



'You are only as writerly as the last thing you've written'

Poet Nikki Finney on convening, silence, empathy and being human

By Kendra Hamilton

Nikki Finney was born in Conway, along South Carolina's rice-growing coast. Her mother was an elementary schoolteacher, her father, a civil rights lawyer; and both -- at considerable risk -- were deeply involved in the battle for social justice, and economic and political fairness in the South. After

undergraduate work at Talladega, a historically black college in Alabama, the young writer lived in Atlanta, mentored by John O. Killens, Toni Cade Bambara and Nikki Giovanni.

Her work has been widely anthologized; and she has published three collections of poetry -- *On Wings Made of Gauze* (1985), *Rice* (1995) and *The World Is Round* (2003) -- plus a short story collection intended for literacy students, *Heartwood* (1998). Finney's work straddles many worlds. She is a frequent collaborator with artists from other disciplines, writing the script for the 1995 PBS documentary *For Posterity's Sake: The Story of Morgan and Marvin Smith*, the liner notes for folk singer Toshi Reagon's compact disc *Kindness*, and the introduction to photographer Bill Gaskins' 1997 collection *Good and Bad Hair*. She even recently appeared on HBO's Russell Simmons' *Def Poetry Jam*.

Her luminous verse, devotion to feminist causes, and gifts as a speaker and writing teacher have won her an intensely devoted following. She has held the coveted Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University, and she won the 1995 PEN American Open Book Award. She is a founding member of the Affrilachian Poets collective for Appalachian writers of African descent and a faculty member of Cave Canem, a workshop/retreat for African-American poets. Finney is an associate professor of English at the University of Kentucky, where she is the interim director of the creative writing program.

Like the title of her latest collection, Nikki Finney's world is round.

To listen to the music of her voice, to watch the play of light over her gold-streaked dreadlocks is to see her standing in a sacred circle, tender yet fierce amid her friends and her creations -- the Goodfellows Club, "Star Man," Contrary Mary, and the tragic Noni, Vina, D'Jaris, and Celeste from her second poetry collection, *Rice*; Jacques Cousteau, Toni Cade Bambara, "Hottentot Venus" Saartjie Baartman, and the lovingly rendered "Kentucky darkies" from *The World Is Round*.

Allow me to take a moment for full disclosure. Nikki Finney is part of the charmed circle of my childhood -- her mother and my mother are first cousins. When I look into her eyes, the ghostly images of our mothers as they were 40 years ago, lovely brown-skinned women with almond eyes and Cherokee-sharp cheekbones, hovers between us. My earliest memory of her is as a child, pigtailed and serious as she showed me the highest mystery of her Ma Bea's farm [Finney's grandmother, Bea Davenport] -- an enormous cow, its breath smelling of hay, its warm bag inexplicably full of milk.

These images persist as a kind of double vision as I watch her now navigating a strange world far from that marvelous farm, a world of writers that has drawn us both to Harrisonburg, to James Madison University, to Dr. Joanne Gabbin's second "furious flowering" of black writers -- Nikky to read, I to listen and be fed.

I spotted her in Wilson Hall Auditorium surrounded by JMU students and poets who'd crisscrossed the nation for that night's reading by National Book Award winner Lucille Clifton, Black Arts Movement legend Nikki Giovanni and many others. Somehow, amid the hugging, kissing, high-fiving and high-spirited laughter, we made our way to each other and made a promise to sit down, catch up and have a serious cousin-to-cousin conversation on the state of African-American verse.

KH: Can it really be that you've been at the University of Kentucky for 10 years, Nikky? It seems like only last month I was visiting you in Atlanta and looking at the galleys for your first book.

NF: It's true. Sometimes I can't believe it myself. I've been [here](#) 10 years; and I can honestly say that I only planned to be [here](#) nine months. I said to myself, "OK, I do this -- I can go to this place I've never heard of where there are five percent African-American folks, do what I need to do, see what teaching is about, and I can just leave." **And** it didn't work out like that. I actually feel like I'm cresting after 10 years of being [here](#). It's a place where I can just say, "I want to teach only on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons." The rest of the time I can do my work, or I can leave on Thursdays and travel. So it works out really good.

KH: This is a pretty significant change from the life you were living before -- in Atlanta and then in California? What is it like being a poet in the academy, especially for a writer like you, who is so committed to giving voice to the notion of community?

NF: I have to tell you, I didn't see myself staying in this region long, *couldn't* see myself [here](#) long. But what happened -- and this is what I tell younger writers all the time -- is that I found a place in the world that supported me and my work. That's what we all have to do. In order to do it, you have to know who you are as a writer, and what your process is, and what you need to do your work. What I needed was time. I had the ideas; I had the stories geysering up all hours of the night and day. But in the life I led in California and before, I had nine-to-five jobs, which just eats away at your spirit and your energy.

