategies on the discourse level—
speaking of how a woman “may use multiple strategies in the quest
for the constructed knowledge of an independent voice” and
exemplifies these strategies by mentioning women who “write
themselves free” while others “talk themselves free” (BFT 119).
Collins actually quotes Giovanni, who in an interview with Claudia
Tate emphasizes people’s power to evade their restrictive reality by
adjusting themselves, a consciousness-related change: “we’ve got to
live in the real world. If we don’t like the world we’re living in,
change it. And if we can’t change it, we change ourselves” (quoted in
BFT 117). Giovanni advocates action for change, but if action is futile,
she recognizes the option of adjusting one’s attitude to reality. Thus,
even when they seem unassuming or lack a visible effect, the personal
moves that lead to creating one’s own definitions and claiming one’s
voice are strategies, as is adjusting one’s attitude to match one’s
circumstances in order to feel content.

Thirdly, Collins links strategies to domestic spaces, as she
speaks of “strategies of everyday resistance,” which materialize in the
formation of “spheres of influence, authority, and power” in areas
where women and African Americans have been allowed little
authority and which are employed to “undermine oppressive
institutions.” She views strategies in relation to the role of women,
whether in their homes, extended families, or in Black communities,
noting Black women’s significance as “blood-mothers and

31 I discuss the strategic choice of Black women to embrace domesticity in the
section “The Meanings of House/Home for Black Women.”
32 Collins places “Black families” together with “the wider Black community as
‘family’” and speaks of “both meanings of family” (BFT 210). hooks has ideas
similar to Collins, as discussed in the “Home and Domesticity” section below.
othermothers in women-centered family networks.” Overworked and explo\ldots

othermothers in women-centered family networks.” Overworked and exploited in low-paid menial jobs, Black women still resisted conveying to their children those prevailing stereotypical images of themselves “as mules, mammies, matriarchs, and jezebels” and their families became “Black female spheres of influence to foster their children’s self-valuation and self-reliance” (*BFT* 209). In their domains, they relied on and helped to produce a different worldview than that promoted in white society, thereby emerging powerful as bearers of culture, transmitters of “folkways, norms, and customs,” and of vital perspectives that would insure collective survival (*BFT* 210). Resistance has been necessary for Black women’s survival and it comprises strategies of survival. The above ways of resisting are strategic in that they involve navigating oppressive social structures and challenging them from spaces within and via being reactionary, not with the aim to openly reform these structures, but rather to make survival within them possible.

Collins traces strategies on the part of Black women that may not be public, or confrontational, or even assessable at large, except in terms of self- and group-validation. These strategic actions/moves/positions/creations/choices/attitudes/perspectives/discourses are meant to contribute to group survival, by undermining oppression and providing alternative ways of knowing and being. While they are meant to sustain the women themselves and those around them, these strategies are also entrenched in Black women’s positions of power within the Black family/community. The strategies I seek to identify in my analysis are very similar to those recognized by Collins, though my focus is primarily on personal empowerment and the empowering function of interpersonal relations.

My understanding and use of “strategy” is further inspired by Gayatri Spivak and the attention she draws to the meaning of the word in an 1988 interview with Ellen Rooney: “Strategy works through a persistent (de)constructive critique of the theoretical. ‘Strategy’ is an embattled concept-metaphor and unlike ‘theory’ its antecedents are not disinterested and universal. ‘Usually, an artifice or trick designed to outwit or surprise the enemy’ (Oxford English Dictionary)” (358). Spivak’s conceptualization of strategy, which she defines and uses in a discussion on essentialism, is significant in that it favors the particular instead of the universal. In this way it remains in line with
the politics of Black women, a non-dominant group with a particular rather than universal perspective. Moreover, the emphasis Spivak puts on strategy as “matching the trick to the situation” as contrasted to the transformation of strategy into “theory” by mainstream feminists, reveals the potential of employing certain ideas, or making claims, only momentarily, in order to serve a certain purpose at hand, and discarding them when this purpose ceases to exist.

A strategy is thus an opportunistic move that takes advantage of the specific situation and never solidifies into a standardized method. It can be slightly modified or substantially changed, whenever there is a need and is abandoned when it no longer fulfils its role. A strategy is usually unpredictable and relies upon subjective criteria. Unpredictability can be a condition for the success of a strategy. However, there is a risk that due to the precarious ground in which it is often rooted, a strategic way of acting could be considered less reliable. In other words, as the principles of a successful strategy cannot be generalized, and it cannot be prescribed for application under pre-defined conditions, there can be no guarantees that it will prove successful. Moreover, as the outcome of a strategy is always uncertain, a successful strategy cannot be predicted—it can only be recognized as such after it has been employed.33

When it comes to the conceptualization of “empowerment,” in the absence of directly relevant literary critical texts, I consider the term in a broader interdisciplinary perspective. However, given that literature and real life do not stand far apart, such an approach is both useful and legitimate.

Naila Kabeer, a development studies scholar, links empowerment to power and “the ability to make choices” for individuals who were originally denied this ability but found ways out of their disenfranchisement and eventually came to acquire it. To Kabeer “empowerment entails change,” its prerequisite being a subjection to states of disempowerment (italics in the original 13-

33 Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* (1910), a work increasingly referred to in the field of business and leadership studies, includes advice on strategic and tactical actions in war which present similarities to Spivak’s understanding of strategy as action that needs to be context specific and is likely to include the element of surprise.
Kabeer takes issue with what “real choice” might mean, suggesting that the presence of visible alternatives is necessary, noting that often gender related inequalities and dependence on others do not go well with “the capacity for meaningful choice;” choice should, in other words, be perceived as within “the realm of possibility” (14). She moreover distinguishes between choices based on the ground of their significance and their consequences, highlighting “strategic life choices” as those that “help to frame other choices that may be important for the quality of one’s day-to-day life, but do not constitute its defining parameters” (14).

When discussing the concept of empowerment, Kabeer suggests the following factors: “agency,” which represents ways in which choice is exercised and further implies challenging existing power relations, “resources,” which is “the medium through which agency is exercised,” including how rules, norms and conventions are interpreted and who has authority to interpret them, and, last, “achievements,” “the outcomes of agency.” Regarding agency, Kabeer notes that empowerment “begins from within” in the sense that before action becomes visible, there is “the meaning, motivation, and purpose that individuals bring to their actions” as they come to recognize “their sense of agency” (italics in the original 4-15). Empowerment, she continues, has its roots in people’s perceptions of themselves and their self-worth, but also how they are viewed by others. How they exercise their agency then has to do with how they are positioned in society, whether they are independent and privileged to govern themselves (and others), for example, or endowed with defining and executive authority when it comes to “rules, norms and conventions” (15) of their societies. Given the agency and resources, individuals may or may not achieve what they hope for—meaning that the potential to live as they like may or may not be fulfilled, their efforts

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34 Kabeer’s extensive theorization of empowerment involves cases of women outside the U.S, but her conceptualization of the term is structured and concrete and, most importantly, it resonates with Collins’ approach. Andrea Cornwall, who discusses Kabeer’s perspectives among others, offers a historical approach of empowerment definitions since the 1970s, but again in the field of development and in relation to gender equality and social policy in developing countries (1-3).

35 Strategic choices concern, for example, where to live, whom to marry as well as how many children to have.
might be successful, but they might also fail. For achievements, agency counts in addition to its consequences and whether the outcome is empowering depends on the broader circumstances: personally fulfilling and uplifting outcomes, prove more empowering than those covering basic needs (15)—even though the fulfillment of basic needs is, undeniably, fundamental and uplifting.

There are several ways in which agency is distinctive: agency may be “passive,” when choice is limited, or “active” and driven by purpose. Moreover, there is a distinction between “greater ‘effectiveness’ of agency, and agency that is ‘transformative’” involving whether agency facilitates taking on “given roles and responsibilities,” or allows challenging these roles and responsibilities via enactment upon their “restrictive aspects”—women, for instance, may come to interrogate and challenge the “patriarchal constraint[s]” they live by (Kabeer 15). Kabeer seems to speak here of agency that gives the individual a seat at the table of power and, alternatively, agency that questions given hierarchical structures.

The empowerment process occurs through agency, resources, and achievements. The three are interrelated and changes in one are likely to affect the others. Sometimes changes are experienced directly, while they may also manifest from one generation to the next. “Transformative” agency is thereby relevant in a long-term perspective, as initiated change might not be noticed, but could still be part of a forthcoming process of change. Kebeer asserts that “changes in the consciousness and agency of individual women” are significant in that they may start such processes, but can hardly “undermine the systemic reproduction of inequality,” whereupon their function primarily shows on a personal level (16).36 This particular emergent empowerment occurring on personal level, via change within women and in their agency, is, however, most useful in my approach, especially when linked to strategy in its occurrence and its potential interpersonal transmission.

Viewing women’s empowerment processes in a transnational context, Andrea Cornwall and Jenny Edwards complement Kabeer’s

36 The transformation of institutional structures, Kabeer contends, requires broader involvement “from individual to collective agency, from private negotiations to public action, and from the informal sphere to the formal arenas of struggle where power is legitimately exercised” (16).
definition by identifying the following important aspects of empowerment: they note “the cultural limits of ‘choice’” along with the important role of relationships (3).

Regarding culture/context-bound choice, Cornwall and Edwards seem to link choice to strategy as they imply variables of actions and their relative outcomes. They highlight the cultural specificity of which choices may be empowering as depending “not only on broader social, cultural, economic and political environments, but also on the circumstances of particular women,” pointing out that an individual woman’s empowering choice is not necessarily experienced so by all women and that, in fact, “empowerment for one can be disempowerment for another.” In addition, the availability of choices varies, they maintain, whereby context determines whether “certain kinds of choices can be constructed as ‘empowering’ at all” (3-4). Cornwall and Edwards mention prayer groups and watching television, to illustrate what would never count as conventionally empowering but may, nevertheless, be so for a downtrodden elderly woman, for example (4). Similarly, I suggest that while domestic experience is not understood as empowering at large, it has been empowering for Black women, due to the specific importance the domestic sphere has come to acquire in African American contexts.37 In contrast, domestic experience has been delimiting to most white American women, especially those confined to suburban homes.

As regards relationships, Cornwall and Edwards argue that “approaches that atomise women, abstracting them from the social and intimate relations” do not facilitate an accurate understanding of “women’s lived experiences of empowerment” (4). Moreover, quoting Cecilia Sardenberg, they affirm women’s relationships as central pertaining to “the ‘power with’ that comes from being embedded in kin and community,” with women enabling each other “to gain the power to act” and highlighting the positive impact of all female relationships for women of younger generations (5). While the effect of relationships remains conventionally unmeasurable, due to their relative invisibility, according to Cornwall and Edwards, women’s

37 See my discussion on the meaning of home for Black women in the “Home and Domesticity” section below.
“growth in self-confidence, capabilities and consciousness” is usually achieved via “relationships rather than assets” (5). The importance of close relationships is in my view at the core of most empowering processes African American women engage in, as is also manifest in the poetry I examine.

The concept of empowerment is defined by Collins in the first edition of *Black Feminist Thought* (1991):

> Empowerment involves rejecting the dimensions of knowledge, whether personal, cultural, or institutional, that perpetuate objectification and dehumanization. African American women and other individuals in subordinate groups become empowered when we understand and use those dimensions of our individual, group, and disciplinary ways of knowing that foster our humanity as fully human subjects. (*BFT* 1st ed. 230)

In the 2nd edition of *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Collins explains further how empowerment is “twofold.” “Gaining the critical consciousness to unpack hegemonic ideologies” and recognizing that one is not obligated to believe whatever one is “told and taught” is liberating and empowering for Black women. Nevertheless, the criticism of hegemonic ideologies, necessary as it is, is still “reactive.” Thereby, Collins points to another dimension of empowerment, which comprises the construction of “new knowledge.” Black feminist thought is, in this respect, highly empowering, as its “core themes, interpretive frameworks, and epistemological approaches” present alternatives to understandings that are taken as given (*BFT* 286).

Collins distinguishes two stages of empowerment, both allied to change. The first happens in the struggle for “self-defined womanist perspectives, which reject the ‘master’s’ images” and which result in Black women changing themselves. Her point of departure is Audre Lorde’s “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” which she quotes (*BFT* 117). Numerous individual women whose consciousness is changed foster subsequently a “collective empowerment.” The second stage, which depends upon this change of consciousness, is the process that enables women to make changes to their lives (*BFT* 117).
Collins seems to make an internal-external distinction, a change that takes place first within and can thereafter bring about external change through action. But the two stages are interlocked and shifting. There is the concrete action Black women have taken by returning to domestic work in order to privilege their families, or Black women’s blues; but also the case of inaction of women “forced to remain ‘motionless on the outside,’” who “develop the ‘inside’ of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom,” which is, arguably, a return to the first stage of a change in “the private, personal space of an individual woman’s consciousness.” This kind of personal empowerment “through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely limit one’s ability to act” is for Collins “essential” (BFT 118). Quoting Claudia Tate, who discusses this state of internal empowerment in Black women’s literature, Collins notes that it happens upon a heroine’s recognition and acknowledgement of the fact that she is unable to change her circumstances. Evading her confinement, however, the Black woman eventually learns to surpass the boundaries that contain her and “only as a direct result of knowing where they lie” (quoted in BFT 118). Internal empowerment, as non-detectible internal change, and empowerment via visible external (lack of) action can, I believe, be seen as interchangeable. The blurring of the two levels of the empowerment process also reveals the presence of strategy: if a woman remains “motionless,” it could be that she makes the decision to refrain from detectible action, a decision that may be strategic in a long-term process of changing her life. After all, as Collins affirms, “[t]he existence of Black feminist thought suggests that there is always choice, and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be” (BFT 290).

The above perspective illuminates also the importance of “rearticulation” and “redefining social realities,” as well as “naming,” which are all significant in terms of empowerment. The naming of daily experiences, the employment of language to characterize everyday life, Collins suggests, “infuses it with new meanings of womanist consciousness,” which in turn enables women to transcend “the limitations of intersecting oppressions” (BFT 118). One of the best examples of the significance of naming to redefine social roles is the word “othermother(ing)” which validates the close relationships
formed when kin members step in and assume the mothering role to children whose biological parents are unavailable. These bonds have been common in Black communities where children (as is the case with Giovanni) were raised by their grandparents, or other relatives.

Throughout *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins theorizes empowerment in ways that highlight its complexity and fluidity as a concept; it is “an illusive construct.” Collins unpacks the notion of empowerment by considering it in relation to the power domains under which Black women are constrained and which need to be specified to reveal how “domination can be resisted” (*BFT* 19). Due to the complexity of oppression, she argues that the “resistance aimed at fostering empowerment” needs to be similarly complex (*BFT* 289). Empowerment is thus related to resistance, but also to consciousness, and to knowledge (*BFT* 290). Collins speaks of the “power of a free mind” as constituting an “area of resistance” and speaks of consciousness, as “a sphere of freedom” and as “a dynamic consciousness,” that is vital to agency; moreover, she links the acts of reclaiming, rearticulating and self-defining to knowledge and sees them as acts of resistance (*BFT* 285-286). Collins also names “human ties,” including love bonds and motherhood, as potentially “freeing and empowering” (*BFT* 285); she points to love, originating in self-love, as “the motive and drive for justice” and the foundation of community, and thereby as crucial to empowerment (*BFT* 171-172).

All the above concepts come into focus in my examination of Nikki Giovanni’s and Rita Dove’s poems, and their (shifting) meanings in various contexts are explored in my analysis. That empowerment defies a fixed definition is, in my view, what makes the state of empowerment vital: experiencing freedom within confining roles and social structures undermines these roles and structures and when freedom is experienced in the realm of consciousness and knowledge, and operates as resistance, it is difficult for that resistance to be checked and subdued. Black women who feel free in their minds and their homes own a kind of empowerment that cannot be taken from them even if they cannot reform their oppressive surroundings.

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38 Collins identifies and extensively discusses four domains of power: Structural, Disciplinary, Hegemonic, Interpersonal (*BFT* 277-288), but these are not of direct relevance to my approach to the poetry.
Moreover, the idea that while empowerment resides with individuals, there is a collective aspect to it (as a source via love relations and as an outcome in communal settings) is intriguing because this aspect is not always visible.

Ultimately, empowerment is linked to strategy. Individuals occupy various social spaces and life histories differ, but even when in the same situation, empowerment might appear differently according to “the consciousness one brings to interpret [the situation]” (BFT 285-286). Consequently, different women are likely to employ diverse resistance strategies as means to their empowerment (BFT 288). Similarly, in their search “for the constructed knowledge of an independent voice,” in the course “toward self-definition, self-valuation and an empowered self,” individual women use multiple strategies (BFT 119).

Here I should specify that, in my view, strategies of empowerment and resistance strategies may be distinct but they may also overlap depending on the circumstances. Sometimes empowerment is the outcome of resistance strategies, while, elsewhere, empowerment strategies may lead to successful resistance. Resistance strategies are often employed in view of immediate outside challenges while empowerment strategies are longer range attempts to redefine oneself and one’s situation and strengthen each other more intimately. Strategies of empowerment are not always detectible and, even if they are, they can neither be generalized, nor prescribed. They are characterized by fluidity and ambiguity and, at best, they are manifest as attempted/tentative/not fully articulated expressions of strength and achievement via internal states of freedom and covert feelings of entitlement.

Collins’, Kabeer’s, and Cornwall and Edwards’ discussions of empowerment share similarities. For instance, Collins and Kabeer both recognize an initial change within, a transformation of one’s perception/understanding of things in other words, before action is traceable and that action, under limiting circumstances, might materialize as lack of action. Furthermore, Collins’ view overlaps with Cornwall and Edwards’ when they state that empowerment “is not just about enlarging the boundaries of action. Empowerment is also about extending the horizons of possibility, of what people imagine themselves being able to be and do” (3). While none of
these scholars are literary critics, Collins’ discussion of empowerment is entrenched in the work of several African American women writers and she frequently makes references to fictional characters to exemplify her points, while Cornwall and Edwards assert that women’s literary, religious and media portrayals have a great impact on how women “are perceived and treated” (4). These scholars thus highlight the significance literary portrayals of (empowered) women have on the lives of actual women. Conversely, their perspectives are illuminating also in relation to the Black women characters in the poetry I examine.

Home and Domesticity/the Domestic

Since the understandings of home and women’s domestic experience in an African American context are key ideas in my study, they require attention ahead of my analysis of poems that deal with Black women’s domestic lives. In this section, I explore conceptualizations of home and the domestic as understood from Black women’s perspectives, which has come to differ significantly from that of white women’s.

Domesticity is an ideology that emerged in the late eighteenth century during the process of industrialization/urbanization. It was in fact a “white and middle-class construction” (Gillis and Hollows 5), whereby women began to be identified in relation to the private sphere of the home, which had become largely void of work practices and was viewed as separate from the public sphere of work. Domesticity contributed to and legitimated gender inequalities between the two spheres: “the ‘proper’ place for women” was in the private sphere, which was considered feminine, and the domestic duties were women’s “natural” duties; so women’s lives came to be defined by their wife and mother roles while they were still dependent on men for their economic survival (Gillis and Hollows 4).

In literary criticism, the terms “domestic” or “domesticity” are usually connected with the concept “domestic fiction.” According to Nancy Armstrong, fiction contributed to the establishment of modern domesticity as a haven in the hard economic world as well as to the
inscription of norms in the domestic woman. As a result, one was “taught to divide the political world in two and to detach the practices that belong to a female domain from those that govern the marketplace” (159-160). Notably, from the literary imagination, this distinction would spill back to real life.

The above division is echoed in a sociological study by Jane Drake, which summarizes the “meaning of home” from a variety of perspectives. Drake’s study shows that there is a great ambiguity around the “meaning” home has for women.39 There is, she notes, a general claim that both men and women experience the home “as a haven for relaxation and loving relationships;” but also that it is “a site of oppression, exploitation and male domination.” However, these—particularly feminist—views might not coincide with the “expressed views” of women themselves (12). Considering how women at home are perceived from an intercultural perspective, Drake finds “cross-cultural similarities” beyond the differences in women’s experience because of their ethnicity. While expectations concerning women’s economic role vary in relation to their cultural background, the responsibility for the home is widely assumed to fall on women regardless of whatever else they might be engaged with (24).

A fine working definition of domesticity is given by Helena Wahlström in a masculinity studies/American studies context. Wahlström views domesticity as “an orientation towards home and family life as well as an orientation towards undertaking of practical work to maintain and nurture the home and the family” (28). This definition is more accurate when describing the situation of adult women/wives/mothers, and less so when it comes to girls, or retired elderly women. In my analysis of the poetry of Giovanni and Dove, in relation to girls and elderly women, I use “domestic existence” and “domesticated,” as meaning homebound, but not necessarily pertaining to nurturing or caring for others.

39 The meanings of home and a woman’s place in the home have been broadly focused on (including various geographical locations) within different disciplines, such as philosophy, architecture, (social) geography, history, cultural studies, sociology and communications. See, for instance, J.J. Gieseking et al. and Annabelle Despard. The perspective of race is just passingly mentioned in these works, but is otherwise missing.
Feminist perspectives on home and domesticity in America have been shifting. Early “domestic feminists” like Catherine Beecher argued for women to be allowed “the authority to arbitrate on matters in the public sphere” since their “investment in domesticity” contributed to their moral superiority in relation to men, suggesting thus the compatibility of domesticity with feminism (Gillis and Hollows 4-5). Jane Tompkins also claimed that beyond being confining, nineteenth century domesticity was “a source of energy, or ‘sentimental power’” (quoted in Foster 7). Furthermore, in the first half of the twentieth century, domesticity was reimagined by modernist women writers wishing to disrupt “its positioning within the binary framework of the ideology of separate spheres” (Foster 2).

During the second wave of feminism, a broad rejection of the idealized notions of domesticity took place. Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows suggest that the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) gave rise to “the idea that an investment in domestic life” contested feminism; it contributed to the perception of “the figure most associated with the domestic—the housewife” as “the feminist’s ‘other’” while the home in the American suburbs came to be perceived “as a prison and a constraint” (1). There was an understanding that domesticated women were “isolated, powerless and, crucially, lacking a sense of identity derived from their own labour.” Confined at home, they were psychologically harmed, fatigued, suffering from “feelings of failure, or nothingness, or lack of completion,” and, being defined solely through their responsibilities as wives and mothers, they lost their sense of identity (6). Women were thereby expected to evade their domestic “subordinated status” (7) to be liberated and “achievement in the public sphere” was privileged (1). Critics distanced themselves from representations of women that perpetuated their roles at home and placed upon them domestic duties. Even when some argued for the validation of “feminine skills and dispositions that women used to create and sustain domestic life” there was a clear “opposition between the feminist—who had left home—and the housewife who remained trapped there” (2). During the feminist backlash period that followed in the late 1980s and early

40 Before Friedan, domestic labor was problematized by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949).
1990s, headed by Susan Faludi, women began to be associated again with the home and a return to “their true place” was advocated, which in turn damaged the revaluation of home as a feminist trope (2).

However, Gillis and Hollows (who study white heterosexual women), observe a renewed desire “to return home.” They consider the implications of this desire, in terms of whether it is symptomatic of a continued backlash, or whether non-academic notions about how women relate to their homes and “the wider value of domestic life” need to be taken more seriously (3). They note the attempts of some feminist critics “to revisit the domestic as a site of important cultural values” and mention the work of Iris Marion Young who views the revaluation of work in the home as “an important strategy,” as long as essentialism is avoided (7). For Young, as well as for Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd, home making contributes to giving meaning to personal lives and making lives meaningful. Recognizing the discrepancy between “the material lived experience of domesticity and the rhetoric of pleasure and choice” along with the importance of not ignoring “the ethics of care which are bound up in a cycle of housework and domestic duty,” Young and Johnson and Lloyd point out the need for explorations of domesticity that are neither celebratory nor condemning (Gillis and Hollows 8-9).

For Gillis and Hollows, domesticity has the following characteristics: it lacks a “fixed” feminist meaning (12), it evolves and its meanings are changing (10), and its understanding is always historically and culturally specific (8). In fact, the ideology of separate spheres repressed differences among women and “falsely universalized a model of home life” that applied only to those women who never worked outside their homes (Foster 5). When race, class, and broader historical perspectives are considered, the picture of women’s domestic experience that emerges is far more complicated.

As part of the impact the heritage of slavery had on African Americans, the house connoted a different meaning for Black than it did for white American women. Historically, the institution of slavery and the segregation era that marked its aftermath caused a division in the parts of the house where Black and white American women were to dwell, the kitchen and the parlor, designating them to different domestic roles. As a result, Black and white women experienced “domestic” space from different standpoints—and for many Black
women their role in the kitchen came to be conflated with their professional role.

The experience of Black and white women was differentiated further by the fact that Black women would cherish the domestic sphere of their own houses as they could not always take it for granted. Due to their having been subjected to forced labor, “an opportunity to invest in domesticity and become full-time home maker” was seen by Black women “as a sign of progress;” consequently, caring for their home became “a source of identity and self-worth,” allowing them to feel proud and achieve status in the Black community (Gillis and Hollows 5). Of relevance here is also that in an African American context, the concept “home” comprised a broad range of familial spaces, and ideas, and thus the domestic space has not always been exclusively private—it could also be public. This fuzziness of limits that commonly delineate the domestic ground and confine, together with the overall Black cultural setting, contributed to the emergence of the African American home as a potent site of resistance to repressive social structures as well as a shielded nurturing site.

hooks’ conceptualization of homeplace in her ground-breaking essay “Homeplace (a Site of Resistance)” (Yearning 1990) recognizes “the primacy of domesticity as a site for subversion and resistance” (48). hooks identifies “the political value of constructing homeplace as a site of resistance” and “the subversive value of homeplace, of having access to private space where we do not directly encounter white racist aggression” (47-48). She also affirms “the realm of choice, and the remarkable re-visioning of both woman’s role and the idea of ‘home’ that black women consciously exercised” (45), which is an affirmation of women’s subjectivity in the home. Echoing Collins, hooks explains that Black women “understood intellectually and intuitively the meaning of homeplace in the midst of an oppressive and dominating social reality, of homeplace as site of resistance and liberation struggle.” She exemplifies this by mentioning her own mother’s effort “to create a homeplace that affirmed our beings, our blackness, our love for one another” in order to ensure that the dominant culture did not “completely shape and control her psyche and her familial relationships” and to equip her children with “degrees of critical consciousness” (46).
Like Collins, hooks addresses the value of loving relations at home, thus linking home, love, and empowerment. To her, home is the “original school of love,” as the ethics of love begins at home (“Talkin’ about Love” np). Recalling her mother’s “hard work” to teach her daughters “tolerance, compassion, generosity, sisterly ways to love one another” hooks establishes that home is where Black girls are socialized, usually by hardworking, determined, and influential adult women whose loving ways have a lasting inspiring impact (Yearning 91).

hooks’ perspectives, as touched upon above, highlight the distinct understandings of domestic spaces and domesticity for Black women, which emerged in conjunction with their race-related historical experience. These specific meanings of home and the domestic are pertinent to my analysis of how the Black female poetic characters in Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems understand and use their position at home for their empowerment and I discuss them further in the section that follows. As Giovanni and Dove use both the words home and house (to refer to built, physical or imaginary structures, or, metaphorically, to ideas), my exploration of domestic spaces involves homes and houses; but it also involves homeplaces, as suggested by hooks, as well as the domestic roles and relations in these familial spaces.

The Meanings of House/Home for Black Women

Since the link between the empowering strategies of Black women and home relies on the acknowledgement of Black women’s presence in domestic spaces which are perceived as simultaneously intimate and expansive, recognizing the specificity of the position of Black women at home, along with the variety of meanings of the domestic sphere in African American contexts, is essential.

The historical conditions Black American women experienced and the domestic roles they commonly assumed due to their historical circumstances shaped different understandings of the house and of domestic life as well as of domestic women’s function than those of white women. In the introduction to Black Sister: Poetry by Black
American Women, 1746-1980, Erlene Stetson points out 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).

During slavery, Black women were denied the right to a house, making them generally disqualified from achieving “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” that could guarantee a woman happiness and power: “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (quoted in Carby 23). But these virtues were never expected to apply to Black women.

At the same time, the emergence in the eighteenth century of two separate spheres, the public and political masculine sphere and the private and emotional feminine sphere, settled by the early nineteenth century into a new symbolic order. Modern domesticity was established “as the only haven from the trials of a heartless economic world” and from there followed the increased establishment of domestic norms for women (Armstrong 159). These norms were utterly restrictive and confining, but they did not apply to Black women who, consequently, were never “debased by their domestic functions” in the way white women were (Davis, Women, Race and Class 17) because they had to work just as hard as Black men did. Since they were not placed on “a domestic pedestal” (Carby 27), domestic chores did not imply weakness or inferiority in their case. Instead, due to their suffering “a grueling equality” at work, they also enjoyed some equality at home (Davis, Women, Race and Class 230, 18-19; Collins 49).

When the dehumanizing institution of slavery deprived the enslaved African Americans of “private” sheltering spaces, housework and being a part of family life came to be perceived by them as a source of achievement; it was experienced as meaningful as and more

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41 Both Davis (Women, Race and Class 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. Collins warns that “Black women’s centrality in Black family networks should not be confused with Matriarchal or female dominated family units” (52).
rewarding than anything else they had to perform. According to Angela 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” (Women, Race and Class 16-17). hooks adds: “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” (Yearning 42). In their provisional and tenuous households, housekeeping was directly linked to survival, and it could thus hardly be considered diminutive work. Accordingly, in spite of the burdens of housekeeping, Black women would generally enjoy their domestic space as a privilege.

How African American women came to perceive the house after emancipation was related to their perception of the idea of domesticity. This was in turn defined by the way their wage work intersected with their family life. The majority of them had to take poorly paid jobs and work long hours in order to survive. As domestic workers, which was soon to become the main occupation for Black working women (BFT 54-55; Davis, Women, Race and Class 93), their experiences in relation to domestic space were different from those of white women because 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, in their professional roles, Black female domestic workers could move between the public and private domestic spaces. They then experienced domesticity from two different perspectives: that of the overworked and largely exploited worker, who was expected to see to the needs of her white employer’s family and ensure a smoothly functioning home, and that of the frustrated wife and mother who frequently 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

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42 For a detailed discussion on Black women’s work see Sharon Harley’s “Reclaiming Public Voice and the Study of Black Women’s Work” (189-209, especially 191-198).
personal power” (hooks, *Yearning* 46), that Black women had the chance to run their own home. But because they were obliged to work outside their house, much like when they were enslaved, housekeeping never really became the “central focus” of Black women’s lives and they evaded the victimization inflicted upon those white women who stayed at home (Davis, *Women, Race and Class* 230-231).

The limiting housewife role for white women thus came to acquire an empowering dimension for Black women. Some, recognizing how vital 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 attending to 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 (*BFT* 54-55). However, the last thing expected from Black women in a racist society profiting from their low-salary employment was to dedicate themselves to Black households. In this sense, for those who could afford to make this kind of individual choice, the decision to stay at home was an act of resistance against racial oppression rather than “a form of exploitation by men” (*BFT* 44, 54-55). Choosing to defend and enhance their families in this way, Black women asserted themselves, while implicitly challenging the hostile society around them. Even though the task of “making homeplace” was delegated to women as a result of sexism, Black women managed to redefine this conventional role by “expand[ing] 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” (hooks, *Yearning* 42-44).

Black women, embracing their responsibilities as homemakers, engaged in creating homes that functioned as spaces of affirmation,

43 See also Harley (191-198), where the class perspective is taken into account.

44 In African American women’s fiction, Candice Jenkins finds a pattern of “black middle-class desire” (15) whereby Black women “embrace [ ] conventional bourgeois propriety in the arenas of sexuality and domesticity” in response to demeaning stereotypes and in order to combat generalized “narratives of sexual and familial pathology” (14).
support, and resistance to racist suppression. They thereby actively contributed to a “remarkable re-visioning of both woman’s role and the idea of ‘home’” (hooks, *Yearning* 45), as well as exposed the existence of subversive forces contained in domesticity as prescribed by patriarchy. Staying at home was more often than not a matter of personal choice and constituted a conscious attempt to reject and resist given norms. Their “domesticity” was empowering; it marked success and not mere compliance. As a result, the home in their case materialized primarily as a site of power rather than confinement. Considering in turn domestic Black women’s contribution to their Black communities, it is obvious that these women were never situated in marginal socioeconomic sites, as these are broadly understood. Evidently, these Black women succeeded in creating new circumstances for themselves and gained privileges that were denied to them historically.

A notable aspect of significance here is that, for Black women, situating themselves in the house and embracing its responsibilities seldom meant isolation or subordination because the Black community was usually marked by fluidity, lacking the conventional public versus private sphere split. The historical experience of African American women was under the influence of alternative definitions of family and community, which kept evolving: Black family and community structures were transformed due to migration and urbanization in the twentieth century, with great changes occurring especially in the post-World-War-II era (*BFT* 47-49, 53, 55, 58-59, 63-64). Even though the work/family relationship underwent dramatic changes and the gradual stratification of the Black community by social class eventually brought the erosion of extended family networks (*BFT* 59, 63-65), historically, Black women experienced enlarged domestic spheres, which encompassed “a broad range of kin and community relations beyond the nuclear family household” (*BFT* 49). In Black segregated communities, where survival depended on communal efforts, there were no rigid boundaries separating different households and 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. Even as their communal role began
to increasingly center on the church, due to urbanization-effected divisions of physical space denoting “households and churches” as “female arenas,” they could still enjoy a great degree of privilege (*BFT* 55, 58). Ultimately, the chances afforded to the majority of Black women to enjoy social status were to be found “outside the labor market—in their family, community and organizational and church lives” (Harley 196).

The house then gradually became an open site of empowerment for Black women where they could feel they were in charge, and from where they could also partake in the larger world. In Black women’s literature, there are several examples of such houses. In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, before it becomes haunted, 124 is 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; it 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 removed, 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” (in Washington 78). Last, the porch, a part of the house which holds a place of great cultural significance in the work of many southern writers, Zora Neale Hurston among them, constitutes a “liminal space” between the indoors and the outdoors. The porch “helps to set the terms of a community,” as well as “fosters the policing of boundaries—boundaries that separate ‘private’ from ‘public,’ ‘self’ from ‘other,’ and ‘home’ from ‘community’” (Donlon 13). hook’s “homeplace,” which I discussed in the previous section,

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45 Also in contemporary contexts, there are cases of African American women who are homebound but community oriented, where their domesticity is redefined in accordance with their roles in their communities (Rouson 164). To Brigitte Rouson homes are “significant in the building up of community, as dwelling spaces that are also symbolic spaces” (164).
corresponds to such communal and domestic spaces, where private and public life intersect.

In Black women’s poetry, including the poems of Giovanni and Dove, the domestic sphere is an intersected and deeply spirited site where past and present, duty and guilt, affection and obsession overlap. Moreover, this space lacks clear limits because the “house” itself seems to comprise a number of ideas, its symbolic use ever expanding:

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. (Stetson xxii)  

A house that transcends its common physical dimensions and metaphorically incorporates a multitude of meanings, as indicated in the above discussion, 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 far too spacious to match conventional definitions of the house as a “sheltered ‘feminine’ space” (Askeland 786).  

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46 In a similar manner, Prince, who discusses the blues and the home in parallel terms, in her “Introduction: a House is not a Home,” asserts that “[t]he city the kitchen and the womb recur as sites that specifically inform our understanding of an African American sense of home” (3).

47 Worth mentioning is Lori 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), the words themselves thus opening to further possible combined meanings.
To sum up, 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 them of all forms of authority while rendering them the objects of rulership, ownership, and mastery. When it came to survival, Black women could not count on their houses for shelter more than they could count on the woods. Moreover, they generally had to count on the involvement, the aid and the support of other members of the Black community in order to remain alive. Still, moving through the porous boundaries of public and private spheres, they developed individual strengths. The house, signifying something different for them than for white women, functioned as a site of empowerment offering Black women space for both self and communal affirmation.

Consequently, in the texts of Black women writers, the desire for a house or lingering in its “private” spaces cannot be taken as a symptom of a limited perspective or a writer’s narrow thematic scope. On the contrary, focusing on the domestic sphere has a significant function. In Sacred Cows . . . And Other Edibles, Giovanni highlights how domestic themes are habitually perceived differently in the work of male and female authors: “[w]hen women write about the reality of our lives, it’s called dull; when white men write their lives, it’s called heroic” (SC 33). Although they risk their choices to be viewed as trivial and dull, Black women writers keep focusing quite extensively on what takes place in and around domestic milieus, exploring the challenges of domestic experience. In this light, texts dealing with the experiences of Black women at home may be seen as subversive and potentially empowering.
Having reviewed the meanings of house/home along with the distinct domestic roles of Black women in a general African American perspective, I shall now turn to the works of Nikki Giovanni and Rita Dove and consider the overall occurrence of house/home-related imagery and discourse in their poetry and prose. My aim is to establish the prominence (if not prevalence) of domestic imagery/references in the poetry that I examine and, moreover, to highlight the theorization by the two poets of house/home/the domestic from a variety of viewpoints and in different (con)texts, which, in my view, inform their use of tropes of domesticity in the poems. In the last section of this chapter, I analyze Giovanni’s “My House” (*My House* np), which I find to contain the most sustained home-related empowerment proclamation relevant to my argument. I focus on how the house/home constitutes a privileged site for the Black female poetic character and a space that has empowering potential. This claim will in turn be my point of departure in subsequent chapters, as I further explore the empowering strategies Black women employ while at home.

**Poetry Collections**

Before I begin to engage in the examination of individual poems, which I do in the last section of this chapter and in the coming chapters, my purpose here is to provide an overview of the inclusion of house/home/the domestic-related elements in the poetry of Giovanni and Dove as a whole. The identification of these references is, I believe, significant in the sense that they constitute the backdrop where relevant ideas of individual poems emerge. The larger picture
that I sketch below will inform, I hope, the particular settings of the poems where Black female poetic characters reside.

