Kathy Rugoff provides an extended biographical essay on Brooks, discussing how some of her works participate in the Civil Rights movement’s fight for equality within Chicago as well as within the United States at large. Rugoff reviews Brooks’s interactions with Harlem Renaissance writers James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes and also examines how Brooks’s studies of works by Countee Cullen, T. S. Eliot, E. E. Cummings, and Thomas Hardy, to name a few, inspired her to incorporate in her poetry a variety of literary forms, from the sonnet to modernism. She discusses how Brooks did not shy away from using her poems to denounce intraracial gang violence and interracial violence brought about by racism and how in her later works Brooks brought attention to racial injustices that extended beyond America and into Africa. Rugoff concludes with a call for more scholarship on Brooks’s works. — M.R.M.

Gwendolyn Brooks is one of the most important poets of twentieth-century America. She was a fiercely independent writer who borrowed from both European and African American literary traditions to write poetry that would cut her own path and inspire writers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her poetry, novel, autobiographies, and short prose works are characterized by an intense awareness of the African American experience, women’s roles and feminist perspectives, and literary tradition. Brooks responded to major events during her lifetime, including World War II, the struggle for civil rights, the murders of African American leaders, race riots, and daily life in segregated urban America. Brooks’s poetry received numerous prestigious awards and, less formally, has been celebrated by other poets. For example, Haki R. Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), a central figure in the Black Arts movement, wrote in 1972: “Gwendolyn Brooks is the example for
us all. . . . she is the continuing storm that walks with the English language as lions walk with Africa” (Brooks, *Report from Part One* 30).

From her first book, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), to her final publications, Brooks’s primary focus was on the lives of African Americans in the context of evolving social, cultural, and political events in the United States. Her portraits are most often based on people from the South Side of Chicago, her home. While it is universally observed that her poetry underwent a transformation in 1967 after she attended the Second Black Writers’ Conference at Fisk University, Brooks’s work is remarkably consistent in the brilliance of her wit and in her subtle treatment of sound and its impact on sense.

It is the marriage of politics and poetics in Brooks that Elizabeth Alexander—an important twenty-first-century writer and the fourth inaugural poet—admires in her work. 1 In a thought-provoking essay, Alexander maintains that Brooks’s *In the Mecca* serves as a model. It reminds her that “none of us lives outside of historical moments” and that Brooks “never feared or shirked what she fervently believed was her responsibility; that sense of responsibility shaped her very aesthetic.” Alexander concludes: “Few poets walk with such integrity” (378-79).

Brooks’s poetry is inextricably grounded in the mid-twentieth-century social and political transformation of the United States and in art’s potential to engage with the complexity and variety of experience in African American life. Rita Dove has also responded to Brooks’s aesthetic. Like Brooks, but with a focus on earlier events, her collection *Thomas and Beulah* (1986) and other poems include portraits of people in daily life, and *American Smooth* (2004) presents poems in the voices of African American soldiers.

As a writer and teacher, Brooks had a major impact on many writers and scholars. Various anthologies of poems include tributes to her, and she edited and introduced important collections, including *A Broadside Treasury, 1965-1970,* and *Jump Bad: A New Chicago Anthology* (1971).2 Finally, hundreds of critical discussions have appeared on her work, reflecting various perspectives in literary theory, such as femi-
nism, new historicism, Marxism, and New Criticism, and in various fields, such as African American studies and cultural studies.

Brooks’s novel *Maud Martha*, published in 1953, did not receive much attention at the time of its publication, partly because of a general patriarchal bias and partly because it did not meet the various expectations of many black and white readers; it is now recognized as a groundbreaking novel and is noted for its impact on later novelists. *Maud Martha* is a series of thirty-four vignettes illuminating the life of a woman living in Chicago during the Great Depression and the years of World War II. This coming-of-age novel responds to inter- and intraracial, gender, and class divisions. In an important article first published in the early 1980s, Mary Helen Washington argues that early responses to the book were symptomatic of prejudices that suppressed the voice of African American women, causing the silenced anger of the main character to be neither recognized nor understood (54-55). Later critics have commented on the novel’s originality and its feminist orientation.3

Early in Brooks’s career, her models were male writers. She was befriended by Langston Hughes, who praised her work publicly. As a young girl she read *The Weary Blues* (1926), which opened up a world of possibilities; she realized, among other things, that “writing about the ordinary aspects of black life was important” (Brooks, *Report from Part One* 70, 170). This would be the foundation of her poetry. She also wrote bluesy ballads such as her early poems “a song in the front yard,” “the ballad of chocolate Mbbie,” and “Sadie and Maud” and later ones such as “Priscilla Assails the Sepulchre of Love” and “Steam Song.”

