

Whatever Happened to Carolyn M. Rodgers?

by

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Former Black Panther, Judy Juanita's debut novel, *Virgin Soul*, which chronicled a black female coming of age in the 60s who joins the Black Panther Party was published in 2013 by Viking Press. Her collection of essays, *DeFacto Feminism: Essays Straight Outta Oakland* [EquiDistance Press, 2016], examines the intersectionality of race, gender, politics, economics and spirituality as experienced by a black activist and self-described "feminist foot soldier." She is a contributing editor for *The Weekling*, an online journal, where many of the essays appeared. The collection was a distinguished finalist in OSU's 2016 Non/Fiction Collection Prize. Seventeen of her plays have been performed at Ohio State University, Loyola Marymount University, in SF, Minneapolis, Berkeley, Oakland and Los Angeles; by the SF Mime Troupe, at Humboldt State University; BRAVA! Theatre, S.F.; National Black Theater Festival, Winston-Salem, NC; and at The Basement Workshop, New York City.

Abstract

A legendary woman poet from the 1960s Black Arts Movement (BAM) resurfaced in the 1990s in Oakland. Carolyn M. Rodgers, (1940-2010), established a major legacy - nine books of poetry and was, for a time, the embodiment of black consciousness. With a hard hitting militant stance and articulating Godlessness in her poems all while echoing her mother's God-fearing voice, she and her cohorts gave poetic expression to the tumultuous societal changes of the era. When she united with fellow Chicagoans Haki Mathubuti and Johari Amini to form Third World Press on a mimeograph machine in a Southside basement, she began a long string of published success. This press would become the largest black independent press in the country. The sixties black poets brought Rhythm & Blues (R & B), a uniquely mid century phenomenon, and urban grit into the vernacular of modern poetry. Rodgers utilized language as a weapon to bring attention to the plight of the urban black woman who was besieged by external oppression and internalized doubt. Rodgers let it rip: "I only call mothafuckas mothafuckas/so no one should be insulted." The BAM poets were forerunners of hiphop, rap and slam poetry. As the BAM grew from its rawness and blackness-as-a-religion, substantive changes occurred with the changing times. Feminists and black lesbians contributed womanist to the dialogue. Rappers sampled R&B freely, mining the urban grit, cursing the system, and reducing it all to "the mix." After Rodgers' flurry of writing fame in the sixties, she disappeared, becoming the phantom of the BAM. Her counterparts changed too, even embracing other religions. Poet Sonia Sanchez joined the Nation of Islam for a spell. Rodgers reconverted to Christianity. Her poetry changed, softened. Gone were the swearing, the N-word, the sexually explicit wording.

BAM themes of revolution, rebellion, and resistance, which had flooded her early work, were replaced by reconciliation and religious ecstasy. Living alternately in Oakland and Chicago, Rodgers faced down middle age. Her health suffered. She battled hypoglycemia and carbon monoxide poisoning. Overcoming them led to new themes as she continued writing, espousing Christianity and togetherness, and distressing her former cohorts. What emerged was the philosopher-poet exploring the human condition, nodding benevolently at contraries, no longer battling the status quo. Though Rodgers transcended her early public persona, her strident legacy resurfaces in the sass and sexuality of newer generations of black women artists and performers like Beyoncé and Salt 'n Pepa.

Whatever Happened to Carolyn M. Rodgers?

There couldn't have been more than six people in the large auditorium of the Fruitvale Branch library in East Oakland, circa 1994. The poet, Carolyn M. Rodgers, read her work to the interested handful, her voice echoing in the empty auditorium. I was mortified at the turnout for this icon of the black poetry movement .Why weren't there more poetry lovers? They'd had ample notice. True, she wasn't a supernova like Sonia Sanchez or Angela Davis, though she had nine books of poetry. After a flurry of fame in the sixties, she had become the phantom of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), disappearing for decades at a clip before resurfacing in her beloved Oakland, California or her native Chicago. When we went out to dinner after the reading, she told me being a poet was "champagne or beer," i.e. whether speaking before a thousand or a few, each encounter was a precious yield. Our friendship, begun that day, led to a lifelong correspondence.¹

Mar 3, 2005

Judy,

I don't guess I ever told you about the time I was asked to speak at SIU (Southern Illinois University). It's a big campus here in Illinois, and carries a lot of prestige here in the state. The black students had just been given a new campus house for their functions and they had named it after Gwendolyn Brooks. I was very excited about going there to read my poetry. The letter stated that I would receive \$450, plus traveling and eating expenses. Not bad. So I went.