The thematic similarities that can be discerned in Giovanni’s and Dove’s preoccupation with the domestic sphere are intriguing. In their poems, the house and its “private” spaces signify an important position. While the two poets often “step out” of the house they refuse to abandon it and the concerns around it, affirming rather than dismissing their importance. Giovanni and Dove celebrate rather than try 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 is thus rarely claustrophobic. Most often, rather than being a place of confinement and isolation, it is a privileged site where the recognition of domestic creativity enables empowerment.

In the poetry I examine, there are poems about the houses of the poets’ parents and grandparents, others where there is direct reference to their own houses, and poems where women, not necessarily the poets themselves, are portrayed at home. Women work at home, cleaning, cooking, and raising children. The emphasis is usually on the culturally vital context in which simple daily chores take place; but of course there are poems where women toil, performing their allegedly predefined gender role. The house frames all kinds of important and unimportant events in women’s lives, for example, girls growing up and becoming women, relationships between men and women, parent/grandparent bonding with children as well as other family relations. Both writers linger upon porches, backyards, bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens and make recurring references to food.

Giovanni and Dove also manage to blur the limits of the house by framing, either in a literal or metaphorical manner, historically or geographically different kinds of rooms. Dove “enters” rooms of houses, huts, palaces or artist studios, an old people’s home, a ruined residence, even a house-like tomb. The buildings are located in America, in Europe, in Africa and in Asia, in the past and in the present. Giovanni usually “visits” houses inhabited by Black people,

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48 As Drake notes, while “[d]ifferent cultural groups vary in their expectations of women’s economic role,” it is widely assumed that “whatever else a woman may do, she bears the main responsibility for running the home” (24).
but also the home of their common mother, Africa; she remembers/imagines the houses of the past and envisages rooms in the future. The variation that characterizes the domestic milieus encountered in these texts, as well as the temporal and spatial location of these houses, endow the figure of the house with an abstract quality of open-endedness.

This use of expanded domestic spaces in the works of Giovanni and Dove deserves further attention. To begin with, the “house” seems to have constituted an attractive theme/meaning in the work of the two poets quite fundamentally, as the word “house” itself is found in the titles of two poetry collections, *My House* (1972), which is the fourth volume of poetry by Giovanni, and *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980), the first published volume by Dove. Moreover, a fine press edition with the title *The Other Side of the House* was published in 1988 by Pyracantha Press (Arizona State U, Tempe, Arizona), containing seven poems that were later to be found in Dove’s *Grace Notes*. As far as strictly domestic imagery is concerned, these collections do not include more poems focusing on the domestic sphere than the remaining early volumes do—in general about a quarter of the poems of each volume include direct references to the domestic sphere. Instead, the use of “house” in these works serves a variety of purposes.

In her critical assessment of *My House*, Virginia C. Fowler claims that the poems in this collection, as suggested in the title, are Giovanni’s “emphatic statement to the world about her identity as a black woman and a poet, about her values and about her intention to live the kind of life and write the kind of poetry she wished” (*NG* 57). Fowler also sees the past and the people of the past as a “cornerstone” of Giovanni’s house. The poet’s house is a metaphor for her way of living: “The Rooms Inside,” the first section of the volume, deals with “personal development” and “The Rooms Outside,” the second section, puts the “personal self” into a larger historical and cultural context (*NG* 61-69).

The division into “rooms inside” and “rooms outside” is analytically useful. The house, the way Giovanni perceives it, seems to consist not only of an interior—a space between walls, a protected space—but also an exterior, which is also “rooms.” However, the “inside” section includes poems like “The World Is Not a Pleasant
Place to Be” and “Just a New York Poem” that could well belong to the “outside” section. At the same time, the title poem, which is the most emphatic when it comes to a demonstration of strength and control over the poet’s house/life, is found at the end of the volume, closing the section “The Rooms Outside.” Notably, Suzanne Juhasz observes that the poems in this section “are not calls to action from the public platform; they are dreams, some funny, some apocalyptic, of old worlds and new” (170). This kind of crossover does not solely stand for the possibility of communication between what is inside and what is outside the house, nor does it simply indicate the relevance of domestic life to public life. It rather works against the establishment of two distinct and separate spheres, one public and one private, as these tend to be defined conventionally by the presence of the house.

Indicative of the erosion of the house’s boundaries are also the illustrations at the beginning of each of the two sections. First, there is a corner of a room seen from the inside, empty except for a huge semi-transparent rose, which appears to be leaning on a window, almost covering it. Due to its transparency, the exact location of the flower is elusive: while its stem is clearly inside the room, it is difficult to claim that it is not partly outside of the window. In the second illustration, there are two closed windows seen from the outside, with a Black girl’s figure visible behind one of them. The outside space is defined not as away from the house but rather as connected to it, as if it constitutes a vantage point to observe the inside from. It seems to me that in a contained domestic space, Giovanni marks the possibility for a move, or expansion, towards the outside, while when outside she turns back and focuses on the inside.

Although the interior and the exterior merge in such a way that trying to locate what is inside and what is outside becomes confusing, in the second section of the collection there is an expansion of the metaphorical role of the house in geographic and historical terms. Here Giovanni makes an effort to identify what place African Americans may claim as home, and indirectly associates house with region. In the poet’s search for belonging, the house opens up into particular geographic areas, to become in turn historically definable ancestral homes. Africa, the imagined archetypal home, represented in the image of “a young man bathing / in the back of a prison fortress” (“Africa I”) turns out to be a disappointment for the writer, when she
visits the continent as a tourist, especially after she sees the dungeons of the British fort, the temporary home for thousands of slaves before they were shipped to the New World: “and I wanted the lock maybe for a door / stop to unstop the 18th century clock” (“Africa II”). Protesting the sense of victimization linked to the place, Giovanni finds her voice “lost in the room / of the women with the secret passageway / leading to the governor’s quarters,” an allusion to her people’s suffering. Consequently, in “They Clapped,” African Americans, embarking on their return flight from Africa, realize “that they are strangers all over;” America solidifies into a home made easier to accept.  

Dove’s *The Yellow House on the Corner* points to the neighborhood, another kind of domestic place. In an interview, Dove suggested that this first work of hers constitutes “a very domestic scene, a real neighborhood” (Schneider 115). The neighborhood, though more local and concrete than the community, may still be linked to communal space (and the dynamics of communal life), which is in turn considered a part of the domestic sphere by African Americans. This, according to Patricia Hill Collins, has its roots in slavery:

> The entire slave community/family stood in opposition to the public sphere of a capitalist political economy controlled by the elite white men. . . . The line separating the Black community from whites served as a more accurate boundary delineating public and private spheres for African-Americans than that separating Black households from the surrounding Black community. (*BFBT* 49)

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49 The Cape Coast Castle in Ghana served as the headquarters for the British colonial administration and housed slaves prior to their transport to America.

50 The house is a metaphor for America also in the essay “Our Own House Is in Disorder” (*SC* 161-162). Yet Giovanni does not remain consistent in her ideas about the home of African Americans. In *Sacred Cows . . . And Other Edibles* she says that Black Americans “really have no home” (*SC* 166), while later, in *Racism 101*, she agrees with a claim that their home is Virginia, the place where they first landed on the new continent (*Racism* 131).
However, even after their migration to urban centers in the north, African Americans continued to form self-contained communities. A demarcation of these communities from their surroundings continued to be better defined than the differentiation of each household from the rest of the Black community. This demarcation was indeed perceived as a public/private split, which occurred where these communities were separated from the surrounding “frequently hostile white neighborhoods” (BFBT 58). Even bell hooks, in her testimony about growing up in a segregated town, speaks of residing “in a marginal space where black people (though contained) exercised power” and were “truly caring and supportive of one another” (Yearning 35). Black neighborhoods emerge with an atmosphere which has some kind of domestic quality, and constitute safe and familiar ground that is neither exclusively private nor public. Such in-between space may satisfy the need for communal belonging and simultaneously enable further departures towards the larger community and then the wider outside world. On the literary level, the introductory poem in Dove’s Selected Poems (1993), “In the Old Neighborhood,” stands as such a point of departure, from where the poet confidently leaves and to which she appears comfortable to return in the rest of her early volumes.51

The neighborhood image in Dove’s work is undoubtedly dynamic and it expands towards new geographic and historic locations. The Yellow House on the Corner, inspired by Dove’s trips abroad, contains poems that engage in transnational issues and various domestic locations in the world. A neighborhood in Tunisia consists of “Roofless houses, cartons of chalk,” which “catch the sky in their mirrors of air” (“The Sahara Bus Trip”). In “Ö,” the last poem in the volume, and the one which includes its title phrase, the house, beyond its potential opening towards the outside (as in “Geometry”), even represents the significant ability to depart:

Families complete themselves  
And refuse to budge from the present,  
the present extends its glass forehead to sea,

51 “In the Old Neighborhood” is not an early poem; it is placed first in the Selected Poems volume however, before the much earlier poems from The Yellow House on the Corner.
(backyard breezes, scattered cardinals)

and if, one evening, the house on the corner
took off over the marshland,
neither I nor my neighbor
would be amazed. (SP 64)

In this unusual extension of a sailing metaphor, the house/neighborhood is neither sealed nor permanently “stranded,”52 but, on the contrary, ready to sail and travel to the rest of the world, as well as to the past. This exploration, as realized in the poet’s preoccupation with domestic milieus of other ages or places, which continues further in Dove’s next volume, Museum, is certainly a move away from the particular houses of her “real neighborhood,” and at the same time it implies a refusal to abandon the domestic theme. In fact, Museum, functioning similarly to the way Giovanni’s “The Rooms Outside” section does (according to Fowler’s argument), “attempts to register personal human experience against the larger context of history” (Dove in Schneider 115). Culturally specific domestic spaces, as in “Nestor’s Bathtub,” or “Boccaccio: The Plague Years” and “Fiammetta Breaks Her Peace,” thus acquire a new meaning. Instead of concealing and isolating, the private houses in the neighborhoods Dove creates are links that connect individual histories against a more general historical and geographical background.

Houses also help establish empowering connections among the people who reside in them, especially between women and men. This is certainly the case in some poems in Giovanni’s The Women and the Men and in Dove’s Thomas and Beulah.53 Dove’s poems are more family oriented while Giovanni’s are individual oriented. Yet in both

52 The image of the house or the community as a ship recurs in Dove’s poetry. See “Courtship” (TB 16-17), “Refrain” (TB 18-19) and “Gospel” (TB 35-36). Moreover, a “picture of a ship” in the house is found in “The House on Bishop Street” (TB 60). “Ö” is also a poem about the power of language to transport one beyond the “strand” of one’s geographical and historical location, despite a refusal “to budge from the present” (SP 64).

53 In The Women and the Men, the poems are arranged in three sections: “The Women,” “The Men,” and “And Some Places.” In Thomas and Beulah the first section, “Mandolin,” is written from Thomas’ perspective while the second, “Canary in Bloom,” gives Beulah’s point of view.
cases, house images define the background\textsuperscript{54} against which significant bonds are developed; however loose its frame, the physical presence of a house is either pronounced, or can easily be assumed. The domestic sphere becomes a crucial meeting point, a place where people of all ages gather, in sorrow or joy, in excitement or boredom, where they spend a great part of their simple lives. A house provides a concrete common ground where relationships flourish, as depicted in Giovanni’s “How Do You Write a Poem?”:

\begin{verbatim}
when i come
home if you’re not there
i search the air
for your scent. (WM np)
\end{verbatim}

But it might also serve on a metaphorical level, linked to a poetic character’s life, as in her “Housecleaning,” where the activity of cleaning one’s house is associated with tidying one’s personal relationship, the removal of a lover being treated as a habitual, but ultimately necessary, housecleaning task:

\begin{verbatim}
i always liked housecleaning
even as a child
i dug straightening the cabinets
putting new paper on
the shelves
washing the refrigerator
inside out
and unfortunately this habit has
carried over and i find
i must remove you
from my life (WM np)
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{54} Domestic references can be traced even in a few poems with other themes, such as Giovanni’s “For a Lady of Pleasure Now Retired” in \textit{Re: Creation} (“there was pork cooking / on the stove”), and Dove’s “The Charm” in \textit{Thomas and Beulah} (“Sunday mornings / fried fish and hominy steaming / from the plates like an oracle”).
Giovanni and Dove examine whether women enjoy being at home or not, as well as how their daily domestic experience affects their own lives and 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” (Yearning 41). Both poets engage in highlighting the indispensable domestic role of women, emphasizing the function of the house as a culturally vital space and essential in keeping people together.55

Prose

As is the case in their poetry, Giovanni and Dove make several references to houses/homes in their autobiographical and other non-fictional writings (and in Dove’s case also in her fiction). These texts are not in the immediate focus of my analysis, but I still find that they illuminate how the two poets understand and theorize the house/home as concrete setting in Black women’s domestic lives, or, more generally, as a trope comprising specific African American perspectives. In this section, I trace Giovanni’s and Dove’s diverse prose treatment of the house/home to broaden, complement, and illuminate the occurrence of such references in their poems. As I have already indicated, I view domestic spaces as the settings where strategies of empowerment are put to use by Black women. However, as the variety of ideas and symbolism attached to these spaces imply, they emerge as dynamic settings that inform strategies with nuanced meanings. Differentiating between house and home in an ambiguous manner, Giovanni cherishes a wide variety of homeplaces, ranging from solid building structures, either existing or remembered, to abstract notions of metaphorical homes as an expression of will,

55 In A Dialogue, Giovanni shows concern about the circumstances where Black men end up battering Black women at home (43, 45). But neither Dove nor Giovanni explore the issue of domestic violence in their poetry.
commitment, and loving interpersonal relations. Dove expresses her awareness of the house straightforwardly, elaborating on the house of poetry metaphor and commenting on some of her poems on houses, as well as indirectly, through detailed descriptions of a series of rooms where she has dwelled and created.

In Giovanni’s autobiographical *Gemini* (1971), the house stands for a crucial source of energy, turning personal efforts into achievements; with its fundamental and benevolent influence on the individual, it supports life itself. In the volume’s first essay, “400 Mulvaney Street,” Giovanni narrates her return “home” to Knoxville, Tennessee, where she used to live with her grandmother. She describes the old house and the neighborhood and lingers upon memories, concluding with her grandmother’s death, a death she blames on “progress,” namely the old woman’s forced relocation to a new house. This issue is revisited in connection to her remembering her parents’ home in “Don’t Have a Baby till You Read This,” where she refers to her hospitalization after giving birth, an experience that almost took her life. “Visions of the old house,” a deviation from her immediate concerns, propel her walk to the nursery and back (*Gemini* 64-66). Particular scenes of her family’s move when she was a teenager sustain her slow physical progress down the hospital corridors. These recalled images aid the transition she undergoes and give her the energy to complete it: “Yep, I would be good and glad to get home” (*Gemini* 66). Giovanni, who lives in New York, gives birth in Cincinnati while visiting her parents. Evidently, as Martha Cook puts it, “she asserts herself and goes ‘home’ to New York” (281). Yet, in *Gemini* the poet claims neither New York nor Cincinnati but Knoxville (where she lived with her grandparents as a child) as a home for her son—so that he knows that they “come from somewhere,” and “belong” (*Gemini* 12). Claiming a specific home, however, is rather an exception here, since Giovanni generally recognizes multiple homes.

The homes in Giovanni’s prose texts deviate from a house’s strict form and specific geographic location. While she identifies the houses of her childhood as homes, having traveled extensively around the country for her work, Giovanni eagerly disassociates home from the materiality of a house. In *Sacred Cows . . . And Other Edibles* (1988), home is described in terms of love rather than defined by
specific locations: “I don’t think of a home as a house, which is another thing I don’t own. Certainly, though, I do live in a house that I have made my home. . . . But I also readily concededef there is no love a building will not compensate” (SC166). For Giovanni the houses of her childhood constitute the kind of archetypal locations where homes were established through generous investment of loving relationships. However, she believes that home may develop independently from any kind of specific physical space: “They say Home . . . is where when you go . . . they have to take you in. I rather prefer Home . . . when you could go anywhere . . . is the place you prefer to be” (SC 166).

This last definition of home involves an element of agency, which arguably becomes even more significant when contextualized with references to slavery, enforced relocation, and generally the humiliating objectification of Black people. In further explorations of the concept of home, Giovanni places it in a historical context and associates it with the pioneer spirit of those who came, or were brought to the New World:

Home is not the place where our possessions and accomplishments are deposited and displayed. It is this earth that we have explored, the heavens we view with awe, these humans who, despite the flaws, we try to love and those who try to love us. It is the willingness to pioneer the one trek we all can make . . . no matter what our station in life . . . the existential reality that wherever there is life . . . we are at home. (SC 167, italics mine)

To Giovanni, home may stand for both origin and destination, as well as for the commitment to connect with others and the eagerness to undertake its creation. The poet refers to a greater home and gradually comes to encourage a dynamic awareness beyond family, or even local community; in Racism 101 she refers to the earth/this planet as

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56 Sacred Cows . . . And Other Edibles is not of her earliest works, but contains statements illuminating Giovanni’s standpoint. Later, in 1994, Giovanni writes: “I have room space from New York to Cincinnati to San Francisco. . . . I thought I’d try a noble experience of letting my son know that home is where we are . . . not a building nor a place . . . not things but a feeling” (Racism 127-128).
home (123, 181). Moving beyond a mere plurality of homes, the home she imagines herself and her female characters to inhabit is an all-encompassing homeplace, one that constantly becomes rather than merely exists.

At the same time, if home can be seen as a site of agency and the expression of will, the house, as far as it is the physical location of a home, serves by extension as the proclamation of its owner’s will. Interestingly, when in the spirit of the Black Arts Movement Giovanni advocates a Black Revolution, she employs metaphorically the imagery of the destruction of a house. Giovanni elaborates on a metaphor where land is a woman, in this instance a Black woman, exploited by the white man. She implies that the Black man is a tenant, who has more right to the land, yet the white man owns it; whatever the Black man builds on the land indirectly belongs to the white man. Under this kind of oppressive circumstances, much as the building of a house by an exploited tenant might be perceived as the result of a certain freedom, burning down the house, a combat tactic, could equally be considered an act of freedom:

After you’re alone with your piece of land you remove very carefully anything that cannot be replaced, like pictures of your first lay, your joints, etc., and you throw kerosene on everything else. You see, it’s yours and if you can’t enjoy it in freedom and peace, then land wants you to destroy it. (Gemini 49)

Keeping in mind that land itself cannot be destroyed, Giovanni indeed encourages the rebellious burning of “a house, a building, a fence” (as they are markers that stake the claim people have on land), when under the threat of the white landlord demanding it back: “That’s when you burn. You don’t burn to get the thief to fix it up; you burn when you have staked your claim and they try to steal it from you. And I really believe that after you’ve fixed it up and made it yours, you’ll kill for it” (49). Although she extensively ponders on the importance of a house, Giovanni does not value it in a conventional manner. Instead, by authorizing its strategic destruction, she urges rather for the maintenance of the sense of freedom inspired by the construction and the existence of the house. As a result of this
freedom, the willingness to destroy is in itself liberating, and thus rendered a legitimate resistance alternative.

Giovanni’s view of domestic space as a site of empowerment falls within the tradition of Black women’s understanding of their homeplace as a site of affirmation, daily struggle and resistance (hooks, Yearning 41-49); it could actually be claimed that the poet not only follows this tradition but even enhances it. Her recurrent return to her childhood homes in her writings strengthens her sense of belonging, while unmistakable empowering elements emerge in her contemplation of her grandparents’ and her parents’ different homes. These are generated mainly through the tight (often cross-generational) bonding among individual family members. When, for example, Giovanni’s grandmother signs up her granddaughter for participation in a demonstration without having asked her first, and the young Giovanni feels obligated to go, it is obvious that their mutual sense of purpose has an inspiring effect (Grand Mothers xiv-xvii). At the same time, the rooms Giovanni inhabits as an adult provide new, more fluid, domestic spheres. As her sense of home expands into the world, the poet advocates bonding among all Black people, then among all people. Furthermore, keeping in mind the “radical political dimension” that the “construction of a homeplace” has in African American history (hooks, Yearning 42), Giovanni’s suggested metaphorical destruction of the house if needed, as a means of asserting one’s position and claiming one’s will, could be seen as a transforming deviation, but it is still in line with the tradition developed by Black women before her.

The domestic sphere also takes on new dimensions in Dove’s prose writings, where her awareness of domestic spaces still prevails. Introduced already in The Yellow House on the Corner in poems like “Nexus” and “Ö,” the idea of the house in relation to poetic creation is developed by Dove more than a decade later in The Poet’s World (1995), where her Poet Laureate lectures are included. In Prosser Gifford’s short preface to the volume, where he presents the lectures, he indicates that the house is the controlling metaphor in The Poet’s World: “She spoke of the double vision from the poet’s house, looking out to the world beyond the front and back doors and also within the house to her own creative experience” (7). Here, along with the extensive use of the house metaphor in Dove’s discussion of poetry,
there is an analysis of several poems that deal with houses. Furthermore, especially in the autobiographical part of this volume, there are lengthy descriptions of the rooms inhabited by the poet during different periods in her life, detailing the space where her creative work took place. Dove proceeds with an analysis of the role the house plays in her work, where it becomes evident that for her the house is empowering and energizing.

In relating the house to poetic creation, Dove was influenced by Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1958). Beginning her first lecture with his statement “The houses that were lost forever continue to live on in us,” she explains how this, in her case, resulted in “a kind of poetic consciousness of occupied space—of the space we inhabit, of the shape of thought and the pressure of absence” (*The Poet’s World* 15). “To inhabit space with thought,” Dove continues, “is analogous to the notion that language is the house we inhabit—a poet is someone who explores those spaces of sensual apprehension made inhabitable by vocabulary and syntax” (*The Poet’s World* 17). To illustrate how interiors are externalized into poetry, she quotes her favorite passage from *The Poetics of Space*:

Words—I often imagine this—are little houses, each with its cellar and garret. Commonsense lives on the ground floor, always ready to engage in “foreign commerce,” on the same level as the others, as the passers-by, who are never dreamers. To go upstairs in the word house, is to withdraw, step by step; while to go down to the cellar is to dream, it is losing oneself in the distant corridors of an obscure etymology, looking for treasures that cannot be found in words. To mount and descend in the words themselves—this is a poet’s life.57

This house of words enables the poet to bring the poem into existence. It is the location where the poet dwells with thought during a poem’s creation, but it is also a poem’s linguistic ingredient. Accounting for a poem that came to her easily following a period of “concentration and

57 This passage is quoted twice in *The Poet’s World*, included both in the first and in the second lecture (18, 45-46).
continuity” in a rented house, Dove claims witnessing the transformation of language from “a commodity to be traded” to “a reality to be lived out,” whereby she herself becomes “living language” (PW 50).

The house as physical site/space has heavily influenced Dove’s work—an influence she herself initially ignored. Its spaces seem to have not merely been a source of inspiration, but a driving force, which settled in her poems in the form of metaphors. In fact, the poet moves beyond abstraction and recognizes parallels between spaces occupied by imagination and real houses. The correspondence of a physical house to spaces inhabited by imagination, as they surface in her work, can be understood in terms of artistic empowerment. This becomes explicit in a discussion of “the dynamics of inside versus the outside” (PW 19), where Dove explores the house and its inner and adjacent spaces as having inspired, or made their way into, her own poems and those of other poets. The house actively intervenes, affects, or even becomes the catalyst in the creative process.

For example, Dove admits to having discovered the frequent occurrence of backyards in her work during a creative writing task she unknowingly prepared for her students. She asked them to draw what they thought of when hearing the word home, then to draw their homes at the time. She finally asked them to live with their drawings, “inhabit space with thought” for a week. This assignment, not consciously planned in advance, was to Dove the result of the house having “risen again” in her (PW 16-17). She consequently came to realize how she had imagined several of her poems to take place in backyards, their presence in the poem being either explicit or implied. The recognition of her fascination around “occupied space,” was followed by an acknowledgement of the concrete influence her childhood backyard had on her, its presence recurring in her work. This backyard with her father’s garden is the setting in “Adolescence—III,” where “[a]ll the required elements of a psychic landscape—comfort and loss, suffocation and risk—come together in the struggle of enclosure versus exposure” (PW 21).

Dove generally associates the yard at the back of the house with (sheltered) childhood; it is a ground the poet could occupy anytime as a child, “without supervision, where the outside was safe” (PW 19). It is where, eventually, the first steps towards the world are taken safely.
Her introduction to the literary world is, namely, in the same direction, over well-trodden and safe “domestic” ground. In her early poetry, Dove kept herself in the shielded yard behind the house, exploring territory that was specific and familiar\(^{58}\) and venturing “only as far as the back half of the side yard.” However, the backyard never ceases to exist in her imagination and even after she had left it, she would still return, as she does in “A Father Out Walking on the Lawn” (\textit{PW} 22). Dove, moreover, mentions how she and a friend (a professor, photographer and mother), having spent days in her backyard trying to define an area to collaborate, finally realized that they are “right in the middle of it” (\textit{PW} 28). Again, the poet is initially unaware of the hugely influential role of the backyard; this part of the house, which in the end proves to be so vital, is originally overlooked ordinary space, a territory so familiar that it is taken for granted.

The back door, the opening to the backyard, is for Dove one of the most significant parts of the house. Moreover, its function appears to be the most empowering: “When one uses the back door, one \textit{pushes} the obstruction (i.e., the door or the screen) \textit{forward} and steps out. As with a screen door, the opening is effortless—in fact, the barrier between exterior and interior is illusory, a gray space: already one can see the outside” (\textit{PW} 23-24). This gray zone is significant in that it filters experience and constitutes a porous divide allowing a two-way flow. What Dove acknowledges is the familiar and inviting “outside;” as “the exterior sensations filter into the interior space, taking up residence in one’s storehouse of memories, becoming recollections of the outside,” one is left as if “in two places at once and yet, curiously, not there at all” (\textit{PW} 24). Similar to the illustrated images in Giovanni’s \textit{My House}, (the window as the contact frame where the inside does not simply interact with the outside but where the two are blurred), for Dove, the back door contributes to the creation of a moment “of ultimate possibility, and of ultimate irresponsibility.” There is, notably, an absence of “absolute demarcation of the moment when \textit{in} becomes \textit{out}; indeed, one passes through a delicious sliding moment when one is \textit{neither} in nor out but

\(^{58}\) In \textit{The Given and the Made}, Vendler claims that Dove’s first work is an attempt “to school herself in Black historical memory” (63). The volume has also been seen as concerned with the “movement from girlhood to womanhood” (Gates and McKay 2612).
floating, suspended above the interior and exterior ground” (*PW* 24). The screen door opening to the backyard allows a kind of evasion of the inside when one is still physically in the house and encourages a smooth transmission to the outside since it is already a part of the inside. In “Geometry” the properties of the screen door seem to apply also to windows, ceilings, and walls: “I prove a theorem and the house expands: / the windows jerk free to hover near the ceiling, / the ceiling floats away with a sigh” (*Selected Poems* 17).

One would expect that the front door, the central and most legitimate entrance/exit point, would match the function of the back door as an empowering spot. But Dove does not favor it equally and gives it a lesser status, because she perceives it as opening more formally towards the perilous broader society rather than to the intimate neighborhood. She finds it to be “the threshold of propriety and solicitation,” where “[f]ear lies in wait” as well as the door through which the exit acquires a quality of finality: “When you exit through the front door of your family home, you are saying goodbye to a womb, you are about to sell yourself to the world. The wind that meets you is chilly” (*PW* 25). Because the front door is usually closed, and because it opens more directly to the perils of the street it is less private and contributes to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity that those standing by this door might experience:

Bad news arrives by telegram. Neighbors watching from the street witness incriminating domestic indiscretions. Death meanders through the streets while we crouch behind out front door, in retreat. . . . Fear enters the house. Fear is let in when we open the door, whether we step out or just look out to see what’s going on in the streets. What does it help to keep the door locked if you venture outside for a breath of fresh air, a bit of life? Can you count on making it back inside? (*PW* 26)

The contrast between the interior and the exterior is the sharpest at the front door, and therefore the front door opening threatens the safety of the domestic milieu, part of which is indeed the back door and the backyard.
The polarity that Dove sees between the front and the back doors corresponds to the polarity that exists in the interior of the house with the living room in the front and the kitchen in the back. As with the backyard, she defines these two different parts of the house in relation to their availability to children and in relation to whether they were frequented by women or not. Dove is fascinated with the welcoming space of the kitchen as opposed to the sterile environment of the front room, which, to her experience, used to be preserved, permanently tidy, only for visitors. More specifically, she sees the front room as forbidden territory, while she views the lively environment of the kitchen where children receive food and comfort as anticipating “our reception into the world” (PW 25). The living room, with its covered furniture, “protected from wear and tear as if it were meant to endure forever,” is the least inviting part of the house. It is also a place that infuses a sense of false safety: “the proud owners insisting on long-lasting interior values while the world outside, sometimes even the outside of the house itself, due to neglect, went from decrepit to dangerous” (PW 25). In contrast, the kitchen with the “warmth of the hearth” becomes “a place for conversation, for social intercourse, for oral history. It’s a place where the daughter, home from the wide world, can join her mother . . . and ‘Lean at the sink, listen to her chatter / while the pressure cooker ticks / whole again whole again now’” (“In the Old Neighborhood,” SP xxiv).

The kitchen in the back of the house, which historically has been the legitimate place for women and the “proper place” for a Black person to occupy in white people’s homes, is for Dove central and significant. “[T]hat ancient haven for gossip and nourishment” (PW 48) is the meeting place for neighbors and for members of the family alike, thus constituting a combined public and private space. In its informal milieu hosts all kinds of communications, making it “spiritually speaking, the source of nourishment and intimate communion as well as the repository for folklore and affairs of the soul” (PW 31). Being the spiritual core of the house, the kitchen

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59 The image of the house interiors Dove explores here reflects that of suburban houses in the 1950s and 1960s. The writer confesses her interest in the way American life has been portrayed through TV series from that era (PW 27-28) and marks the continuing influence of various more contemporary TV programs (PW 38).
ultimately offers the most fertile ground for the cultivation of strong
relations, especially among women, who are the ones that frequent it.

In her lectures, in pursuing her overriding argument about the
need for American poets to reach out while retaining their inwardness,
Dove relies heavily upon the discussion of the house as a metaphor,
privileging specifically the kitchen. Clearly, the position of the
kitchen with its always-open door is in this perspective pivotal, since
it is there the connection to the self as well as to the practical wisdom
of the African American culture is made possible. Dove outlines a
correspondence between a daughter leaving home and the poet who
steps out into the world. Using the back door to exit the kitchen, she
claims, a young woman “retains the interior life—that handful of
intimacy—even while she moves away from her own mother’s life”
(PW 28). Conversely, female and ethnic artists who shun the kitchen
run the risk of denying “the positive anima of the spiritual domicile—
its privacy and intimacy, its down-to-earth gratitudes and communal
acceptance” (PW 32). Dove sees how recognition is placed on
entering the house through the front door, but warns against the
difficulties it entails, which force artists to abandon the house and thus
lose their soul. Dove’s remark against venturing out into the streets at
the price of one’s soul is intriguing in the context of my approach,
especially as it also resonates with Giovanni’s work; Giovanni is of
the artists who arguably mastered the streets and yet never abandoned
the kitchen.

Regarding the presence of the house in her work, as in the work
of other poets, Dove finds houses to be embodied in the American
psyche (PW 41). Nevertheless, the physical presence of the house also
heavily affects the process of her poetic creation. The vital influence
of the domestic sphere is evident in detailed descriptions of actual
houses as well as in extensive accounts of domestic routines and
occurrences that are unimportant in a broader literary perspective.
Both in her lectures and in the autobiographical part of The Poet’s
World, Dove maps the space in which she dwells and marks her
satisfaction or dissatisfaction with it. How appealing the room is and
whether the writing process is successful are often interrelated.

60 The titles of her lectures are “stepping out: the poet in the world” (divided into
two parts, “house and yard” and “a toe over the threshold”) and “a handful of
inwardness: the world in the poet.”
For Dove, who continuously refers to the rooms where she has lived, the association of domestic space with creative production is unforced. An early version of *Through the Ivory Gate* is created in a rented house in Dun Laoghaire, Ireland, “in the ground floor dining room, peat fire at my back.” *The Yellow House on the Corner* is completed in a two-story apartment with “whitewashed, light-filled arches and corridors” and windows with a view of the Old City of Jerusalem. In Berlin, different rooms generate different kinds of production: “In that cold ‘loaner’ apartment I wrote short stories in longhand into a red notebook; our oven-warmed room I reserved for writing many of the poems that would make up my second book, *Museum*” (*PW* 89-90). Along with a description of a rented house in France, and the particulars of their daily working schedule, Dove admits that “a temporary rental situation” requires the mind to adjust to “the strange new physical space” and “develop alliances that provoke imagination and creation” (*PW* 49). Yet the parameters within which creation takes place are concrete: after the dishes are washed, in the absence of a television and pinned to a seat for fear of insects, the poet starts to dream (*PW* 49-50). Creativity does not always prevail: in the Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, Italy, together with other scholars and artists strolling through the estate gardens instead of working, the poet ends up simply drowsing, or watching the goldfish in a pond (*PW* 101-102). But when Dove is in the grasp of writing, it is as if a transfusion takes place. The mind exits the real house to move into the house of words.

Giovanni and Dove understand and relate to the house in similar terms, although they approach it from different perspectives. The house image constantly shifts from solid to elusive in shape as well as in terms of location, from functioning as a metaphor to literal manifestations, allowing a range of dynamic combinations of meaning. As traditional homeplace the house stands for origins, affirmation, safety, power of will, connection, and love, but it also signifies hope, freedom, inspiration, imagination, and creation. Viewed as a site where both poets depart from and subsequently return, the house stands as a constantly changing field of empowering possibility.
The House/Home as a Site of Power

In many of the poems by Giovanni and Dove, the female characters move in and around domestic space, but instead of feeling confined or desperate to escape, these Black women seem eager to explore their domestic privileges and often succeed in taking advantage of them to carve out positions of authority. Even though they might occupy conventional feminine territories, or play traditional roles, these women seldom project images of vulnerable, helpless, passive, and as such inferior domesticated women. In several poems they actually appear purposeful and strong as they claim rather than question their importance in the house and adopt inspiring roles in relationships to those around them.

In this section, as an introduction to my exploration of particular strategies that contribute to Black women’s empowerment in the coming chapters, I will illustrate, in a quite general sense, how a woman may position herself in her home (and by extension in the world) and assume an attitude that leads to her empowerment. In the process I will also exemplify a variety of aspects that comprise, or inform, the meaning of home for Black women as discussed above.

“My House” (MH np), the epilogue poem in Giovanni’s volume with the same title, serves to demonstrate quite accurately how the willful rearticulation of one’s domestic experience becomes a strategic move towards a woman’s empowerment. Fowler argues that in My House Giovanni “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” (NG 78). In fact, Fowler sees “My House” as an announcement of Giovanni’s “right to make herself at home in the

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61 Instances where the poets, either directly or through their poetic characters, voice a complaint over the fate of domesticated women are relatively rare.

62 Fowler also notes Giovanni’s insistence that “gender cannot be used as a tool of oppression or trivialization once she decides to define the world as ‘my house’” (NG 77).
world, to claim it and order it as she wishes” (*NG* 74).

“My House” is a powerful expression of a woman’s right to order her experience.

The house in this poem can be seen as a metaphor for the greater world, materializing thus an opening of the private towards the public sphere. But it may also stand for the woman’s life, her primarily private world. Giovanni views 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, functioning as a refrain, the poet challenges the idea that a poem that deals with domestic experience is to be considered less noteworthy or insignificant and, consequently, that domestic experience is uninteresting. In fact, although reminiscent of the confessional poetry of the 50s and the 60s regarding poetic subjectivity, Giovanni’s verse here contains a distinctive boldness.

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 speaker’s actions and thoughts imply an equation of the importance of the private and the public; to her, smiling at old men while enjoying homemade fudge counts as an act of revolution:

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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  (*My House* 68)
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64 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).
This is a revolution, through “human connection and human love” (Fowler, NG 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 (Juhasz 168-169, 174). In “A Very Simple Wish,” a poem addressing violence, she writes of her surprise over how shooting or knifing down people is easier “than to touch skin to skin / anyone whom we like” (WM np). Touching or smiling emerge as loaded forms of expression, not reserved to occur exclusively within the span of intimate interpersonal contacts. Instead, they may also be valid in enlarged, socio-political contexts and as a subversive means of enacting a revolution. Such highly unconventional revolutionary acts are considered more concrete and real in “My House” than the Black revolution taking place in the streets. They therefore constitute far more exceptional and radical alternatives than other acts of resistance.

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” (7). Betts mentions a piece of advice in a poem by Eleanor Ross Taylor, to “Stay here where the suffering’s homemade, sure to fit” (quoted in Betts 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). Homemaking is also recognized as radical by hooks, as mentioned earlier (Yearning 42).

An awareness of the importance of the house as a feminine space dominates Giovanni’s 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

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65 For the importance of the act of touching in more poems, see the chapter “Inspiring Ancestors, Strategic Communications.”
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). Similarly, Fowler highlights the woman’s traditional female role in the poem, yet slides into belittling her actions, 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” (NG 75, 74, italics mine). Both critics obviously ponder over the worth of these allegedly trivial chores and spaces focused on by the poet.

However, the significance of domestic experience is ultimately underlined by the poem’s speaker herself. That is to say, she 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 traditionally expected of women to desire (that is, a house and somebody to care for), and she is inclined to perform chores, some particularly to please her lover. This seems to have a tendency to support a conventional view of women as submissive and self-sacrificing. Yet, this poetic character’s assertion that she is the owner of the house, expressed through the emphatic repetition of the word with the possessive pronoun, conveys a sense of defiance against how her life is perceived. She is the one who decides if she wants to accomplish something, and if so what; she has the power to create (a meal, a quilt, a poem) the right to name (the house, love, a revolution, the poem) and may do both to define her world.66 If the dirty windows restrict her view of what lies outside this world and thus isolate her, she acknowledges that they also shield her from undesirable intervention—after all, the choice whether or not to clean the windows is hers alone.

