

John F. Callahan: On "To the Diaspora"

Certainly, she writes many of her powerful post-1967 poems in a voice resonant with a new sense that each member of her audience is "essentially and essential African." The *word-play* of Brooks's phrase directs us to ancestral presences and questions of being she is now conscious of and inspired by as she writes. Her sense of oneness with the continuum of African culture leads her to a spirit of generosity and expansiveness of language. Poems like "To the Diaspora" are both tough-minded and free of the recriminations other poets sometimes aim at those black Americans who have not experienced conversion to a transforming, transcendent black awareness. Implicit is the complexity of her awakening--the fact that she has journeyed from appearances to essences in relation to Africa, and that she, too, goes to Africa only to find that what she seeks was and is within. . . .

In "To the Diaspora" Brooks becomes one with her audience because they participate in the same surprising, belated act of discovery, and because of that, her language is gentle, tactful, and loving. Her posture as a poet changes from someone who leads her audience to someone who, as one of them, recognizes that her voice, like Africa, is a sign of community, of the promised land within. True call-and-response depends on a reciprocity of vision and experience. For Brooks formerly to have called her audience to their internal connection with Africa, they would have needed to have arrived at a readiness in their own beings. . . . But the trust required for believing call-and-response is a mutual condition shared by performer and audience, and Brooks calls attention to her own previous condition of unreadiness. Her use of *mouth*, not as synecdoche but metonymy, implies that previously her audience would have rightly regarded her words--her *mouth*--as separate and distant from her essential self. The stanza depends on that characteristic honest playfulness that exists between African storytellers and their participatory listeners. Still, Brooks's words and rhythms testify to her *gradual* awakening to an indwelling African presence able to merge African and American elements in her work. . . . Now, Brooks, perhaps thinking of her entire canon, evokes the forms of African-American oral culture as "diamonds for you"--living manifestations of her audience, the human "Black continent."

Callahan, John F. "Essentially an Essential African: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Awakening to Audience." *North Dakota Quarterly* 55.4 (Fall, 1987): 59-73.

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