Not one single student showed up for the reading! Not one! The first and last time it ever happened to me! They made some lame excuse and said that students were probably busy studying for finals. I was given my check (glory,glory) and I took my wounded pride home. Several days later, I received a letter saying that they were sorry that I had not been paid (!) and they sent me a second check. An obvious mistake! It doesn't get much better than that. It doesn't get much worse than that by this I mean no one showing up!

Things will get better, I'm sure. You learn from it all. Hopefully, one day we will look back and laugh at it all!

Hang tough! Luv Ya!
Carolyn

Her emergence and dominant role in the Black Arts Movement would define her public life. In 1967, she partnered with fellow poets Don L. Lee/Haki Madhubuti and Jewel C. Latimore/Johari Amini to found Third World Press (TWP). Thus began one of the Black Arts Movement's most successful presses on a mimeo machine in a basement apartment on Chicago's South Side. Rodgers, a Chicago native born in 1940, earned her BA from Roosevelt University in 1965 and would complete her M.A. in English from the University of Chicago in 1980. A central *padnuh* in the OBAC (Organization of Black American Culture) coterie, she prospered as it flourished. TWP published her first book, Paper Soul. Hoyt Fuller, editor of *Negro Digest/Black World*, wrote the introduction. Her footpath in the poetry world followed the standard operating procedure for artists – initial emergence within a clique, break with the clique or clique dissolves, fade to black or transcend. Umbra, the Lower East Side collective put Ishmael Reed, David Henderson, Steve Cannon and Calvin C. Hernton on the map. The beats gave LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka his lift-off; *The Journal of Black Dialogue* in San Francisco put Marvin X in orbit. The essential difference in Chicago was the presence of a woman mentor, Gwendolyn Brooks, a writer of stature. Rodgers wasn't Brooks' mistress, wife, maidservant, fuckbuddy or sycophant.

Feb 19, 2005

.... I found one of my old essays where I was using the f-word all over the place! Now I know what they liked about me. I had forgotten me. I was almost completely irreverent at times, and might I say with gusto and flair! I couldn't believe who I was. It was real food for thought. No wonder they look at me the way they do now! I still believe that half the battle though in getting published is who you know. I was very lucky to be in Chicago with Gwendolyn Brooks and many famous literary people came to sit at her table and I met them. I believe though that you have to keep on putting yourself out there. That's what I have to do, otherwise I am an interesting artifact. Or as I told some of my students, I'm history, literally.

Keep the faith. I love the sunshine and laughter you keep sending. My days are getting brighter. Definitely! Hope yours are too.

Standing in that East Oakland library in her ever-present head wrap of African cloth, Rodgers read old poems and recent ones. The newer work relied on biblical references, and on salt as a metaphor. "In the Shadow of Turning" begins with "Throwing Salt/Teshuva: To Balance the Scales."

Teshuva is Hebrew for turning back to God, as with one who has left God: “Since we use the/good in our past/to lead us to future good/to remind us of what man is capable/of, it seems/right then that we/should use the evil/in our past also/to remind us of what man/is capable of.”²

That’s her first stanza - proposition, theme, contention. The next line renders solution: “Salt is what/it all becomes...” and later in the 26-line poem, a rueful observation: “The main event in life is something/We think we can plan, but can’t...”