Her relationship to her lover, who is a guest in her house and the one to whom the poem is dedicated, is based on desire: “everybody has some / thing to give and more / important need something to take.” 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.67

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

66 According to Martha Cook “she is an autonomous being who can shape at least the smaller places of her world to suit her own needs and desires” (293), while Juhasz argues that “[s]he controls not only through need and desire but through strength, ability: ‘i can take the heat’” (172).

67 An earlier poem, “Seduction” (Black Feeling, Black Talk/Black Judgment 38), illustrates vividly how, while in the house, the woman’s relationship to her lover is defined according to her desires and is structured in accordance with her set of meanings. The man there keeps discussing politics while the woman teases him and slowly removes his clothes. As he is about to realize his “state of undresses” she expects him to ask: “Nikki, / isn’t this counterrevolutionary . . . ?” As a Black power poet/activist, Giovanni was expected to dismiss sexual intimacy as politically inappropriate. See also Ekaterini Georgoudaki and Domna Pastourmatzi, Women, Creators of Culture 156-157.
cause its my house
and i plan to live in it (MH 67)

The poem’s narrator in “My House,” like several others that populate the poems of Giovanni and Dove, is comfortable in her traditionally domestic role as she simultaneously achieves liberation on a personal level. Her claiming the rewards of domesticity instead of attempting to refute her position in the home, or abandoning the house altogether, is crucial. The skills to reorganize the conditions of her situation, so as to gain control over her house, show the woman’s ability to find potential for empowerment even in the ostensibly limiting confines of domestic experience.

The ways Black female poetic characters relate to the houses where they dwell, in the poetry of Giovanni and Dove, and consequently the strategies of empowerment they employ there, are defined by and shape their domestic role. The two poets examine the lives of women of all ages and in different stages of their life, who occupy all kinds of domestic milieus, different historical settings and in a variety of geographical locations. Young girls dream about adulthood, old women recollect their youth; women in mid-life, with families and friends, or alone, are in loving relationships or betrayed; professional women as well as housewives struggle daily. Collectively, whether happy or disillusioned, these women claim their lives and anticipate the future with hope. They usually assert themselves through their tasks and responsibilities in and around the house, and sometimes even through their mere presence. Moreover, the ways in which they deal with the burdens of female domestic existence do not necessarily involve taking overtly reactionary positions against victimizing patriarchal attitudes and practices. Still, they seem to succeed in maintaining a distinct autonomy, and sometimes even manage to occupy quite influential positions, affecting those around them.

In the following chapters, I examine the lives of Black women in their domestic environments and discuss the strategies they opt for to empower themselves when their circumstances require it. I look first 68Giovanni’s characters are almost exclusively Black women while in Dove’s work also white women appear, primarily in her historical poems.
into the lives of girls and adolescents, then adult women, and last mature women, before I proceed to the exploration of intergenerational communication as strategic to women’s empowerment.
In *Talking Back*, bell hooks refers to her childhood homeplace and explains how her experiences as a girl at home inspired her writing career. “There, black women spoke in a language so rich, so poetic, that it felt to me like being shut off from life, smothered to death if one were not allowed to participate” (5), she writes, and she continues:

> It was in that world of woman speech, loud talk, angry words, women with tongues quick and sharp, tender sweet tongues, touching our world with their words, that I made speech my birthright—and the right to voice, to authorship, a privilege I would not be denied. It was in that world and because of it that I came to dream of writing, to write. (6)

But hooks also notes that speaking when one was not asked to speak was “a courageous act” because “talking back,” when one was a child, and a girl child in particular, invited punishment (*Talking Back* 5-6). To cope with her need to speak and with the adults’ attempts to suppress her speech and silence her, and in order to maintain her spirit intact, the young hooks had to employ a number of empowering strategies. She repeatedly ignored the threat of punishment and claimed her right to a voice of her own by insisting on talking, asking questions, raising issues, intervening in conversations. As she invariably suffered punishment for her improper interruptions, she started writing in diaries. It became “a way to capture speech, to hold on to it, keep it close,” but it was also a way of “expressing the intensity of [her] sorrow, the anguish of speech—for [she] was always saying the wrong thing, asking the wrong questions” (*Talking Back* 6). Moreover, the fear of the ridicule and humiliation that followed the exposure of her thoughts, when her diaries were discovered in their
provisional hiding places, led her to elaborate on self-protection maneuvers, “choosing [her] hiding places well, learning to destroy work when no safe place could be found” (*Talking Back* 7). hooks kept dreaming of becoming a writer, when becoming one was not realistic.

“Talking back,” hiding, or destroying her written thoughts are empowerment strategies hooks employed as a child. These strategies, together with the access she had to Black women’s collective wisdom in the domestic sphere, contributed to hooks eventually achieving her dream. In part, success was due to her “talking back,” which hooks found to have functioned as “a rite of initiation, testing [her] courage, strengthening [her] commitment, preparing [her] for the days to come” (*Talking Back* 9). Obviously, defiant engagement in the adult women’s world at home enhanced hooks’ opportunity to succeed in the wider society later. She had tested her skills first in a loving context, where also punishment propelled her forward.

While hooks’ strategies in her parental home were those of powerful resistance (and they were offensive as much as they were defensive), in the poetry of Nikki Giovanni and Rita Dove Black girls often employ strategies that are less discernible, or which cannot be easily defined as strategies. Most interestingly, although the girls in the poems tend to avoid taking overtly defiant positions against patriarchal attitudes and practices at home, they manage to maintain a distinct autonomy and at times even succeed in influencing those around them.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which young females relate to the domestic milieus of their childhood homeplaces in affirming and empowering ways in the poems by Giovanni and Dove that focus on the experience of childhood and adolescence at home. Determining which poems and female characters are relevant can be challenging. Sometimes it is difficult to say when a teenager girl starts to behave as an adult woman, like when Beulah in Dove’s *Thomas and Beulah* (1986) flirts and eventually gets engaged to be married to Thomas. Sometimes, as in several of Giovanni’s poems, a young girl interrelates with an adult woman, and one could choose to view their interaction from either the girl’s or the adult’s viewpoint. Here I have included poems where young and teenage girls are present and I have chosen to give their perspective as they interact with others.
Given that Giovanni and Dove have not been as outspoken feminists as hooks, what is of interest to me is to trace how, in their poems, young and teenage characters are situated in the homeplace and, additionally, how these girls navigate their relationships for self-affirmation. More specifically, I am interested in exploring how girls interact and achieve empowerment within domestic contexts that are commonly seen as trivial and unimportant.

How girls operate at home in contrast to their adult counterparts (which is examined in the chapters to follow) is also intriguing. The childhood perceptions of home differ from those of adulthood and old age, primarily due to the different degrees of responsibility girls and women have in the house. However, the nature of these differences is not my main concern here; nor are the girls’ perspectives of home to be considered in isolation. Instead, I view childhood and adolescent standpoints in relation to adult female standpoints as the former set the grounds for, or influence, adult experience and values.

**Living and Learning in Safe Homeplaces**

In the poems of Giovanni and Dove, the home is usually characterized by familial stability. This stability involves loving attitudes in relaxed and enjoyable circumstances, while it also inspires creative commitment on the part of the children. The girls in Giovanni’s and Dove’s poetry grow up and learn about life in safe home milieus and through nurturing family relationships.69

The family homes the two writers portray in their autobiographical poems are idyllic places, whether these be realistic or dreamlike and utopian depictions of existing home milieus, where the children can be safe and carefree. In “Knoxville, Tennessee” (*BFBT* 65)70 Giovanni remembers her childhood as a summer day when she

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69 Commenting on Giovanni’s *Vacation Time* (1980), a volume of poetry for children, Georgoudaki notes that Giovanni portrays the girls in her poems “in a conventional middle class manner” (*Race, Gender and Class Perspectives* 119), which is also valid for Dove’s portrayal of young girls.

70 Also published as an illustrated book for children (1994) with illustrations by Larry Johnson.
could enjoy the vegetables from her father’s garden (fresh corn, okra greens, and cabbage), the food “at the church picnic” (barbecue, buttermilk, and homemade ice-cream), the sounds of gospel, wandering barefooted and feeling warm “all the time / not only when you go to bed / and sleep.” In Dove’s “Grape Sherbet” (Museum 47), the scenes are similar to those in “Knoxville, Tennessee.” As stated in the first line, it is Memorial Day, and the poem’s tone is rather playful, matching the excitement of a family gathering and creating an atmosphere where the children’s carefree games around the graves do not appear improper. The father’s sherbet is, in the children’s eyes, the most special part.  

When they get to enjoy this “masterpiece— / swirled snow, gelled light,” made according to his “secret” recipe and tasting “just how we imagined lavender / would taste” they find that “Each dollop / of sherbet, later, / is a miracle.” They all enthusiastically agree “it’s wonderful!” and come to think “no one was lying / there under our feet, / we thought it / was a joke.” This dessert is for them the materialization of the celebration of life during a particular day. Moreover, being nostalgically remembered, it stands for a celebration of the happy times of childhood.

In complement to the jubilant scenes of “Knoxville, Tennessee” and “Grape Sherbet,” Giovanni’s and Dove’s autobiographical poems also depict the milieus “where the everyday rules of how to live and how to act were established” (hooks, Talking Back 5). In “Nikki-Rosa” (BFBT 58-59), Giovanni becomes indeed lyrical remembering holiday gatherings as well as everyday pleasures: “how happy you were to have / your mother / all to yourself” and also (in a house that did not have an indoor toilet) “how good the water felt when you got your bath / from one of those / big tubs folk in chicago barbecue in.” Giovanni focuses on the importance of her family sticking together, understanding and supporting each other, beyond hardships and poverty, and stresses especially the importance of love: “Black love is

71 Here, as in “Knoxville, Tennessee,” homage is paid to the father; it is he, not the mother, who prepares the sherbet. This is an occasion out of the ordinary and his contribution is obviously cherished. Notably, “Knoxville, Tennessee” and “Grape Sherbet” make short references to grandmothers, but mothers are absent from both poems, the mother figure being commonly associated more with ordinary family circumstances. A similar image, of a father “cooking breakfast,” but with depressing implications, appears in Giovanni’s “Woman Poem” (BFBT 78-80).
Black wealth.” This is an undoubtedly powerful statement, which summarizes the poet’s ideological standpoint via seemingly commonplace insights.

And though you’re poor it isn’t poverty that concerns you and though they fought a lot it isn’t your father’s drinking that makes any difference but only that everybody is together and you and your sister have happy birthdays and very good Christmases and I really hope no white person ever has cause to write about me because they never understand Black love is Black wealth and they’ll probably talk about my hard childhood and never understand that all the while I was quite happy (BFBT 59)

In the poem, Giovanni expands the personal, its immediacy denoted in the narrator’s “you,” towards the familial and the communal, highlighting the transformative potential of assertive will. This idea resonates with Keith Leonard’s perspectives in his analysis of “Nikki-Rosa.” Leonard points to the efforts of Black people “to sustain an affirming communal emotional life” and asserts that the poem is about the togetherness that develops because of poverty, but is at the same time “not characterized at all by suffering.” He further offers insights on the choice of this communality, noting a willingness to “embrace the togetherness over the trouble...not through naiveté but through an empowering sense that the togetherness is validating.” The poet’s exaltation of togetherness signals her eagerness “to redeem suffering or even to sublimate it.” This “transvaluation,” as Leonard calls it (quoting Eddie Glaude), also “transforms mainstream values into distinctive black ones,” whereby Black people can “articulate their own emotional lives”—which is, he suggests, what Giovanni calls love. Giovanni’s “black love,” is, in this sense, “a principle of emotional health and affirmation that both motivates this necessary, chosen togetherness and is created and sustained by it” (621).
Evidently, Black daily life is validated through the expression of a girl’s perspectives, which in turn seem to be of equal weight to the political statements made by the adult poet; the latter are after all a fruit of the former. Virginia C. Fowler notes that Giovanni introduces “Nikki-Rosa” with anecdotes to show the kind of values her parents aspired to convey to their children. Although their house lacked proper plumbing facilities, “it contained hundreds of books as well as a piano,” and Giovanni’s parents succeeded in making their children “feel that whatever they had was best” (NG 7). The material conditions along with the strong family bonds she experienced as a child in a relatively economically disadvantaged but emotionally rich domestic environment shaped the poet’s beliefs and her ethics later in life. In Giovanni’s own words:

I was trained intellectually and spiritually to respect myself and the people who respected me. I was emotionally trained to love those who love me. If such a thing can be, I was trained to be in power—that is, to learn and act upon necessary emotions which will grant me more control over my life (Gemini 33).

Another poem, Dove’s fifteen-stanza long and far more complex “In the Old Neighborhood” (SP xxii-xxvi), recounts a return to the poet’s parental house as an adult, and a journey, through the memories that arise during the visit, back to her childhood. As Dove states in The Poet’s World, the environment of her childhood home was inspiring and provided the children—boys and girls alike—with intellectual challenges. The poet describes a family ritual according to which everyone had to narrate something about their day at the dinner table, a practice that she later came to recognize as “learning how to shape life—or, more precisely, memory” (PW 59). She also notes that even though her parents discussed racial history and discrimination she was raised to believe that “times were changing, and [the children’s’] abilities would be recognized. Education was the key” (PW 59).72 At home, the young Dove was taught to read the newspaper properly and in a structured, matter-of-fact manner, “headlines first, / lead story (continued on A-14), / followed by

72 See also Dove’s interview by Pereira 188.
editorials and / local coverage,” and was exposed to the stimulating influence of books.  

Similarly, the poet’s contact with literature was a part of everyday life. In fact, Dove identifies the books in the bookshelf in association with the foods she ate as a child, while reading them:

I have read every book in this house,  
I know which shelf to go to  
to taste crumbling saltines  
\textit{(don’t eat with your nose in a book)} (SP xxiii)  

In a realist mode (and making specific cultural references), Dove elaborates on how food (sardines, stuffed green olives, Candy buttons, Bazooka bubble gum, Fig Newtons, and bitter lemon), and text existed alongside in the volumes. Likewise, the relationship between the two is regulated by commonplace parental intervention with demands for discipline, materializing here in the mother’s “calling” at bedtime or mealtime.

But Macbeth demanded dry bread,  
crumbs brushed from a lap  
as I staggered off the cushions  
contrite, having read far past  
my mother’s calling. (SP xxiii)

The encouragement of the children to pursue their interests and learn obviously occurs within the parameters of an ordinary domesticated childhood. Along with being guided to find information in the newspaper about the unknown and exciting world “Santiago, / Paris, Dakar—names as / unreal as the future,” they also learn to use

\footnote{Pereira notes that Dove “speaks of her childhood experiences as typically middle class. She studied cello extensively . . . was exposed to literature and reading in a home filled with books, and became fluent in German” (“Interview”184). In Dove’s own words, she “grew up protected, in a loving supportive but also stern environment” (Walsh 145).}

\footnote{The use of “calling” allows a twist of meaning here as the word can also mean devotion.}
the newspaper to deal with mundane but still basic needs, like carrying out the garbage:

as I wrap bones and eggshells
into old newspaper for burning,
folding the corners in
properly,
as I had been taught to do. (SP xxvi)

However, the continuous interplay between the banal and the extraordinary, the everyday and the imagined is proof that this domestic environment is never uniform. This is expressed also through the poem’s form, especially with a set of recurring shifts in time and in space (real or imagined), the intervention of a long dream sequence into the account of lived events, as well as the unsettling effect caused by the sudden introduction of statements and thoughts in direct speech, usually set in italics. This kind of energetic domestic scene constitutes, nevertheless, a stimulating and nurturing context where the girl is provided with the opportunity to learn and, more importantly, to develop her thinking skills.

Concealment, Hiding, and Sharing Knowledge

In the shelter of homes, the empowering strategies employed by girls at an early age are not gender specific; much like the boys, or together with the boys, they find themselves exploring the house and its yard for spaces where they can be alone, or with each other, away from adult control. Hiding and concealment, which were also mentioned earlier, in relation to hooks, are powerful strategies when put in a historical perspective. For African Americans to hide has often been both imperative and empowering. When slaves were on the run, hiding until they reached safety was essential. In addition, hiding their thoughts and their feelings was not only preferable but necessary if they were to maintain their integrity, and disguising their true feelings was commonly practiced in their confrontations with their oppressors.
in order to avoid overexposing themselves and the risk of harassment, or worse, punishment.

In Giovanni’s “The Rose Bush” (Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day 76-77) and in Dove’s “Adolescence—I” (The Yellow House on the Corner 48) hiding offers the appropriate conditions for the development of empowering alliances, while it also infuses a sense of security in the child. In Giovanni’s poem, the childhood home provides a shelter where, as a girl, the speaker could withdraw and feel shielded from unexpected threats and, moreover, where she was able to determine her own beliefs. Speaking as an adult, the woman recalls the time when she could fit “beneath the rose / bush by my grandmother’s porch.” The empowering effect of hiding shows in the boldness of the children who crawl into this secluded corner; on rainy summer days “we laughed my cousins and sister and i / at the foolish old people / and their backward superstitions” when they said “you children be still the lightning’s / gonna get you.”

In contrast, in the absence of the protecting bushes, the insights of childhood are beyond reach and the speaker is overpowered by confusion and helplessness. Struck by a mysterious flash of “lightning” in New York, the young woman realizes that physical growth prevents her from finding a proper hiding place (“i couldn’t have grown so much though / i don’t see why the back of the couch / doesn’t hide me from my sister”) to gain the clarity required to figure out what happens around her. Fowler draws a parallel here, commenting that the speaker is altered by “something as perilous and uncontrollable as the lightning that ‘the foolish old people’ had warned her would ‘get’ her, if she did not remain ‘still’” (NG 94). Away from home and having been hit by this new kind of “lightning” the woman runs aimlessly “to or from what i’m not sure,” indecisive and disorientated.

While the nature of the peril affecting this woman remains untold, the mention of New York implies a contrast between a shielded childhood and her exposure to a more hostile city life. A sense of dislocation and alienation is palpable in the last stanza, its shorter lines carrying the woman’s anxiety “and i run,” “but I was hit.” As a Black person and a woman, the speaker is more likely to be harmed in an urban racialized context than she would at home and, lacking the confidence she felt on sheltered ground, she sinks into a
disempowering state of ambiguity. However, as the young woman revisits the hiding childhood scene in her mind, the memory of her defiant self and the safety of her past produce insights that could help her to regain strength to resolve her troublesome present.

In “Adolescence—I,” collective withdrawal inspires the sharing of important secrets among a group of hiding girls, allowing them to derive strength from private communications: “In water-heavy nights behind grandmother’s porch / We knelt in the tickling grasses and whispered.” Linda, who possesses knowledge about intimacy, with her face grown “wise,” informs the rest that “A boy’s lips are soft, / As soft as a baby’s skin,” a piece of information leaving the girls perplexed and in awe. The whispered words make a great impact on the previously ignorant speaker:

The air closed over her words.
A firefly whirred near my ear, and in the distance
I could hear streetlamps ping
Into miniature suns
Against a feather sky. (SP 42)

This kind of active sharing of experience/knowledge is vital and potentially liberating. The playfulness of the moment, as conveyed in the poem’s language, contrasts the seriousness of the communication, the slightness of the information revealed being nevertheless startling. With their commitment to enlightening each other, the girls’ awareness sharpens, to facilitate perhaps their disclaiming future roles of passivity. In fact, the notion of enlightenment is suggested here figuratively; the sound of the words merges with the sound of different sources of light. The gradual move from ignorance to

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75 Fowler suggests that the young woman is comparable to that of Giovanni’s grandmother whose home “was obliterated by the ‘lightning’ of urban renewal,” a connection that she bases on the fact that the bushes of the childhood home in the poem are “anyway . . . gone” (NG 94). Another allusion here would be to the flight of runaway slaves. But this woman’s uncertainty when on unfamiliar ground is different from the uncertainty of a runaway slave, since a slave was usually purposeful and knew well from what and to where (s)he was running.

76 In “Poem in Which I Refuse Contemplation,” the girl is again in the crawl space, but now alone with a boy: “we were ten in the crawl space / but I can’t feel his hand who knows / anymore” (GN 19-20).
knowledge is audiovisual. First, there is the pale light of a buzzing firefly, then the streetlamps, which in turn explode into suns.

A poem which tentatively ties together the image of the house with the emotional state of a girl having experienced a first, confusing, encounter with a boy is the “First Kiss” (SP 48). It is a short but complex poem, which is not about hiding per se, but rather lifts the effects of uncovering, and having to deal with things hidden:

And it was almost a boy who undid the double sadness I’d sealed away.
He built a house in a meadow no one stopped to admire,

and wore the wrong clothes. (SP 48)

The tone is less triumphant here than in “Adolescence—I,” and there is one agent, a mediator, who acts to help the girl out of her “double sadness.” This mediation reveals her strategy of having “sealed away” this sadness, perhaps discomforts difficult to deal with and left aside. It also links the construction of an odd “house in the meadow” to the release of the girl into new states of awareness. The encounter with this “almost a boy” wearing the “wrong clothes,” is in a sense unconventional, he seems determined and defiant, “Nothing / seemed to get in his way,” and, in the face of the girl’s insecurities, his motives are inexplicable. Still, he is a catalyst for her, while taking her first steps towards adolescence, to confront these insecurities. The “undoing” of sadness leaves her confused, she asks him to leave, yet she seeks to find him and understand him. But, he has become, through memory, part of herself—he is resurrected in her—and what the girl learns is that memories pertain and that controlling the outside might be far less complicated than controlling the inside:

I promised him anything if he would go. He smiled

and left. How to re-create his motives irretrievable
as a gasp? Where else
to find him, counter-rising
in me, almost a boy. …”  (SP 48)

Giovanni’s *The Girls in the Circle* (2004)\(^{77}\) illustrates far more concretely the use of concealment as strategy of empowerment employed by girls within a domestic context. It is a poem addressing young readers, but as both Giovanni and the volume’s illustrator, Cathy Ann Johnson, note, it carries their own childhood memories. What is more, it is a poem where, through the young girls’ rehearsal of adult women’s experience, women of all ages are brought together.

In this playful poem, the girls play dress-up in a manner they have picked up from watching their mothers and grandmothers, engaging in a gender- and race-specific performance: painting their toes, braiding their hair, applying face powder and perfume.

The girls in the circle
have painted their toes.

They twisted their braids
with big yellow bows.

They took Grandma’s face powder
and powdered each nose.

They sprayed *Evening in Paris*
all over their clothes. (*The Girls in the Circle* 5-11)

The girls perform according to what in their perspective marks a glorified adult womanhood, as prescribed by and celebrated in patriarchy. At the risk of stereotyping, one could claim that fancy dresses, high heels, and jewelry complete the expected/desired image of a female. Since they are oblivious of the burden these

\(^{77}\) As part of Giovanni’s later work and, moreover, having been published as a children’s book, this poem was not one I originally intended to examine. I include it, however, as I find that it clearly makes the point I am arguing and perhaps more so than other poems in this chapter. Not commenting on it would be an omission.
expectations and yearnings might entail for them as adults, the girls enjoy enacting their version of womanhood.

Along with their excitement over their transformation, however, there is a sense of trespassing into the adult world, expressed in a feeling of impending disapproval: “Mother may not be amused.” The fleeting unease is dissolved and they resume being cheerful, until their merriness is overshadowed by a newly felt sense of confinement.

The girls in the circle now tease and giggle.

They look so grown up with that high heel wiggle.

Their pearls are flapping. Their dresses flow.

They are so sorry they have no place to go. (GC 17-23)

The girls are caught in a limiting domestic scene, its atmosphere of excitement and festive spirit still failing to accommodate their expectations for greater escapades. Fueled by anticipation, as inspired by their wearing “Evening in Paris,” they entertain the idea to show off their glamorous attire in public. After their spectacular transformation the girls’ chances for gratification lie outside.

Nevertheless, to leave the house, when their mother will not “drive them / anywhere / looking like that!” the girls must compromise. At this point, while recognizing the need to conform to what is appropriate and acceptable, they begin to subvert given meanings. As they change into their plain clothes and walking shoes, their pearls and high heels removed, a trace of their previous makeover remains for them to cherish: their toes are still painted. This gives them a shared awareness that the transformation back to their normal appearance is not complete.

The girls in the circle
have changed their clothes.
They are tying their shoes
which are hiding those toes.

Mother thinks they took
that red polish off…
but they didn’t!  (GC 27-29)

*The Girls in the Circle* clearly exemplifies the employment of strategies of empowerment. The girls here do not bother to fuss at their mother’s refusal to take them anywhere dressed up and comply to change in order to get out. However, while in accordance with her wishes they abandon the idea of showing off, by keeping their red toenails they do not yield to her authority completely. To achieve what they want, they are seemingly obedient, and at the visual level, they resume their figures, but, defiantly, they keep a trace of their makeover and do not fully abide to her requirements. As the painted toes are concealed in shoes, their secret is a hidden attempt at “resistance” that might appear negligible. Still, this stealthy act of concealment creates a secret bond among them, based on a silent version of hooks’ “talking back.” Their compromise occurs along with a minor hidden rebellion, which may look pointless, but has noteworthy implications: it involves an empowering piece of knowledge, a change of the meaning of what is understood as allowed, accepted, and appropriate. This change is subtle but it is effective exactly because it is hidden: what the mother knows is different from what they know. Having resisted a bit by partly defying, or at least challenging, an adult’s authority, the girls enjoy a sense of exciting empowerment.

The fact that their defiance, however slight, is enacted collectively strengthens the girls further. The repetition of the line “the girls in the circle” throughout the poem suggests an inner circle of shared knowledge that the girls foster. Concealment within a circle is strategic and empowering, as is the covert active sharing of experience; their rebellion, unseen by the mother, remains intact, even as they appear to be complying. The implications of the girls’ behavior are, moreover, larger than they appear at first, their acts being entrenched in an African American historical context: during
slavery, but even after emancipation, concealment was perhaps the only way for African Americans to achieve freedom. Resorting to concealment brings the girls into the same circle of ancestral practices to handle defeat and strive for achievement. The poem’s last image is indeed powerful and celebratory, showing the girls, their brother, and their mother seated around a table, the youngest girl’s shoe pictured midair: hers is a triumphal move, the shoe kicked off in mischief, the toes of her bare foot now visible, her nails colored red.

**Homebound Imaginative Flights**

Similar to physical hiding, young girls also attempt “imaginative flights,” a term I have borrowed from Ekaterini Georgoudaki’s comment on Gwendolyn Brooks’ poetry: “moments of solitude, privacy, imaginative flights, and inner freedom from adult restrictions are important for Brooks’s girls—her boys appear more extroverted and action oriented” (*Race, Gender and Class Perspectives* 119). In Dove’s “Adolescence—II” (*SP* 43), a comic free verse poem written in the mode of magical realism, has a hiding teenager girl visited and teased by “three seal men”: “although it is night, I sit in the bathroom waiting / Sweat pricks behind my knees, the baby breasts are alert.” They ask “Can you feel it yet?” and, confused about the implications of an impending sexual awakening, the girl admits “I don’t know what to say, again.” Though her anxieties are not resolved, as the simile of the night resting “like a ball of fur” on the girl’s tongue in the poem’s last line indicates, before they “vanish” and she is left alone “at the edge of darkness,” these strange creatures of her imagination infuse in her a shred of hope that she might “feel it,” or “know what to say,” “maybe next time.”

In two other poems by Dove, “Fantasy and Science Fiction” (*Grace Notes* 15) and “Geometry” (*YH* 17), the girls’ fantasies are dominated by the image of the house. In “Fantasy and Science Fiction,” reading is seen as metaporphic space of habitation and

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78 Words like “flight” and “escape” are strongly charged with historical meanings within an African American context.
growth, whereby the pages of books and magazines enable an escape from a girl’s everyday life.79 These imaginary escapes are portrayed as concrete departures from the house. Especially intriguing is the attempted exit from the paternal home in the first stanza of the poem, where the imagined destination is a house, the mirror image of the house of the girl’s parents. The girl, looking out of the front door, sees the building’s identical duplicate but is aware that this new house is different:

I knew if I crossed the street and entered,  
taking living room, stairwell and landing  
in reverse, I’d end up on my knees  
in a house my parents never owned nor dreamed of owning  
in the dark not daring  
to open my eyes. (GN 15)

This is indeed her house, her mind’s creation, a place she controls. Her existence in its mirror-image space is not only different from her existence as defined in her parents’ house, but also changed far beyond their expectations.

The poet offers a glimpse of how liberating and enabling such an imagined exit can be in the third stanza:

Sometimes, shutting a book and rising,  
you can walk off the back porch  
and into the sea—though  
it’s not the sort of story you tell your mother. (GN 16)

The girl is all-powerful when she daydreams. She can envision going to places and attempting deeds that would worry her mother. Still, out of a wide range of possible destinations, her wandering mind takes her

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79 In The Poet’s World, Dove writes about her fascination with a science fiction story she had read in one of her brother’s magazines. There, a mentally retarded boy builds a junk sculpture that turns to be the doorway to a new dimension, where the boy’s town exists as its mirror image and the boy himself is the town’s hero (78-79). Dove claims to have identified herself with this boy: “I identified with that village idiot, because the place I felt most alive was between the pages of a book, while in real life I was painfully shy and awkward” (78).
just across the street and into another house. Moreover, the hesitation expressed in the conditional “if I crossed the street” implies that her departure at this stage is in fact uncertain. It could be claimed that her thought/dream is only the exploration of the possibility to leave, a hypothetical exit. In any case, the girl’s imaginary escapes are heavily influenced, if not inspired, by the physical presence of houses; this presence is so dominating that it affects the girl’s span of imagination.  

Daydreaming is taken further in “Geometry,” where the figure of the house frames a young girl’s imagination, but its solid image is altered to abstraction. “Either the house metaphorically portrays the mind, or the mind-blowing expansion blasts the house apart,” notes Steffen (Crossing Color 24). Either way, closed space dissolves into openness. While the girl is physically indoors doing her homework, her fierce ability, declared in iambic pentameter in the poem’s first line (Alexander 55), causes the house to open up, and its walls to grow transparent so that she can “catch a glimpse of the possibilities of the Open” (PW 21):

I prove a theorem and the house expands:
the windows jerk free to hover near the ceiling,
the ceiling floats away with a sigh.

As the walls clear themselves of everything
but transparency, the scent of carnations
leaves with them. I am out in the open

And above the windows have hinged into butterflies,
sunlight glinting where they’ve intersected.
They are going to some point true and unproven.  (YH 21)

Even when the visit to a less domestic science fiction landscape becomes possible, in the second stanza, the dominating image is again a building, this time a skyscraper.

See also Alexander’s (58-60) and Vendler’s (The Given and the Made 67-68) analysis of “Geometry.” Samuel Delany has however criticized Vendler’s analysis and her pronouncing this poem a poem of perfect wonder and the best poem of the Grace Notes volume. Dealny argues that Vendler seems to like “Geometry” because Dove “has not a word to say about the fraught subject of blackness” (quoted in Tucker 29).
Alexander speaks of the girl’s empowerment in terms of her achievement and the recognition of her “complex subjectivity” (55). Equally instrumental in contributing to feelings of liberation, in my view, is the transformation of the house to open-endedness in her fantasy, once the problem is solved. Notably, the house itself is by no means rejected; the poem’s tone “of possibility and development” (Pereira *Cosmopolitanism* 68) incorporates its presence as it bursts into a new shape: the house’s windows, morphed into butterflies, reach towards the world of possibilities that suddenly lies visible. Because the “open” appears right where the familiar existed, the girl can feel confident to explore it. Evidently, the pervasiveness of the house in the imaginative undertakings of a young girl does not necessarily signify withdrawal and passivity.

*(Re)Visions of Adult Life*

As girls reach puberty and start to confront their future womanhood, their imaginative flights are increasingly grounded in and shaped by the domestic reality they recognize in adult women’s lives. Consequently, some of these flights are not particularly radical and they somewhat reinforce the girls’ bleak prospects. In Giovanni’s “For Theresa” and “Adulthood (For Claudia),” both from *Black Judgement* (93-94, 68-70), and in Dove’s “Hully Gully” (GN 14) and “Adolescence—III” (YH 50), girls tend to anticipate their lives in ways that reaffirm rather than question traditional gender roles. These coming of age poems offer, nonetheless, a renegotiation of the conditions of these roles.

In “For Theresa” a teenage girl’s friendship with an adult woman alters the girl’s idea of life, as it promotes a vital reshaping of her priorities when it comes to emotional labor.82 The immediacy of the girl’s plight is presented in an unpunctuated first person account of her mundane state: her feelings of solitude, boredom, and an overall

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82 “For Theresa” can also be examined from a strategic interaction/communication perspective, but here I rather focus on the revisionary effect the friendship has on the young girl’s perceptions of adult womanhood.
sense of abandonment in view of the limiting prospects that lie ahead of her. The girl’s perspectives initially match conventional patterns of domesticated existence:

and when i was all alone
facing my adolescence
looking forward
to cleaning house
and reading books
and maybe learning bridge
so that i could fit
into acceptable society
acceptably (BFBT 93)

Vaguely disappointed, the girl might be “looking forward” to what she knows to be “acceptable.” Recognizing herself as “being black and bitchy / hateful and scared,” she experiences the increase of unsettling moods, of dissatisfaction rooted in an internal conflict. The source of confusion is that her blackness, bitchiness, hatred, and fear are most unacceptable and will therefore eventually hinder her social approval.

The reaffirming mediation of a friendship with a loving female figure becomes instrumental for the girl’s rescue from self-hatred and defeat. Theresa loves the girl with her given traits and allows her to own her personality. Their interaction also involves the reinforcement of traditional views on family. While the cause of the girl’s worries is not diminished, an enlargement of her horizons begins to take place as she learns “all the things necessary / to adulthood” that will help her manage. The reassessment of unconditional love and self-sacrifice occurs while at the same time encouraging self-love. So, while the cadence of the imperatives the girl faces continues, the contrastive conjunction “but” interrupts and modifies a supposedly pre-determined social identity:

that i should love
pepe [her nephew]
but not too much
and give to gary [her sister]
but not all of me
and keep on moving
‘til i found me (BFBT 94)

Theresa does not advocate evasion of family obligations. Her standpoint is rather a warning against unconditional commitment; she advises avoiding being reduced to a nurturing figure and cautions against being available and eager to sacrifice oneself while accommodating the needs of others. Ultimately, the girl is guided to give certain priority to herself, to dedicate attention to her own development.

In “Adulthood,” a young girl’s dreams come true and a real flight from home is eventually undertaken, but is later reconsidered. Here the primary strategy, the girl’s insistence on her right to dream and aspire for the future, bears fruit, but hopelessness brings regret and regressive reflection. In retrospect, the poem’s now adult speaker remembers her initial insecurity and lack of confidence, how she “usta wonder who i’ be / when i was a little girl in indianapolis,” how she felt meaningless, wondering “if life / would give me a chance to mean,” and opted for “withdrawal from all things / not like my image.” This feeling of “basic powerlessness” prevailed even during her adolescence:

when i was a teen-ager i usta sit
on front steps conversing
the gym teacher’s son with embryonic eyes
about the essential essence of the universe
(and other bullshit stuff) (BFBT 68)

Having outgrown her previous petty concerns that led to withdrawal and eager to evade the domestic sphere, as figuratively shown in her occupying the house’s “front steps,” the girl’s interest shifts to other, equally insignificant matters. Later, having left home, she, nevertheless, becomes disillusioned about the outside world. The tone then changes from directly ironic and critical early in the poem to more objectively reflective of the young woman’s discouragement and

83 In “Dreams,” Giovanni says she dreamed “before i learned / black people aren’t / supposed to dream” (BFBT 74).
disappointment. From discovering how “from involvement with things approaching reality / i could have a life” and hoping that “all good people could get together and win,” she becomes bitterly disappointed after a series of assassinations of political leaders important to the Black Revolution. These disturbing deaths shatter her beliefs and lead her to reconsider alternatives likely to have spared her the pain:

and i sometimes wonder why i didn’t become a debutante
sitting on porches, going to church all the time, wondering
is my eye make-up on straight
or a withdrawn discoursing on the stars and moon (BFBT 69-70)

The idea of turning towards what she used to consider an uninspiring domesticated existence is tempting but obviously ironic. Giovanni’s parody of Romantic lyricism (“embryonic eyes,” “the essential essence of the universe”) in contrast to her powerful use of the Black vernacular (involving repetitions “i usta wonder,” “i usta sit,” and street expressions like “bullshit stuff”) corresponds to the contrast between the lack of political consciousness of the fifties and the commitment to political change during the late sixties. Giovanni privileges the struggle with its potential for personal and communal fulfillment, so in reevaluating her situation, her persona faces the painful necessity to accept the perils the complexity of her Black identity exposes her to.84

The theme in “Adulthood” runs parallel to the poetic theme of Giovanni’s “Dreams” (BFBT 74) and “Revolutionary Dreams” (WM np). In “Dreams” a woman claims to have dreamed naively as a young girl, “before i learned / black people aren’t / supposed to dream.” But later, as she “grew and matured,” she replaces her ambitions of becoming a singer with a “more sensible” decision to “settle down / and just become / a sweet inspiration.” This self-adjustment and

84 In a later poem, Giovanni follows up and negotiates further the issue left unresolved here writing that “the times / make requirements that we dream / real dreams,” and “require that i give / myself willingly and become / a wonder woman” (“The Wonder Woman,” MH 28). See also the end of “Revolutionary Dreams.”
modifying of one’s expectations to fit their circumstances is valid also in “Revolutionary Dreams.” In Giovanni’s powerful verse, “militant / dreams of taking / over america” and “radical dreams / of blowing everyone away with my perceptive powers / of correct analysis” are abandoned for “natural / dreams of being a natural / woman” supported by the insight that “doing what a woman / does when she’s natural / i would have a revolution.” Although the poet’s claim here rings controversial (and is highly essentialist), her twist is unexpected and refreshing. Placed at the end of the poem, the suggestion that “natural” female traits and ways of being can be revolutionary is certainly radical and highly subversive.