By the early 1930s Brooks had read poetry by Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, and other poets anthologized in *Caroling Dusk*, which was edited by Cullen, and in *Negro Poets and Their Poems*, which was edited by Robert Kerlin (Kent 23). Various poets of the Harlem Renaissance wrote sonnets. Brooks also studied well-known poems in the traditional canon that appeared in the *Winged Horse Anthology*, which was edited by Joseph Auslander and Frank...
Ernest Hill. Upon the suggestion of James Weldon Johnson, she became acquainted with poems by modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and E. E. Cummings (Brooks, Report from Part One 173).

In 1941, her study of modern poetry and its techniques intensified through the influence of Inez Cunningham Stark when Brooks attended a poetry class held in the South Side Community Art Center led by the well-to-do reader for Poetry magazine. Like the early modernists, Brooks paid particular attention to elements of form. The result is “tense, complex, rhythmic verse,” Houston A. Baker, Jr., observes, “that contains the metaphysical complexities of John Donne and the word magic of Apollinaire, Eliot, and Pound” (21). Baker concludes that Brooks’s poetry “equal[s] the best in the black and white literary traditions” (28). In addition, Gertrude Reif Hughes argues, Brooks transforms some of the tenets of modern poetry as she undermines male white hegemony in poetry that reflects a feminist African American perspective (140-43).

By her late teens, Brooks was contributing to the weekly “Lights and Shadows” column of the Chicago Defender, an influential newspaper with a large readership in the African American community. Her first book was published by Harper and Brothers (later Harper & Row), a major New York press, followed by six subsequent books. Although Brooks had a productive relationship with her editors at Harper, her work was subjected to some “requests for revisions,” which, as John K. Young points out, “reinforc[ed] the aesthetic and political issues behind white consumption of black texts.” In 1969, Brooks began to publish strictly with black presses, including Broadside Press, Third World Press, and her own press, David Company (Young 97, 94). She pointed out in an interview with Young that in the late 1960s Broadside Press’s Dudley Randall provided a “platform to young Black poets, people that Macmillan and Harper wouldn’t accept” and she “decided to go with a Black publisher and give some assistance to them” (qtd. in Brooks and Hawkins 280).

* A Street in Bronzeville * exhibits a broad repertoire in tone and struc-
ture, from songlike lyrics to sonnets, ballads, and other narrative forms. One critic has observed that the book comprises “a collage of racism, sexism, and classism of America in its illumination of the people who strive to survive Bronzeville” (Bolden 13). Bronzeville from the 1920s into the 1950s, known as the Black Belt, was the heart of the Great Migration from the South, which began in the nineteenth century but increased considerably during the 1920s and 1930s. The community “on Chicago’s South Side quickly became a ‘Black Metropolis’” and became “the demographic base for Chicago’s literary renaissance of Black writers” (Bolden 3). 5

With a large white audience in mind, Brooks confronts social issues and provides a voice for Chicago’s African American underclass in her early poetry. Her particular exploration of black and European literary traditions is disarming. For example, as a poem that engages its reader through lively rhyme and assonance, “the ballad of chocolate Mabbie” addresses the tragedy in a boy’s abandonment of a dark-skinned schoolgirl for a girl with lighter skin. Not unlike Emily Dickinson, Brooks, in unidiomatic syntax, in two lines that resist direct paraphrasing, conveys the acute loneliness of the rejected child who learns the cruel lessons of, first, being female and therefore at the mercy of a male’s whim and, second, of having dark skin in a society that privileges whiteness. Of this innocent child Brooks concludes: “Mabbie on Mabbie with hush in the heart./ Mabbie on Mabbie to be” (23-24).