The Background of “I’m History, Literally”

Rodgers’ poetic foremothers were Pulitzer Prize-winners Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker. Each woman was married, a key figure in African-American literature in Chicago, their work and social activism having surfaced in the 1930s-40s. Gwendolyn Brooks, in 1968, said:

“There’s something very special happening in poetry today and I see it happening chiefly among the young blacks. I think that later they will take out some of the unruly roughness, but right now, I’m just glad to see it coming out. I think after all of the activity there will be an intense interest in saying things more effectively, using language more effectively.” Hopefully something will have been decided, and the poets will then have time to play more with their art”³

The movement for civil rights, like the abolitionist movement 100+ years earlier, gained traction once the world took notice. Emancipation became foreseeable once Europeans, especially the British, understood the horror and treachery of slavery from abolitionists, slave narratives and ex-slaves travelling abroad. President John F. Kennedy had proffered a tepid response to the Emancipation Proclamation’s 100th anniversary until pressured by civil rights activists to approve the March on Washington.⁴ The American workforce was changing as were TV, radio, pop records, magazines, fashion. Rhythm & Blues (R&B) was the persistent beat undercutting that. The Cuban embargo cut off Americans from the overt knowledge of the Cuban influence on music, especially R&B. ⁵ Bo Diddley had fused a 3-2 clave with R&B and rock and roll. A Bo Diddley beat meant a clave-based motif. Clave is the name of the patterns played on two hardwood sticks in Afro-Cuban music ensembles. This syncopated accent on the “off beat” was perfect for the click-and-slip of the pelvis in many popular dances of the time, including the Boogaloo, Shimmy, Hully Gully, Hitch Hike, Popcorn, Jerk, Philly Dog, Watusi, to name a few. BAM poets, the forerunners of hip hop, rap and slam poetry, were the Bo Diddleys of the poetry world, working the off beat as hard as they could, jerking, shimmying, boogalooing, popcorning, jerking and philly dogging in all the urban hot spots of the sixties.

Feb 12, 2005

I was most appreciative of the interview that you sent me. Ossie Davis & Ruby Dee have been friends of mine for a long time! Years ago, Ruby came to Chicago to do a reading and she was using one of my poems. She asked if anyone knew how to get in contact with me. She thought I might like to see the performance. Hence, the beginning of a long friendship. I was in Walgreen's buying some stuff and the Black salesgirl, (a young girl) told me [about Ossie Davis' passing]. I knew then that he had indeed left an indelible and lasting mark. She was barely twenty and she was saddened by his passing. I was overwhelmed, right there in the store. But in my life, that's how things are right now. We all have this curtain call. And I'm busy living and trying to love my life as much as possible, hoping I get it all together and have plenty of time to do it! I want to teach five classes in one class. Happy Valentine's Day!

A Poignant Set of Fisticuffs

In her work, Carolyn utilized language as a weapon to draw attention to larger social issues in an era that was an amalgam of social change. In "The Last M.F." Rodgers defends her use of profanity by vowing to not use it, but to be, "as the new Black Womanhood suggests/a softer self..." Then, signaling she - a modern, intelligent, educated, outspoken, sistah for the ages- won't be silenced, she writes "...I only call muthafuckas, muthafuckas/so no one should be insulted."⁶ She's not only claiming her right to profanity, but her right to free speech, her right to be ornery, her right to not bow down. She embraced feminism and femininity on her own terms.

Jan 6, 2006

I was thinking about you and the new year and hoping that this will be my year to win the metaphorical lottery and get back to Oakland! I long to see Oakland. It's like my second home. I was just telling my friend who lives there and was born and raised here that I envy her so much. I fear flying. That's my problem. I am hoping to psyche myself out of it this year. I'd be in and out, just like that!

As for the burst pipes and my storage...I just went through the most difficult thing I've encountered in life. My black book collection, my letters from Margaret Walker, Ruby Dee & Ossie, Gwendolyn Brooks and stuff from Johnson Publishing Company was all but totaled.... I had already willed my black book collection from the sixties, seventies and eighties to the Black Student Organization at the University of Chicago. I've actually got to change my will. I have no black book collection, anymore... Some of the anthologies I was published in, about thirty, all perished.