While “For Theresa” and “Adulthood” offer retrospective reflections over girlhood as the origin of empowered womanhood, in Dove’s “Hully Gully,” the teenage girls seem unconcerned about their future prospects. It can be argued that their superficial thoughts and easygoing behavior comprise a kind of protective strategy: an attempted disavowal of the impact their parents’ lives will have on their own, by detaching themselves from any such worries. These girls are preoccupied with themselves, interested in little more than their appearance, popular music, and having a good time, while ignoring the gloomy adult reality: “as they leaned their elbows / into the shells of lemons, / they were humming, they were humming.” Their world, before they are caught in the snares of married life in the 50s or perhaps early 60s, is dreamy. They spend their days at home, in self-imposed isolation from their surroundings, “Locked in bathrooms for hours, / daydreaming in kitchens,” and wait for the evenings to get dressed up, step out and enjoy themselves. Along with their imaginary escapes their departures from the house are also physical, first through the porch, where “porch geraniums / rocked the grandmothers to sleep” and then “down / the swollen pitch of avenue.”

In the poem’s last stanza, however, the poet sets the girls’ carefree existence against the less glorious life of their parents:

daughters floating above the ranks of bobby socks.
Their was a field to lie down in
While fathers worked swing shift and
Wives straightened oval photographs
Above the exhausted chenille
In bedrooms upstairs everywhere. . . . (GN 14)

The past tense of the narration throughout the poem, along with the pervasiveness hinted by its ending line point to a bleak outcome beyond adolescence. Here, “everywhere” implies that the girls, upon their return home and through marriage, are inevitably headed for a fate similar to that of their domesticated mothers. Their casual departures from home are merely a privilege of youth and quite likely to be temporary.

“Adolescence—III” (YH 50), a poem similar to “Hully Gully” but written from the first person perspective, also records the life and the expectations of adolescent girls. In the first stanza, the girl, who is in the garden with her mother (“With Dad gone, Mom and I worked / The dusky rows of tomatoes”), recognizes in the ripeness of the tomatoes her own budding maturity. She knows that the innocence of her prim undergarment is slowly outgrown: “I too / grew orange and softer, swelling out / Starched cotton slips.” While working in the garden she starts daydreaming; the color of the sky associatively links with cloth, then dresses, which bring her back to her room:

The texture of twilight made me think of
Lengths of Dotted Swiss. In my room
I wrapped scarred knees in dresses
That once went to big band dances;
I baptized my earlobes with rosewater.
Along the window-sill, the lipstick stubs
Glittered in their steel shells. (MH 50)

Old dresses trigger the girl’s imagination about her mother’s or even grandmother’s youth, and now that her body is physically ripe she starts to prepare herself for a similar course. She still has scarred

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85 As the boring life of women is balanced against their husbands’ toil, it appears doubtful that either is more privileged. The same occurs in Giovanni’s “Mothers” (MH 6): “she was very deliberately waiting / perhaps for my father to come home / from his night job or maybe for a dream.”

86 The girl, like her mother in this poem, is at home. The father is absent from the house—he probably is at work—and returns only in the last stanza. For Dove’s thoughts on the father’s role see The Poets World (19-21).
knees but tries to hide them. The rosewater and the tidily arranged lipsticks (which in their “steel shells” invoke associations of ammunition casings), testify that she longs for what is about to come.

Looking out of the rows of clay
And chicken manure, I dreamed how it would happen:
He would meet me by the blue spruce,
A carnation over his heart, saying,
“I have come for you, Madam;
I have loved you in my dreams.”
At his touch, the scabs would fall away. (MH 50)

When the teenage girl claims her right to dream, all is magic. The imagined lover’s touch has the power to beautify her and her world, making her a woman. At the same time, her aspirations are also disturbingly clear and concrete; ironically, all the preparations, whether physical or mental, seek their fulfillment in a man through romance.

Claiming One’s Ground

The girls’ position at home entitles them to a kind of elevated domestic status, which, in courtship situations, makes them superior to boys/young men. Although their role on such occasions is meant to be passive, the girls exhibit an awareness of their power and do not hesitate to make use of it, to seduce, or intimidate, their beaus.

In Dove’s “A Suite for Augustus: Planning the Perfect Evening” (YH 27), a girl deliberately lets her date wait, to enhance the effect of her eventual appearance: “I keep him waiting, tuck in the curtains, / buff my nails (such small pink eggshells). / As if for the last time, I descend the stair.” It is obvious that coquetry here is both conscious and purposeful. Spending extra time on her nails is equivalent to the girl’s preparation to impose her authority over the boy waiting downstairs: “He stands penguin-stiff in a room so quiet we forget it is there.” The posture of the boy in the quiet room is not relaxed, partly because of the clothes he is wearing but also because he is on less
familiar ground than she is. Thus, according to her plans, the beginning of the “perfect evening” finds the girl in an advantageous position and enables a more confident attitude on her part during the rest of the date. The psychological setting she has created for the evening leaves her more comfortable than him, as witnessed in the tone of her casual comments on his appearance and his failed efforts to impress her on the dance floor: “Ah, / Augustus, where did you learn to samba? / And what is that lump below your cummerbund?” This is, of course, a crude and humorous assault on his masculinity.

Similarly, in “Courtship” (TB 16-17), the courting Thomas lingers around Beulah’s house, feeling uncomfortable and out of place. When his presence in the neighborhood (“up and down the block / waiting—for what?”) does not produce the desired results because she “won’t set a foot / in his turtledove Nash, / it wasn’t proper,” the young Thomas has to step into her house to pursue her:

Then the parlor festooned
like a ship and Thomas
twirling his hat in his hands
wondering how did I get here.
China pugs guarding a fringed settee
where a father, half-Cherokee,
smokes and frowns.
I’ll give her a good life—
what was he doing,
selling all for a song? (TB 17)

Beulah’s appearance in the poem is faceless (“Her pleated skirt fans / softly, a circlet of arrows”) yet she is definitely not passive and Thomas, met by her “arrows,” feels compelled to claim her, giving his guarantees to her disapproving father. Although the discussion here takes place in a traditional manner, between men, the daughter is the actual director of the scene. The house is staged to welcome the prospective fiancé, the father seated king-like in the parlor to establish authority. The effect on Thomas is bewilderment. He associates her home with a ship, giving expression to his feelings of uncertainty and perhaps even fear. The shifts from reported to direct speech in the
account of his thoughts, whereby his spoken words dramatize his state of mind.

Beulah’s stance, however, is governed throughout the affair by the need to keep the situation under control, her main concern being to have their conduct remain proper. She keeps her ground around her parents’ house and refuses to join her prospective lover outdoors; his eligibility is determined by his ability to follow her around and navigate at her command.

A commentary on Beulah’s perspective in the poem “Courtship, Diligence” (TB 50) appears in Dove’s short story “Second-Hand Man” (Fifth Sunday 23-29), which is, I would argue, a prose version of the poem (Virginia there being an alias for Beulah). In “Second-Hand Man,” Dove illustrates the girl’s strategies in her effort to impose her will, as she, step by step, allows her lover to proceed (his movement being traced schematically from the street through the porch and into her house):

She knew he was the man. She’d know it a long while but she was just biding her time. He called on her the next day. She said she was busy with canning peaches. He came back the day after. They sat on the porch and watched the people go by. He didn’t talk much, except to say her name like that: “Vir-gin-ee-a,” he said “you’re a mighty fine woman.” She sent him home a little after that. He showed up again a week later. She was angry and told him she didn’t have time for playing around. But he’d brought his twelve-string guitar, and he’d been practicing all week just to play a couple of songs for her. She let him in then and made him sit on the stool while she sat on the porch swing. (FS 25)

The girl keeps to her ways even though she realizes she is in love. After their meetings outside, she orchestrates a gradual retreat into the house, allowing him to advance, not too quickly and always guarded by certain (implied) rules of decency:

87 For an insightful analysis of “Courtship” and “Courtship, Diligence” see Lisa Steinman 434-435. “Second-Hand Man” also covers the theme of “The Summit Beach 1921” (GN 3), see below.
She didn’t let him know it though, not for a long while. . . .
No, he courted her proper. Every day for a little while.
They’d sit on the porch until it got too cold and then they’d sit in the parlor with two or three bright lamps on. . . .
Everything had to be proper. He got down, all trembly, on one knee and asked her to be his wife. She said yes. There’s a point when all this dignity and stuff get in the way of Destiny. He kept on trembling; he didn’t believe her.
“What?” he said. “I said yes,” Virginia answered. She was starting to get angry. (FS 26-27)

His presence around her house follows the conditions set, at some point even capriciously, by the girl. Thomas’ emphasized trembling and his insecurity about the outcome of his effort as he finally proposes to her are dramatically juxtaposed with her short and confident assertion. The house is for Virginia a sturdy base where she can operate confidently and it provides space where she can assert herself. For Thomas the domestic setting, initially unfamiliar and intimidating ground, will take time to cease being unsettling.88

Black girls like Beulah never have the chance to leave the house without running the risk of defying set expectations about (gendered) proper behavior.89 There is never a rebellion against these expectations, but not because they lack the nerve to challenge their conditions. Instead, given the oppression facing their Black families in the struggle to be integrated into the American mainstream during the first half of the twentieth century, these girls are too well behaved to consider rebellion as an option. So upon marriage, they simply move from the homeplace of their parents to homeplaces of their own. Consequently, their opportunities to sustain and strengthen themselves

88 Six months into their marriage, Virginia finds out about her husband’s past (that he had been married, that his wife had died in childbirth and had left him with a disabled child). She holds him at gunpoint for three days and three nights, waiting for him to sleep so that she can shoot him (FS 25).

89 In “Magic” (TB 48-49), the young Beulah has a sign that “she would make it to Paris one day.” Years later, in “The Great Palaces of Versailles” (TB 63-64), she still thinks about Paris, but it is now obvious that she will never go there. Inspired by her library readings about French ladies, she then “face[s] last year’s gray skirt” with an extravagantly colorful lining. Her determination to enjoy any glamour she can afford finds its fulfillment in the pleasure she derives from wearing the skirt.
remain in the house and their empowerment is derived from the ways they maneuver within and use the space that is available to them.

**Departures and Returns**

In some poems by Dove, girls have the opportunity to actually leave home. This is in line with an observation Betts makes in the introduction to *Southern Women Writers*: “While place and the homeplace are still strong, each year female characters and their creators want, not rooms of their own, but even larger spaces” (Inge 5).\(^{90}\) Notably, however, even girls who undertake strategic departures and become empowered through their achievements in the greater world eventually return home, validating thus their domestic origins. Their departures are in fact fascinating when seen in the context of what the home holds for the girls and in relation to their future return. Likewise, the appreciation of the domestic sphere weighs heavily when demonstrated by those who have experienced the world outside.

In Dove’s “Augustus Observes the Sunset,” “Wake,” and “Back,” all three from the six-poem sequence “A Suite for Augustus” (*YH* 25-30), and in “Backyard, 6 A.M” (*GN* 43) the house is a site of departures as well as a place that—whatever grief it holds—is safe to return to.\(^{91}\) In “Augustus Observes the Sunset” the setting is reminiscent of the domestic setting in “Adolescence—III.” But the atmosphere here is more charged, the poetic voice is intense, the tone eruptive. In the bizarre blending of images of natural elements (the sun, the air, the sky) and different kinds of food, words like “conspiracy,” “burns,” and “silence” suggest unrest while “spreading,” “swelling,” and “growing” indicate expansion.

July. The conspiracy of colors—

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\(^{90}\) On Dove’s experience in Germany, see her interview with Kitchchen (233).

\(^{91}\) Another poem about return to the parental home is “A Father Out Walking on the Lawn” (see *PW* 57-58). Also relevant is the first part of “The Other Side of the House” (*GN* 37) but this poem, along with “Backyard, 6 A.M.,” as Dove explains, examines “the perimeters of new motherhood” (*PW* 28). The departure/return theme could be seen as a point of transition from childhood and adolescence to adulthood.
Ketchup, marshmallows, the tub of ice,  
Bacon strips floating in pale soup.  
The sun, like a dragon spreading its tail,  
Burns the blue air to ribbons.

Eastward, the corn swelling in its sockets,  
A wall of silence, growing. (YH 28)

As the cadence of sharp exchanges in the interplay between the above images culminates in the self-addressing question “What are you doing in your own backyard / Holding your coat in your arms?”, it is clear that an immediate departure is at stake.

This departure, which takes place in the backyard and is negotiated between what is well known (foods from the kitchen and the garden) and the unknown (the state of the weather) is not an ultimate exit. However decisive the line “There is so much to do!—You pack” may sound, it is not the poem’s final. Instead, the last two lines echo those at its beginning and the tension between “spareribs and snow-puffed potatoes” and “The sky shakes like a flag” is left unresolved. As home is projected through its nurturing function, the exit from it is non-definitive, similar to the exit in Dove’s “The Other Side of the House” (GN 37), where “extension cords” are mentioned, leaving is here rather an act of expansion, with the ties to the house kept intact (PW 28).

In any case, for Dove’s female characters, leaving home in pursuit of experience does not entail the rejection of home and its importance. While in “Wake” the girl takes the direction “eastward, following rivers,” in “Back,” she is “scholarshed / to Europe and back” and can face the circumstances at home from new perspectives. “Wake” and “Back” do not address feelings or attitudes towards home, as the poet explores the consequences her absence has had on a relationship with “a young boy.” But in the autobiographical “Backyard, 6 A.M” (GN 43), Dove, a young woman now, shows openly her delight to be back home and cherishes the safety of its

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92 While “Backyard, 6 A.M” is not about adolescence, its inclusion here sheds light on how home is experienced upon return after having experienced the wide world; the poem could be viewed as rounding off the transition from childhood into adulthood—see also the previous footnote.
solid ground as her reward: “I swore to be good and the plane didn’t / fall out of the sky.” The domestic setting of the backyard is to her “the floor of the world,” which makes the existence there with any pleasures or grief it might hold difficult to dismiss as simple or uncomplicated.93

I have discussed imaginary as well as real flights from the house in poems featuring both younger and teenage girls and argued for the empowering potential of flights when viewed in relation to and conditioned by the presence of a house. A poem where the complexity of the issue of leaving home becomes apparent through the portrayal of the dynamism hidden within a girl/the young Beulah as she tries to enact her desire before she must settle is “The Summit Beach 1921” (GN 3)—a poem that thematically belongs to the Thomas and Beulah series, but which instead opens Grace Notes (Pereira Cosmopolitanism 121).

Elements existing in other poems so far (a rural domestic scene, a perplexing sense ahead of a flight) are also present here, but the final scene of this poem references a striking incident. Apparently, harboring a fantasy to take flight, the girl proceeds with a bizarrely real take off, jumping from the top of a tin roofed shed:

She could feel
the breeze in her ears like water,
like the air as a child when
she climbed Papa’s shed and stepped off
the tin roof into blue,

with her parasol and invisible wings. (GN 3)

Naive as it might be, this is a genuine move, entirely viable from a child’s perspective; the girl does not only aspire to fly away, or

93 Speaking metaphorically about her poetic work in terms of departures and homecoming, Dove also links the home to her poetry and the artistic liberty she gradually came to experience: “After Museum I felt I had gone away from home and was now able to return, like a prodigal daughter. Thomas and Beulah (1986) represents my homecoming . . . To me, Grace Notes (1989) was a book of freedom—having come home again, I was free to fly in whatever direction I chose” (“On Voice” 111).
imagines her flights but she actually acts to reach that aim of “impossible freedom” (Pereira Cosmopolitanism 121), only to hit the ground and break a leg.

Confronted with reality a few years later, Beulah appears reformed and set to conform to norms regarding proper behavior. Sitting on the beach during a party and determined not to be “so fast” in flirting she plays her role effortlessly, “She was cold, / thank you, she did not care to dance—,” despite the constant reminder of “the scar on her knee winking / with the evening chill” (GN 3). Beulah demonstrates what she has learned from that childhood incident, namely that she would need to contain her impatience and channel her desires through exit routes more appropriate and realistic:

> Her knee had itched in the cast
> till she grew mean from bravery.
> She could wait, she was gold.
> When the right man smiled it would be
> music skittering up her calf

like a chuckle. (GN 3)

Beulah carries the scar as a reminder of her rebellious spirit along with the insight to adjust to her chances and be content with what she would realistically encounter, a loving partner. Having failed in her original endeavor to lift herself up in the air and leave, she will have to settle for the next alternative available to her. While there are aspects of defeat, compromise, and acceptance of one’s lot, there is also intense purposefulness from having grown “mean from bravery,” as well as the anticipation of happiness, the expectation of another kind of uplifting, now through the “music skittering up her calf.”

This poem is very suggestive and complex in references and associations, involving the body, memory, the past, strong and unfulfilled desire for the extraordinary, and humble adjustment to one’s circumstances. Still, a passage from “Second-Hand Man,”

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94 This echoes the rules governing her courtship with Thomas in “Courtship” (TB 16-17).
95 That people could fly to escape slavery is found in African American folklore, see Virginia Hamilton The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales.
which, as I have suggested, retells Beulah’s story in prose, shows that even adjustments can be relative: “Virginia was nineteen then. ‘High time,’ everyone used to say to her, but she’d just lift her head and go on about her business. She weren’t going to marry any old Negro. He had to be perfect” (FS 24). The poem’s placement outside, and more specifically after, the Thomas and Beulah volume is significant here, in the sense that the impossibility of Beulah’s ultimate freedom is known, the gratifications she could expect in her humble life already given. Still, in the aftermath, Beulah reassuring the dying Thomas in “Company” is enlightening: “listen: we were good, / though we never believed it” (Thomas and Beulah 74).

In many of the poems I have examined, the domestic existence of young and adolescent girls is represented by an overflow of idyllic images. However, less rewarding parts prompt girls to use a range of strategies to navigate their experience of growing up and cope. The strategies employed function temporarily and their effects are not particularly long-lasting. Moreover, they are likely to build on seemingly naïve perceptions and longings. But strategies are not redundant in the face of romanticizing the girls’ circumstances and prospects, and their precariousness allows shifting alternatives regarding what empowers different girls towards adulthood at different times. Besides, the temporary effects of strategies enable constant experimentation, which can sharpen the girls’ awareness and result in a plethora of approaches to their personal situation according to distinct circumstances. After all, not all strategies that are helpful in one context will be helpful in another. The escape through isolation or daydreaming, for example, and the reliance on romance can be useful only as long as they are passing stages.

Since there is a prevailing discrepancy between the life girls dream about, or imagine, and that which they are bound to experience as adults, idealized representations of domestic existence contribute to emphasizing the importance of and the need for well-functioning homeplaces. Idealized presence at home is empowering in the sense that it may make girls feel less constrained and thus enhance their
chances for achievement. Because once they learn to claim their part in what is close and most familiar to them, they can assert themselves and claim a role even in the unfamiliar world outside.

The autobiographical aspect present in several of the poems could add to the assessment of the strategies mapped here. The homes where Giovanni and Dove grew up are remembered as providing encouraging possibilities: they sheltered their insecurities and allowed room for their aspirations; they contained them but did not restrain them. While revisiting their childhood experiences, the two poets engage in the idealization of their homeplaces. But the portrayal of these childhood homes is noteworthy also because they are often not depicted in purely conventional terms, their descriptions being disrupted by various interventions, as the integration of memory and dream. The fragmented imaging of the house is with its open-endedness part of the strategies of the girls who inhabit them, reinforcing the validity of these strategies. Furthermore, as the liminality of domesticity enables the poets’ own girlhood strategies, their success stories prove that the cherished potential for expansion of one’s experience outside the house is tightly linked to their lingering within. Ultimately, the two poets moved beyond their early expectations, as expressed in these girlhood poems, and into celebrated careers. However, in their work, they do not disclaim the significance of the domestic and their choice to write about their own idyllic home milieus, real or imagined, is fundamentally strategic.

In conclusion, in the poems by Giovanni and Dove, the female characters experience their girlhood in peaceful and nurturing domestic milieus, where they have opportunities to develop and thrive. At an early age, girls hide in their games, form alliances, read, learn and join each other (and boys) in play. In adolescence, entitled to the privileges of careless youth, they tend to find themselves shielded from the adverse aspects of domesticity and never actively challenge the conditions of their domestic milieus. Later, as they grow and

96 A parallel to this claim can be found in Barbara Christian’s comment on Giovanni’s idealization of the urban milieu and the inhabitants of inner cities in the North. Giovanni, argues Christian, puts emphasis on the “glamour” and the “vibrancy” of urban life and idealizes inner city inhabitants “making them feel magnificent in their fine clothes and hip talk and therefore capable of stronger action” (22-23).
anticipate their future, they start to steer towards self-asserting positions in the home and outside it. This includes learning how to explore what possibilities they have, or engaging in developing alternatives that they need. Dreaming and daydreaming, hiding or self-isolation, ignoring their surroundings or stepping outside, taking their choices seriously or abandoning their aspirations in self-restraint, claiming a role in the house or opting to depart and return enlightened are all strategies that serve their purposes.
The experiences of girls and adult women are different, and so are their perspectives on the domestic sphere. While the girls may be more protected and carefree or remain oblivious to the hardships waiting for them later in life, the realities of adult women are more complicated, as they often include the day-to-day juggling of such hardships, and generally involve more responsibilities around the house. However, the women portrayed in domestic spaces in Nikki Giovanni’s and Rita Dove’s poems appear to enjoy, appreciate, or be at ease with their roles. For them, the domestic sphere, rather than symbolizing female exclusion, victimization, or exploitation, is usually a space for retreat, as well as for affirmation and resistance.

In this chapter, I examine the presence of adult Black female figures in poems of Giovanni and Dove that have a domestic theme and explore the strategic attitudes, choices, actions and perspectives related to their survival and empowerment in (commonly) dull circumstances. In order to place the role of these domestic women in a historical context, I begin with the analysis of Dove’s “The House Slave” (YH 33). Black women’s role at home is after all to be viewed in its particularity as a choice that has not always been given. Thereafter, through the exploration of a series of poems, I trace several ways in which Black female poetic figures tackle their experiences and how they pose themselves as they navigate the adversities of their daily lives and not only remain unbroken but also emerge individually and collectively empowered.

As already discussed in the section “The Meanings of House/Home for Black Women” of my “Theoretical Framework” chapter, the heritage of slavery has played a crucial role in the shaping of African American women’s views on domestic experience. A poem that illuminates the historical dimension in Black women’s perspective on housekeeping is Dove’s “The House Slave” (YH 33).
This poem highlights a multiplicity of meanings shaping the perceptions of domestic tasks and, by extension, of domesticity during slavery. They include an understanding of privilege tightly intertwined with dehumanizing subjection, small joys for the relative relief from more oppressing demands, but also sorrow and guilt. In “The House Slave,” it is indicated how being left behind to attend to the house chores, instead of being taken out to the fields for back-breaking work, was often as close to a privilege as a slave woman could come. Angela Davis notes that while “Black women enjoyed few of the dubious benefits of the ideology of womanhood, it is sometimes assumed that the typical female slave was a houseservant—either a cook, maid or mammy for the children of the ‘big house.’” However, along with most male slaves, female slaves were largely “field workers.” “For most girls and women,” Davis continues, “as for most boys and men, it was hard labor in the fields from sunup to sundown” (Women, Race and Class 5-6).

Nevertheless, and although individual experiences varied widely,97 the house servants would stand apart. The house slave in Dove’s poem, still lying in her cot, watches the rest of the slaves during their hectic early morning preparations as “children are bundled into aprons, cornbread / and water grounds grabbed, a salt pork breakfast taken” before they are “driven into the vague before-dawn,” for work. The poem’s audiovisual imagery, especially the emphasis put on aspects of time, “The first horn,” “before-dawn,” “the second horn,” “not yet daylight,” and the repetition of “Oh! pray,” show how regimented the field hands’ condition is, in contrast to hers. While it becomes clear that the slave woman herself partakes mentally in the suffering of the field workers, it is also obvious that her position at this point lies somewhere between her sister’s, who is already out, forced to work under the threat of the whip, and that of the white mistress, who is still asleep in her bed.98 Thus, the field slaves’ heavy

97 In Margaret Walker’s Jubilee, for example, an enslaved Caline has “imposing eyes and the unruffled air of importance and dignity that one associated with house servants” (4). In contrast, Toni Morrison’s Beloved shows how a change of circumstances (the master’s death) could bring a considerable decline in the conditions of the novel’s principle character Sethe’s life.

98 Calline’s words in Margaret Walker’s Jubilee express poignantly the superiority a house slave could feel: “House servants and field hands just don’t mix.
labor is sharply separated from (though undoubtedly vital to) the comforts and commodities of the master’s house, where the house slave is exempt from outdoor toil, but nonetheless under the constant risk of sexual abuse (“Massa dreams of asses, rum and slave-funk”) and an oppressing internal form of suffering.

If working in the slave owner’s house could render a slave woman at least relatively fortunate, it is not strange that for free Black women, taking care of their own house acquired quite an empowering function. In the poems of Giovanni and Dove, the majority of the adult female figures are mostly 20th-century women, who may or may not be full-time housekeepers, observed either at moments of leisure or during household work. The portrayal of these women depicts diverse home activities and settings, which in various ways yield opportunities for empowerment.

Moreover, not surprisingly, Giovanni and Dove usually engage in the establishment of stable home environments, which may appear unrealistically idyllic, but they are essential as representations of safe homeplaces in an African American historic context. By situating Black women in homes that are sheltering, more than confining, the two poets expand the plurality of understandings of homes from an African American perspective. At the same time, they contribute to a widening of the meanings attached to domestic existence at large.

Appreciating Domestic Existence and Roles

In Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems about women’s presence at home, several of which are autobiographical, the Black women appreciate the house as a peaceful and safe site, where they retreat in solitude to relax or do something they like, or where they can enjoy loving relationships. Giovanni’s “Hampton, Virginia” (WM np) and “Winter” (CC 81) convey the idea of a cozy domestic milieu yielding a sense of

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I ain’t no yard nigger myself and I don’t have nothing to do with yard niggers. First place they stinks!” (73).

99 The portrayal of slave women is rare. The poetic characters in some of Dove’s poems (primarily from Museum), belong to early historical eras or non-American geographic settings.
comfort during winter. Here, Giovanni establishes the function of the house as a shield against harsh weather, drawing parallels to the natural world and mentioning how animals prepare to meet the cold season. In this light, the fact that the female characters occupy a domestic setting implies a privilege; the women are fortunate to be able to create and enjoy domestic warmth:

i quilted myself
one blanket and purchased five
pounds of colored popcorn
in corners i placed dried
flowers and in my bathroom a jar
of lavender smells
my landlord stripped my windows
and i cut all my old sox for feet pads  (WM np)

The idyllic image, composed in lyric detail in “Hampton, Virginia,” is of a woman who enjoys making herself comfortable at home. In “Winter” there is reference also to the care of family: “mothers make oatmeal / and little boys and girls / take Father John’s medicine.” Mothers are here pictured as withdrawn and secure with their children inside, while fathers (indirectly mentioned in the name of the cough medicine) are absent from the house. The two poems convey a peaceful view of domestic experience and contain nothing that challenges this view. In fact, the imagery (predominantly visual but also suggesting the employment of other senses—smell, taste, touch) and a tone of simple indulgence render the women’s withdrawal perfectly justifiable. Furthermore, in terms of resistance against social conditions that called for Black working women to spend their time away from their homes, while Black men faced the difficulties of finding work, the stay-at-home option of Black mothers poses a valid alternative to alienating paid labor.

Conventional domestic idylls with an emphasis on the pleasures that women experience there are explored further in the poems “When I Nap,” by Giovanni (MH 23), and “Pastoral,” by Dove (GN 38). Giovanni’s “When I Nap” is a short and straightforward description of an ordinary domestic leisure scene, a mid-day nap. The speaker is alone in early afternoon, the sun shines in her room, and with her face
where her lover’s feet rested she smells “the sweat of your feet / in my covers / while i dream.” This daily routine, in all its lack of action, is presented as an unexpectedly crucial, or memorable, event. The poet provides information about the parameters of time (“usually after 1:30”), nature of light (“the sun comes / in my room then / hitting the northeast / corner”) and exact position (“i lay at the foot / of my bed”) when it takes place, accentuating the importance of the woman’s rest.

Interesting here is also that while the smell is linked to lovemaking, it invokes associations with the conditions in crowded slave transport ships, or overpopulated slave quarters, as strikingly exemplified in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: “storms rock us and mix the men into the women and the women into the men / that is when I begin to be on the back of the man / for a long time I see only his neck and his shoulders above me” (212), “there is no breath coming from his mouth and the place where breath should be is sweet smelling” (213 ) and “the man on my face is dead / his face is not mine / his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked” (211). In contrast to the horrific smell of the crowded slave ship, in her peaceful home atmosphere, the woman’s casual position at the wrong end of the bed is not forced but self-selected. Her exposure to the smell of sweat from her bed covers, a trace of intimacy, is then unexpectedly empowering, as it is pleasurable and inspiring pleasant dreams.

On a similar note, Giovanni writes about the empowering feeling of fulfillment (“and I was full and complete”) that giving birth yields in “My Tower” (*MH* 45), a poem where metaphoric imagery describing becoming a mother is associated with images of building not a house, but a tower and a castle. According to Virginia C. Fowler, who comments on “motherhood as a liberating force” in Giovanni’s work, motherhood “enables the poet to discover and express essential parts of her being.” Fowler notes that in the work of white women writers, motherhood tends to be a “stifling and restrictive force.” For Black women, on the contrary, she claims quoting Mary Burgher, it expands into “a creative and personally fulfilling role” (*NG* 49, 163).

Dove embraces the mothering role in “Pastoral,” where the commonplace image of a mother lying with a newly born baby that she has just breastfed is placed in dreamlike light, transforming satisfaction and delight into empowering feelings of liberation. The speaker gives a lyrical, perhaps idealistic, first person description of
nursing the child (“like an otter, but warm, / she latched onto the
shadowy tip”) in the first stanza, only to admit, in the second, “I liked
afterwards best, lying / outside on a quilt, her new skin / spread out
like meringue.” Later, the poem contains an imagined love scene, a
metaphor for the intensity of the woman’s feelings for her child. The
mother feels “what a young man must feel / with his first love asleep
on his breast: / desire and the freedom to imagine it.” The combination
of the two intimate scenes is indeed powerful; Dove moves beyond
the clichés of pleasures inherent to motherly love to uncover, under
the peaceful surface of a domestic scene, intense liberating feelings.

Dove has explained to Vendler the process she underwent to
come to the state where she could embrace the importance of
motherhood, and assert the legitimacy (as a poetic theme) of the
presence of women and children in common and uninteresting home
milieus, such as the backyard. Dove revealed that when she became
aware that her own experience as a mother was emerging in her work
while writing Beulah’s poems for Thomas and Beulah, she grew
uncomfortable: “I was harboring an unspoken notion that poems about
children and mothers are mushy and you just don’t write those
things.” Dove resolved that she was to write those poems as they were
covering an important part of her life (in Gates 489-490), which
resulted in her poetic voice becoming even more self-conscious and
immediate in Grace Notes, where the poems are written in the first
person.100 She also claimed the dynamics of the backyard (PW 28)
when children started to occupy, stating that “it became absolutely
necessary to talk about that aspect of domesticity” (in Gates 490).

The poetic voice in “Pastoral,” but also in “The Other Side of
the House” (GN 37) that immediately precedes it, as well as in
“Backyard, 6 A.M” (GN 43) is the confident voice of the poet herself
who insists on claiming her position as a mother and as a poet in her
house. Parts of the imagery in “The Other Side of the House” (“I walk
out the kitchen door / trailing extension cords in the open” and “the
dim / aggression of my daughter on the terrace drawing / her idea of a
home”) mark a powerful interconnection between women and their

100 Giovanni underwent a similar process. It culminated in her Re-Creation
poems, written during “one of the most significant” years in her life, the year of the
birth of her son. These poems focus in subject on “the particular and concrete” and
the poetic voice is “stronger and more self-confident” (Fowler, NG 48).
domestic surroundings, which challenges the notion of domestic life as static and passive.

Furthermore, in “Backyard, 6 A.M” the poet approaches the complexity of domestic experience, in its interconnectedness with the larger world. In a direct first person voice, the poet is back home after a trip and has to deal with “jet lag and laundry,” but she also finds herself marveling at tiny, seemingly unimportant details, like examining the rhythms of the slightest moves of the insects in the garden, and becomes receptive to their meanings:

I swear

hear wings, and spiders
quickening in the forgotten shrines,
unwinding
each knot of grief,
each snagged insistence. (GN 43)

Intriguing here is Dove’s mention of the subtle sound of the micro-movement of wings, as it links back to her own privileged air travel, but also because the flapping of wings often signifies freedom. From her perspective as a cosmopolitan poet, Dove validates her ostensibly vain preoccupation with detail, in tracing the movement of insects, with the attention she pays to describing it. She values the experience enough to write about it and thus more broadly gives substance to the intricacies of domestic moments.

The Removes of Romantic Love

In most of the poems I have examined so far, the focus has been on the presence of women in homeplaces of their own, which, I have argued, can be empowering when viewed as a privilege and as it is associated with happiness. Other poems focus more specifically on romantic encounters within spaces that the women perceive as their own. Dove’s “The Secret Garden” (YH 24) and “Then Came Flowers” (YH 55), for example, contain bedroom scenes where women are
empowered in their interplay with prospective lovers. As managing their will requires entirely different choices, the women in these poems act differently. Yet they both appear purposeful in controlling their circumstances.

“The Secret Garden”\textsuperscript{101} portrays a woman who is ill in bed, probably bored and restless, “lying on my bed of old papers,” but apparently pleased with the visit of her lover and inclined to accept him. Read metaphorically, the poem contains a fever-driven dream of self-recovery, its expression rendered through explicitly sexual imagery. The poem’s two first stanzas are indeed full of (fever induced) comic fantasy where the man’s appearance is like that of a magician who comes “with white rabbits in your arms” and amidst doves flying. His presence brings a change in the atmosphere of the room, which opens up during their passionate encounter and is eventually transformed into a vegetable garden:

\begin{quote}
    Now your tongue grows like celery between us:
    Because of our love-cries, cabbage darkens in its nest;
    the cauliflower thinks of her pale, plump children
    and turns greenish-white in a light like the ocean’s. (\textit{YH} 24)
\end{quote}

The shifting colors, the shapes and the light dramatize the process of a change that is radical and liberating. The contrast between the closed claustrophobic sickroom, where the woman is restrained “fainting in the smell of teabags,” and the effect of the refreshing presence of the lover, “you came with tomatoes, a good poetry,” is sharp. The substitution of the stale smell of teabags with that of tomatoes, a result of the man’s concern for her recovery, is to the sick woman as inspiring as “good poetry.” She welcomes the man’s amorous intentions, perceiving herself as privileged to be the recipient of such attention: “I am being wooed. I am being conquered / by a cliff of limestone that leaves chalk on my breasts.” By acknowledging and accepting his advances, giving in and thereafter being willingly “conquered,” the woman pursues pleasures for her own sake, as well

\textsuperscript{101} The title of the poem is a reference to Frances Hodgson Burnett’s novel \textit{The Secret Garden} (1911), a children’s literature classic.
as for the sake of her beloved. The excited tone throughout the poem and the lovemaking “limestone cliff” metaphor at its end, indicate her keenness to set her mind beyond her fatigue, but also her gratification for their union. Feeling loved, she is able to recover from her initial “I was ill,” cured as she is, by affection, out of her state of misery.

While in the “The Secret Garden” the woman is empowered through consent and through encouraging the lover, in “Then Came Flowers” she claims her solitude. In the poem, the speaker imagines the bouquet of thorny chrysanthemums she receives from her prospective lover spread in their bed on the occasion he was to spend the night with her: “If I begged you to stay, what good would it do to me? / In the bed, you would lay the flowers between us.” Though the imagery here is quite similar to that in “The Secret Garden,” (“your tongue grows like celery between us”), the mood is different, the poetic voice more sober. The woman refrains from “begging” the man to stay, feeling hurt, perhaps in the aftermath of a fight: “The white spikes singed my fingers. / I cried out; they spilled from the green tissue / And spread at my feet in a pool of soft fire.” She states her intention to pick the flowers up “later,” to “arrange them with pincers” and place them on the bureau in her bedroom. The reduction of the man’s chrysanthemums to a decorative detail, though certainly intrusive, (“All night from the bureau they’ll watch me, their / Plumage as proud, as cocky as firecrackers”), shows the woman’s ability to reject the man and retain control over her personal situation.

But even when women are not in control of their situation, as in Dove’s “Nestor’s Bathtub” (M 16-17) and in Giovanni’s “A Certain Peace” (MH 21-22), where they are left at home during the absence of their spouses, they nevertheless take advantage of their circumstances and enjoy being alone in the house. In the two poems, instead of feeling abandoned, the women find empowerment in the limited space of their bathrooms. Bathing is a pleasurable experience, an occasion to “soak in bubbles” and relax, and it can be soothing and liberating. It is also a personal experience that takes place in “a small room,” one of the most private parts of the house, which involves revealing one’s

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102 A poem that can be considered in contrast to “The Secret Garden” is Giovanni’s “Seduction” (BFBT 38), where the woman actively seduces her politically distracted lover, after he walks into her house.
nude body. Thus, instead of signifying restriction and subordination, enclosure in these poems constitutes a condition of self-affirmation.