I had no plans to be in the academy. I had heard from sound artistic people whom I trusted that the academy eats you alive and spits you out. And it can -- if you are not, as an artist, aware of the dangers -- it can. And that lingo! That was really what scared me, because I love this language I have had since I was a young girl. I have willed into being and polished this wonderful field of very sensory and visually laced words -- and that's not what the academy wants. The academy wants you to pare that down. Don't be too dynamic and particular, and please don't swear or cause any trouble or leave anybody out or make somebody mad. To me, that's not writing. Here I am trying to teach my students how to take risks, how to be authentic, how to know their own voice -- and 90 percent of the other stuff they're hearing is counter to that.

I'm careful not to get sucked into the pleasures of the academy, the safety and secure dimensions of it. I feel like I walk the rim. I'm in it; I teach in it -- I love teaching in it. But traveling is what keeps me in the community, keeps me talking to people who did or did not go to college, and keeps my communication muscles alive and working, and apart from that academic lingo.

KH: Traveling, for example, to conferences like Furious Flower?

NF: Furious Flower is more than golden. And Joanne Gabbin [professor of English at JMU, founder of the Furious Flower conference in 1994, and director of the Furious Flower Poetry Center] has to be lifted up for this great gift, for the bringing together of the folks who are on the front lines of keeping poetry alive and in the hearts of America -- not just in communities of color, but just in the airspace, in its righteous form. I think of Joanne as the great conductor, because here we are in our own little hamlets scattered here and there, and to bring this chorus of sound and message together is a great feat.

We used to do more of this when it was obvious and palpable and clear that there was more at stake. In the '20s with the Harlem Renaissance, there was the whole notion of the black aesthetic, the rise of the Negro intellectual and the Negro artist; and the flames of that rising [\[were\]](#) in the cities. Then again during the Black Arts Movement, there was this whole new kind of assertion ... we were staking out territory and formulating our mouths to say the word "black." Now, it's almost as if we don't always understand that there is still so much at stake.

That's what is so powerful about what Joanne has done. She's our bell to remind us. She keeps ringing to tell us that we have to keep convening; we have to bring the elders before us; we have to invite the younger generation coming up; we have to talk to each other. We can't have those private conversations (among genres and schools and cliques) going on, because there is still so much that we have to do battle with.

And this is why when she does this convening, the whole coupling [creating a video anthology] with California Newsreels is so important. When you look at those videos from Furious Flower I, they are classics. They report the state of black poetry in America. And now, with the upcoming anthology from Furious Flower II, it's like that Lucille Clifton "keeping place." Here is the keeping place, and Joanne has orchestrated how that must happen for us. It's just such a rich and valuable source for us.

KH: You raise an interesting point when you talk about the "private conversations" among poets. I think that's the truly revolutionary thing Joanne has done. We have these different aesthetics and political orientations and alignments, and we have these different generations with such different approaches. At other places you might expect an explosion. Yet at Furious Flower, I sense nothing but respect. Do you sense that?

NF: I absolutely feel the respect. I am in that middle ground as a poet, having been out on the road and at the desk for 20 years with three books of poetry out. I'm not an emerging writer, but I'm not in an elder space either. Yet I got such rich respect from young people: "My teacher at Howard uses your work for my class," "I saw you at the Black Arts Festival," "I heard about you at Cave Canem." It means everything to me to be stopped by a young black writer who is trying to figure out, "Is this what I want to do?" So I agree with you, I think that is happening. I would go so far to say it may be happening [in poetry] even more so than in other disciplines.

I don't know that this is a fact. But I have been to the Black Arts Festival [in Atlanta] where [playwright, poet and political activist] Amiri Baraka was on the stage talking about the blues, talking about jazz; and these young musicians would stand up and say, "You know what? What y'all did was what y'all did, and what I'm doing is what I'm doing." They would not see the continuum, the strong lines that connect. The audience just sort of gasped, because it wasn't just one artist. It was artist after artist who said, "Look, more props to you for what you did. I don't know it that well." The whole understanding of how those worlds are wonderfully braided just was not there.

Of course, I'm generalizing because there are always exceptions. But it makes me wonder what is it that young black poets know about the older generation of black poets that young black musicians perhaps are not aware of about older black musicians. It makes me think about the reverence that I felt as a young writer toward the older black poets who were so far, far away that I wouldn't get to see [them], because many of them had left the planet. When I was just wondering about publishing, I was reading Langston Hughes and Claude McKay and Countee Cullen and thinking, "All these people are gone." And the ones that were still here like Gwendolyn Brooks -- well, she was one person in Chicago, far, far away.