My contributor's copies. But enough already. This WAS a lesson in detachment. I DID think about what it might have felt like if instead of a storage space, it had been my HOME. So, life goes on and we pick up the pieces, such as they are, and we are grateful for sunny and even rainy days.

Happy New Year. Let's try to fulfill some of our dreams this year. In spite of all that went down in 2005, I cannot honestly say that it was my worst year. It really wasn't.

Tuesday, I go to find out if this stomach tumor has shrunk any after three months of medical therapy. Chant for me, please... Peace out.

Carolyn's mentor, Gwendolyn Brooks, defied the pattern of female invisibility in middle age, instead becoming a different version of herself, leaving her husband (ultimately returning), becoming close to Don. L. Lee and leaving her New York publisher for Third World Press, and finding in Blackness at age 60 new themes and new peers. This radical change of direction was a phenomenon Carolyn would experience in middle age too; when confronted with illness, she used the same poignant fisticuffs and wordplay she'd socked at social problems: "when they told me I had it/they played it down. A low key,/minor on a grand middle-aged piano,/my life./I must have had it right then./I mean it must have had me in its tight fist...I went around saying it silently and softly/to myself like/it was a new name someone had given me./it was a sign of me to myself./i am woman, negro, colored, then black./now/hy pogly cemi a/ a new name and because parts of me were missing/from a knockout bout with carbon monoxide/I walked around saying the word to myself/like it was a new name/trying to make myself whole again./even as I remained fragmented/from loss and pain."⁷

From the cradle up our grannies, aunties, mommas teach what I call The Black Woman's National Anthem: *you can do bad by yo-self*. Taking this maxim to heart while embracing the open sexuality and unbridled militancy of the era, Carolyn, Sonia Sanchez, et al, brought a new artistic voice into the poetry community. With their parallels to R&B, their uncommon voices crossed genres and traduced boundaries, mixed slang, nostalgia, curse words and sociological analysis, utilizing:

- direct speech and direct address,
- frank hope, frank distress
- sexual pleas for attention and raw revelation, sexual intimacies
- explicit language
- confessionals that evoked anger v. pity

The poems were manifestoes of blatant and obscene phraseology: we will not disavow one another. We are significant not insignificant. We stand in unity to avert disaster. The white woman can spit in her man's face (and 40 years later lean in). But we stand with you, brother.

They addressed the abyss between black men and women by looking at it and acknowledging its presence as problematic issue in the community. This new work located the black community, despite dispersion due to migration, mobility and integration. Its black heart was the community unlike traditional poetry.

It transgressed norms with obscene images of the black heart, the black pudenda, black desire. Thomas Kuhn, the scientific philosopher who brought *paradigm shift* into the lexicon, said that intellectual courage is even rarer than physical courage. David Brooks said Kuhn realized that “an intellectually courageous person is willing to look at things that are surprisingly hard to look at”.⁸ But this new paradigm of Blackness, though courageous, had its formalisms that at points wholly constituted its *raison d’etre*:

- natural hair v. hotcombed/chemically-treated hair
- fierceness v. accommodation
- hardness v. softness
- Godlessness v. God-fearing
- Being colorful v. trying to blend in
- Black v. Negro
- empathy v. sympathy. If you were angered by the poet’s voice, you perceived inside the boundaries. If you pitied the poet’s voice, you were outside the boundaries.

But as the BAM grew from rawness to maturation, paradigm shifts occurred in the religion of blackness, during and immediately after its establishment. Feminists and black lesbians contributed *womanist* to the dialogue. Offspring generations sampled R&B, reducing it to “the mix.” Carolyn reconverted to Christianity, having set God aside during her militant phase. Novelist Muriel Spark in *The Informed Air* reflects on the stresses of Job. “With God we have none of us any privacy, in itself an almost intolerable burden. If we did not set God aside in our minds for most of the time, we would be semi-paralyzed. We could never get anything done, never be ourselves.”⁹ Maybe someone else would say Carolyn got soft. I say she softened.