In “Nestor’s Bathtub,” Dove reinterprets a Greek legend, presenting the “female side” of the story, “which has been suppressed and excluded by traditional history that usually glorifies male achievements” (Georgoudaki, *Race, Gender, and Class* 207). The title’s genitive construction documents the legend’s original masculinist view, with Nestor as the owner of the bathtub. However, the irony with which Dove perceives this ownership becomes explicit through the dramatic break that separates the poem’s first two lines: “As usual, the legend got it all / wrong.” “Nestor’s bathtub” was in fact his wife’s, suggests Dove, and thus foregrounds the existence of a queen, whom patriarchal mythmaking tends to ignore. “Nestor’s wife was the one / to crouch under / jug upon jug of fragrant water poured / until the small room steamed” (italics mine), she claims. Dove wonders about Nestor’s whereabouts while his wife bathed in the company of a lover, she invokes his participation in “the Trojan wars” and speculates that even when at home he frequented the palace’s main rooms: “on his throne before the hearth, / counting the jars of oil / in storeroom 34,” leaving the queen alone and the bathtub at her disposal.

According to Ekaterini Georgoudaki, the poem contrasts “the power and responsibilities of the Greek King’s public office with his wife’s limited life” (*Race, Gender, and Class* 207). To me, Dove’s remake of the myth is ironic: by envisioning a woman using the clay tub, she allows a queen’s figure to come distinctly into sight, but not as a victim. Instead, she lifts her from her marginal position and imagines her as adulterous, letting her thus tread alternate spaces of

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103 Nestor was the wise king of Pylos, advisor of the Greeks in the Trojan War. For a detailed analysis of the poem, see my paper “Glorious Men and Bathing Women in Rita Dove’s ‘Nestor’s Bathtub.’” On revisionist use of myths, see Ostriker’s “Stealing the Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythology.” In what Ostriker calls “revisionist mythmaking,” women “deviate from or explicitly challenge the meanings attributed to mythic figures and tales” (215).

104 For information about Nestor’s wives, Anaxibia and Euridice, see Robert Bell 36-37.

105 Georgoudaki notes that finding a lover is the best alternative the wife has “to overcome the boredom of domesticity and her loneliness” while she deems the
feminine empowerment. Dove erases the queen’s subjugation and accentuates her significance by foregrounding her in acts of pleasure and sensual joy, against the king’s duties that exclude her involvement. The woman does not dwell in inaction: she enjoys in luxury intimacy with a lover, under jugs of warm “fragrant water,” scraping his body’s dirt with a “bronze scalpel,” combing his hair with “ivory combs.” The bathtub stages her private rebellion; it is where, like an artist, she sculpts the object of her desire.

Bathing is neither a chore nor a wife’s duty; the bathing queen abandons her expected role as a wife and uses the narrow space of the bathroom to affirm herself. Instead of honoring a remote husband, she indulges herself with a lover. In this light, her confinement is redefined: secretly, this neglected wife finds a way to affirm herself. In the “voluptuous” tub/gravy dish, she disobediently reveals her body to a man other than her husband and becomes the center of regard and attention. Evidently, her domestic role is ambivalent, as the dirt she cleans is on a lover’s back and the “gravy dish” she uses is to crouch in. This nameless queen is able, with her infidelity, to challenge and ridicule her husband’s wisdom as well as his authority.

Moreover, as the bathroom’s marginal space is noteworthy in an archaeological context, the life of the woman who occupies it becomes interesting. In the poem, the relic fails to serve the king, but instead hosts her infidelity. Here its existence as historical evidence, though commonly appropriated to solidify Nestor’s reign, bears testimony to her escapades, reaffirming her historical presence. Indulging her desire in the tub, the queen can demonstrate her rejection of the king’s celebrated role, as well as claim her own personal story.

While the classic setting and charged vocabulary of Dove’s poem render a historical dimension to the unimportant act of bathing, in Giovanni’s “A Certain Peace” it retains its ordinariness. Bathing, nevertheless, becomes instrumental in Giovanni’s demonstration of the empowering potential of the private. The poem’s imagery, described straightforwardly, is purely domestic. Yet the tone is somehow detached throughout the poem and there are tensions

queen’s role “subservient” and her existence “unheroic” (Race, Gender, and Class 207-208).
operating on the language level. The claim that the absence of the man from the house has a “very pleasant” effect, is followed, for example, by an emphatically apologetic statement “not that i don’t love you / and want you and need you / and love loving and wanting and needing you.” This is in turn controlled by the affirmation of “a certain peace / when you walked out the door.” The speaker is apparently beyond resisting her lover’s decision to go out alone and opts to “run / a tub full of water” instead of exiting the house herself. Thereafter, in a set of clauses arranged in parataxis, the chance the woman has to enjoy peace and attend to her body is posed against the duties she would have to attend to otherwise:

and i could run
a tub full of water
and not worry about answering the phone
for your call
and soak in bubbles
and not worry whether you would want something special for dinner
and rub lotion all over me
for as long as i wanted
and not worry if you had a good idea
or wanted to use the bathroom (MH 21)

The liberating effect is achieved here through the emphatic repetition of “not worry.” Still, taking into consideration the woman’s declaration of being in love, it is liberation from her need to pamper the man rather than from any form of oppression by him.

Giovanni’s poem demonstrates no gender conflict; the speaker is neither helplessly confined nor emotionally abandoned and does not feel bitter. In fact, she appears pleased with the possibility to be alone, she is comfortable with her peaceful privacy, and simultaneously satisfied that she is able to affirm her lover’s needs: “and i knew you would do something / you wanted to do.” Moreover, at the end of the poem, her assertion “and i had a day of mine / that made me as happy / as yours did you” does not only highlight the importance of accommodating a wish for withdrawal and recollection, but also validates the woman’s trivial choice to bathe.
Empowering as it may be, a retreat to the bathroom is ultimately a short-lived strategy, and, particularly in the face of emotional abuse or abandonment, there is a need to pursue more extreme modes of self-affirmation. In Giovanni’s “Mixed Media” (MH 24), due to the lover’s failure to return home when expected, the woman plans to replace him altogether with his picture mentally etched on the wall. Tired of “bathing and oiling / and waiting for you to be too tired or / too drunk” she decisively rejects the man in flesh, but saves the image of his smile: “when i realized it was your smile / that turned me on i engraved it / just above the shelf where the ash tray sits.” The woman adjusts her flawed lover’s memory, keeping to desired associations; she does not hesitate to mutilate the face, cutting off nose, ears, and eyes, to achieve the preferred effect before she renders him immobile, in her bedroom, among the rest of her belongings.106 The qualities of the final product, of “a very energetic / sober brother,” override the real man’s tiredness and drunkenness and meet the woman’s expectations, while the man himself is removed from her life.

Even more radical than the strategic fragmentation and dislocation employed in “Mixed Media” are the measures taken against an ex-lover in Giovanni’s “Housecleaning” (MH np), another poem where man and house are interconnected. While in “Mixed Media” the man is partly preserved (reduced to a picture of his smile), in “Housecleaning” the woman decides to remove him completely: he is expelled from her house, figuratively thrown out during a housecleaning operation.107 In both poems, women act to take control over their house/life, much like in “My House,” as they simultaneously navigate problematic love relationships.

106 This is of course a strikingly ironic move, as it reminds of what slave owners would do to punish rebellious slaves.

107 In “Mixed Media” and in “Housecleaning,” the disappointed woman remains in her house. In contrast, in “Master Charge Blues” (SP 87), the woman develops a new strategy to cope with her loneliness (Fowler, NG 55). When her patience while “waiting for the telephone” is exhausted, and her efforts to invite friends to her house fail, she declares (in a Blues mode) that she is “a modern woman baby,” who “ain’t gonna let this get me down.” Instead, she leaves her house for the mall, determined to “get everything in town.”
Dealing with Loss

Domestic space is also where women can find comfort, healing, and the strength to deal with sorrow when they have suffered the painful loss of a loved one. Giovanni’s “Turning (I Need a Better Title)” (CC 85-86) and Dove’s “The Wake” (GN 33) are two otherwise very different poems that contain the aspect of becoming empowered after a loss.

In “Turning,” a woman’s circumstances and her sentiments, after the departure of her lover, and the condition of her home are explicitly linked. Her apartment is smaller, emptier and less comfortable now that the woman is alone: “she compacted her / life into one / tiny room with kitchen bed and roaches.” The deterioration of her domestic conditions echoes the woman’s emotional deterioration, but the emptiness of the apartment is also experienced as liberating, because now, no material things could keep her back “in case / she had to run / for her sanity.” Her downsized and simpler living space and her lighter body signify relief from a heavy burden:

she became happier without
the big apartment
the stereo components
and the ten pounds she shed
while adjusting to the loss
of his love (CC 85)

Although there is a touch of irony and a sense of detachment in her third person description of her situation, the woman is evidently recovering from her loss, she is growing stronger, and will eventually heal. Besides, as the poem’s title is a reference to her birthday, there is the implication that growing older also contributes to her maturation. By the end of the poem, she has gradually “gained / knowledge,” through introspection, and mellows to new, empowering insights.

In Dove’s autobiographical poem “The Wake,” the female speaker, returning to her childhood home upon the death of her father, finds the house empty because of his physical absence and at the same time full of mourning friends and relatives. As she wanders about in
the rooms, the woman imagines the dead man’s comforting spirit following her, “When I sat down in the armchair / your warm breath fell / over my shoulder.” But when she withdraws to bed, she turns to another presence, inside her this time, that of the child she carries:

When I lay down between the sheets  
I lay down in the cool waters  
of my own womb  
and became the child  
inside, innocuous  
as a button, helplessly growing. (GN 33)

In the poem, the following are linked: house, the dead father’s spirit, daughter (child of the house), bed, womb (house of the conceived child), and unborn child (expected child of the daughter/granddaughter). The suggested connection between the domestic surroundings and the woman’s body and the implied substitution of the departing spirit of the man with the “helplessly growing” fetus have a healing effect. The woman can fall asleep and carry on because she can see life in a wider perspective, where interconnectedness and continuation prevail in a “family-cycle asserting itself relentlessly” (Righelato 119), and she understands that like the child in her womb, stillness is a way of being too: “I slept because it was the only / thing I could do. I even dreamt. / I couldn’t stop myself.”

**Embracing One’s Circumstances and Choices**

When Black women are in the house, either in solitude or together with others, they often succeed in finding space for self-assertion and empowerment. Because of their responsibilities around the home, however, women’s relationship to the domestic sphere may be complicated. Their role commonly involves less leisure and more
dutiful performance of housework, including the care of others.\footnote{108} In many cases, it is also a role they would not choose, if they had other alternatives, but one they have had to adopt as inevitable.

In the “Canary in Bloom” section of \textit{Thomas and Beulah} (1986), where the majority of Dove’s poems about housekeeping are collected, the protagonist, Beulah, modeled after Dove’s maternal grandmother, is a proud and strong woman who is confident in her role in the family and her presence at home.\footnote{109} In a series of poems, Dove follows the everyday life first of a young wife, later a mother, and finally a mature woman. Throughout these poems, it is evident that Beulah would have chosen a different, perhaps more adventurous kind of life, if she had had the opportunity, and that, to some extent, she sees her lifestyle as a compromise. According to Lynn Keller, Beulah’s depiction gives “a portrait of a particular woman within her time and circumstances” (135). Keller puts emphasis on Beulah’s intense imaginary life, but states that she is prevented from fully expressing her imagination due to her socioeconomic circumstances. “Dove herself perhaps embodies what Beulah might have been,” she suggests, “had she lived in an era according greater opportunities to black women” (130).

Nevertheless, Beulah is rarely depicted as a victim, and instead emerges as resilient.\footnote{110} To Steven Schneider, Dove has mentioned that she thinks of Beulah as being very strong, but deprived of opportunities to show her strength: “She is the one who really wants to travel, to see the world. She is curious; she is intelligent and her situation in life does not allow her to pursue her curiosity. If there is anything I want to honor in her, it is that spirit.” The poet explains that while sacrifices are required from many people, “[i]t’s the way one

\footnote{108} Marty Grace, drawing on Ann Oakley’s work from 1974, offers a short outline of the debate on women’s domestic work. While some feminists have seen housework as hindering women’s emancipation, notes Grace, others “have argued for valuing women’s traditional home-based work” (405).

\footnote{109} \textit{Thomas and Beulah} covers the period from Thomas’ birth, in 1900, to Beulah’s death in 1969 and Beulah’s experience of adulthood reflects the lives of women in Dove’s grandmother’s generation, from the 1920s to the late 1960s.

\footnote{110} Vendler sees “ordinary satisfactions” in Thomas and Beulah’s life, but in her view, “Beulah is disappointed in marriage and exhausted by maternity” (\textit{The Given and the Made} 78). I find that her passing claim (her short analysis focuses on poems from the “Mandolin” section) requires further qualification.
handles sacrifice that’s crucial.” She emphasizes the importance of knowing that “there’s a struggle involved, that the sacrifice is being made” and the necessity of acceptance, of learning “not to be crushed by what you can’t do.” Indeed, Beulah’s main strategy appears to be the way she “gracefully, but not too gracefully” (Schneider 120) deals with her situation and the limited range of choices she has, without allowing her spirit to be crushed.