Maybe the thing that makes young black poets so reverent is the fact that older black poets aren't on the radio. Music is on the air; music is in a record store or can be ordered. Music is in the clubs; and if there isn't any in your town, you can fly to Chicago and hear it. But we poets write at our desks and send the work out. If you love poetry, you have to go search and find the book -- which is a sacred space of its own -- and hug it to your chest. That's what I'm saying about this festival. There were no great festivals until recently; there was no Cave Canem until 10 years ago. So young black writers walked across the mountain to be here because how many times do you get to see Rita Dove, Amiri Baraka, Sonia [Sanchez], Nikki [Giovanni], Eugene Redmond on the same stage?

KH: That's a wonderful image of the book as a sacred space. Were there any books or any encounters with books that were particularly meaningful for you when you were a young poet?

NF: Definitely. Lucille Clifton has been central in my life for 20 years. I remember it so clearly. I was 21 or 22; and I was working at Talladega College, my alma mater, as a photographer. They sent me to New York City for an alumni festival, and I took a break and went into Strand's bookstore in the Village. This was a time in my life where I was trying to figure things out. I was writing, but I was also doing this job as a photographer. I was asking, "What am I supposed to do; how do I feed this creative part of me? How do I become a writer? Not having had any models in my hometown but having read all these books, I'm feeling that there are all these stories I want to tell about family, about black folks, about the South. But I don't know who's doing that.

And there in the stacks at Strand's was *Generations*, which I think had been remaindered for almost

nothing. A pittance. I'd never heard of Lucille Clifton, but there were these pictures of black folks -- Southern, sepia-toned -- and there was this amazing language around these photographs. I just sat down in the stacks, and I read this book cover-to-cover. It was the story of her family, as you well know. As I read it, I said to myself, "This is what I'm trying to do." The form -- the whole notion of mixing words and photographs -- is what eventually happened with *Rice*.

That must've been '78 or '79. That was my crossroads year, because I was really trying to figure out how to go to graduate school, how to get the work I was doing into someone's hands. It was like someone lit a fire in me. It was total permission. So I bought the book, and it's kind of tattered, but I still read that book. It's one of my favorite books on the planet. And do you know I never met Lucille until this year at Furious Flower? I thanked her -- I come from a family who taught me to thank people who have reached out of their little box, whether knowing it or not, to bring me along and give me some moment of their lives.

That's what I work on. I never had a teacher, never had a creative writing class. But I have Lucille Clifton and all the other books that I dive into daily.

KH: We've been talking a lot about Furious Flower and the excitement of moments when you can be among "your people," who speak the language you speak -- not to mention your elders. It makes me think back to when I was a young writer and how drawn I was to "making the scene" -- being in the place where the art was and the energy was. Can you talk about the balance it's important to strike between the excitement of the scene and the silence you need to do your work?

NF: I think this is so important -- and this has to be because of my childhood, because I grew up walking a farm. There was one moment when I saw this so clearly. I had friends coming home from college with me for spring break to hang out at Ma Bea's farm. The guy from Philadelphia took one look around and got back in the car. He was like, "Oh, no. No sirens? No fire trucks? What is this?" To this day I remember looking at him and thinking, "He can hear his heart beat." He could hear things he'd been trying to run from, duck from, dodge from, because the city gives you audible spaces to go and hide. At Ma Bea's, he couldn't hear nothing but cicadas and crickets, and the screen door slamming; and it wasn't enough.

So you're right -- that kind of silence is revelatory. You've got to put yourself in it and stay in it to hear characters speak, to hear words come up that are descriptive for the situations you want to write about. In those cities you're talking about, yes, you're going to be fed by a new poet every night standing up and doing one-on-one to the crowd. You're going to find fabulous films and music and restaurants, and all of that is stimulating and good. But you as a writer -- and this is what I learned -- still have to pick yourself up and go home and sit at that desk and not be lured out by those things, because you'll never do your work. That's the grown-up thing.

This is what I learned from the people I got to hear early in my life, from John O. Killens, Nikki [Giovanni] and Toni Cade [Bambara]: You are only as good, you are only as writerly, as the last thing you've written. And that is true. You cannot just write one thing in your life and live off that, attach suckers to it, and say, "But I did this." You cannot fall in love with your work, just say, "Oooo, that was nice," and sit back. You've got to keep on working.

KH: In your work, Nikky, you've written beautifully about family. But your work is much bigger than that. It's about your specific family, yes, but also about the human family. Something as simple as a poem about eating shark can turn into a truly disturbing meditation on the middle passage -- the way the sheer number of bodies being thrown overboard changed the migratory patterns of sharks. How do you get your students to make that kind of intuitive leap -- away from the poem simply as autobiography?