Being Middle Aged, Transition, Convergence

Jan 5, 2005

One of my friends who lives in Oakland and has for the last twenty -five years came home to Chicago for the holidays. I got a visual tour of my beloved Oakland, through her eyesight! More than ever, I’m pledged to get back there! I can hardly wait. I have no illusions about some of the problems. They were there when I was last there. But what has that got to do with loving the place?

By her 50s, when I met her in East Oakland, Carolyn Rodgers had survived carbon monoxide poisoning and fallen out of favor with black arts orthodoxy because of her espousal of Christianity. In "Salt: Prospective," Rodgers wrote about her concept of God: "all things may sometimes converge/God may be called that focal point/or some may call it light or truth or love..." Always mindful of divergence, her newer work sought togetherness. "...at some point in any man or/woman's life, all/paths/roads/points/come together/for evil/or/for good."¹⁰

What emerged was the philosopher poet exploring the human condition, nodding benevolently at contraries, no longer at war with the status quo.

Her lyric heart cries its independence in the midst of anxiety, in the conflict between the necessity of hardness and the ideal of feminine softness: "...knowing the music of/silence/hating it/hoarding it/loving it/treasuring it, /it often birthing our creativity/we are lonely/ being soft and being hard/supporting our selves, earning/our own bread/soft/hard/hard/soft/knowing that need must not/show..."¹¹

Unlike Tyler Perry's Madea, who's become a head-snapping, celluloid Sapphire-in-perpetuity, anguish, bewilderment and audacity are a big part of the Rodgers early poetic persona. She was able to express the pain of being a black woman in a society that found such beings at distinct odds with its definition of femininity: "I went through my/Mean period/If you remember/I spit/out nails/Chewed tobacco on/The paper/And dipped some bad snuff..."

But the pain changes two stanzas later: "...I woke up one/Morning/And looked at myself/And what I saw was/Carolyn/Not imani ma jua or soul/Sistah poetess of/The moment/I saw a woman. Human and/Black.

Nov. 9, 2004

I am just hanging on here. In Chicago, people are pretty sobered after the election and blame is going everywhere. I had to have oral surgery Saturday and I have stitches in my mouth, so I'm not debating anybody about anything much!

I went to my second conference though yesterday, for women who want to start their own business. It was held at the Hyatt Hotel here and I had been planning to attend for months; I wasn't about to stay home because of my mouth. I'm so glad I went. It was all about woman power! Women of every race, creed, and color, (to borrow a cliché) were there, and we were all trying to break the glass ceiling, among other things. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

I would like to learn how to create a web site. I am hoping that when I do go back to teach it will only be for a short time. But who knows? I might get a real good [book] deal, anyway, as we settle in, for what lies ahead. Thanks for putting me on your mailing list. There is so much good head food that you send me. Sometimes, I am awed by people's capacity to still articulate in extremely erudite, yet down-to-earth fashion, the challenges that we face today. Everybody here was overjoyed that Barack Obama won over Alan Keyes. I'm guessing that you know who those two are.

The Black community here though is still quite stunned and Jesse Jackson held a historic meeting with Minister Farrakhan and they talked about what our new challenges are. People were invited to comment and it was all very good and helpful. So, life goes on....Keep the faith! Chant some good things for me and I will affirm good things for you!!!

Singer-songwriter-poet Chris Stroffolino, aka Piano Van Man, bemoans the loss of the representable in contemporary music.¹² Stroffolino contends that the incessant demands of commerce in a capitalist society prevent the authentic, the spontaneous. The BAM was perhaps the last time the noncommercial expression of black dialogue, the black aural expression, surfaced, the last time it was representable. By the end of the black-is-beautiful phase, blackness was commoditized. Integration meant not only school busing and affirmative action, but Diahann Carroll in "Julia" on TV. All gussied up and proper, her single parenthood transmogrified to a lunch-pail, antiseptic widowhood which conferred respectability (unlike Carroll's 1972 Oscar-nominated character in *Claudine* who had six kids out-of-wedlock).