It could be argued here that Giovanni’s poem “Choices” (CC 66) addresses the kind of conditions that shape Beulah’s life in the “Canary in Bloom” poem sequence, as it explores the alternatives a woman like her would possibly have to manage these conditions and cope:

```plaintext
if i can’t do
  what i want to do
then my job is to not
do what i don’t want
to do

if i can’t have
  what i want then
my job is to want
what i’ve got

since i can’t go
where i need
to go then i must go
where the signs point

when i can’t express
  what i really feel
i practice feeling
what i can express (CC 66)
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“Choices” suggests an ultimately positive attitude towards the limitations that govern a person’s life, a kind of “this is life” stance that comes with the recognition that one needs to adjust to one’s circumstances, even if they are poor. Much like Beulah, Giovanni’s
poetic character is not simply unaware of her narrow possibilities. On the contrary, she is quite aware of her disadvantaged position. Yet she explores her opportunities to extort pleasures and satisfaction from the few alternatives available to her. This attitude may be linked to what Lynda Koolish suggests is “[a] tradition of resistance to oppression, a legacy of will and respect for possibilities, [which] can elicit from characters or individuals a willingness to hold onto what is difficult” (in Harris and Aguero 4).

Although “Choices” is not strictly about domestic life, it deserves further attention as it offers an array of self-affirming strategies, but which are also risky to practice extensively, as they might perpetuate a state of inferiority and abandonment, or feed internalized worthlessness. There is certainly a fine line between accepting an oppressive context, while managing to remain intact within it, and being crushed into submission. The kind of action that is supported in the poem informs a willingness to change oneself in order to accept one’s set surroundings, and thus have some sense of satisfaction. The choice of such a position may be gratifying, but it is accompanied by the high risk of losing one’s sense of worth in trying to accommodate or conform to external imperatives.

A crucial question is how to maintain one’s integrity in an externally pre-defined state of things while adopting a role of submissiveness. In the poem, the purposeful change of mind that facilitates the woman’s change of mood and protects her spirit from the perils of pessimism may indeed be speckled with ambiguity, as in the last stanza. Whether “i can’t express / what i really feel” here means “hindered to express,” or “unable to express” a complicated emotional state, or controversial feelings, the effect of the idea to revise one’s feelings is nevertheless striking. Even if the poet is being ironic, as the reliance on conditionals and recurring relative clauses might indicate, the woman’s response is powerful. Additionally, a closer look at the verbs in this poem reveals a significant sequence of possible choices. In a self-help manner, it includes the choice to refrain from doing what the woman does not want, to assert the importance of what she has, to limit herself to the direction she takes in life according to the options available to her, and to govern her feelings. By adjusting herself to her circumstances, the woman is
being pragmatic; she tries to simplify her concerns, to make them manageable.

While the overall response to her situation may imply naiveté and passivity, little speaks for a state of a general resignation; the woman’s stance is obviously strategic. Her direct first person account and an unmistakable assertiveness in her tone, reminiscent of the tone in “My House” (MH 67-69), still hold an underlying awareness of the compromises involved together with the recognition of choice. Ultimately, what happens in the end is actively selected. The woman’s life may be subject to a greater oppressive framework, but she does not allow her situation to be decided upon. Instead, she claims a participatory responsibility and the right to decide, her decisions ranging from subtle to extraordinary. That her response is seen as a “job” shows that it does not necessitate fundamental change of herself, but suggests, temporarily, a modification of how she acts. A strategic aspect lies exactly in the temporariness of the woman’s actions. The fluidity of the positions she takes and their unpredictability underscore the ongoing adjustments to her reality.

In “Choices” Giovanni points to the existence of a variety of ways to answer to one’s circumstances, including the achievement of an empowering state of consciousness within. Similarly, in the “Canary in Bloom” poems, the ways in which Beulah poses herself in relation to her domestic situation and handles the different aspects of her daily life vary with the occasion. Sometimes she soberly considers her options and takes action to change what she finds unsatisfactory; other times, she tries to accept the state of things and concentrates her efforts on moving forward. At times, she seeks to evade her everyday concerns by retreating into memories or daydreaming or attempts to physically distance herself from her surroundings for a few moments of solitude. Beulah shows no inclination to renounce the everyday reality of her simple life, with its sorrows and small rewards, and tends to accept rather than question the conditions by which she must live. She embraces her role and performs dutifully within her family/community context. If she ultimately manages to remain empowered throughout her life and sustain herself without sinking in

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111 Passivity may also be a valid way to respond under certain circumstances. In a historical perspective, passivity has often proven life preserving for African Americans.
dissatisfaction, frustration, or bitterness, it is because of her willingness to focus on the rewarding parts of her experience along with her predisposition to survive and even find reasons to enjoy her life.

In “Weathering Out” (*TB* 56-57), it is easy to identify an inclination on the part of Beulah to adjust to her destiny, which in turn has an empowering effect on her. While her situation is not ideal, a young woman, pregnant with her first child, waiting for her husband to come home from his often-unsuccessful job hunting, there is a distinct sense of hopefulness and even tacit satisfaction that prevails. The poem begins with “She liked the mornings the best,” the superlative indicating that Beulah finds portions of her daily routines pleasurable. What probably makes mornings so pleasant is that in this time of the day there is a renewal of hope, as Thomas resumes his job pursuits and Beulah, left alone—which she seems to find enjoyable—has the chance to orient her thoughts towards her future as a mother:

her coffee flushed with milk,

outside autumn trees blowsy and dripping,
Past the seventh month she couldn’t see her feet

so she floated from room to room, houseshoes flapping,

navigating corners in wonder. When she leaned

against a door jamb to yawn, she disappeared entirely. (*TB* 56)

As is obvious later on in the poem, Beulah has reasons to worry since “Thomas returned every evening nearly / in tears” and “The coffee was good but too little,” but, during the mornings, she chooses to put aside her concerns and remains peaceful in her solitude.113

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112 Dove maintains that the Black people in Beulah’s generation, as well as the generations before, could not really afford the luxury of bitterness. At a time when “[i]nequality was a given” they “had enough to do with surviving” (Schneider 120-121).

113 “[T]he legacy of the nineteenth-century middle-class ideology of ‘separate spheres’” that is reflected in the division of the *Thomas an Beulah* volume in two sections is here reflected also in the poem, with Beulah “at least partially buffered
The atmosphere of unrest that can be sensed in “Weathering Out,” as far as Beulah is concerned, is kept in the background. Whenever disturbing undertones and worries threaten to surface, such as after the excursion to the zeppelin factory, or when she lies awake at night, Beulah manages to keep them at bay. Her implicit, highly self-ironic identification with the zeppelin, which after a short demonstration in the open is taken “back inside,” is followed by the line “she glistened from cocoa butter smothered in.” This image of tranquil buoyancy suggests a pleasurable experience rather than confinement, when she herself is “back inside.” But even though she perceives the outside as threatening (“Outside / everything shivered in tinfoil”), also there she is inclined to identify something that can sustain her: “only the clover / between the cobblestones hung stubbornly on, / green as an afterthought….” Beulah is a realist who, nevertheless, opts for avoiding distress and selectively acknowledges the most affirming parts of her experience.

Coping with Hardships via Daydreams, Memory, Withdrawal

While in “Weathering Out” Beulah is presented “float[ing] placidly through her pregnancy” (Keller 129) and is not explicitly shown doing housework, there are several poems by Giovanni and Dove focusing on daily chores, especially cooking and cleaning, and how women experience and respond to this part of their lives. As suggested earlier, in an African American context, housework is not perceived as a demeaning activity. Its importance, however, does not overshadow the fact that it may also be a burden to those expected to take care of

from anxiety by being neither part of the paid workforce nor the designated provider for the family” (Keller 129).

114 Referring to Beulah’s narrative at large, Alexander claims that it explores the “tension between confined domestic space and outside vistas” (52-53).

115 In Righelato’s view, Beulah’s pregnancy gives her “opportunity to dream alone, to nest domestically” (95). To me, Thomas is indeed the dreamer here, the one who hears the baby “really talking”—which to Beulah, in a matter of fact way, is the “pok-pok-pok” tapping of the baby in her belly.

116 To Mohamed B. Taleb-Khyar, Dove has said that in “Dusting” she shows “how domestic chores figure in the turning of the globe” (359).
it. When faced with dull chores, the women in the poems resort to mentally distancing themselves from them. They daydream, seek solitude or temporarily deny the implications of the hardships they face.

In poems like “Dusting,” “Daystar,” “Pomade,” and “Sunday Greens” (*TB* 52-53, 61, 65-66, 69), it is evident that Beulah is actually overwhelmed by her domestic duties. Although her mood, and consequently her attitude towards her work, is different from occasion to occasion in these poems, she can be seen trying to step out of her immediate reality, thus mediating its consuming effect on her. “Dusting” and “Pomade,” are quite similar in structure but differ in tone. Both poems start and end in the present, while the poetic characters are at home doing something trivial, but their time frame also includes a suddenly remembered past event, the memory of which stands in contrast to their current state and functions momentarily as a relief, yielding new insights about life.

In “Dusting,” Beulah performs her domestic duties mechanically, as if in a trance, with her mind wandering back to her childhood when a “silly boy” with an exotic name had won her a goldfish at a fair’s rifle booth. Beulah detaches herself from the “wilderness—no shade in / sight,” and her routinely “patient” dusting of the furniture, trying to remember his name.117 Keller argues that Beulah longs “for someone/something ‘finer’” and that she achieves her “only freedoms” during her work via “fantasy and memory, suggested by her final recollection of the boy’s French name, Maurice” (130-131). Pondering on her “wavery memory,” Beulah is led to review her life—and only afterwards can she recall the name:

That was years before
Father gave her up
with her name, years before
her name grew to mean
Promise, then

117 Beulah’s dusting is described as having a vitalizing and beautifying effect: “her gray cloth brings / dark wood to life” and “Under her hand scrolls / and crests gleam / darker still.” The chaotic state of “wilderness” she is in here, recurs in another of Dove’s poems, “The Bird Frau” (*YH* 9) where it is a state apparently cherished.
Desert-in-Peace.
Long before the shadow and
sun’s accomplice, the tree.

Maurice. (TB 53)

As Keller points out, Beulah’s name means “marriage,” and is also the name of “the land of Israel” in the book of Isaiah, as well as “a country of rest and peace in Pilgrim’s Progress,” which suggests “that she is a source of stability and strength for those around her” (132).118 While trying to recollect how he was called, Beulah recaptures the meaning of her own name, and consequently the meaning of her life; “the solarium a rage / of light, a grainstorm” in the beginning of the poem is a desert, but a “Desert-in-Peace.” The empowering potential of Beulah’s memory lies less in its function as an escape as it rather facilitates her reconciliation with her reality.

A similar pattern of temporary detachment during the performance of a less inspiring task at home recurs in “Pomade.” Beulah dwells simultaneously on two different levels,119 the physical level of her present, “She sweeps the kitchen floor of the river bed her husband saw fit / to bring home with his catfish,” and an imaginary or memory-related one, “recalling / a flower” that “she had gathered in armfuls / along a still road in Tennessee.” The ironic pun in her remark regarding Thomas’ thoughtlessness, which originally created the mess on the floor, implies a distinction for Beulah, between her own refined ways and her husband’s clumsy manners.120 Furthermore,

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118 Keller discusses Beulah’s name in “The Great Palaces of Versailles” (TB 63-64) and “Weathering Out.” Shoptaw examines the implications of her name in “Dusting” in relation to other poems (in Gates 380). Dove has pointed to the “longing and resonance” that the name contains in an interview with Vendler (in Gates 486).

119 This dual mode of operation can be used as a critical idea in the analysis of several of Dove’s poems. Alexander mentions this presence in the “lived-in” world and, simultaneously, in an imagined one in her discussion of “The Oriental Ballerina” (54).

120 The same attitude of superiority can be witnessed in “Courtship, Diligence” (TB 50), where Beulah refers to Thomas’ mandolin tunes as “Cigar-box music! / She’d much prefer the pianola.” See also Keller’s comment on Beulah’s interest in “courts and royalty” (137).
it prompts her mental separation from the base parts of her experience. The elaborate description of the flower that follows, “very straight, / with a spiked collar arching / under a crown of bright fluffy worms,” stands in sharp contrast to the cleaning task at hand.

Through a brief plunge into the past, Beulah escapes her sweeping act, remembering the eccentric Willemma, Thomas’ sister back in the South, who led a simple but original life among a “pack of dusty children” in a “leaning cabin with its little / window in the door, the cutout magazine cloud taped to the pane.” Providing a brief escape from her reality, Beulah’s memory is empowering on multiple levels. The remembrance of her visit to Willemma’s house, where she was taught how to make pomade, an essential African American beauty product, enables her connection to the past, both personal and collective. This older female relative represents the culture, the know-how, and the down-to-earth wisdom of the rural South. Willemma’s steadfast and proud posture and her peculiar manners, (“Willemma stood straight as the day / she walked five miles to town for scotch tape / and back again”), as well as that, on the occasion remembered, she passed on to her a valuable traditional skill, have an affirming impact on Beulah. Willemma had embraced the young Beulah, “shushed” the children and “took her inside the leaning cabin,” thus figuratively inviting her into her world.

Importantly, the older woman had not simply shared her skills, but also given Beulah insights into inspirational ways of being.

121 Keller contrasts Thomas’ and Beulah’s “survival strategies” and finds Beulah’s “forms of solace [to] reflect the physical limitation, the domestic enclosure of a woman’s life” (131), exemplifying this through her analysis of “Daystar.” My perspective is less categorical regarding characterizations such as “limitation” and “enclosure.” To me, a turn outwards “fishing, singing, even walking under the viaduct” is not necessarily a more effective survival strategy than an imaginary escape. Also Georgoudaki views Thomas as more privileged, but in terms of their means/freedom of expression (Race, Gender, and Class 215).

122 Beulah’s imagined departures from her house and its housework here and in “Dusting” involve entrance to another house that somehow has a liberating potential. In “Dusting” there is the image of the girl who brings the partially frozen fishbowl inside, where warmth causes the ice to melt and the fish can swim free. “Pomade” includes the recalled visit to Willemma’s cabin. Willemma’s relation to her (either literally, or metaphorically) “leaning” house, her standing “straight” in it and her eventually collapsing there, while preparing food, are also noteworthy.
Beebalm. The fragrance always put her in mind of Turkish minarets against a sky wrenched blue, sweet and merciless. Willemma could wear her grey hair twisted in two knots at the temples and still smell like travel. But all those years she didn’t budge. (TB 66)

While partaking in Southern domestic rituals, (“rub the petals fine / and heat them slow in mineral oil / until the skillet exhaled pears and nuts and rotting fir”), Beulah had the chance to note the small unsuspected luxuries of Willemma’s kind of living: “That cabin leaned straight away / to the south, took the very slant of heaven” and “Barley soup / yearned toward the bowls edge, the cornbread / hot from the oven climbed in glory.”

In Willemma’s determination to tackle her poor material circumstances, in the oddest manner, Beulah could trace possibilities that could sustain even her. She could see how Willemma’s creativity was employed against her poverty: this woman walked for miles to get tape for “the cutout magazine cloud taped to the pane.” Whether it was in order to replace a piece of curtain she could not afford to buy, or a more capricious (and imaginative) move to keep the sun out with just the image of a cloud on her window pane, Willemma’s originality serves as a strategy of survival for herself, but, indirectly, also for Beulah. Willemma’s emphatic justification “so’s I’ll always have shade,” put in italics in the poem, is an obvious attempt to persuade herself that she manages well. It is, moreover, an articulation of her empowerment, that she has all she needs, whatever the means of achieving it, a message shared with Beulah at the time and shared again now, via memory.

The alternatives suggested by the powerful presence of this extraordinary Southern woman make sense in Beulah’s own life, as she needs to balance conceptions beyond the bounds of her circumstances and contentment with her lot. Willemma, Keller notes, “combines African American country traditions with personal strength and freedom” and, in Beulah’s mind, she “achieves a kind of exoticism within authentic traditions, making her one model for what Beulah herself wants but has failed to achieve” (133). In her kitchen,
Beulah, holding the broom, suspects that she will never travel to those remote, exotic places of her dreams. She realizes that what remains is to dismiss that unattainable experience and try to somehow be content with what is currently in front of her. If the smell of the pomade could make her dream of exotic places, she now finds herself projecting an image from the Orient onto her overwhelming reality, a thought that functions as a comic relief:

Beulah gazes through the pale speckled linoleum to that webbed loam with its salt and worms. She smooths her hair, then sniffs her palms. On the countertop the catfish grins like an oriental gentleman. Nothing ever stops. (TB 66)

Her “grinning fish” is nothing like Willemma’s “Beebalm,” but Beulah knows that there is some continuity. Although the experience of her collapse is lacking in relation to Willemma’s, if her “slowly rolling down the sides of the earth” is to be measured against Willemma’s sudden and almost theatrical fall (“her chest opened and the inrushing air / knocked her down. Call the reverend, I’m in the floor / she called out to a passerby”), she seems to know that her life is in (a new) juncture with that impressive woman’s life.

By contrast, in “The Great Palaces of the Versailles” (TB 63-64), Beulah, depressed with her wage work, removes herself mentally from her surroundings, venturing into an era and a culture different from her own. While ironing a dress in the backroom of Charlotte’s Dress Shoppe, she drifts away into what she had read about French ladies’ lives. Keller’s comments on this poem convey a gloomy and decadent Parisian atmosphere and a disappointment on Beulah’s part with what she, according to Keller, recognizes as “corruption beneath the glamour of white society” (132). But I find Beulah’s observations of the French aristocrats’ manners and the

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123 Of interest here is Trudier Harris’ observation that “suprahuman women have been denied the ‘luxuries’ of failure, nervous breakdowns, leisured existences or anything else that would suggest that they are complex, feeling human beings” (“This Disease Called Strength,” 122).

124 Righelato views Beulah’s marginalization as comparable to her domesticity: “she is as encaged in the back of the shop as she was at home” (98).
disclosure of their humanity (“lifting shy layers of silk, / they dropped excrement as daintily / as handkerchiefs”) humorous and playful.

At the same time, by imagining the French ladies as crass, though dainty, Beulah demythologizes their status and brings them closer to herself. A hint of her approval, rather than disillusionment with their ways, is her effort to imitate their elegance when, “Against all rules,” she decides to save “the lining from a botched coat / to face last year’s gray skirt.” Beulah’s share of extravagance is in the pleasure of knowing that “whenever she lifts a knee / she flashes crimson.” Beulah “crosses boundaries of race and class through the inner journey she undertakes. . . . From the French aristocracy she appropriates the social status, comfort, luxury, finesse and dream quality that her own life lacks” (Georgoudaki, *Race, Class, and Gender* 214). Similarly to the girls’ concealed red toenails in Giovanni’s *The Girls in the Circle* (2004), the red lining of her skirt gives Beulah the excitement of secretly trespassing and delight from a sense of entitlement. Like Willemma, who creates shade through a paper cut cloud, Beulah puts a touch of luxury in her wardrobe through a stolen piece of fabric.

Another poem where Beulah tries to detach herself, physically and mentally, from the consuming demands of her daily life, is “Daystar” (*TB* 61). The peculiarity of “Daystar” lies in Beulah’s awareness of her domestic situation and the need to protect herself from being completely absorbed in it—which makes her empowerment strategy here a conscious move of self-preservation. In “Daystar,” Beulah is not simply carried away through the recollection of another place, time, or person, while continuing to work absent-mindedly. Instead, having observed herself in relation to the ever-untidy state of her household and having recognized the need for a pause in her endless duties, she resolves to keep some part of herself to herself. This involves deciding on a daily, if only “for an hour, at best,” withdrawal:

> She wanted a little room for thinking:  
> but she saw diapers steaming on the line,  
> a doll slumped behind the door.

> So she lugged a chair, behind the garage
Beulah allows herself a place of retreat and thus shapes, more actively than in “Dusting” and in “Pomade,” her private imaginary space. Behind the garage, mid-day, and for the short while her children are asleep, she takes the opportunity to remove herself from her domestic context and pays attention to tiny, irrelevant details, or stares at nothing at all, creating in her mind, an alternative world: “And just what was mother doing / out back with the field mice? Why, // building a palace.” Beulah does not long for someplace/something else—“building a palace” is a cliché phrase—but rather wishes not to be anything at all. She achieves that state of emptiness and relief momentarily, enabled by the privacy the specific place and time grants her. Still, she can indulge in peacefulness only during her children’s nap, and is, even then, constantly aware of her maternal duties as the concern about being interrupted by her daughter shows.125 Evidently, the fragility of these moments makes them precious.

Beulah’s temporary withdrawal from her responsibilities occurs on a regular basis, however brief it may be. But even though she is mentally detached during her pauses, she remains homebound and continues to be a wife, a mother and a housekeeper, aspects of her life that are exposed in a less flattering light. Nevertheless, as Georgoudaki notes, “[t]he inner life that Beulah gradually develops enables her to reinvent herself and her environment to transform and thus resist the hard conditions of her outer life that would destroy her.” (Race, Gender, and Class 212).126 Whenever required, such as during the routinely conducted sexual intercourse with Thomas referred to at the end of the poem, Beulah resourcefully returns with her imagination to “the place that was hers / for an hour” and that state of mind, “where / she was nothing, / pure nothing.”

Withdrawal, whether physical or mental, is a recurring coping strategy, employed whenever there is a need to overcome some of the challenges of domestic existence. The result of withdrawal is the development of an inner life that sustains and strengthens the woman in her commitments. Withdrawal ranges from states involving

125 Dove has affirmed the importance of Beulah’s mother role as reflecting her own mother role in an interview with Vendler (in Gates 489-490).

126 Georgoudaki continues by citing “Obedience” (TB 62) in its entirety.
memory and imagination to states where absent-mindedness and emptiness take over. But these different types of detachment operate similarly: temporary relief from current concerns comes via remembered events and past experiences that sometimes include imaginary landscapes or “pure” nothingness. By navigating an inner life, which contrasts her lived reality, a woman opens up to alternative states of awareness and insights that enrich her and mitigate her tiredness, boredom, or frustration.

Willingly Transforming the Mundane

Related to the ability of temporarily distancing herself from her immediate surroundings and finding solace within herself is Beulah’s skill to magically transform her environments with the power of her thought. In “Obedience” (TB 62), a poem where, according to Pat Righelato, she is accorded “imaginative space and authority” (97), Beulah is powerful enough to affect the order of the world around her and to perceive her surroundings in a spectrum of (gratifying) colors:

The smokestack, for instance,
in the vacant lot across the street:
if she could order it down and watch
it float in lapse-time over buckled tar and macadam
it would stop an inch or two perhaps
before her patent leather shoes.

Her body’s no longer tender, but her mind is free.
She can think up a twilight, sulfur
flicking orange then black
as the tip of a flamingo’s wing, the white
picket fence marching up the hill . . . (TB 62)

The freedom of Beulah’s mind is stated here in a direct claim. Keeler sees the portrayal of an “imaginative transcendence of [Beulah’s] material circumstance, where she allows her ‘free’ mind to re-create
her physical environment so that it obeys her wishes” (131). Keeler claims that the world, as Beulah would create it, “would have an expansive freedom lacking in her reality” (132). Here, Beulah exhibits strengths that have an “otherworldly” and “mythical” dimension, as she appears able to “defy spatial and bodily limitations” (Harris, “This Disease Called Strength,” 122). Her powers to manipulate the perception of her surroundings are in turn instrumental in her coping with the less satisfying sides of her reality.

Even Beulah’s limited authority may exalt the significance of the life she is a part of: “The house, shut up like a pocket watch, / those tight hearts breathing inside – / she could never invent them.” In this striking metaphor, the image of the shut “pocket watch” house suggests preciousness; the privilege of owning a pocket watch was hardly ever reserved for poor Black women, while the image of the “tight hearts breathing inside” shows the love contained in the place. Beulah employs her mental skills to revise the commonality of things around her and refashion them to her liking. Viewing the house that contains her beloved ones as a “pocket watch” allows her to derive pleasure from its possession.

In “Sunday Greens” (TB 69), Beulah appears less resigned and far more alert, fussing about her home on a Sunday morning, while longing for change. She is burdened by the delimiting effects of poverty and domesticity upon her and would welcome a reformed family situation:

She wants to hear 
wine pouring. 
She wants to taste 
change. She wants 
pride to roar through 
the kitchen till it shines

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127 Keller interprets Beulah’s transcendence of her circumstances in “Obedience” as a “nighttime version” of the transcendence that takes place in “Daystar.”
128 In “This Disease Called Strength,” Harris presents several examples where “this suprafemale quality” is manifested including, among others, the poetic characters in Maya Angelou’s “And Still I Rise” and Giovanni’s “Ego-Tripping.” (114-115 and 121). See also my discussion on female stereotypes in the next section of this chapter.
like straw, she wants

lean to replace
tradition. Ham knocks
in the pot, nothing
but bones, each
with his bracelet
of flesh.

The house stinks
like a zoo in summer,
while upstairs
her man sleeps on. (TB 69)

Beulah’s desire for change, conveyed here through the emphatic, rhythmic repetition of “wants” is contrasted by the foulness of her household conditions. As implied by “zoo,” these are less than human living conditions; there is no leisure, no touch of glamour, there is an overworked sleeping husband, and “the smell of cooking collard greens [that] causes the house to stink . . . until Beulah wishes for ‘pride to roar through / the kitchen until it shines’” (Dove, Poet’s World 31). Doing the housework and doing it well is important to Beulah; she takes pride in keeping the house clean and her family fed. In fact, through her, Dove reasserts the importance of the kitchen as a place of spiritual “nourishment and intimate communion” (Poet’s World 31).  

Yet, Beulah knows that neither her decisiveness nor her unfailing daily toil is anything but a minimal contribution to altering conditions based on economic constraints. She entertains the thought that the rejection of tradition could make a difference, only to realize, on her way to church at the end of the poem, that changing her attitude could have similar effects.

Robe slung over
her arm and

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129 For Dove’s views on the role of the kitchen see The Poet’s World 27 and 31-32.
Beulah finds sustenance in a momentary recollection of her mother’s different way of dealing with equally depressing conditions, recognizing at the same time the empowering role of religion and the legacy of the blues. Like Wilлемma, Beulah’s mother “provides an image . . . of freedom and abandon within domestic routine, a freedom tied to rural tradition” (Keller 133) that enables Beulah to acquire new perspectives, which legitimize her choice to feel content.

In general, being content seems to constitute the backdrop of Beulah’s monotonous life. She neither rebels, nor manages any dramatic changes in the conditions that shape her experience. Her accomplishments are having been a wife, a mother, a housewife, and, later in life, a wage seamstress—roles in which she is witnessed as being attentive to the needs of others, but not to the extent of martyrdom. Privileged with a sense of relative stability in her immediate surroundings, she apparently enjoyed parts of her experience though it included adjusting herself to others.

Furthermore, also in “The House on Bishop Street” (TB 60), where one might be tempted to compare Beulah with her caged canary, there are underlying notes of liberation. The porch, where the cage is hanging, is, in Dove’s view, “public space . . . a soapbox for airing opinion and an eagle’s aerie, a look-out post” (Poet’s World 130). For the connection between spirituals and blues, the emancipating role of the blues, and a discussion of the way in which domesticity and marriage figure in women’s blues (Bessie Smith and Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey), see Angela Davis’ “I Used to be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality, and Domesticity” in Blues Legacies and Black Feminism (3-41). In contrast, Giovanni’s “Poem for Aretha” (WM np) highlights the exploitation of women who professionally sing the blues: “cause nobody deals with aretha—a mother with four children—having to hit the road.”
and besides, it is, in the poem “cantilevered on faith.” Moreover, an ambiguous sense of freedom can be traced in the poem’s last stanza:

there was
a picture of a ship she passed
on her way to the porch, strangers calling
from the street Ma’am, your bird
shore can sing! If she leaned out she could glimpse
the faintest of mauve—no more than an idea—
growing just behind the last houses. (TB 60)

There is the image of the ship set in its frame, the cheerful attention passing strangers pay to her singing bird, as well as the view of the late afternoon sky slowly “growing” mauve in the space beyond her built milieu.131 These are conflicting symbols of freedom and confinement, suggestive of a sense (“no more than an idea”) of stealthy freedom as contained in compromising circumstances (“If she leaned out she could glimpse”).

In “Canary” (GN 64), a poem about Billie Holiday (but also linked to the Beulah “Canary in Bloom” poems through the canary reference), Dove ponders over the peculiarity of freedom available to Black women. Holiday, unlike Beulah, evaded domestication and even reached public acclaim. Yet she is still set at home. Her achievements viewed through a metaphor about composing music as cooking:

(Now you’re cooking, drummer to bass,
magic spoon, magic needle,
Take all day if you have to
with your mirror and your bracelet of song.) (GN 64)

The imagery in “Canary” is strongly reminiscent of that in “Sunday Greens,” the word “bracelet” being placed here in a new context.

131 Righelato has a quite similar reading of this poem. She mentions that Beulah derives pleasure from “passersby praising her canary’s song,” but sees the cage and the ship in the picture rather as “reminders of the limits of [Beulah’s] existence and the fact that she still yearns for a fuller life” (96-97).
The poem brings together the mundane milieu in “Sunday Greens” and the process of artistic creation, and gives them both an otherworldly, magical dimension. Furthermore, through its allusion to the celebrated blues singer, there is also a “glimpse” of ambiguous possibility, like in the ending of “The House on Bishop Street.” “Canary” ends with “If you can’t be free, be a mystery,” a phrase posing transcendence as a remedy to a woman’s lack of freedom. This is an imperative Beulah seems to have espoused and lived by.

In Giovanni’s work there is no sequence of poems that corresponds to the Beulah poems; Giovanni addresses the experience of housekeepers more sporadically, in a less consistent manner, and from a greater diversity of perspectives. Some of her poems, however, exemplify how women, whose lives resemble Beulah’s, situate themselves in the domestic sphere and perform domestic labor, while also demonstrating ways in which their position proves empowering.

Giovanni’s “Each Sunday” (WM np) could be considered a continuation of Dove’s “Sunday Greens,” reaffirming the often ignored potential fulfillment, satisfaction, and liberating feelings a woman might experience in her domestic role. In the poem, a younger woman (the poet herself), observes an elderly woman, who happens to be dozing during mass, an observation which prompts her to contrast the kinds of freedom each of them is entitled to. After reflecting on their different appearance and behavior (choice of attire and posture that do not jeopardize their respectfulness), the poem’s speaker ventures into envisioning the older woman’s youth and imagines the constrictions she was probably subjected to and the dreams she might have had to abandon:

i wonder did she dream
while baking cold-water cornbread
of being a great reporter churning
all the facts together and creating
the truth
did she think      while patching the torn pants
and mending the socks of her men      of standing
arms outstretched before a great world
body offering her solution for peace
what did she feel wringing the neck
of Sunday’s chicken breaking the beans
of her stifled life (WM np)

The experience described here could be that of Beulah’s. The “stifled”
domestic existence of the older woman is contrasted to the life a
woman of a younger generation is likely to have as a successful
professional. Without offering any evaluation, or explanation, the
poetic voice then states that the old woman sits “in the temple of her
life in the church of her god / strong and staunch and hopeful / that we
never change / places” (WM np). The validation of the older woman’s
domesticity is sudden, as much as it is rooted. From Giovanni’s
perspective, a young woman may prefer a different kind of life and
would embrace opportunities outside the home, but, nevertheless,
acknowledges and finds inspirational the life of women who did not
have such alternatives.132

Challenging Self-Defeating Stereotypes and Opening to the World

While Giovanni finds the accomplishments of domestic women
invaluable and their integrity admirable, she also avoids stereotypes of
strength and discourages self-sacrifice. Carby considers the origins of
romanticizing and victimizing stereotyped Black women in her essay
“Slave and Mistress,” where she, moreover, discusses the politicized
construction of these images: “the strong, nonsubmissive black female
head of household did not become a positive image, but . . . it
became a figure of oppressive proportions with unnatural attributes of
masculine power. Independent black women were destined to become
labeled black matriarchs” (39).133 Trudier Harris offers a

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132 Fowler points out that, for Giovanni, “connections to the past are through
women” and that the poet insisted on “claiming and valuing” the women of older
generations (especially mothers and grandmothers), well ahead of many feminists
(NG 61–62). More poems where the domesticity of women from older generations is
focused upon are included in the following two chapters.

133 See also Barbara Christian’s “Images of Black women in Afro-American
Literature: From Stereotype to Character” in Black Feminist Criticism.
comprehensive analysis of the strong Black female stereotype in “This Disease Called Strength” and in the introduction to her Saints, Sinners, and Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature (1-20). She also traces the advent of such portrayals in slavery and argues that Black women have been expected to be strong so consistently that strength has become a dominant character trait, overshadowing their soft and vulnerable sides and depriving them of “the complexity of their femininity and humanity” (9-10).134

In her poetry, Giovanni uses irony to highlight the need to evade female stereotypes of strength. In her highly ironic “[Untitled]” (MH 27) the poet includes a list of chores that comprise a woman’s “real world.” The poem thus focuses more on the actual workload and the often overwhelming lived experience, rather than an abstract, idealized everyday reality at home. Because a woman can attend to all her duties, Giovanni seems to argue, she is usually perceived to be strong and able to manage whatever kind of situation she may encounter:

because the real world
made up of baby
clothes to be washed
food to be cooked
lullabies to be sung
smiles to be glowed
hair to be plaited
ribbons to be bowed
coffee to be drunk
books to be read
tears to be cried
loneliness to be borne

says you are a strong woman (MH 27)

134 Harris’ examination of several literary portraits of Black women is insightful. The “problem” with Black women’s strength, she suggests, is demonstrated in the way Black female fictional characters sometimes give up too much of their lives to others while elsewhere they grow too dominant, with a destructive impact on those close to them. In other words, these women are “almost too strong for their own good, whether that strength is moral or physical, or both” (“This Disease Called Strength,” 110).
Domestic acts and instances of emotional involvement are listed here in italics; their performance is deemed mandatory. At the same time, the parenthetic structure of this list, the caesura effect, and the verbs’ passive voice contribute to the impression that the woman who must perform them is obscured. In sharp contrast to the impersonal listing of duties, Giovanni lifts the woman, evoking her involvement, in a direct second person address. While the above activities suggest a full life for the poem’s female character who attends to them, this does not necessarily mean that she has unlimited energy and stamina, the poet suggests. Instead, as they are likely to have contributed to an overestimation of her ability to endure the loss of her lover (“and anyway he never thought you’d really miss him”), their implications are probably in need of revision. So rather than emphasizing the abilities of the woman at home, Giovanni recasts the image of the omnipotent Black woman and has her poetic character emerge more human, vulnerable, and deserving of respect.

Giovanni attacks the exaggeration of Black women’s strengths also in her early “Woman Poem” (*BFBT* 78-80), where she challenges the widespread stereotype of the strong domestic woman, “get back fat black woman be a mother / grandmother strong thing but not woman,” along with the legacy of women’s sacrifices:

- it’s a hole in your shoe
- and buying lil’ sis a dress
- and her saying you shouldn’t
- when you know
- all too well—that you shouldn’t (*BFBT* 79)

By noting that the woman prioritizes her sister over herself, the sacrifice is taken less for granted. It is, moreover, a choice and not an obligation, which highlights the woman’s will and agency rather than her giving in to what is expected.

But if she opposes the stereotype of a Black woman’s selflessness and polemically rejects assumptions that place the value of Black women “in the strength and sacrifices she can offer to others” (*Fowler NG* 45), elsewhere, Giovanni claims that it is not bad “to be used by someone you love” (*Gemini* 144), whereby she also validates loving care. In accordance with this claim, in “Woman Poem” the poet
ponders the depressing consequences of not caring about others (when “joy” becomes “finding a pregnant roach / and squashing it / not finding someone to hold”). Abandonment, unhappiness and lack of freedom are in the poem expressed directly, but they are also implicit in the image of a neglected home:

it’s a filthy house
with yesterday’s watermelon
and Monday’s tears
cause true ladies don’t
know how to clean (BFBT 79)

Finally, in “A Very Simple Wish” (WM np), Giovanni establishes a link between common aspects of women’s domestic life and labor, such as cooking and quilt making,\textsuperscript{135} and the need for commitment in the public sphere:

i want to write an image
like a log-cabin quilt pattern
and stretch it across all the lonely
people who just don’t fit in
we might make a world
if i do that

i want to boil a stew
with all the leftover folk
whose bodies are full
of empty lives
we might feed a world

\textsuperscript{135} Quilts hold a special significance in the African American tradition and their use has been strategic. In “Hands: For Mother’s Day” (TWR 16-18), quilts materialize specific African American perspectives on living, exemplifying concrete survival strategies. “Quilts,” writes Giovanni, “are the way our lives are lived . . . We survive on patches . . . / scraps . . . the leftovers from a materially richer culture . . . the / throwaways from those with emotional options . . .” (TWR 17). As traditional artifacts with family history clues, quilts signify inclusion, which in turn validates one’s struggle and survival in dire circumstances. Quilts could also be subversive, as in cases where quilt patterns were created to hold messages for slaves looking for information about the Underground Railroad.
The speaker here is a poet/Giovanni herself, who wishes to “write an image” like those on quilts. The lower case “i,” together with the poem’s title (marking her wish as “very simple”) initially signify humility, modesty, and informality. Still, the overall statements she makes, if a bit hesitantly, are all but humble. As the “i” becomes “we,” she claims a voice to speak for everyone, along with a standpoint from where she makes assessments about the state of humanity and particularly the deterioration of human relations. Moreover, she is willful and exhibits an aspiration to transform the wrongs of the world.

The poet has the confidence to intervene in the public domain, is convinced she has the strength needed, and feels empowered by how competent she is at home. Sewing a quilt and preparing a meal, both of which demand commitment, creative engagement, and specific skills, are presented as the means to shelter and nourish “all the lonely / people.” Quilting and cooking stand for tradition, connection, goodwill, and understanding. The woman who performs these tasks at home is here able to embrace and offer relief to more people.

The confidence in the woman’s capacity is also shown implicitly in the poem’s last stanza, as she seeks to turn the quilt, a symbol of domesticity and private family histories, into a flag, and make it a public symbol of a greater domain:

i want to make a quilt
of all the patches and find
one long strong pole
to lift it up

i’ve in mind to build
a new world

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136 Giovanni writes about the symbolic and practical value of the quilt in “Stardate Number 18628.190.” The pattern contains pieces from “grandmother’s wedding dress,” “grandpappa’s favorite Sunday tie” and documents disease and death: “that white strip there . . . is / the baby who died . . . Mommy had pneumonia so the red flannel / shows the healing . . .” A quilt is not a museum item, she continues, “nor will it sell for thousands . . . this is here to keep me warm” (SP 19).
want to play (WM np)

So the very declaration of the wish to exercise her authority to change the world functions simultaneously, in reverse, as an assertion of the strengths domestic experience can endow, honoring the skills of women and the care they provide within the family by placing them in a wider context. In the poem, the idea of an expansion of a woman’s personal contribution to encompass the wider human community, although redefined as mere play in the end, undoubtedly enhances the woman’s sense of personal power.

The adult female characters in Giovanni’s and Dove’s poetry commonly cherish the advantages of ordinary daily life and show willingness to celebrate its possibilities and potentials. They sometimes enjoy, sometimes simply accept, their role within the domestic sphere and their domestic duties, though they might wish to evade them at times. In any case, they remain aware of their sacrifices, regardless whether they choose to fight the problems they are confronted with or retreat in the face of difficulties. However, their responsibilities and daily life skills seem to constitute the very ground which allows these women to transcend their circumstances, moving beyond the tiredness of work. Their domestic role is special, their function important, not only because it is vital for their loved ones, but also because it can be liberating for themselves.

In and around their homeplaces, Black women exhibit a variety of strengths, whether these are acknowledged or remain unacknowledged. They show an ability to take control over their situation and initiate small or great changes to accommodate their needs, whether these changes are real or imaginary. When change is unattainable and neither protest nor action provides a desirable outcome, they opt for non-embittering compromises. In such cases, they stay empowered by choosing to focus on the most rewarding parts of their experience and refusing to sink in despair. It could be said that the women in these poems pursue and find the means to

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137 As I discuss in relation to elderly women below, women’s strengths manifested in self-sacrifice and nurturing others tend to be expected of Black women. Yet they often remain unappreciated.
endure, keep themselves from distress, and frequently derive satisfaction from their presence and roles in and around domestic spaces.

As it has been shown, many of the empowering strategies employed by adult Black women at home overlap with those used by young girls and adolescents. However, as women age and their strategies are adjusted to their changed needs and roles, they morph further into the strategies of elderly women. The presence of elderly Black poetic figures at home and their impact on younger women as well as the strategies they employ for their individual and collective empowerment will be explored in the chapters that follow.
In this chapter, I explore the presence of elderly Black women at home and, by extension, in the domestic spaces of the African American community as they are featured in the poetry and other texts by Nikki Giovanni and Rita Dove. In the same way as with young girls and adult women, my aim is to examine how the elderly women relate to the domestic sphere and to identify the strategies they use to assert themselves, especially as they deal with their aging and the changes old age brings to their lives.

In order to outline the prominence of mature women in an African American context, I begin by focusing more generally on the elderly Black woman/Black grandmother as a significant, empowered and empowering ancestral figure. Thereafter, I discuss the influence the real life elderly women Giovanni and Dove knew as children have had in their writings and lastly I turn to the domestic presence and the empowering strategies of elderly female poetic characters in Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems.

**Family and Community “Pillars”**

In her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison writes that “the presence of an ancestor” is one of the recurring characteristics of African American writing. “There is always an elder there,” says Morrison, adding that “these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343). The presence of the ancestor in a literary text is so influential that it determines how successful a literary character is. “When you kill the ancestor,” Morrison claims,
“you kill yourself.” She continues by warning against the dangers of total self-reliance and the conscious severance of any historical connection (343-344). In “City Limits, Village Values,” Morrison elaborates further on the sustaining role of the ancestor, the “traditional role of advisor with a strong connection to the past,” and attributes to him/her the power to secure the “neighborhood links” in a city, or to make a village feel beautiful and healing (40-41).

The figure that represents the ancestor in Morrison’s works, just like in the works of other African American women writers and in the works of Giovanni and Dove, is often an elderly Black woman, usually a grandmother: Eva Peace in Sula, Pilate Dead in Song of Solomon, and Baby Suggs in Beloved are examples of strong and influential grandmothers.138 This is not surprising, considering the important role old Black women have always played, as grandmothers and as othermothers, in the African American community. Remembering her journey to her grandparents’ house, when she was a child, bell hooks refers to it singularly as her “grandmother’s house”: “I speak of this journey as leading to my grandmother’s house though our grandfather lived there too. In our young minds houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place” (Yearning 41).139 hooks explains that through the stories told by the Black women in her grandmother’s house, about marriages and deaths but also about how Black people were treated by the whites and how they survived, she “learned dignity, integrity of being” and “to have faith.” The Black women of her childhood acted as “primary guides and teachers” (Yearning 41-42), a role which coincides with that of the “female

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138 To Joanne M. Braxton, the ancestor in contemporary Black women writers’ texts is most commonly represented by the figure of “an outraged mother” who “embodies the values of sacrifice, nurturance, and personal courage,” who “employs reserves of spiritual strength, whether Christian or derived from African belief,” and who is “outrage[d] at the abuse of her people and her person. She feels very keenly every wrong done her children, even to the furthest generations” (300-301). In the literary works she examines, Braxton’s identification of “outraged mothers” includes grandmothers. In fact, she establishes a mythological dimension of this figure, via references to the Jamaican Maroon folklore suprahuman “Grandy Nanny” (301).

139 hooks writes about both her grandmothers, her great grandmother, and other elderly women she knew during her childhood in Bone Black.
ancestor, who passes on her feminine wisdom for the good of the ‘tribe,’ and the survival of all Black people” (Braxton 300).

Patricia Hill Collins and Germaine Greer emphasize the centrality of Black grandmothers in the extended African American family and kin, or “fictive kin,” in a broader (historical) perspective. Greer claims that the effect slavery has had on Black families has been an intensified need to rely on older women (257). Collins asserts the significance of grandmothers as linked to the childcare responsibilities they have been called on to take since slavery (when parents or children could be sold to new owners) and up to the present (when young men and women fall victims to drugs, or crime, leaving their children in need of care), as well as in relation to the parenting support they have usually offered to young mothers within the African American community (BFT 178-183). Collins does not associate the community-based raising of children exclusively with grandmothers, but places them within the broader category of othermothers among sisters, cousins, aunts and neighbors (BFT 178). She speaks of a “traditional source of support” and illustrates the continuity within a tradition of women-centered networks, which in turn is “a continuation of African-derived cultural sensibilities and functional adaptations to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class and nation” (BFT 178). Even Greer marks a link to the important role “the large, strong woman” plays in African villages: “The Afro-American woman bears a strong family resemblance to her queenly African counterpart, even when she is forced to live in a menial condition” (257).142

140 Harris, who is critical of the assumed suprahuman “strength” and self-denial of Black women, notes that in some cases “biology gives way to the stereotypically maternal” whereby elderly Black women “assume a directive posture in the lives of younger blacks” ignoring their own troubles in order to offer help (“This Disease Called Strength,” 111).

141 Collins notes an increasing deterioration in the function of the “community structure of bloodmothers and othermothers” during the last decades (BFT 181). Her examples show, however, that supportive female involvement is still intact. She quotes Stanlie James, whose daughter found comfort in a female extended family member, who helped her to deal with her great-grandmother’s death: “This fictive kin who stepped in to counsel my daughter was upholding a family tradition that had been modeled by my grandmother some fifty years before” (BFT 179).

142 Greer’s assumption regarding African women is arguably stereotypical.
Elderly Women Influences in the Works of Giovanni and Dove

Extending this socio-cultural legacy, ancestral figures are present in both Giovanni’s and Dove’s texts. The two poets have acknowledged their own grandparents’ lives and written about intriguing encounters with other elderly people, often old women in the Black community. Works that feature people of previous generations are *Thomas and Beulah* by Dove and Giovanni’s edited collection *Grand Mothers: Poems, Reminiscences, and Short Stories About the Keepers of Our Traditions* (1994). (This was followed by *Grand Fathers: Reminiscences, Poems, Recipes and Photos of the Keepers of Our Traditions* in 1999 and *Great Aunts* in 2001). These works have relevance as they focus on the lives and the experiences of the writers’ grandparents and in Giovanni’s texts also the role of grandparents in general. *Thomas and Beulah* is a tribute to the life of Dove’s maternal grandparents and an attempt on the poet’s part to connect with her family’s past. However, as *Thomas and Beulah* follows the life of this couple from youth through adulthood, and then to old age, of importance in this chapter are the poems that refer to the couple’s mature years. Giovanni’s *Grand Mothers* and *Grand Fathers* include some texts by Giovanni, but are otherwise edited volumes.¹⁴³ Poems that deal with elderly women are otherwise found in Giovanni’s *My House* and *The Women and the Men* (especially the section on the women).

While both Giovanni and Dove consider representations of elderly people, there are certain distinctions in the way they perceive the ancestral figures and address their presence. Firstly, reliance on the elderly, or exchanges between the old and the young, where

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¹⁴³ Another edited volume by Giovanni is *Appalachian Elders: A Warm Hearth* (1994), which contains the writings of the (all white) residents of the Warm Hearth Retirement Community, where Giovanni led a writers’ workshop. Moreover, *A Poetic Equation: Conversations between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker* (1974) contains an exchange of ideas between the then almost thirty-year-old poet and the middle-aged Walker. Their discussion is general but regarding domesticity, Giovanni and Walker agree on non-stereotypical gender roles at home (112-114). Similarly, Giovanni and Queen Latifah discuss Black life “kitchen-style” in a conversation published in *Essence* (1999), see Evelyn C. White’s “The Poet And The Rapper - rap singer Queen Latifah; author/political activist Nikki Giovanni.”
empowering ideas and attitudes are communicated, can be traced throughout Giovanni’s work but are more subtle and appear less frequently in Dove’s. For Giovanni the ancestor is represented solely by females, but in Dove’s poetry those who convey the ancestral wisdom may also be male.144 The figure of the grandfather, for instance, is given a quite prominent place by Dove, sometimes overshadowing the grandmother; in poems like “Grape Sherbet,” “Sunday Night at Grandfather’s” (M 47, 50), and “Hully Gully” (GN 14), a grandmother is present but portrayed as withdrawn and distant, sometimes rocking-chair-bound when everyone else is in movement.145 Similarly, the two poets’ approaches to the dynamic involvement of grandmothers (or other elderly Black women) in intergenerational interactions vary.146 In Giovanni’s poems, there are instances of dynamic contact between elderly and younger women, or girls, with direct exchanges of opinions, criticism, or pieces of advice. In Dove’s work, contact is more indirect, or occurs on different levels of awareness, which is realized through memory or (day)dreaming. Furthermore, among Giovanni’s early poems there are some where the poet envisions herself in old age; such poems are absent from Dove’s volumes.

The differences in the ways the ancestral presence is portrayed in their poetry probably reflect the ways in which the two poets were influenced by their own grandparents and the close family and broader kin constellations they experienced personally. Although Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems are not exclusively autobiographical, the inspirational role Giovanni’s maternal grandmother played in her life is easily detectible in her work while a bond with such a mature female figure was absent from Dove’s life. Drawing from her relationship with her grandmother and the childhood years she spent near her, Giovanni is straightforward and concrete when dealing with

144 In “Roses” (M 48-49), “Promises” (TB 51), “Summit Beach, 1921” and “Flash Cards” (GN 3, 12), pieces of wisdom and advice are handed down by a father while in “Magic” (TB 48-49) there is the collective “the old folks said.” Then, in “Old Folks Home, Jerusalem” (GN 73), the wise old people are not African Americans.

145 Of course, sometimes this distance is employed strategically: in “Parlor” (On the Bus with Rosa Parks 1999), for example, “Grandma insisted / peace was in what wasn’t there, / strength in what was unsaid” and “she had kept them just so: / / so quiet and distant, / the things that she loved” (30).

146 I examine intergenerational interactions at length in the next chapter.
relationships between girls and elderly women. However, since she does not have a daughter herself, the extension of this familial bond towards future generations involves a boy, the poet’s son. As for Dove, she explores the lives of both of her grandparents extensively, and, due to the lack of an intensive bond with a grandmother when she was a child, she considers her grandfather and grandmother on rather equal terms as bearers of cultural information.

Giovanni’s close relationship to her grandmother has not only led to a more consistent representation of older women in her work; it has informed the formation of the poet’s ideological standpoints. Margaret B. McDowell comments on Giovanni’s early knowledge of her grandfather smuggling her grandmother out of Georgia after she had “offended white people with her outspoken assertion of her rights.” McDowel claims that the “moving portrayal” of Giovanni’s grandmother in Gemini “suggests the effect of her independent, yet emotionally vulnerable, ancestor” had upon her (140). Additionally, according to Virginia C. Fowler, Louvenia Watson seems to have been of the greatest influence and a great source of inspiration for her granddaughter, Nikki. With her “strong, committed, assertive, and sometimes controlling personality” she was of the women who operated as “pillars” of the community and contributed with their efforts to the success of the Civil Rights movement (NG 3).

Louvenia embodied those qualities and values that Giovanni most respects: Louvenia devoted her energies and talents to a future that would be better for her people; she insisted on her rights as an individual, even though she was a black woman in a racist and sexist society; she provided a home for her children that was nurturing yet disciplined; . . . whatever she and hers had was always generously shared with others. It was her spirit that gave her granddaughter a sense of belonging in the world. (NG 3)

Giovanni’s unwavering personal integrity and her insistence on the need for commitment and struggle are an inheritance from her grandmother: “Louvenia instilled in her a belief in the importance of individual action, of the moral imperative to ‘stand up and be counted’ whether your side wins or not” (NG 9).
At the same time, the idea of life’s continuity, a recurring theme in Giovanni’s work, is based on an active connection to the past, enabled by the presence of mature women like her mother and grandmother. In Gemini, Giovanni writes about her visit to Knoxville, the place where she had lived as a child. She mentions how her mother’s old Bridge club showed their warmth by bringing her beads, how she spotted “Miss Delaney in her blue furs. And was reminded life continues” (Gemini 12). The people connected to the place, though not necessarily to her personally, provided with their welcoming gestures a link back to a common past:

And I saw the young brothers and sisters who never even knew me or my family and I saw my grandmother’s friends who shouldn’t have been there out that late at night. And they had come to say Welcome Home. And I thought Tommy, my son, must know about this. He must know we come from somewhere. That we belong. (Gemini 12).

More importantly, however, her respect and admiration for her maternal grandmother made Giovanni appreciate, embrace and claim the contribution of “mothers and grandmothers” at a point when her contemporaries were oriented towards rejecting “the older generations and their strategies for negotiating a racist world” (Fowler, NG 61-62). The immediate presence of such a powerful ancestral figure during her youth and their intense connection regarding daily and other matters have found their way into Giovanni’s autobiographical writings, like Gemini and the introductory essay in Grand Mothers, but also in her poetry, especially when she depicts the life of elderly women.

Utilizing Memory and Claiming a Peaceful Domestic Life

A peaceful old age in a house of their own has been uncommon for Black women historically. Their labor well beyond middle age usually constituted a premise for the wellbeing of younger generations. They were called upon to support, help raise, or take the entire responsibility for mothering children in their extended families.
Consequently, they often had their houses full of family, neighbors, and other community members and they were generally busy with tasks that, however gratifying, were likely to leave them with little or no time for themselves. In this light, a peaceful retirement at home could be seen as a cherished privilege, a comfortable state that elderly Black women may indulge in.

The poems that deal with women merely spending time at home during old age are comparatively few, yet constitute Giovanni’s and Dove’s attempts to show what the experience of having grown old involves, based on images of older women they knew. In general, it could be claimed that as the female characters in their poems age, they tend to appreciate the opportunity of being relieved from the kind of domestic duties they had while raising young children, but remain situated within the domestic sphere of otherwise empty houses. Especially in some of Giovanni’s poems, the women seem to identify their perception of a happy old age as peaceful existence at home and therefore long for quiet homes where they can be left undisturbed. But while Giovanni tends to romanticize old age, visualizing it at times in a non-realistic light and giving retirement a utopian tone, in Dove’s poetry, some old women cling to the past and appear in need of strategies to deal with their present.

A sense of optimism, confidence in oneself, a certainty that everything will be as planned and satisfaction with one’s own kind of living as well as a belief in the sanctioning effect of love and the memory of love (together with faith in the power of poetry) are the driving forces in Giovanni’s “You Are There” (CC 82-83). In this poem, a woman’s life and her house are interrelated while the domestic scene, with the central image of the poet in her rocking chair, poses a metaphor for old age. However, the poem also includes the expansion of this domestic scene, through a series of similes: the lover ceases to be a cat on her knees and slides outside to become an umbrella in the rain, a lighthouse in the dark, and coconut oil in the sun. The poet gives voice to the desire for a peaceful old age in the company of the memory of her beloved, a dream that, as she claims, is likely to come true, since the essential preparations are made: their shared experiences are stored in her poetry and can therefore be retrieved at will.
my rocker and i on winter’s porch
will never be sad if you’re gone
the winter’s cold has been stored
against
you will always be
there  (CC 83)

For Giovanni, Paula Giddings notes, poems are “as souvenirs
extracted from the site of some precious moment. Their value is in the
experience that it recalls” (CC 13). This practice of capturing
moments in poetry has a comforting function: in her imagined state of
solitude, the woman’s recollections and memories are soothing. When
she visualizes herself being protected from rain and sun, and led in the
darkness by her lover, she is expressing a deeper desire not to be left
alone by the person outside the text. However, she has found a way to
be completely independent and beyond the promise “i will not let you
/ down,” because even if she is eventually alone, in her “special
poem,” the lover is not given the option to leave. As expressed in its
title, the repetition of “you’ll be there” throughout the poem, and,
finally, stated in the self-reassuring “you will always be / there,” the
lover is conjured present through memory and poetic language, a
strategy similar to the one in “Mixed Media” (MH 24).

The reliance on memory as an empowering strategy is
acknowledged further in Giovanni’s “For a Lady of Desire Now
Retired” (WM np), with the claim that “age requires happy memories,”
and, furthermore, in “Once a Lady Told Me” (WM np). “Once a Lady
Told Me” is an account of an elderly woman’s views of her home and,
consequently, her life. In a vivid monologue, or perhaps stream of
thoughts, moving in a circular pattern, the poem’s speaker brings
together the past, the present, and the future of her domestic life,
ending up with a straightforward declaration of domestic happiness.

This woman is empowered through a strong connection to the
past, on several different levels. The poem begins with her stating that
her personal experience is a link in a tradition, being similar to that of
generations of women before her: “like my mother and her
grandmother before / i paddle around the house / in soft-soled
shoes.”

The tradition that she acknowledges is particularly assertive since it constitutes an indirect celebration of the freedom of Black women to walk, and by extension wander randomly about in their own homes, exempt from the preordained routines of slaves and the hectic circumstances of active homemakers. Moreover, while there is nothing extraordinary in the act of walking around the house, in this casually made statement the verb “paddle” renders the image of the house unconventional; the house is like a body of water, more likely to be associated with the open space outside rather than with the interior of a building. The woman walking in her own house is free. More importantly, although she is alone, she is not isolated.

The immediacy achieved through the poem’s first person gives an authentic quality to the speaker’s words even as she continues by mentioning how she chases the disturbing ghosts that inhabit her now empty house. As mentioned already in the analysis of “Obedience” (TB 62), the “otherwordly” and the “mythical” are directions in which manifestations of strength occur: “[b]lack female characters defy spatial and bodily limitations, commune with the dead, or die and continue to be sentient” (Harris “This Disease Called Strength,” 121). At the same time, rather than profoundly disturbing, the ghosts in the house keep the woman company; in the poem, the ghosts’ and the children’s disturbances overlap. All kinds of communications with people who probably were close to her when she was younger seem to be possible, through memory and through imagination, while she remains physically in her house.

Moreover, the decision to stay at home is the woman’s own; she is determined to be there and maintain order in her life. Her stand against her children and grandchildren, who claim the right to decide over her, is persistence. The woman’s main argument is that old age is her chance to devote time to herself: “the children say you must come to live / with us all my life i told them i’ve lived / with you now i shall live with myself.” The directness of the poetic voice in the reported (real or imagined) encounters with her children and

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147 This is also reminiscent of Dove’s “she floated from room to room, houseshoes flapping” in “Weathering Out” (TB 56-57).

148 This is a perspective that is also found in “The December of My Springs” (WM np) where a woman longs for the time she will be “free from children and dinners / and people I have grown stale with.”
grandchildren dramatizes the woman’s determination. The expressed awareness of the importance of her domestic role for her family in the past, in contrast to her present irrelevance, exposes the superficiality of their concerns: “my children wanted my life / and now they want my death.” By countering her grandchildren’s accusations of disgracefulness “you in this dark house with the curtains / pulled snuff dripping from your chin” the old woman also evokes with pride the glory of her youth: “i was very exquisite once very small and well courted / some would say a beauty when my hair was plaited / and I was bustled up,”149 reminding them that she was not always old.

This woman knows what is important to her, and her resistance to the ideas of others has its source in this knowledge: for her, her domestic experience in solitude is closely related to personal freedom and happiness. So, while by the end of the poem she indicates that she has noted other opinions, she concludes, now emphatically, with the declaration that her original decision remains unchanged:

but i shall pad around my house
in my purple soft soled shoes
i’ m very happy now
it’s not so very neat, you know, but it’s my
life (WM np)

The potential of the woman’s persistence becomes significant, if one takes into consideration the autobiographical dimension of this poem, whereby her attitude presents an alternative Giovanni imagines to counter the result of her own grandmother’s relocation. In Gemini, Giovanni gives a vivid description of the domestic milieu of her grandparents’ old house (the smells, the shadows, the noises, that brought forth all kinds of ghosts from the past), presented in contrast to the emptiness and lack of vitality of the new house where her grandmother, Louvenia, had moved when her house had to be pulled down for the construction of a road. The new house had “no familiar smell,” no sounds, no marks of bygone days and it was in a street that “was pretty but it had no life” (Gemini 10). Giovanni is convinced that

149 The reinforcement of the stereotype of the petite beautiful and greatly prized young woman is broken by what would be an unfit attitude. This Black woman is beautiful not when she is quiet but when she is “bustled up.”
for her grandmother—as well as for other elderly people—being forced to move from their homes is a devastating blow. When the nurturing powers of their houses cease to exist the old people become lonely and die: “Like my grandmother would probably have lived another ten or twenty years, but urban renewal took her home that she had lived in for forty-three years, and she was disjointed and lost her will to live” (Gemini 65). The fate of Louvenia, who died shortly after she had allowed herself to be persuaded by her children and grandchildren to move, and was thus deprived of the empowering contact with the past, highlights the importance of the decision taken by the elderly woman in “Once a Lady Told Me” and in a sense confirms that it is life-preserving.

If the speaker in “Once a Lady Told Me” is self-confident, aware of her strengths, and eager to claim her right to choose, Dove’s “The Bird Frau” (YH 9) infuses less optimism in its examination of the disillusionment that lurks in loneliness when a woman derives her sense of purpose from her role as a wife and mother, and is thus vulnerable to solitude. This poem is different from the poems I examine here: the cultural context is European, it is about a German woman (probably modeled after Dove’s mother-in-law), and there are Second World War references, making it different also in tone. Still, it is notable that Dove exemplifies disempowering domestic experience via a white woman, a physically starved creature caught in an oppressive state, figuratively “an old rag bird,” who does not fly, only “move[s] about the yard.” “Women who have lived all their lives in houses filled with noisy other people, responding automatically to the demands of others,” argues Greer, “might find the sudden silence deafening and frightening” (270). This elderly woman has less control of her house/life than Giovanni’s poetic character in “Once a Lady Told Me.”150 Having given herself to others, she has little chance to reach empowerment: “The woman ejected from feminine subjection by the consequences of her aging can no longer live through others, or

150 Notably, however, the circumstances of Giovanni’s grandmother after her grandfather’s death are similar to those mentioned in Dove’s poem here. Giovanni explains: “All of her life she had been in the service of her God, her husband, her children, that which was right. Yet none of us could replace what she was losing” (GM xxi).
justify her life by the sexual and domestic services that she renders” (Greer 262).151

A poem that summarizes the empowering resources an elderly woman has access to in a house/room of her own is Giovanni’s “The Room with the Tapestry Rug” (Those Who Ride the Night Winds 57), where the woman’s life and the house are again inseparable. Martha Cook argues that while “My House” conveyed “the development of a strengthening identity as a single woman,” written more than a decade later, “The Room with the Tapestry Rug” illustrates “not only the strength but also the depth and range of that identity.” Here, Giovanni shows “not only the need for but the fact of control over the places in her own life” (298).

The possibility of withdrawal, detachment, tranquility and peacefulness, as they can be experienced in a quiet room, and which seem to be comforting to most of the women in the poems examined above, take a new dimension in this poem. Solitude provides imaginative opportunities. “And when she was lonely . . . she would go into the room . . .” the poem starts and the female figure browses the room’s contents, touching, and remembering. The third person narrative mode of the verse, with the use of ellipses to connect phrases in longer lines, conveys a sense of humble entitlement and wholeness via the realization of alternatives:

If it was cold . . . she would wrap herself . . . in the natted blue sweater . . . knitted by a grandmother . . . so many years ago . . . if warm . . . the windows were opened . . . to allow the wind . . . to partake of their pleasure . . .

Holidays were never sad . . . seasons in fact . . . unchanging . . . Family and friends . . . lovers and longings . . . rested . . . waited . . . never to betray . . . never to leave her . . .

Her books . . . her secret life . . . in the room with the tapestry rug . . . (TWR 57)

151 Beyond clinging to their old lives and grieving for them, Greer suggests that these women “must let go” so that they can “recover [their] lost potency” (262).
The elderly woman asserts her ability to shift her ground whenever she risks discomfort: when loneliness is about to take over, she employs imaginary openings and intrusions that populate the calm. The instrumental use of memory is manifest in that the empty room, which at times allows her the delights of solitude, may, at will, also be filled with loved ones from the past. The woman is in perfect control of her imagined communications with these people, as her memories do not permit them to disappoint her by leaving or betraying her and she enjoys the privilege of selectively sharing with them “pleasures.” Besides, the room itself “holds memories of the past, symbolized by a garment created by a member of her family who was important in her childhood, used in a literal and metaphorical way to keep out the cold” (M. Cook 298).

But while the sweater, the tapestry rug, or her books, and other possessions that have symbolic value, and can enable further connections, contribute to the woman’s physical and emotional wellbeing when indoors, the opening to the outside is also welcomed. The possibility of having the windows open is a guarantee against enclosure and ensures the open-endedness of the room’s space. The effect of a breeze when it is warm, matches the effect of the imaginary opening to the past: the room is no longer “only a place of confinement and protection from the larger world; it becomes the place where [the woman] can also find comfort in the cool air from outside, while luxuriating in the security of her own space” (Cook 298).

Focusing on the Rewarding Parts of One’s Existence

In the Beulah poems, Beulah’s mature life is characterized, to some extent, by disillusionment and disappointment, as a result of her having devoted herself to her family and that, due to their poverty, Thomas’ promises had remained largely unfulfilled. However, these feelings are counterbalanced, by Beulah’s tendency to focus on the most rewarding parts of her experience. In “Recovery” (TB 70), where Beulah and Thomas are old and together at home, her disappointment with him for not ever taking her on a trip to Chicago is overshadowed
by an expression of satisfaction over having shared her life with him. “Years ago he had promised to take her to Chicago,” remembers Beulah, but she dismisses the thought and in the immediately following lines she draws on a more pleasant memory of Thomas’ physical beauty in his youth: “He was lovely then, a pigeon / whose pulse could be seen when the moment / was perfectly still.” Her memory here is strategically selective; she exhibits a preference to replace the parts of her experience that failed her expectations with others that did not. In contrast to the white woman in “The Bird Frau,” the old Beulah can stand peacefully “by the davenport, / obedient among her trinkets,”152 with her “secrets like birdsong in the air,” even when “In the house // the dark rises and whirrs like a loom.” Moreover, she can find enough reasons to declare (to Thomas, or to herself) “listen: we were good, / though we never believed it” (“Company” TB 74), a statement with more empowering potential than travel memories from Chicago, or even Paris, would ever offer. Although Beulah has indeed “settled / for less” (“Headdress,” TB 67-68) than she had initially hoped for, her domestic life and her devotion to her family seem to matter more than the lost chances to travel.

Throughout her life, Beulah shows an ability to compensate for the lost opportunities to have a more glamorous life, or see the world, by entering a secret inner world of dreams and indulging in daydreaming. Paris, for example, had been anticipated in “Magic” (TB 48-49) in one of Beulah’s attempts to escape reality. As the chance to visit the city fails to materialize, she “revisits” it in another imaginary escape in “The Great Palaces of Versailles” (TB 63-64). In “The Oriental Ballerina,” the last Beulah poem, and also the final poem of the Thomas and Beulah volume (75-77), Beulah’s imaginary world contributes for one last time to her empowerment before it collapses into the dying woman’s reality.

In “The Oriental Ballerina,” Beulah’s presence in her sick room becomes the focal point of natural and imagined events, while her death coincides with a metaphorical explosion of the house. Beulah’s image remains largely impersonal throughout the poem, her portrayal is fragmentary and elliptic: “a hand / reaches for a tissue,” “the right

152 Similarly, in Giovanni’s “The Life I Led” (WM np), a woman imagines: “i will look forward to grandchildren / and my flowers all my knickknacks in their places / and that quiet of the bombs not falling in Cambodia.”
ear which discerns / the most fragile music / / where there is none,”
“The head on the pillow sees nothing / else, though it feels the sun warming / / its cheeks.” Though backgrounded in favor of other details in the room, Beulah’s physical presence signifies control. Her wandering mind guides the reader around in her room, in a 360-degree sweep, stopping at the radio (the tunes of a hymn), the flowers, the pirouetting ballerina on the jewelry box lid, the glass with its straw on the sideboard, the windows, the walls “papered in vulgar flowers.” Although she suffers from glaucoma, it looks like Beulah “views” the objects in the room, as if through the eyes of the ballerina.

Moreover, Beulah’s great desire for exotic places, occupies her very last thoughts, as she contemplates the imagined beauties from “the other side of the world,” China. As a result, “[i]ronic juxtapositions of the exotic and the homely, the beautiful and the vulgar, organize the poem,” notes John Shoptaw (380). Yet under Beulah’s “glance,” the homely and the exotic eventually merge, or rather the exotic is overruled by the homely, before they are both abandoned. Beulah does not move, but functions as a magnetic pole that draws to her the motion of the ballerina and the sun. The ballerina is imagined drilling a tunnel through the globe, all the way from China, to end up on her jewelry box, which could be viewed as an allegory of domestic space, the enclosed privacy, the guarded treasures of personal integrity. The spinning movement of the ballerina projects a sense of grace and balance: “She flaunts her skirts like sails, / whirling in a disk so bright, / so rapidly she is standing still.” Yet hers is an enchanting “toed” levitation, elevation, a movement that also signifies extension, elongation, a rather fitting image as Beulah is about to pass, physically and spiritually, from this world to the next.

The ballerina dances
at the end of a tunnel of light,
she spins on her impossible toes—

the rest is shadow. (TB 76-77)

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153 As Dove states in the “Chronology” (TB 78-79), Beulah, suffering from glaucoma, had taken to her bed three years prior to her death in 1969.
At the same time, the sun “strikes the windows” and then “walks” the room,\(^{154}\) causing a brightening of its gloomy atmosphere through a cheerful animation of the commonplace surroundings, till it reaches her cheek, at which point she can renounce her dreams along with her lived reality and die—it is as if just before her death Beulah manages to bring her dreams home.

The head on the pillow sees nothing else, though it feels the sun warming its cheeks. *There is no China;* no cross, just the papery kiss of a kleenex above the stink of camphor, the walls exploding with shabby tutus. . . . (TB 77)

“The Oriental Ballerina” has been widely analyzed.\(^{155}\) To Lynn Keller the poem “portrays Beulah’s death as a relinquishing of her fantasies about ‘the other side of the world’ where life is dramatically different and more beautiful” (135). Shoptaw suggests a “Beulah-Land,” a land Beulah’s heart is set on, which comes to her deathbed “as daylight.” “What finally dawns on Beulah is not a Beulah-Land,” he argues, “but an unbridgeable nothing that [her] name has hidden.” Thus, her renunciation “explodes Beulah’s myths of Beulah. There is no China, no Promised Land, no LandLord” (380-381). Both Keller and Shoptaw interpret the phrase “*There is no China*” in isolation. I find that, to Beulah, the beauty of her dreams and her lived life are interwoven; as Vendler puts it, the dancing ballerina figure “sum[s] up all Beulah’s longing” (in Gates 486).

The dying Beulah, although she is immobile in her bed and unable to actively control her house/life, like the women in Giovanni’s “My House” or “Once a Lady Told Me,” can still order her experience, to the degree that her condition allows it. She seems able to engage in imaginary extensions of her existence, which empower

\(^{154}\) The lines “In this room / is a bed where the sun has gone / walking” are reminiscent of the imagery in Giovanni’s “When I Nap” (MH 23).

\(^{155}\) For other interpretations of the poem, see Alexander (54), Righelato (102-104,108), and Steffen (Crossing Color 104, 108).
her at the moment of her death. She employs fantasy, and in her strife for the few shreds of pleasure she can derive from her last moments in life, she manages to appreciate her miserable surroundings. However unworthy, she perceives the common objects around her in a beautifying perspective: she “reaches for a tissue, crumpling it to a flower,” she “sees” the dance of the ballerina “at the end of a tunnel of light.” She even hears music “where there is none” and feels the pleasant warmth of the sun.

Beulah’s existence thus expands; her being is merged with that of her house to such a degree that the point of her death signals its dramatic demolition: “the walls exploding with shabby tutus…” While the interdependence between the woman’s life and her house is similar to that in Giovanni’s account of the case of Louvenia (Gemini 10-11), the move here is the opposite as the demolition of the house follows the woman’s death. The parallelism accentuates the significance of Beulah’s presence in the house; when she ceases to exist the house explodes.

As they get older, Black women in Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems emerge firm in their expectations to stay in control of their houses and their lives. Elderly poetic characters value their peaceful existence at home and in cases where it is threatened, they show determination to claim it. They generally enjoy remaining in their homes, muse in solitude, and appreciate the freedom from the domestic responsibilities that burdened them when young. They derive strength from their domestic existence, especially their ways of governing their domestic space and ordering the activities that take place there. Moreover, they seem to evade emotional confinement by relying primarily on the use of memory and imagination. When allowed to reside in familiar/comforting environments in old age, these women appear reconciled with themselves and generally content with the alternatives they were given in life.

Resignation is not a prominent trait in Black women’s old age. Instead, whatever their personal and material circumstances, mature Black women manage to resist marginalization and affirm their relevance in their communities. Beyond their social/racial vulnerabilities they exhibit power to cope individually and to contribute with valuable knowledge to those around them. As I will
discuss in the next chapter, elderly Black women take on inspirational positions particularly in their contacts with younger women. These interactions may in turn prove further empowering and lead to self-affirmation. Importantly, contacts between the old and young are vital for the continued support and empowerment of younger generations of African American women.
Elderly Black women are held in positions of prominence in Nikki Giovanni’s and Rita Dove’s poems, where, in a culturally specific manner, they are shown to contribute to the empowerment of younger women/girls. In this chapter, I explore poems by Giovanni and Dove that yield perspectives on this kind of cross-age socialization and bonding. My point of departure is the presence of mature Black women in the homeplace, which has been both essential and broadly cherished, especially for the contribution these women have made to the upbringing of younger generations in the African American community. I view the many ways in which the interactions between young and older women take place as strategic, and, in the context of such encounters, I highlight the influential—inspiring and supportive—role of elderly women in the empowerment of younger women and girls.¹⁵⁶

The involvement of mature African American women in the parenting of children and the commitment they have shown historically have been consistent; in fact, traditional dependence on the care elderly women could offer as othermothers has been the origin of the African American survival strategy of reliance on kinship. As their position at home or in extended families has been acknowledged and respected, the impact of older Black women in the lives of younger women has been deemed significant. In turn, due to their participation in the lives of the young, loving bonds and relationships of trust have occasioned either direct or indirect sharing of knowledge and strengths. Karla F. C. Holloway and Stephanie

¹⁵⁶ Exceptions to this can be found in Giovanni’s autobiographical poem “Mothers” (MH 6-7), where the poet’s son takes the role of a girl and in Dove’s “Roast Possum” (TB 37-38), where the contribution of an elderly Black man proves, unintentionally, empowering for his granddaughter.
Demetrakopulos highlight the “spiritual/political significance” of Black women “as foremothers whose survival ensured ours, brought us into being, and gives us strategy” (177). Strategies of survival that originate in traditional ways of being are taught straightforwardly, for the empowerment of younger women/girls, or are passed on in a more subtle manner. In other words, strategies may also be used to enable and facilitate the transmission of ways of thinking and acting in general.

The strategies employed in intergenerational communications of Black women involve various ways of sharing cultural information and providing links to the past. Older women sometimes try to actively pass on their wisdom; they “preach,” instruct, order, insist, argue, forbid, control, even threaten. Alternatively, they are simply present in nurturing domestic milieus where they converse, advise, confide, comfort, support, and encourage—whereupon younger women are likely to listen and agree, feel inspired or just comply. Otherwise, they might object, refuse to pay attention, and seek new approaches. While some exchanges are explicit and uncomplicated, others are implicit, and while some are more challenging than directly affirming, most are inspiring and spark insights. These insights can be individual but they may also be experienced mutually.

Generally, the emotional bonds developed between the old and the young in othermothering arrangements, along with the awareness that elderly Black women had toiled with racial injustice and poverty, frame their empowering influences on younger people. Mature women grant vital links to the past, and with their loving engagement they allow for assertive attitudes to be spread to those around them. While empowerment often happens via conscious decisions to bond, it can also occur by chance, during unintended encounters; occasionally, it may even operate in reverse, resulting in the empowerment of the old by the young.

Mature Women as Nurturers and Guides

The conditions under which African American women have struggled to keep together, protect, and provide for their loved ones have
required them to exhibit strength, determination, and patience. These qualities have thereafter directly or indirectly been passed on to younger generations of women. It could be argued that Black women possess a particular kind of wisdom, acquired through centuries of living under inhumane conditions, enduring hardships and surviving hard work. In *Women, Race and Class*, Angela Davis argues that slave women had learned “to extract from the oppressive circumstances of their lives the strength they needed to resist the daily dehumanisation of slavery. Their awareness of their endless capacity for hard work may have imparted to them a confidence in their ability to struggle for themselves, their families their people” (11). Furthermore, those enslaved women, “who were beaten and raped but never subdued . . . passed on their nominally free female descendants a legacy of hard work, perseverance and self-reliance, a legacy of tenacity, resistance and insistence on sexual equality” (29).

As discussed earlier, in relation to adult women, the prevalence of tough and resilient Black female figures in literary texts is striking, even though their strength might constitute a symptom of how exposed they have been historically. Aware of how Black women ran the risk of “being maligned for any socially deviant behavior,” as Trudier Harris notes, “community conscious” writers would usually engage in “less problematic portrayals than those that invited trouble” (“This Disease Called Strength,” 122). This image of the strong, determined, and cunning Black woman often coincides with that of the Black mammy, who is depicted “as cook, housekeeper, nursemaid, seamstress, always nurturing and caring for her folk” (Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* 5), but whose figure is still one that infuses respect, inspires, and empowers.\(^\text{157}\) Christian also points out the importance of the mammy figure in African mythology (5), indicating her link to similar functions in the ancestral African culture. Mary Helen Washington problematizes the stereotypical portrayal of Black mothers and grandmothers in the works of Black women writers and highlights the presence of mother figures who defy the stereotype, like Toni Morrison’s Eva Peace and Zora Neale Hurston’s Nannie, who

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\(^{157}\) Christian’s definition refers to the mammy figures in slave narratives, where the stereotype, originating in Southern literature, persists, but where the mammy was no longer harmless: she “saw herself as a mother, but to her that role embodied a certain dignity and responsibility, rather than physical debasement” (5).
are grandmothers but figure primarily as mothers (xxi-xxiii). Additionally, as Washington notes, the recurring image of “the powerful black mother” in the stories Black women writers have written about their mothers and grandmothers is to be attributed to the fact that historically “Black women have seen their mothers and aunts and grandmothers taking care of their families under the most severe circumstances” (xxi).

To bell hooks the commitment of Black women to their families is “rooted in love.” Talking about her grandmother and her mother, hooks shows how influential these hardworking (even though controlling) women were to her and how their ways had a deep inspiring effect. hooks lists Baba’s (her mother’s mother) endless chores, linking them to an emotional state among family members: “The sweet communion we felt (that strong sense of solidarity shrouding and protecting my growing up years was something I thought all black people had known) was rooted in love, relational love, the care we had towards one another” (Yearning 35). hooks also speaks about her mother’s determination for her six daughters to cherish their connection to each other:

Often she would “preach” on the subject of sisterhood. She would tell us about households of women, sisters usually, where they were always quarrelling with one another, fighting, back-stabbing, working out some “serious” female rivalry. Mama made it clear there was gonna be none of that in our house. We were gonna learn how to respect and care for one another as women. (Yearning 91)

She further notes that the success of her mother’s effort led to strong ties between the adult sisters, despite their differences. hooks’ acknowledgement is profound: “I remember mama’s hard work, teaching us tolerance, compassion, generosity, sisterly ways to love one another (Yearning 91). But while the mother is concerned about solidarity within the immediate family, in hooks’ work it is, moreover, evident that the grandmother guards the
connection to their immediate community, “their people, their own” (*Yearning* 90).158

hooks’ experience is common in an African American community context, and is also documented in Giovanni’s *Grand Mothers*. Ethel Morgan Smith, one of the contributors to the volume, testifies: “Big Mama and Mother seemed so powerful to me. They allowed no one to disrupt our lives, not even white folks. When we were growing up, it was Big Mama who did most of the mothering” (*GM* 16) and “Our house had been the neighbourhood day-care center. There was no money involved. Big Mama offered love and discipline, and the children gave love and respect” (*GM* 19). In Giovanni’s case, “home training,” as hooks calls it, was taken care of most efficiently by her dominant grandmother: “Mother would have accepted ‘No’ or ‘Not yet’ for an answer. Grandmother wanted it *now*. And cheerfully. Grandmother helped me become civilized. She helped me see that little things are all that matter. She taught me patience. She showed me how to create beauty in everything I do” (*GM* xvii). Referring to her own grandmother in her piece in the volume, Virginia C. Fowler admits that although they “argued frequently and vigorously” during the time they were living together, she, as an adult, found herself “speaking with her [grandmother’s] sharp tongue as well as exercising her quick wit” (*GM* 6). Obviously, even as they were feared and may still be remembered as bossy and dominating, these elderly women succeeded in communicating their thoughts and attitudes and affected their (grand)daughters’ perspectives.

Giovanni explores the communication and exchange of thoughts between the young and the old in several of her poems as well as in other writings. In the introduction to *Grand Mothers*, in particular, Giovanni addresses the role grandmothers play in young people’s lives and suggests its importance, drawing an outline of common grandmother-grandchild relationships:

> We were all young when we met these women; we were teenagers by the time we learned to resent their easy, almost

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158 This connection was “with particular black folks that one is connected to by ties of blood and fellowship, the folks with whom we share a history, the folks who talk our talk (the patois of our region), who know our background and our ways” (*Yearning* 90).
casual way of telling us what to do and how to do it. On top of that we had to hear how they and our parents had done everything better. . . . It helps tremendously, I think, to just learn that “grown” is something between who we, teenagers, are and who our grandmothers are. Grandmothers make those transitions for us. And are always on our side. (GM xvii)

To Giovanni, the grandmother guides and sustains her grandchild, shifting her manners between serious and easygoing to suit the occasion. She teaches discipline and obedience; but this is often done by retaining a casual outlook and pretending she is not too involved. Then, she requires excellent performance, her demands reinforced by means of comparison with the achievements of previous generations, which she feels entitled to make, because she knows her grandchildren and she knows their parents. Although setting previous generations as a standard might have inhibiting effects, the older woman reinforces her grandchild’s belonging, strengthening their sense of lineage. Matching this kind of extension to the past, the relationship with the grandmother enables extensions to the future, reducing teenage insecurities along the course to adulthood. So, the grandmother is portrayed by Giovanni as a leading and controlling figure, who intervenes, challenges, and makes demands on her grandchildren, but who can also be counted on to offer support and lifelong guidance. Grandmothers “teach us even when they leave us behind” (GM xviii), notes the poet. “If there is one group who mean ‘forever,’” she claims, “grandmothers are certainly that group” (GM xx). Thus the grandmother’s parenting infuses a sense of safety and security based on physical and spiritual availability, her being “forever,” even when she is gone.

Offering Support and a Sense of Belonging

To Giovanni a grandmother is a person one can always turn to for comfort and healing in times of misfortune, one who will “put quilts over us and let us curl upon the couch and rock ourselves to sleep” (GM xx). A grandmother’s supportive role is in some cases solidified
by the presence and use of the quilt, a highly symbolic African American artifact, its importance entrenched in its facilitating empowering connections to the past. The cover illustration of Grand Mothers actually shows a young woman wrapped in a quilt by an elderly one, who leans over her from behind, embracing her. Cultural memory, Giovanni suggests, can have a healing effect on individual injuries, and both the grandmother and the quilt contribute to that.

Giovanni confesses a great admiration and affection for old people; she has expressed her respect for their “wisdom of age” (Appalachian Elders 107, 109), and has urged to “always talk to old people because they know so much” (Gemini 97). In some of her poems, like “Alabama Poem” (originally in Recreation, WM np), “Conversation” (MH 11-12), “The New Yorkers” (CC 29-31), and “Legacies” (MH 5), one can witness the exchanges taking place during encounters between elderly and young women, or girls. In these poems, mature women attempt to communicate their views while engaging in conversation with their younger counterparts.

In “Alabama Poem” and “Conversation” a female student (a younger version of the poet herself) is confronted by elderly Black women whom she meets at their respective homes, where they sit on the porch. In both poems, the old women manage to surprise and outwit the young student, who approaches them respectfully and with genuine interest, but has, nevertheless, predefined ideas about them and their lives. However, these older women succeed in displaying the validity of their standpoints, while allowing the young woman to partake of their knowledge. The focus of both poems is on the wisdom of old people, which is usually acquired through hardships, and whether it is “superior to the knowledge acquired from schools and books” (Fowler, NG 54), but there is also emphasis on the elderly women’s humor and wit.

In “Alabama Poem” before meeting the elderly woman, the student had come across an elderly man who had addressed her, “‘girl! My hands seen / more than all / them books they got at Tuskegee,’” and whom she had casually dismissed. The two old people in the poem are presented in a parallel manner: they both introduce viewpoints different from those the student would acquire in school; their attitude undermines the belief in formal education and questions the credibility of formal studies. While the old woman’s peculiar
words, which, similar to the man’s, suggest embodied knowledge, initially fail to capture the attention of the young student, “‘sista’ she called to me / ‘let me tell you—my feet / seen more than yo eyes ever gonna read,’” the address eventually intrigues her. Having “smiled at her and kept / on moving,” the student resolves to return to the porch to talk to this “old woman / with a corncob pipe / sitting and rocking.” The encounter reveals the mature woman’s easygoing manner, self-certainty, but also her sense of playful superiority:

“i say gal” she called down
“you a student at the institute?
better come here and study
these feet
i’m gonna cut a bunion off
soons I gets up” (WM np)

As Fowler suggests, “[s]ecure in who she is and in the value of what she knows, the old woman offers to let the speaker learn from her” (NG 54). Hers is an invitation to challenge the importance of formal education and pay attention to the wisdom of ordinary Black folks.

The Black vernacular together with the narrator’s internal references to talking trees, function here as the poem’s frame. “if trees could talk / wonder what they’d say,” which precedes the man’s words in the beginning and “if trees would talk / wonder what they’d tell me,” which comes after the woman’s words at the end, demonstrate the fundamental quality of the old people’s views. Lived experience and the skills acquired through life are acknowledged as more valuable than any theoretical approach and the qualifications it might render. Although they express the same position, the woman’s words appear as more radical than the man’s and therefore as more intriguing; there is after all a discrepancy between her homebound status and her claim that her knowledge resides under her feet. If her words appeal to the young woman, it is because, in contrast to the walking man’s words, which accent the value of what his hands have constructed, the old woman’s words contest her apparent state of immobility, or limited/repetitious mobility, her “sitting and rocking” on the porch.
This arresting unpredictability of the old woman’s statements can also be found in “Conversation.” Examined in relation to “Alabama Poem,” “Conversation” illuminates further the dynamics of the interaction between women of different generations, showing how an old uneducated woman can still contribute to a young woman’s development. In her analysis of the poem, Fowler focuses on the young poet’s brightness and her naïve inclination to “take herself and the world very seriously” (NG 62) while she also highlights her vain efforts to appear sophisticated and her inability (due to her self-absorption), to detect the old woman’s humorous maneuvers. The young woman’s attempts to stereotype the older one are bound to fail as, “[i]ronically, the old woman is more in touch with the significance of current events than the young poet” (NG 62).

As echoed in the poem’s title, which highlights the conversation itself (as a medium), the old woman uses rhetorical strategies to swiftly manipulate and steer the discussion, challenging the young woman throughout, in anticipation of more thoughtful responses from her. The first part of their dialogue is informed by the young speaker’s (a city dweller and a poet) stereotypical assumptions about elderly people. The young woman comes with a set idea in her mind, an idea which is at first fully reinforced by the elderly woman’s own words: being a widow she is all alone, she sits on the porch and socializes with other old people, goes to church, has grandchildren.

“what do you do” i asked
“sit here on the porch and talk to the old folk
i rock and talk and go to church most times”
“but aren’t you lonely sometimes” i asked
“now you gotta answer yo own question” (MH 11)

But while her responses are predictable, the old woman adopts an imposing posture. She emphasizes her age, the implications of which become clearer when she returns to it later in the poem, to claim her

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159 In Grand Mothers, Ethel Morgan Smith writes: “And I realized that some of the most valuable lessons I’d learned came from an old woman who couldn’t read or write and didn’t even know her real birthday” (22).

160 In contrast, “Alabama Poem” highlights the geographic and cultural location of the exchange.
wisdom from years of experience. Her husband, she points out, has been dead “longer than you is old,” a comparison that accentuates the poet’s youth and signals her own superiority in life experience. A similar effect is achieved with her highly ironic comment “ain’t no time for old folks / like me,” in her reference to her busy (grand)children. Likewise, by avoiding to answer a direct question about whether she feels lonely or not, and inviting the poet’s own judgment, the elderly woman indirectly comments on the banality of her discussant’s attempt to appear friendly, while she at the same time avoids becoming an objectified interviewee.

However, the young poet’s assumptions about this elderly Black woman are in need of revision. Contrary to what she probably expected from a homebound old woman, this one “does not yearn for the past but is excited about the adventures of the present” (Fowler, NG 62) commenting, as she does, on the expeditions to the moon. The interest in space travel-related technical achievements suggests a wider perspective than what the young speaker would have assumed. Channeling Giovanni’s own declared fascination and excitement about moon expeditions,161 she is meant to figure as a remarkable woman. Nevertheless, the surprise of these progressive ideas is contained on the part of the poet, who swiftly tries to regain control of the conversation by wittily referencing to pop stars and advancing the talk in a new direction. “‘i see stars all the time,’” she boasts and mentions having been “at madison square garden recently,” posing “square” in contrast to “porch” and thus casually demonstrating her privileged geographic mobility and her cosmopolitanism. But the elderly woman cuts her off with “‘what you doing here,’” by which she reclaims the lead. The answer “‘i’m a poet’” is received without surprise162 and dismissed with an accusation of being “uppity,” a word which, together with the hot sun, has an utterly unsettling effect.

With her witty speech and her confident and determined manner, this elderly woman succeeds in conveying a message: to

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161 In “Shooting for the Moon” (Racism 75-80) Giovanni calls herself a “Trekkie” (a devoted Star Trek fan) and a “space nut” (75). See also “Space” (CC 72-73).
162 In Dove’s “Old Folks Home, Jerusalem,” the reaction is similar: “So you wrote a few poems. The horned / thumbnail hooked into an ear doesn’t care. / The gray underwear wadded over a belt says So what” (GN 73).
always place value on old age and be respectful. Their exchange is not congenial, the young poet’s arrogance takes a blow, but the result is her recomposing herself and seeking, in silent communication, the old woman’s wisdom.

i looked her square in the eye
“i ain’t gonna tell you” she said and turned her head
“ain’t gonna tell me what” i asked
“what you asking me gotta live to be seventy-nine fore you could understand anyhow” (MH 11)

In a manipulative rhetorical maneuver, the elderly woman claims knowledge by the right of age, but simultaneously declares her capricious inclination to withhold it, suggesting that the poet will not reach the understanding she seeks till she lives to be “seventy-nine.” By claiming knowledge that is unattainable, this old woman wishes to be acknowledged, rather than simply stereotyped. In fact, she invokes the predefined image the poet holds of her and subverts it: “‘honey if you don’t know how can I’” she answers, when questioned about the insights from their exchange. Afterwards, in a highly ironic tone, she offers food for thought, first with a confusing joke163 and then by claiming “‘honey, ain’t never been wrong yet’” followed by: “‘you better get back to the city cause you one of them / technical niggers and you’ll have problems here.’” While in their immediate communication the older woman’s triumph may appear disempowering, as the conversation leaves the poet dismayed, in a larger perspective the elderly woman’s wit frames the young poet’s cultural belonging in an inspiring manner.

Even though the encounters with mature Black women in “Alabama Poem” and in “Conversation” are educating in a less straightforward manner, with the poet having been challenged and defeated into a new awareness, they are still symptomatic of the affirming involvement of the old in younger women’s lives. At ease on their porches, these genuine women infuse their young peers with a

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163 The old woman’s “keep yo dress up and yo pants down and you’ll be all / right” is a witty reformation of the boxing cliché “keep your guard up and your chin down,” a variation that is not only a joke but a playful dig at the young woman.
sense of belonging through their concern and willingness to engage in
discussion, whatever the purpose and the tone of the encounter.

**Physical Resemblance and Touching**

In some of Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems, belonging is established
and empowerment is achieved also via lovingly reaffirming each other
in safe spaces, in view of the alienation Black women face in the
broader society. This often happens in embodied ways: recognizing
the bodies and embracing the presence of loving allies is an essential
part of the empowerment processes at work in intergenerational
contexts.

Holloway’s account of her participation as a child in elderly
women’s gatherings highlights how the recognition of physical
resemblance affords a sense of safety and inclusion. In her exposition,
Holloway notes that she initially singled out one of her grandmothers’
friends “an ancient woman,” as she characterizes her, on the grounds
of her physical traits, specifically her hair, which was braided, like her
own hair: “I was always intrigued by the wrap of braids around her
head—they were grey braids, streaked with bits of faded blue tint, and
I remember thinking that they were like my braids and why does a
woman so old still wear braids?” (181-182). The girl’s reaction to
physical resemblance yields an understanding of physical traits as
markers of continuity and inclusion in an African American
community context (and simultaneous exclusion from white society),
a condition which facilitates empowering insights. Physical
resemblance provides the safe ground needed for trust to take roots.
The next step is involvement: when caught staring, the girl is
admonished to listen instead:

Mrs. Smith understood, and demanded my understanding,
that her words were important for me. My grandmother knew
I needed this language as well. There were many times she
took me to Mrs. Smith’s home, or the houses of other older
women she knew and ministered to, and told me to sit quietly
while they talked; I now realize that they never sent me out of
the room because they wanted me to listen and learn and wonder at women like them. They knew the importance of their conversations and began teaching me their ways through their words. (182)

Obviously, although Mrs. Smith places the value of her words in contrast to the girl’s wonder at her looks, it is the two together that make a lasting impression regarding the significance of the elderly women’s words.

In contrast, an example of how the unsettling realization of racist behavior is brought forth when touching is deliberately avoided is displayed in Audre Lorde’s experience as a girl in a Harlem-bound subway wagon, an incident which resulted in the confusing recognition that she was being perceived as untouchable by white people. Sitting next to a white woman, Lorde witnessed the woman’s efforts to keep herself from accidentally touching the Black girl, plucking her coat closer and looking terrified:

I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us—probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she is looking, so I pull my snowsuit away from it, too. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us: it is me she doesn’t want her coat to touch. (147)

The white woman’s effort to avoid even the slightest physical contact with the child delivers a message of hatred that leaves the young Lorde puzzled and wondering how she was to blame. Aida Hurtado notes that encounters like this “force women of Color to acquire survival skills” very early in their lives (146).

Because African Americans have historically been denied their humaneness and have long been kept alienated, the touching

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164 During slavery African Americans were commonly separated from their loved ones and deprived of intimate relationships with each other. hooks mentions the case of Fredrick Douglas’ mother, who, having been sold away while her infant son remained behind, would walk back to him every night just to hold him for a while as
gesture, and, by extension, intergenerational “touching,” whether it occurs on a physical or spiritual level, is particularly vital. Touching ensures that one’s own humaneness and the humaneness of others are asserted; it means recognizing each other in relationships in the hope that they will resist disruption, acknowledging a common history of suffering, and defining the need for further struggle against ongoing oppression. Indeed, if there is a revolutionary quality in human relations, it is to be found where an empowering connection, or “touching,” as Giovanni puts it, takes place.

Giovanni’s “The New Yorkers” (CC 29-31), about the poet’s meeting with an old blind beggar “Uptown on 125th Street” in Harlem, draws on the assertive potential of acknowledgements of belonging. Here, the street is an extension of the immediately domestic, I would argue, because although it is public, this Black neighborhood environment still constitutes a safe space for the disenfranchised. Nonetheless, the old beggar is also linked to a more privileging (though imaginary) domestic setting: she is a Southern woman whose house, Giovanni finds herself speculating, “is probably spotless / as southern ladies are wont to keep house,” and who “is out only in good / weather and clothes.”

The poet’s contact with the strangely intuitive and greatly unpredictable old woman is direct and multilayered, as this blind beggar playfully claims to know the poet: “You that Eyetalian poet ain’t you? I know yo voice. I seen you on television.” Giovanni makes a powerful self-ironic pun on race, origins, and naming via the woman’s claim, to have “seen” the “Eyetalian” poet; the two are namely connected through their ancestral history and heritage. This connection is demonstrated with the poet lowering her head for the beggar to touch her kinky hair, a proof of racial belonging. But such a gesture is also perceived as an act of blessing: “You touched my hair that’s good luck.” Thus, it turns out that the beggar, who originally pleads “got something for me,” has instead something to offer. With her final comment “Good luck is money, chile / she said / Good luck

he was sleeping, before she had to return to the new plantation to begin her workday (Yearning 386)

165 As suggested in my discussion of the meanings of home and domesticity from an African American perspective, domestic spaces are not only places that are private, but may also be public, such as Black neighborhoods.
is money,”

The “The New Yorkers” is a complex poem, which, similarly to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, also contains a striking social commentary. Observations of homeless people and their living conditions in an alienating inner city environment are together with the woman’s exposed state in the street, involuntarily and out of need, central to the poem. This woman does not talk from a position of entitlement; she does not stereotypically own a home that is a haven for her in old life. While the poet still imagines her in an orderly house environment, she represents the disenfranchised, but resilient, ancestor, whose personal circumstances are utterly precarious, but do not hinder her from empowering the young woman.

While in “The New Yorkers,” physical touching is an essential way to knowledge, whereby the blind woman recognizes the poet as one of her own people, touching is also instrumental in a metaphorical sense. In poems like “For a Lady of Pleasure Now Retired” (originally in *Recreation, WM* np), “When I Die” (*MH* 36-37), and “Africa” (*WM* np) one can trace its importance as a strategic validating gesture and as a means to interpersonal assertion and empowerment. In “For a Lady of Pleasure Now Retired,” and in “When I Die,” touching, on a metaphorical level, enables “recreation” and “rebirth,” concepts which could be linked to “revolution.” Moreover, in “Africa” (*WM* np), one of the poems where Giovanni engages in the exploration of the ancestral home of African Americans and where she expresses “the possibility of kinship between Africans and black Americans” (Fowler, *NG* 83), the necessity of touching is interwoven with dreaming and telling stories, and the creative work of poetry writing.167

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166 A similar connection between luck and wealth is made by Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. A slave’s fate used to be determined by luck. If a runaway slave was lucky enough to reach a free state, they symbolically purchased themselves. The freedom of those who had managed to escape slavery was thus equal to the amount they could be sold for. Jim says: “I’s rich now, come to look at it. I owns myself, en I’s wurth eight hund’d dollars” (Clemens 78).

167 As a sign of assertion and reaffirmation, Giovanni also uses “smiling.” In “For a Lady of Pleasure Now Retired” a smile signals a desired response. In “My
“For a Lady of Pleasure Now Retired,” following the pattern of a young woman’s encounter with an elderly woman, deals again with the inspiring impact the old can have on the lives of the young and vice versa. But in contrast to the spirited dialogues of “Alabama Poem” and “Conversation,” the verbal exchange in this poem is near to non-existent. In fact, the elderly woman shows no intention to communicate at all, as the two women are not really acquainted—they simply happen to meet each other occasionally as they live in the same building. Here, the mere presence of the elderly woman next to the young is centralized, being an occurrence of slight “touching” which becomes engaging and fulfilling for both.

In “For a Lady of Pleasure Now Retired,” empowerment takes place beyond the agency of the older woman, the strategic aspect being linked to the young poetic character instead, via her engagement in the presence and envisioning the elderly woman’s life. The elusive contact with her neighbor is intriguing to the young woman since this lady is quiet and mysteriously withdrawn: “she asks nothing / seems to have something / to give but no one to give it / to.” That her silence might hide some loss and the old woman’s visible effort to maintain a proud posture trigger the young speaker’s curiosity: “her head is always high / though the set of her mouth shows / it’s not easy.” In an imaginary departure from their homely setting, she then recreates this secretive old woman’s glamorous past: arrived from her home island, she was “most / beautiful and like good wine / or a semiprecious jewel,” an exclusive lady of pleasure for “those / who could afford / her recreation.” The young woman admires her neighbor’s imagined past and her survival into old age, hoping perhaps for a similar fate.168

Of relevance, Holloway provides testimony to the impact of elderly women’s lives on her as a child, how she “hungered” for hints on “their histories” and imagined their past as full of excitement: “We met them at the point of achieved, accomplished adulthood, where they had arrived safe and whole. . . . The miracle of their survival into old age [was] our reality, our possession of their presence in our House,” the poet declares emphatically the crucial worth of smiling: “and smile at old men and call / it revolution” (MH 68).

168 In “The Life I Led,” Giovanni indeed puts such hopes into words as she wishes “to grow old like vintage wine fermenting / in old wooden vats with style / i’d like to be exquisite     i think” (WM np).
formative years.” Holloway’s suggestion that it is empowering to see aged Black women and remember that they had “the wit and the magical strength” for their own survival and the survival of what she calls the “clan” (182) makes these older women vital female archetypes for girls’ and young women’s aspirations.

Furthermore, in the poem’s final stanza, the young speaker succeeds in initiating contact and breaks her neighbor’s detachment. She assumes that the old lady’s reluctance to pursue relationships—her not sharing the “something” she owns—originates from her stigmatization as a former prostitute and takes the initiative to chat. Their awkward encounter in a cold elevator—a metaphor for their distant relationship—is eased by the sincerity of the young speaker’s attempt (and her reference to the sun):

