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Challenging White Fragility Through Black Feminist Political Poetry

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Challenging White Fragility Through Black Feminist Political Poetry

Langley Leverett

2022 April 27

Personal Statement

With a love of stories comes a love of people. This thesis is for the Black women who pioneered their way to the forefront of academia and the public eye to show the rest of the world that Black women do matter. Their voices matter, their opinions matter, and their work matters.

Thesis Statement

Due to overwhelming patriarchal hegemonies that women – white women, rich women, young women, and cis[1] women – continue to uphold, feminism struggles to serve all women justly. To combat this negligence in feminism's fourth wave movement, I will use this thesis to highlight ways that Black feminist poets have not only shaped feminist theory through their own contributions, but also have prolonged and saved the livelihood of both gender and racial equality. With a strong emphasis on Intersectional Feminism, I will explore the ways in which women can be united against tokenistic power, beginning with the inspiration from three voices: Gwendolyn Brooks (1917 – 2000), Maya Angelou (1928 – 2014), and Audre Lorde (1934 – 1992).

Theoretical Framework

White Fragility

Robin DiAngelo, anti-racist educator and sociologist, outlines the ways in which white people avoid and dismiss racism through various behaviors and mindsets.

Articulation

Patricia Hill Collins, a Black feminist and sociologist who explains how Black women have had to uniquely express and convey their oppression as both women and as a minority group.

Textual Analysis

Nine poems analyzed through a combined lens of white fragility and articulation

Writers in Focus



Gwendolyn Brooks

1917-2000



Maya Angelou

1928-2014



Audre Lorde

1934-1992

Background - A Woman of Firsts

- Born in Kansas, raised in Chicago on the South Side
- First published poem at 13 years old
- Focused her work around community & family
- First Black author to win a Pulitzer prize in any category
- First Black woman to stand as the poetry consultant to the Library of Congress
- First Black Poet Laureate for the state of Illinois
- Received the 1995 National Medal of Arts



Selected poems under Gwendolyn Brooks

1

"kitchenette
building"

2

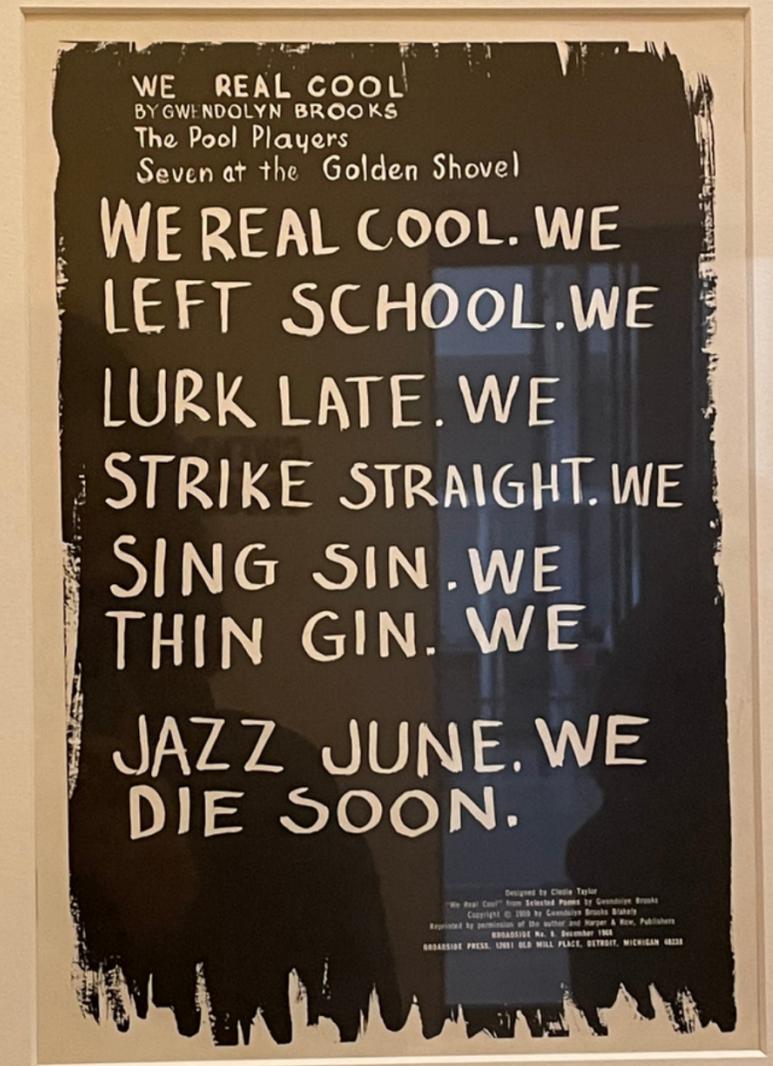
"We Real Cool"

3

"RIOT"

"We Real Cool"

- Written in a Blues style, ties in both historical and cultural connections
- Illustrates an "unforgettable portrait of lost young men of color whose lives are over far too soon" (Jackson 84).
- Simple rhyme and meter, 3 syllables per sentence
- Enjambment, with "We" at the end of every line (except the last) to start the next sentences
- Articulation using free verse and a chant-like style



**We real cool. We
Left school. We**

**Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We**

**Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We**

**Jazz June. We
Die soon.**

Background - A Woman of Persistence

- Born in Illinois, raised in Stamps, Arkansas
- First Black woman on a U.S. quarter
- Received the Medal of Freedom (the highest civilian honor), from President Barack Obama in 2010
- Received the National Medal of Arts, awarded by President Bill Clinton in 2000
- Worked closely with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X
- Worked all over the country as an activist, memoirist, poet, dancer, singer, and more



Selected poems under Maya Angelou

1

"Still I Rise"

2

"Phenomenal
Woman"

3

"Caged Bird"

"Caged Bird"

- Bird imagery to reflect state of racism
- Free verse, rhymes sprinkled throughout
- Dream theme crops up again
- Articulates the persistence of oppression despite legislation and decades of protesting
- Changes a triumphant tone to a somber tone to show that progress is still needed



**A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.**

**The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.**

Background - A Woman of Zeal

- Native New Yorker, lived in Harlem for most of her life
- Child of Caribbean immigrant parents
- Immigrant, Black, Lesbian, Woman
- Pioneer of intersectional feminism, fought in several liberations, Civil Rights, Women's Liberation, Gay Liberation
- Worked as a librarian and professor
- Diagnosed with breast cancer at an early age
- Traveled abroad to Germany to bring about the Afro-German Feminist movement



Selected poems under Audre Lorde

1

"Who Said It Was
Simple"

2

"A Litany for
Survival"

3

"Power"

"Power"

- Free verse poem
- Acts as a cathartic release for Lorde's emotions
- Responds to the murder of 10 year old Clifford Glover by a NYC policeman in Queens
- Contrasts two incidents of brutality, a murder and a rape
- Uses the emotional response from readers to prove her point of racism and police brutality being sustained issues



A policeman who shot down a ten year old in Queens stood over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood and a voice said “Die you little motherfucker” and there are tapes to prove it. At his trial this policeman said in his own defense “I didn't notice the size nor nothing else only the color”. And there are tapes to prove that, too.

These women changed my perspective on racism as a whole. Their poetry is powerful and honest, and deserves a brighter spotlight within instruction. Through my examination of these poems and the author's histories, I have expanded my ability to hold space for conversations on race and have a stronger will to examine and break with my internal biases and assumptions. These women aren't here today, but I feel like I know them personally. If I could say anything to them now, I would say thank you.

Thank you
for listening!