Jan 17, 2008

... I have been corresponding for at least two years, probably more, with a PH.D. Black history professor at the _____. He was writing a book, his third or fourth to be published, and he wrote me about using some of my work and that's how it started. Through my illness and madness and everything, he was right there. Well, I hadn't heard from him for a few weeks, and I'd sent him a Christmas card. I thought it odd that I hadn't heard from him but he was the Chairperson of the African -American/Black Studies Department there, so he was very very busy, at times. Well last week I got the card back. A note was scribbled on it, which simply said "sorry, deceased." I almost fainted. What? He was 62 years old and happily planning his retirement!!! I couldn't believe it!

So I called the school and his secretary told me that he had slipped and he fell and fractured his skull in the parking lot when he was keeping a doctor's appointment! And that was it... I am a changed woman. Life keeps making me change, just when I think I can handle it all or it's all okay or this or that, something happens. He had been teaching for 34 years and was looking forward to retiring. He's written 7 books and had 3 more coming. It scared me. It intimidated me....And to make matters worse here, the sun has all but abandoned Chicago. For days on end we are overcast. It is gloomy, and dark, many days, one right after the other. We all have SAD, Seasonal Affective Disorder, and today it is just almost 3 o'clock and it's almost dark. It's too much! For this cause, in 1986, I left Chicago and first moved to Oakland.

What's happening on your end of the world. We're holding fort here.

Poets who became nationally prominent in the 70s and after included Ntozake Shange, the late greats Lucille Clifton, Jayne Cortez and Wanda Coleman, by turn fierce, wise and soft. The stance, the growl, the ferocity of the black arts movement poems had startled me as much as its Black orthodoxy felt restrictive. The recently-deceased Wanda Coleman and I were born the same year, 1946. I had the privilege of meeting her at a good friend's dinner, although Coleman's crude insults thrown in our hostess' face offended me. I wondered, while reading her obituary, if the poetic personas many black poets adopted were a professional necessity. Did they, like Tupac and Biggie, gangsterize their public image to match the simmering rage of being black and oppressed in America? Graciousness was not a part of the black arts orthodoxy.

By embracing Christianity graciously in her writing, Carolyn became a heretic and an ecumenicist, characteristically embracing opposites. When a radical friend trashed me for embracing Buddhism, Carolyn M. Rodgers wrote "Ten Worlds" which melds Buddhism and Christianity: "my buddhist friend/tells me there are ten worlds...ten cesspools of sin?/or ten sanctuaries and gateways to heaven(s)/ten gardens of eden or/ten paths to travel...ten ways to laugh or cry and find or be found in...in the room of this house/I am catholic and I drink the blood, and eat the body of the lamb/god/man/called Christ while my friend/chants in another/room of the house/ Nam-myoho-renge-kyo."¹³

This is some distance from the angst and loneliness of her sixties classic, "Poem for Some Black Women" which expresses the dilemma of black women: i am lonely,/all the people i know/i know too well/there was comfort in that/at first but now/we know each other's miseries/ too well....we are/lonely women, who spend/time waiting for/occasional flings....we understand the world/problems/Black women's problems with/Black men/but all/we really understand is/lonely..."¹⁴

Sept 27, 2004

I just got your piece from E.L. Doctorow. It sorta blew me away! I just pulled it down/printed it out, and it made me want to write my own poem about the war and everything. I haven't finished reading the piece yet, but I wanted to respond quickly. Sometimes, it takes days for me to get to my e-mail. I don't do anything except work since I quit work! I can't believe I have even less time, but it almost seems that way.

I miss my job. And more than anything else, I miss getting paid every two weeks, even if it was almost slave labor. But the weather in Chicago in autumn is unbelievably beautiful, so I'm enjoying that. Especially, since it definitely isn't going to last. Maya Angelou was in our city tonight for a book signing. More to come. I'm just a rambling rose right now.

A softened Sonia Sanchez commented recently on the tempering of her work: “You must remember, in the time that we were writing, all the death and dying that happened and how we had discovered how much we’d been enslaved in this country...We came out hitting and slapping and alerting people to what had happened.”¹⁵

April 5, 2005

I am finally making some headway. And I don't mind telling you that your emails give me much motivation. I'm not just out here, "all by myself" trying to make it work/or happen! In the last two months I have bought 3 different pieces of software to do chapbooks with. Finally, it looks like one of them is going to work! It is actually viable, and I have been able to begin a decent dummy again. Glory, glory! smile.