```
and it was cold
on the elevator that morning
when i spoke to her and foolishly asked
    how are you
she smiled and tilted her head
    at least, i said, the sun is
    shining
and her eyes smiled yes
and I was glad to be
there to say through spirits
    there is a new creation
to her (WM np)
```

“Touching” here occurs when in response to the young woman the elderly lady’s head tilts and her eyes signal approval, smiling “yes,” whereupon, the young woman rejoices over a potential bond between them: “to be / there” and witness this “new creation.”

The encounter here is empowering for both women. Giovanni’s witty choice of words and the ambiguous use of “new creation,” in contrast to the earlier “recreation,” implies that this connection is realized in a new (domestic) context and on a deeper level than whatever relationships the old woman had experienced as a prostitute. She, who was transported to America’s alienating and consuming “recreation” scene, is now invited to partake in a “new creation” by
her young neighbor and is given a chance to share the “something” she owns at last.

To solidify the significance of empowering connections enabled by touching, there is an example of Giovanni dealing with the reverse avoidance of an old white woman in “Categories” (MH 29-30). In line with the hostile subway incident described by Lorde, the poem highlights the adversity that governs interracial relations, against which the weight of Black bonds can be measured. In the poem, motivated by racial anger, a Black girl/woman adopts an aggressive pose against an elderly white woman, invoking a Black woman’s “job” as being “to kill maim or seriously / make her question / the validity of her existence.” Even though the poet is ironic, self-critical (“just realized / i’m bored with categories”), and ultimately indifferent to the white woman, the violent mood of “Categories” contrasts the largely inspirational tone of poems where Black women of different ages interact.169

Dwelling further on the importance of metaphorical touching, the meaning Giovanni attaches to casual communication with elderly women, but also involving elderly men, is evident in “When I Die” (MH 36-37), where her esteemed old people become part of the legacy the poet wants to leave to her son when she dies. She wants him to know that “his mother liked little old ladies with / their blue dresses and hats and gloves” and that “smiling at an old / man / and petting a dog don’t detract from manhood.” “When I Die” is written in the first person and its final (widely quoted) lines convey Giovanni’s standpoint:

and if i ever touched a life I hope that life knows that i know that touching was and still is and will always be the true revolution (MH 37)

169 Lorde condones the expression of anger, employed creatively, as a response to racism, viewing it as “an appropriate reaction to racist attitudes.” Furthermore, Lorde sees anger as a survival strategy and claims that Black women have had to navigate their anger and use it “for strength and force and insight within [their] daily lives” (129).
Fowler claims that these lines declare Giovanni’s “absolute conviction of the truth about human life and social change: human connection, which is always individual, is ‘the true revolution’ not social or political movements” (NG 68). Evidently, the poet asserts the importance of person to person contact and bonding, touching and being touched by each other’s lives, by measuring human connection against what is perceived as legitimately great: revolution.170 This piece of knowledge is so vital for her that she wishes to pass the message to her son171 and to the reader.

Communicating Legacies

Partaking in legacies is empowering for African American people whose culture has been routinely undervalued and marginalized. The passing down of cultural information entails meaningful links to the past, but also provides a sense of continuity into the future. After all, the kind of continuity that allows communicating a legacy within a family is a privilege African Americans did not always have. 172

Giovanni’s “Legacies” (MH 5) extends beyond the feelings of belonging and sharing the same heritage and recognizes a sense of dependence on elderly women,173 their words, or their skills, and thereby their knowledge and wisdom. For Fowler the poem “establishes a connection to and continuity with the past as a critical

170 As discussed previously, Giovanni makes a similar argument in “A Very Simple Wish” (WM np), where she expresses her surprise 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.”

171 Fowler notes that Giovanni “is concerned that her son does not repress his gentleness toward and connection to others out of some false conception of masculinity” (NG 67).

172 Hurtado points out that Black women cannot take their children’s lives for granted the way white women usually do. To her, the loss of children who fall victims to “[d]rugs, prison, discrimination, poverty and racism” and what this means “for the survival of future generations” constitute the basis for a distinction in the concerns of Black feminists (147).

173 Giovanni’s views here resonate again with what has been expressed also by Holloway (182).
element in identity.” Commenting on its placement at the beginning of *My House*, Fowler argues that “Legacies” also “establishes the past and the people who embody it as a cornerstone of the house Giovanni is building.” “Mothers,” the poem that follows “Legacies,” she adds, continues on the same theme, “making clear that the poet’s connections to the past are through women” (*NG* 61).

In “Legacies,” Giovanni shows that the sharing of legacies via direct instruction can be complicated and unpredictable. In the poem, a grandmother summons her granddaughter home from the playground preparing to instruct her: “‘I want you to learn how to make rolls’ said the old woman proudly” (*MH* 5). However, these intentions were met with the little girl’s refusal:

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because she knew
even if she couldn’t say it that
that would mean when the old one died she would be less
dependent on her spirit so
she said
  “I don’t want to know how to make no rolls”
with her lips pocked out (*MH* 5)
```