NF: I think the key is empathy. I'd have to say my student poets don't empathize a lot. They write all this "I"-voice poetry, and then they run out of things to write about because they haven't cast their net widely enough. They're not thinking enough about the world.

I'd been thinking about how to address this, and I gave them an article about Frida Kahlo from the Smithsonian. They know about her because they've heard about the movie, but they don't know what made her so amazing.

We use Frida Kahlo's life to talk about image and symbol. I say to them, "Find 25 symbols in her life, then draw a line down the page and draw 25 symbols from your life, and then cross-reference anything that you see. Empathize with the fact that she's on the trolley car, and she has this accident that changes her life. Throw your sensibilities and your empathizing mind out of your life into someone else's so that you

can see writing poetry is about being human and not always about being you."

That's why poetry is so necessary in the body of human language -- because we get to empathize. I don't think the world teaches that. The world is so concerned with making sure you have your own -- your own Web site, your own e-mail address. The world is concerned with the individual, not the collective human spirit, which poets have been writing about for a thousand years.

KH: You talk about technology, and the way technology has, ironically, narrowed our horizons. Can you talk a little about your own recent experience with the new technology, and how it's interacting with the world of poetry? You were recently on HBO, on *Def Poetry Jam*. What was that like?

NF: I loved *Def Poetry Jam*; though I tell you, I was shocked when I first got the call. I don't have cable, so I don't have HBO. I just don't have time for it. I find TV so distracting. I love film, and I love movies, and I feel like I miss so much. But I find that when the TV is out of my life, these old voices of these old folks and these really clear things I want to write about rise to the surface like concrete bubbles until I turn to them. TV is a diluter of that voice. In a very subconscious way, you come in and you sit in front of it -- it's like you just put it to your nose and inhale.

But I was absolutely honored to be on HBO. I really believe in the mix of black poetic voices being in the same bowl, being in the same room. Too often we don't touch each other's worlds. The "intellectual-writers-on-the-page" read to each other, and the performance poets read to each other; and never the two shall mix. I think one of the powerful things about the HBO series is that you have poets on the page and poets off the page, reading one after the other, reading from their hearts. I felt it was a good thing.

On the other hand, you can never forget for a minute that it is HBO, it is TV, and they want to sell something. They want to sell profanity; they want to sell shock. So of course I want to get up after the show and have a conversation with the audience about what they've heard. I felt that's the thing that can happen that's not happening. The poets on the page who read and are saying very profound things for you to digest and think about get these very light claps. The poets who are slamming profanity and talking about constipation or about bitches and violence get the biggest applause. I'm thinking, "Wait a minute -- do we know what we're applauding here? Are we applauding the audacity of the poet to say this on TV, or is the audience nervously applauding and not knowing what to do?"

For instance, after my poem about the woman who has been abused all her life and has known violence all her life, you have [rap star] Kanye West coming up with a poem that speaks reverently and bodaciously about being an abuser. You have these worlds-apart experiences. And you need a conversation because there's no question in my mind that people always want to be better even if they don't say it or show it or know how to articulate that. I think that's what's missing -- and I don't know how to fix it because it is TV and it is HBO -- is a conversation that helps an audience digest what they are hearing in a way that would be beneficial for all of us.

This goes back to what poetry is and what art is. We haven't had enough conversations outside the academy about that for me. We don't talk enough about self-expression and the power of self-expression. Is Kanye saying this because it sells? Is he talking bad about his mama on TV because it makes him look like a bad boy -- and a bad boy image is what the white record producer wants to sell? There's this persona that's put before the black community; it's put before the white community; it's put before America. It's the persona of the bandit, the outlaw, the rebellious young person coming forward. But what is also coming forward is this stereotypical image of black folks.

This is what is so detrimental in what we are passing on to young people who have not yet discerned the subtle differences between what sells, and what the marketing tool is, and who black people really are. That's the thing I cringed at when I left the stage. And that's where Furious Flower comes in. At the poet laureate's event, we saw Rita Dove sitting next to Amiri Baraka, sitting next to Sonia [Sanchez]. Do those laureates have different perspectives? Absolutely. Do they have different belief systems? Absolutely. Can they sit on the stage together and do their work? Yes.

That's the power. That moment was critical for me to see because we will fight and disagree. We are not monolithic. But can we come together under the banner of black poetry and stand and deliver our voice? Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

About the Author

Kendra Hamilton is assistant editor of Black Issues in Higher Education and a scholar of the literature and culture of the South.

She has also been widely published as a creative writer.