You are the playwright that I still want to be! I can't get to my plays yet at all. Too much going on around me..... I don't know anymore how I had time to work! I will have to make drastic changes for this upcoming job in the fall. It's a seminar on older Black writers, like

G. Brooks, Margaret Walker, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, et. al....So, life goes on. Although she did fly under the radar in middle-age, her work and Sonia Sanchez's poetry furnished several generations with new paradigms and language. Influenced by e.e.cummings' idiosyncratic grammar and punctuation, Rodgers and Sanchez, alongside Baraka, led the assault on tradition, transforming the Coleridge's "infinite I am" to "i am" and using repetition and alliteration to exploit cliché. When *news* becomes *noose*, meaning enlarges; calling the telephone cord "the witch cord/that erases the stretch of/thirty-three blocks/and tuning in the voice which/woodenly stated that the/talk box was 'disconnected'..." critiques AT&T and monopoly capitalism; calling her mom "religious-negro" who is "religiously girdled in/her god..." is critique minus bitterness ("It's Deep: don't never forget the bridge that you crossed over on"). Carolyn soldiered on through the times, anthologized many times over, appearing in *Essence* and *O* magazines, speaking locally.

May 19, 2005

Hi Judy, I just had to share the good news. After not receiving any royalty statements from Doubleday for the last three years, I figured the little glory ride was over! But lo and behold (!), what was in my P.O. box but a statement with a small check, after three long years. It made my day, possibly my year! smile. Now all I need is a little more macho to approach them about a book contract. I've queried them about that for the last five years, at least, and never even received an answer back. Well, too bad for them. Now for sure, I'll try again.

Often American poets and writers bravely face the theme of mortality toward the close of their lives (Raymond Carver), on the battlefield (Wilfred Owen), or in dire illness (Jane Kenyon). But, like Emily Dickinson, BAM poets always looked at death, farewell and departure, and created a poetry of disengagement from a toxic and disparaging culture. In her life and her work, my friend faced adversity with hopeful knowing.

Feb 25, 2010

Finally I'm back to life again, back to reality as the song says. Last night I read poetry with Sonia Sanchez and Angela Jackson and the day before I was so sick and had been so sick for weeks, I could not hardly do nothing. They put some happy gas in my IV, gave me 2 pints/units of blood and I was good to go. I think I'm just coming down. Only to hear from Sonia at the poetry reading that Lucille Clifton made her commitment/ or transition as some people call it.

Girl Things are happening. I know everybody was watching me these last few weeks and quiet as it's kept, I been watching some of them. I am trying to enjoy life as much as I can. I'm taking it easy. I'm laughing, and I think this is the way. I have to watch my blood pressure now. My feet are so swollen I cannot even get them in my boots. My legs are swollen too. I have to take diuretics and then run run run to guess where. I just laugh it off. What else is new?

She knew the seriousness of her illness and talked from her poet's soul of mortality. Throughout her final illness, she asked me to chant for her, promising she'd pray while I chanted. We kept in contact until a few weeks before she died on April 2, 2010, in Chicago.

Feb 26, 2010

Each day I am more impressed about youth and age. I am so glad I have been allowed to grow "old" shall we say? I love being an elder and I love the children. They are precious and I see me and others I know and don't know going and coming. You know what I mean? Somedays I want to say, this one or that one is back on earth again???? Let's hang in there. I feel so good today if only in my spirit and soul, well not only but mostly. I fully plan to make it back to Oakland one day soon. It is one of my goals for 2010 or 2011, hopefully the former! I was telling Sonia S., I would love to host a gathering of Black women writers from the '60's and maybe not only Black... What do you think? I'm seriously sitting places trying to figure out how to pull it off. If you have any ideas about it, cue me in. Keep the faith.