Fowler’s commentary on this poem focuses on the issue of “failed communication;” the grandmother’s efforts are unsuccessful “because the legacy she wants to give is not the legacy the granddaughter wants to take” (*NG* 61). To me, however, the poem’s third person perspective, with the inserted commentary, normalizes this case of intergenerational miscommunication: “neither of them ever / said what they meant / and I guess nobody ever does.” In their exchange, while both the grandmother and the girl show stubbornness, they still acknowledge and cherish their connection to each other. The elderly woman is aware of the importance of having something of cultural value to hand over, but when her offer is rejected, she does not insist: “and the old woman wiped her hands on / her apron saying ‘Lord / these children.’” The granddaughter is too young to comprehend the worth of the elderly woman’s gesture and oblivious to how meaningful the shared experience of making the rolls could be for both. In the place of the old woman’s worldly instruction the poet
has the girl consider an extended reliance on her grandmother’s spirit and so she rejects the knowledge that would make her independent. “Legacies” contains a nourishing metaphor, intertwined into the poem’s subject matter; the legacy the old woman aspires to “feed” her granddaughter which is in itself food related.\textsuperscript{174} Moreover, an empowering “feeding” of the girl with her culture is intended: it involves the grandmother’s wish, or even concern and sense of responsibility, to equip the child against both cultural and material/bodily starvation. That Giovanni presents the possibility of spiritual communication as linked to something so fundamental as preparing a meal, while she also imagines the girl defiantly opting for such long-term spiritual contact, accentuates the importance of intergenerational reliance.

In “Mothers” (\textit{MH} 6-7), Giovanni explores another way of passing down a legacy from one generation to the next and specifies why legacies are so precious. Moreover, this is one of the poems where the poet has a gender inclusive perspective. Here, there is a gradual, step-by-step transmission, as opposed to the direct grandmother to granddaughter approach in “Legacies.” A short children’s verse, its rhythm contrasting the otherwise narrative mode of the poem, is passed on, first from a mother to her young daughter—incidentally, at the time the girl sees the mother “consciously” for the first time—and later by the adult daughter to her young son, who in turn recites it for his grandmother. The involvement of a boy is due to the fact that the poem is autobiographical,\textsuperscript{175} and Giovanni writes about her son, her only child. Nonetheless, in her poem “Because” (\textit{CC} 47) the poet addresses her son saying “you are / my little boy,” only to follow with a reference to him as her daughter “you are / my darling daughter,” a statement that highlights the importance of daughters, but also suggests the irrelevance of gender (how a son can stand for a daughter) when it comes to primary family bonds. In any

\textsuperscript{174} Food references, as part the African American experience, appear in the works of many African American women writers, where it is not unusual that meal preparations are described in detail and food carries symbolic meanings. Food recipes are, for instance, included in Toni Morrison’s \textit{Beloved} (136-138) and Ntozake Shange’s \textit{Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo}.

\textsuperscript{175} Similarly, Dove’s autobiographical “Roast Possum” (\textit{TB} 37-38), which I discuss in the next section, involves a grandfather instead of a grandmother.
case, the empowering dimension of preserving a verse by teaching it to children of successive generations, as indicated in the poem’s concluding lines, “just to say we must learn / to bear the pleasures / as we have born the pains,” informs a strong intergenerational linkage. The invitation to share cultural codes results in the establishment of identity strengthening relationships among those who are part of a lineage.

Giovanni is explicit about the goal of the transmission of cultural information to children and maps the ways in which this transmission is implemented in “Always There Are the Children,” the last poem of The Women and the Men and one that brings together her perspectives in “Legacies” and “Mothers.” Although the poem does not contain an enacted intergenerational encounter, it summarizes Giovanni’s ideology regarding how equipping children with beliefs, values, ideas, and skills enables them to own their culture. The function of this “shared wisdom” is to ensure the survival of children and the preservation of culture (Holloway 182). Present in the poem are domestic references, like the mention of “food and warmth,” and nourishing/sheltering imagery commonly associated with domesticity. While gender and cultural contexts are downplayed and Giovanni claims a universal perspective, “we welcome the young of all groups / as our own,” there is emphasis on the uplifting of the race176 and thus certain cultural specificity:

we feed the children with our culture  
that they might understand our travail

we nourish the children on our gods  
that they understand and respect

we urge the children on the tracks  
that our race will not fall short (WM np)

Giovanni indicates how the strategic communication of valuable cultural codes is implemented via a range of verbs like “feed,”

176 In “A Very Simple Wish” the poet prioritizes love for “people who look like us / who think like us / who want to love us” (WM np).
“nourish,” “urge,” “welcome,” “prepare,” and “implore” and in an upbeat and enthusiastic tone. Allusions to “the colonialism of the past” and “the racism of the past” are to be excluded, their exclusion making the poet’s well-meaning but ambiguous and idealized embracing gesture a sincere expression of hopefulness. Understanding, respecting, and extending the achievements of previous generations are expected in return.

Children are to follow in the tracks opened by their elders, profit from their contributions, but also to ensure that their own contributions will be available for future generations. For African American communities, where external disruptions would make close relations precarious and for African American women, who suffer the loss of children to drugs, criminality, and to racist institutions, the poem’s emphatic “always” and the repetition of “there will be children,” are confidently optimistic. Giovanni “speaks of the hope of the race,” as Eric Weil puts it (233). She affirms the fundamentality of willed empowerment, of continuity, and interdependency between generations. The handling of cultural information, presented through a feeding/nourishing metaphor, results in the empowerment of both the young and the old.177

**Assertive Connections over Food**

In Dove’s poetry, the transmission of legacies spun around foods and “feeding” is expanded to the sharing of cultural information while socializing over food in a broader sense. Whether participation in the preparation of meals sets the ground for strategic bonding, or, more peripherally, food descriptions inform the domestic setting where insights are generated, the nourishing metaphor and attitudes to food and nourishment as strategic are often intertwined with other strategies I have discussed (for example reliance to memory or

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177 In contrast, in “A Very Simple Wish,” Giovanni links the experience of the young and the old, “twice in our lives / we need direction / when we are young and innocent / when we are old and cynical,” on a more pessimistic tone, bemoaning the refusal of the old to “discipline” the young and the consequent refusal of the young to “discipline” the old as “a contemptuous way / for us to respond / to each other.”
imagination). In some poems, the connection between the young and the old is straightforward, involving routine, or even ritual, as in “In the Old Neighborhood” (SP xxii-xxvi), “Crab Boil: (Ft. Myers, 1962)” (GN 13), and, at least in part, in “Pomade” (TB 65-66), while it may also occur via memory as in “Sunday Greens” (TB 69).

In “In the Old Neighborhood” (SP xxii-xxvi), the very presence of the visiting daughter in her parental home is fulfilling. The young woman is in the company of her elderly mother, leaning at the kitchen sink and listening to her chattering while preparing a meal, “stacked platters high / with chicken and silvery cabbage,” and she realizes how connected and fulfilled she feels: “the pressure cooker ticks / whole again whole again now.” Hers is a realization which is direct and profound, especially if one keeps in mind the cultural implications of the kitchen as a place of one’s own in African American historical context and a place where Black women gather and partake in others’ lives, as already discussed earlier in this chapter.179

In “Pomade” (TB 65-66), descriptions of food and cooking channel insights about women’s inspirational resilience and cultural belonging. Dove employs food imagery, “Barley soup / yearned toward the bowl’s edge, the cornbread / hot from the oven climbed in glory,” to illustrate Willemma’s impressive—and to Beulah influential—presence and how she “stood straight.” The poet further accounts for the collapse and death of Willemma in terms of an interruption of cooking preparations, interrelating thus this ancestral woman’s core of existence and her role as a nurturer and a heritage bearer. Indeed, when Willemma shares with the young Beulah her knowledge of making hair pomade, they both partake in an act of ritual cooking.

It was Willemma
showed her how to rub the petals fine
and heat them slow in mineral oil
until the skillet exhaled pears and nuts and rotting fir. (TB 65)

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178 “In the Old Neighborhood” and “Pomade,” which follows here, I have already discussed from the perspective of the younger women in these encounters.

179 Also Dove, in her discussion of women’s storytelling, has the women telling stories in the kitchen (see Steffen, “Conversation” 106).
Dove’s “Sunday Greens” (*TB* 69) is similar to Giovanni’s “Each Sunday” (*WM* np) in that connection to elderly women takes place via memory, or imagination and in that a cooking scene is dominant in the poem’s setting. Cooking figures as an inescapable daily domestic routine that yields, nevertheless, a comforting affirmation of familiarity and (cherished) continuity. Both these poems contain embedded subversive aspects, which disturb the mundane and settled experience of the women involved. In Giovanni’s poem, there is the unexpected violence of “wringing the neck / of Sunday’s chicken,” while Dove makes allusions to the vibrant atmosphere of live musical performances:

```plaintext
Ham knocks
in the pot, nothing
but bones, each
with its bracelet
of flesh.
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. . . . . . . . .

she pauses, remembers
her mother in a slip
lost in blues,
and those collards,
wild-eared,
singing. (*TB* 69)
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These poems acknowledge the wild and unruly aspects contained in the given and allegedly tame behaviors of homebound women. Unpredictable and rebellious modes are seemingly embedded in domestic actions, like cooking, meant to signal contentedness and conformity, the homely thus containing the subversive.

Elsewhere, Dove links food to empowering insights about African American identity. In “A Suite for Augustus: Augustus Observes the Sunset” (*YH* 28) and “Wingfoot Lake: (Independence Day, 1964)” (*TB* 72-73), the poet introduces the 4th of July celebration of the American experience, through the spectrum of dishes eaten that
day. In “Winfoot Lake” Dove assumes an integrationist perspective, observing Blacks and whites “unpacking the same / squeeze bottles of Heinz, the same / waxy beef patties and Salem potato chips bags” (*TB* 72). But in “Crab Boil: (Ft. Myers, 1962)” (*GN* 13) and “Roast Possum” (*TB* 37-38), specific foods linked to the African American heritage become distinctly interrelated with strategies of survival historically employed by Blacks. The setting in these poems is outdoors, yet the preparation of food, a domestic chore, constitutes their core and how these foods are perceived informs the contact between the old and the young with empowering inferences. These poems arguably offer homeplace scenes where identity affirming familial ties are renewed in nature.

In “Wingfoot Lake: (Independence Day, 1964),” Dove places focus on food imagery during a segregated company picnic by a lake shore, bringing together the African American segregation reality and the idea of a collective racial consciousness. The poem exemplifies a reciprocal quality in intergenerational communications, showing that empowering insights can be offered or received and that exchanges among younger and older women can have an impact on both.

The poem is written from the mother’s perspective—the mother is Beulah—but its message is delivered through her daughter’s (reported) voice, expressing a self-assertive statement: “*Mother, we’re Afro-Americans now!*” (italics in the original). While the elderly Beulah recognizes her roots in the rural South, “Where she came from / was the past, 12 miles into town / where nobody had locked their back door,” she seems to doubt the importance of a greater African past. In her effort to determine what is common ground in the African and the (Black) American experience, she half-ironically wonders “What did she know about Africa?” Obviously, the daughter’s connection to Africa and her sense of empowerment, as expressed in the poem, have taken place beyond Beulah’s mediation. In fact, Beulah struggles to acknowledge the “transitions” of her daughters (Righelato 102). However, having embraced her African roots and

180 Also in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (293-295), the final reunion scene is on the 4th of July over a barbecue.

181 See also my discussion on the meanings of home and domesticity for Black women, where I suggest that non-conventional domestic spaces may still contain domestic qualities.
now able to claim the future, the young woman wills also the empowerment of her mother, who was domesticated most of her life, experienced segregation, and only late in life witnesses the Civil Rights movement.

In the interaction with her daughter, Beulah presents, through her memories, a solid connection to the past, a past the younger woman can acknowledge and move beyond. Pat Righelato recognizes Beulah’s “emergent politicized awareness” (102) while Keller sees her as intimidated by the change of times: Beulah’s “fearful response to the ‘crow’s wing’ of the marchers moving . . . is simply one person’s truth, perhaps a common one in Beulah’s generation” (135). I hesitate to suggest that Beulah, who may indeed feel uncomfortable at a segregated Independence Day company picnic, finds herself “scared” in relation to the televised 1963 March to Washington, and ultimately even her daughter’s ideas, as a result of her inability to recognize her African heritage. To me, the main reason for Beulah’s disempowerment and fragility is rather a personal misfortune, namely Thomas’ recent death. But whatever causes Beulah’s caution, in this poem, her daughter’s connection to the past is not based on acceptance of the views of the elderly woman; it involves the interrogation of these views. In this perspective, the possible impact of the younger woman on her parent is as valuable.

The young woman’s emerging voice in “Wingfoot Lake: (Independence Day, 1964)” echoes also in Dove’s autobiographical “Crab Boil.” The two poems are similar in that in both the poet undertakes explorations of the African American experience during segregation in discussions over food. In “Crab Boil,” Dove recalls a family excursion and picnic at a “forbidden beach,” and engages in recounting the exchanges that are supposed to have taken place between herself as a young girl and a female relative, Aunt Helen, over the preparation of a crab meal. Dove maps the fears and the distress caused by segregation, through the mention of claims about generalized attitudes of Blacks towards each other and an allusion to beliefs about the inhumanity of Black people, which justified their enslavement. The poet then moves to the untangling of these fears and their substitution with self-confident insights and the will to resist victimization.
Aunt Helen is a living link to the South and to the past, indeed a personification of the southern experience. Her buoyancy and the heavily ironic tone of her statements provide the basis on which the girl can test her own attitudes and express her standpoints. When she notes that the old woman laughs at the crabs in the bucket “before saying ‘Look at that— / a bunch of niggers, not / a-one get out ‘fore the others pull him / back,’” the remark appears cruel (“Why does Aunt Helen / laugh,” she wonders). The comparison is evidently self-defiant as the girl can relate the distress of the crabs to her own distress over occupying the “whites-only” part of the beach. She, nonetheless, decides to dismiss its implications: “I don’t believe her—.” Her impatience (“When do we kill them?”), a sign of discomfort and fear that they will be chased away, signals also that she is alert to danger and reluctant to be naive. After all, she is caught in a situation where both alternatives, namely to remain in the white part of the beach or to move back to the Black part, are perilous: “just as I don’t believe they won’t come / and chase us back to the colored-only shore / crisp with litter and broken glass.” In this context, the easygoing manner of Aunt Helen and the woman’s poignant declaration that the crabs do not feel pain, “‘Kill them? Hell, the water does that. / They don’t feel a thing . . . no nervous system,’”\(^{182}\) have an enabling effect. To the girl, Aunt Helen possesses the wisdom one gains after having survived the hardships of the South and, in this light, her own hunger proves compelling:

I decide to believe this: I’m hungry.
Dismantled, they’re merely exotic,
a blushing meat. After all, she has
grown old in the South. If
we’re kicked out now, I’m ready. (GN 13)

In the process of interacting with Aunt Helen then, the girl reaches empowering insights. These are brought forth through the older woman’s eagerness to be didactic, casually and humorously so,

\(^{182}\) The crab metaphor could be an allusion to the middle passage (cf. the epigraph to this section of the volume “All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was” by Toni Morrison) and to the mythology about the lesser humanity of slaves.
as well as through the girl’s respect for this woman’s living experience. From the girl, there is initially interrogation, hesitation, and resistance, but then adaptation to the circumstances by making an appropriate decision. “This child,” writes Righelato, “does not wait and dream but makes choices about what to believe” (114). Obviously, the individuality of the girl matches the individuality of the defiant old woman.

Additionally, in “Crab Boil” the girl partaking in the African American heritage is liberating even in a greater sense. Her participation in the preparation of the crab dish is significant, as the ability to hunt or fish and prepare food outdoors was crucial during slavery; the slaves had to depend on wild dishes as a complement to their invariably poor diet. But more importantly, when hiding in the woods, their ability to find food was vital for their chances to survive. The cooking of the crabs under circumstances which are perceived as threatening, at least by the girl, becomes a reference to the fugitive conditions of escaped slaves on their way to freedom. Similarly, the girl’s final utterance “If / we’re kicked out now, I’m ready” voices an enslaved (and later segregated) people’s readiness for action, making it an individual, but also collective stance after centuries of injustice.

“Roast Possum” elaborates further on traits of strategy I have already touched upon in relation to “Crab Boil” and Giovanni’s “Legacies” and “Mothers.” The poem follows a recognizable pattern, where intergenerational bonding takes place and empowering wisdom is communicated in a strategic manner. The setting could loosely be identified as domestic, as the scene takes place in the yard and food is given attention in regard to its cultural significance in African American perspective. The discourse over food is enhanced by its enactment in the African American storytelling manner, and is thus aligned with a tradition that has been spun around the need for Black empowerment. In contrast to the other poems, however, “Roast Possum” contains a “showdown, man-to-man between Malcolm and Thomas” (Pereira Cosmopolitanism 208), a grandson-grandfather encounter.

Moreover, the reference to the color of the flesh of the crabs evokes the materiality of the girl’s own flesh/color, as focused upon by discriminatory institutions.
Given my focus on female ancestral figures and their influence on the empowerment of younger women, the relevance of “Roast Possum” lies in that it highlights, from a new angle, aspects that I have considered throughout: what kind of information which is passed on and how successfully it is transmitted, the parts involved, and, by extension, how this sharing of knowledge is subversive. The outcome of the poem is highly relevant because it is unpredictable: against the grandfather’s intentions, the individual empowered in the end is a little girl—it is the poet as a girl who inherits the shared piece of wisdom and retells the story. In connection to this, Dove succeeds in strategically undermining traditional gender roles. Moreover, the poem’s function extends outwards and underscores the skirting narrative strategies that poems can take to empower listeners/readers.

In “Roast Possum” different sets of stories are being intertwined and are dwelled upon in a manner that is meant to help the children tackle their reality and survive the victimizing attitudes that they are likely to face as they grow up. There is the encyclopedic version about the possum, there is the story of trying to catch a possum that Thomas recalls and wishes to tell primarily to his grandson, and, lastly, the story of Jim, the horse, brought in when the girls get “restless.” Thomas navigates these stories in a non-linear way, inventing embellishments to attract the children’s interest and, in order to protect them, he keeps the degrading text of the Werner Encyclopedia to himself. In place of making his grandchildren aware of Black people’s stereotypical dehumanization, Thomas opts for an anecdote about the humanization of a work horse, who “was buried / under a stone, like a man,” thus offering an inspiring outlook on life through a narrative they could appreciate. In the poem, Righelato notes, Thomas makes use of “old time know how,” which is “fiction . . . and a survival skill, like playing possum,” which he knows his grandchildren will need” (87):

You got to be careful
with a possum when he’s on the ground;
he’ll turn on his back and play dead
till you give up looking. That’s
what you’d call sullin’. (italics in the original TB 38)
In the poem, the strategic aspect in the focus on foods meets the strategic aspect in storytelling: “telling stories creates as well as sustains community, narrative lets itself to being a source of empowerment” (Keller 112). Storytelling is a tradition Dove took part in as a child, to which both men and women made their contributions, but in different ways. Women’s stories differed from the men’s in that they were told in the kitchen, and were “more intimate and chaotic, more fluid; the tales came out in bits and gobbets.” Men’s stories “belonged to another part of the world” and were in “a much more deliberate, show-offy style of narration, exaggerating the story in the tradition of “toasts” (Steffen, “Conversation” 106-107). Dove has indicated how the strategic elements of Thomas’ story in the poem are in line with those in traditional African American storytelling: one is given different elements and is invited to decide what is most essential and all the story’s diversions are important (Pereira “Interview” 208). Central to this tradition is that the tellers keep changing their stories over time and that no moral is given. Storytellers would deny knowing what happened to a story’s characters leaving it to the listener “to figure out what paths they would have taken” (Pereira “Interview” 209-210). The structure of the stories is characterized by fluidity and ambiguity, nothing is fixed or given, and the audience is called to fill the gaps with whatever meanings make sense to them. There is also a dialogic quality brought forth via a fragmented and elliptic narration, where knowledge is passed on in bits and pieces but, additionally, new knowledge is constructed with the active contribution of the listener together with the storyteller.

The ambiguity of the narrated story in “Roast Possum” matches the ambiguity of who the story is narrated to and, ultimately, who will take part in the empowering insights the story is meant to generate. Thomas’ intimate and fluid manner of storytelling resonates with women’s storytelling modes; also thematically, alongside hunting, he relates domestic tasks. Moreover, as evident in the poem’s title, the possum ends up as a valued roast meal, which evokes the traditional female role in preparing food: “Yessir, / we enjoyed that possum. We

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184 Dove discusses the poem quite extensively in her interview with Pereira (185-187).
ate him / real slow, with sweet potatoes.”

So while Dove foregrounds the grandfather and the grandson in a man-to-man communication, seemingly in spite of the presence of the granddaughters, the idea that her aim would be to reaffirm the bonds of intergenerational masculinity rings hollow. While Thomas chooses the male child to entrust his wisdom to, it is one of the girls who in the end salvages it and passes it on. Ironically, the presence of the girl, even though apparently ignored, proves crucial: Thomas’ preference for the boy is undone as the empowering message is embraced by the poet to be, who will then transmit it to far broader audiences.

Similar to Giovanni’s “Always There Are the Children,” moving beyond communications which are strictly among Black women of different generations yet still entrenched in cultural specificity, “Roast Possum,” highlights the transmission of knowledge to new generations beyond restrictions set by gender and race.

In several poems by Giovanni and Dove, women elders are portrayed in stereotypical roles in domestic environments, but they nonetheless embody subversive functions as memory bearers, culture transmitters, and providers of support and empowering knowledge to younger Black women. The two poets are inclusive regarding how empowering information is shared, and by whom, and they explore real or imaginary communications in conventional or unconventional domestic spaces while they also challenge strict/stereotypical gender roles. There is thus variation regarding in what ways, to what extent, and from whose perspective the contact between different generations proves empowering. At the same time, cases where girls/children are trusted with legacies constitute concrete portrayals of strategic attempts to empower them. Still, the nature of what is passed on and whether there is a conscious recipient of a legacy or other cultural information contribute to whether the communication is noteworthy. Instructions about preparing traditional foods or learning a rhyme, for example, are so commonplace and integrated in daily life that they occur unnoticed and their significance is easily overlooked. However, knowledge is conveyed and it is culturally specific. It is knowledge

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185 Thomas’ shift, when cornered with questions by his grandchild, from outdoor hunting to collectively enjoying a meal also provides rhetorical relief, and as such it is an example of acting cunningly, like the possum.
pertinent to everyday ways of being and it is largely communicated in loving relationships.
Conclusion: Implicit Knowledges and Love as Means to Empowerment

Nikki Giovanni and Rita Dove engage broadly in the African American experience via various artistic outlooks and thematic choices. The two poets have distinct but often aligned perspectives and, therefore, the study of their poems sheds light on a wide spectrum of attitudes to poetry and life, especially the life of African American women.

Of interest to me has been the emphasis the two poets place on race-related ways of being, surviving dehumanizing challenges, and prevailing. Against this background, I have examined the empowering strategies that are employed by Black women who figure in Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems. I have focused on the women’s presence in the domestic sphere, open-ended and liminal as it is in African American contexts, and explored the empowerment of girls, adult women, and elderly women in their individual circumstances in and around the house. I have also paid attention to intergenerational communications and discussed how women empower each other and how they derive strength from what is communicated during familial or otherwise domestic encounters.

I have traced several empowering strategies at work in the poems. These strategies materialize in different formats and even though they may be recurring in some respect, their meanings and implications are constantly shifting. They are sometimes concrete, explicit, and direct, as in the case of storytelling and the passing down of cultural information. In other instances, they are less easily discernible, which can take the form of accidental insights or reliance on memory and dream. Moreover, the use of strategies is sometimes intended while at other times strategies are circumstantial. Similarly, these strategies are sometimes consciously employed to sustain or inspire others, or they may have self-affirming results, which makes the success of the outcome varied. But perhaps, most importantly,
strategies are often derived from or entrenched in a shared African American cultural heritage, involving the memory of an enslaved past and the broad variety of survival and resistance strategies African Americans had to rely upon historically. It is thus not unusual that Black women tend to appreciate and strive to derive joy from their experiences, even when their circumstances are mundane and their lives lack excitement. In the situations where they do not feel content, they often try to “make do” with whatever resources are available to them, both materially and emotionally.

My understanding regarding the empowerment of women represented in Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems is that there is a subversive quality in Black women’s strategies of empowerment which is linked to the condition of love that these women experience at home, because loving relationships contribute to affirming and sustaining individuals. However, a subversive quality is inherent also in the recognition of alternative understandings of oppressive structures and in the appropriation of implicit knowledges to resist and combat them.

While neither Giovanni nor Dove are outspoken feminists and while their poetry is not usually perceived as furthering feminist ideas, their poems contain strong female figures and explore ways of being which, nevertheless, indicate a feminist outlook. Indeed, when the critical perspective of Black feminist thought is taken into consideration, it becomes obvious that Black women’s close alliances in the poems and the ideologies that sustain them and help them survive the conformity of their lives are feminist acts. Their reliance on African-derived perspectives (BFT 10) seems to enable Black women to emerge resilient and defiant in subtle and commonplace, rather than extraordinary, ways. However, from an outside viewpoint they may still appear victimized and compromising. Thus, even though one would be tempted to dismiss the poetry of Giovanni and Dove as apolitical and uninteresting in a feminist context, the emergence of empowered female figures in their poems actually demonstrates the contrary: these women are too bold to succumb to oppression and face their missed opportunities with grace; or they are far too conscious of their limited prospects to be deemed indifferent. It is as if theirs is a kind of tranquil awareness, a sense of being in control, whatever their circumstances.
At the same time, Giovanni and Dove challenge and complicate the stereotype of the strong Black woman by evading the clichéd portrayal of dominant women who fight beyond their powers and manage to cope in hardships never losing hope. As I have mentioned when discussing adult and mature women, common stereotypical literary representations of strong women have been identified and problematized, a point made by Trudier Harris, who additionally notes how their strength tends to hide the complexity of the “femininity and humanity” of Black women (Saints, Sinners, and Saviors 19, 13). Giovanni’s and Dove’s representations of women achieve what Harris finds missing in the depiction of the African American female characters because, in the poems, the represented Black women are seldom strong throughout. In fact, a state of vulnerability is often the starting point of the empowerment processes these women undergo—originally, they appear tired, needy, weak, bored, or willingly resigned and silent. This combination of traits, of strengths and weaknesses, humanizes the portrayal of Black females giving validity to their experiences and their choices.

Similarly, Giovanni and Dove problematize the availability of homebound women to comfort others, which is usually the case when women’s strength is taken for granted. Following Patricia Hill Collins’ observation that Black intellectuals portray Black mothers as “complex individuals, who often show tremendous strength under adverse conditions, or who become beaten down by the incessant demands of providing for their families” (BFT 75-76), I would note that Giovanni and Dove acknowledge maternal care and sensitivity, feminine values that have been imposed as norms for white women but were largely denied to Black women. However, the women in their poetry are not tested in the extremes as outlined by Collins. The female figures in Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems are usually caring and nurturing but they also cherish and guard their individuality; they, for example claim their right to rest as well as enjoy solitude among beloved possessions and memories, especially when they are older. Moreover, the mother/grandmother figure is not singled out exclusively in binary terms with a daughter/granddaughter—the poets replace them occasionally with fathers/grandfathers and sons/grandsons.
The women in Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems generally exhibit a willingness to communicate their survival strategies to the younger generations, in contrast, for example, to women characters in African American works examined by Harris, who may be strong themselves, but are incapable of or indifferent to passing their skills on to younger women, thus leaving a younger generation without guidance (Saints, Sinners, and Saviors 184). Still, as I have found, the communicated information among women in Giovanni’s and Dove’s poetry does not necessarily constitute an imperative. Though Giovanni, during her childhood, saw her grandmother’s words as orders, both she and Dove have created defiant girls and young women, who at times question or dismiss elderly women’s perspectives, or ignore the passing down of legacies. The two poets thus decenter the dominant role of older women in relation to the young.

The empowerment of Black women at home, as I have traced it the poems of Giovanni and Dove, is more implicit than explicit and the knowledge that informs it remains both elusive and difficult to theorize. This knowledge has to do with embracing self-definition rather than internalizing harmful mainstream definitions and reclaiming the importance of what occupies women at home rather than allowing their perspectives to be belittled. If practices like preparing for the winter, for example, or passing down an old recipe are of value, recognizing this value and asserting these practices as meaningful becomes empowering. That the poets privilege these acts as the subject of poetry confirms their validity even beyond the everyday.

This new knowledge is thus fundamentally linked to individual understandings, attitudes, and ways of being. It is knowledge that is constructed and shared among Black women via their day-to-day experiences and encounters, and it is instrumental in their sustaining each other, although this might not be acknowledged at large or in broader contexts. Empowering insights are generated in the process of “making do” to meet common everyday challenges, in taking stances which are temporary, sometimes unpredictable or unconventional, and which cannot be generalized—I have discussed these insights throughout the thesis within the frame of strategies employed by the women.
Furthermore, in the paradigms I have examined, this knowledge often emerges from (and further redefines) the meshing of the private and public spheres, where the domestic is characterized by a sense of liminality and is thereby not inherently oppressive and confining to those inhabiting it. At the same time, the articulation of new/alternative knowledge fuses any initial contradictions contained in the experiences of Black women at home and the dynamics that govern their empowerment; as the perceived inferiority attached to domestic status is challenged, domestic experience is rendered as legitimate as public experience.

In domestic contexts, love is often a condition of empowerment, or it is more broadly linked to empowerment. The link between love, strategy, and empowerment is intriguing as it reinforces the idea that even subtle empowerment involving unremarkable daily routines and encounters can be important in the sense that the radical and the revolutionary can indeed reside in the homely. Love is, of course, already inscribed in the conceptualization of the homeplace as a loving place where close relations exist and develop. The domestic sphere, which, as I have suggested may include the surrounding Black community and is understood as physical or emotional space, provides safe places for retreat, self-preservation, and nurturing one’s strengths. Some of the poems about elderly women’s domestic experience show that claiming control over one’s home, including its banal routines, soothes, sustains, and empowers against the restraints of the broader society, where racism is likely to prevail. bell hooks’ theorization of the home as a site of resistance, and, in terms of love, her claim that it affirms Black women’s subjectivity, together with her highlighting these women’s effort to ensure loving one another as a means of survival and resistance to the hostility awaiting on the outside (Yearning 46-48, “Talkin’ about Love” np) applies either directly or indirectly to many of the poems I have explored.

Moreover, Giovanni and Dove portray empowering loving connections, especially among Black women. In the poems love informs their bonds with each other and permeates intergenerational communications, for example when girls are socialized via the interventions of older women. Love, originating in self-love, “the motive and drive for justice” and the “basis of community” (BFT 171-172) characterizes bonds that yield recognition essential in the process
of empowerment. Being part of loving relationships feeds the confidence and the determination of Black women to keep struggling (even when this is done quietly) and constitutes a solid base from which strategies are launched.

Love arises as crucial to empowerment, in the manner suggested by Collins, via “human ties,” that are potentially “freeing and empowering” (BFT 285). Oppressive and disempowering domestic relations are seldom dealt with by the poets. Giovanni and Dove embrace the radical and revolutionary quality of love, which usually remains unaccounted for, and point to the important role of the women (and the men) who foster this love at home. Their poetic explorations of intergenerational caring interventions, as potentially alleviating the less rewarding parts of domesticity, consolidate the significance of loving relationships.

Returning to Collins and her claim that a “rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African American women and stimulate resistance” (BFT 32), I would suggest that the knowledge shared in loving domestic contexts shapes the existence of the new consciousness Collins points to; it is the “everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge” (BFT 32) of Black women, not dismissed but instead utilized as a means to self- and interpersonal affirmation. This consciousness emerges when “new meanings” are infused in what is given, as Collins notes, which results in covert understandings that strengthen Black women from underneath. Thus, the Black women in Giovanni’s and Dove’s poems navigate their circumstances and devise alternatives to enhance their domestic existence in ways that are subtle and not conventionally remarkable. Nevertheless, they live defiantly, having apparently reached a state of individual and collective consciousness where the overall patriarchal structures they inhabit lose their meaning. These Black women can mentally move beyond patriarchal gender- and race-related imperatives and defy patriarchal oppression by embracing alternative understandings of their struggles and accomplishments.


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