Without the black women poets of the sixties breaking through, there would be no Beyoncé on the cover of TIME in her bootypants, no Audra MacDonald being the most celebrated Broadway actress ever, no Mae Jemison astronaut falling gracefully in space, no Oprah and Gayle/paradigmatic girlfriends influencing cultural politics, no Sistah Souljah being called out by a faux-black Bill Clinton, no Salt-N-Pepa, Cheryl James Sandra Denton and Deidra Roper ("Salt," "Pepa," and "DJ Spinderella") talking provocatively and gyrating their pelvises exponentially harder than Elvis. Black women strippers, derisively called "shake dancers," and blues singers had gotten down and dirty behind closed doors in the repressive decades before the sixties. But Salt-N-Pepa weren't marginalized and hidden from public view. They engaged sexually, a form of sexual politic. Rodgers, Sanchez, Wanda Coleman, Jayne Cortez, Shange, June Jordan et al, opened the political door, and like other affirmative action babies, Salt-N-Pepa walked through with nonchalance, becoming the first female rap group with huge hits in the US and United Kingdom.

Ah, push it, ah, push it
Ooh, baby, baby, baby, baby
Ooh, baby, baby, baby, baby
Get up on this.
Ah, push it, ah, push it
Ah, push it

- Salt-N-Pepa

Like so many, Carolyn was overjoyed at Barack Obama's Presidential election.

Nov 10, 2008

How lucky I am! I was standing on the corner (Friday) where I live, which is directly across the street from where Obama goes to work out, when I look up and what do I see but a string of about 20 black, long limos, with Obama and God knows how many secret service men, and University of Chicago students of every race, creed, and color running along the street, wildly, holding up their cell phones with the cameras, yelling "I got one." I just [stood] there frozen in time, finally able to lift my arm and wave at this wonderful man in this long stream of sleek shiny black cars, policemen, in front and behind. I wish I had grandchildren to tell it to! It made my day you know and everybody else's, waiting for the bus!

Obviously, I live in a very posh neighborhood. Usually, I don't think much about it, because it is University turf and it's my SISTER's money, obviously not mine! (smile). His neighborhood office is in the building on the sixteenth floor, and we look over at it from our living room. I calm myself, or I am constantly hyperventilating! (smile). What a world. What a life. Can't help lovin' it.

Whatever happened to Carolyn M. Rodgers?
She transcended herself.

Endnotes

¹ I have eliminated salutations after the first *Hi Judy* and *luv Ya! Carolyn*.

² "In the Shadow of Turning." ROOMS, Vol 4, No. 4 (Winter 1997).

³ Kent, George E. *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*, University Press of Kentucky (2009) 228.

⁴ "'The Kennedys were almost morbidly afraid of this march. They understood there'd been nothing like it,' said Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-District of Columbia, who helped plan the march 50 years ago." <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/28/politics/march-on-washington-kennedy-jitters/index.html>.

⁵ Peñalosa, David. *The Clave Matrix- Afro-Cuban Rhythm: Its Principles and African Origins*. Bembe Books, Redway, CA. (2009).

⁶ http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rogers/about.htm.

⁷ "A new Name." ROOMS, Vol. 4, No. 2. (Summer 1997).

⁸ Brooks, David. "The Mental Virtues." NYT 8.28.14.
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/29/opinion/david-brooks-the-mental-virtues.html?_r=0.

⁹ Spark, Muriel. *The Informed Air*. (New Directions Publishing Co, 2014).

¹⁰ "Salt: Prospective." ROOMS. Vol. 4 No 4. Winter 1997.

¹¹ "Poem for Some Black Women." <http://www.afropoets.net/carolynrogers2.html>.

¹² <http://chris-stroffolino.tumblr.com/post/102613873124/03-life-in-a-tin-can>.

¹³ "Ten Worlds." ROOMS. Vol. 2 No 3. Fall 1995.

¹⁴ Ibid. xi.

¹⁵ "Wear the Day Well: An Interview with Sonia Sanchez." *The Writer's Chronicle*, Feb. 2014:29.