“Ballad of Pearl May Lee” is in the voice of a black woman and treats one of the most painful and inflammatory subjects in African American history, the lynching of a black man accused of having sex with a white woman. 6 Brooks deals with the double tragedy of racism regarding the impact of the assumption that white is more desirable than black as well as the impact of the horrendous torture and murder of black men by white men. She places this tragedy in the familiar blues-song figure of the unfaithful lover. Here, it appears that a black woman revels in the consequences of her lover’s infidelity in his attention to a white woman:
Then off they took you, off to the jail,  
A hundred hooting after.  
And you should have heard me at my house,  
I cut my lungs with my laughter

This takes a highly ironic turn several stanzas later as a mob drags the man from jail and hangs him from a tree:

And they laughed when they heard you wail.  
Laughed,  
Laughed.  
They laughed when they heard you wail.

Although Pearl May Lee may be a victim of both her lover’s racism and that of the murderous whites, Brooks provides her with a powerful voice through synecdoche and metonymic imagery. Pearl May Lee addresses her dead lover: “You paid with your hide and my heart . . .” (98). His body is destroyed and her emotions are damaged. In addition, she addresses him as “Brother,” rather than lover (93-94). He is one of many black men who have been caught up in white violence. Finally, Pearl May Lee treats whites like objects, not individuals, reciprocating the treatment blacks have received. The white woman has no name and is described as a “taste of pink and white honey” (99).

Black men treating black women as objects is critiqued, among other things, in “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith,” a highly satirical third-person portrait of a black man. The man’s limitations are a consequence of his secondary status in white America. D. H. Melhem points out that, like Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Brooks’s portrait “deals with an antiheroic vision, but it places the protagonist solidly in his environment” (Gwendolyn Brooks 34). While “Prufrock” may be an interior monologue of Prufrock’s musings, “The Sundays of
"Satin-Legs Smith" is a satirical portrait of a black man who appropriates the trappings of wealthy whites. The poem also conveys an ironic view of the trappings of high art in white culture through visual imagery and prosody.

Smith is a ghetto prince. His closet “is a vault/ Whose glory is not diamond, nor pearls./ Not silver plate with just enough dull shine./ But wonder-suits in yellow and in wine” (44-47). This zoot-suited man survives by satisfying his appetite for food at Joe’s Eats and for sex with an unnamed woman “with the most voluble of veils” (138). One critic notes that in Smith, “the ‘choice’ of race rebellion is here reduced to consumer preference”; Smith embodies “the displacement of historical consciousness onto the flat surface of the material now” (Mullen 164).

The speaker of the poem—addressing an unidentified “you” and the poet’s reading audience (if these distinctions can be made)—draws attention to the details of Smith’s world: “alleys, garbage pails,” “broken windows” and “foodlessness” (28, 91, 100). Brooks illuminates the contrast between Smith’s environment and his showy clothes (which are considered in bad taste by whites) by incorporating meter, diction, and conventional imagery found in traditional poetry. Many lines, for example, use blank verse, and the diction is elevated. For example, the poem opens with Latinate words: “Inamoratas, with an approbation,/ Bestowed his title. Blessed his inclination” (1-2). The heavy rhyme and alliteration may mock Smith, the speaker, and the unidentified “you.” In addition, Brooks refers to a garden and includes a catalog of flowers, which is reminiscent of English poets from the Renaissance through the Romantic era. However, “No! He has not a flower to his name” (32). George E. Kent argues that the poet is addressing “a white observer” and that the “speaker’s vocabulary and attitudes create sardonic tones of cool condescension and contempt” so that Brooks presents criticism not only of “the hip life” but also “of life and society” (70).

The rarefied society of Eliot may be included. “The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith” recalls Prufrock in lines such as “Let us proceed. Let us inspect, together/ With his meticulous and serious love” (43-
which brings to mind the “let us” figure in Prufrock, and “meticulous” Eliot’s “Politic, cautious, and meticulous” (116). Smith, of course, is the inverse of Prufrock; one man is a snappy dresser and loves women, whereas the other is intimidated by women. Between the man in a zoot suit and a man anxious about rolling up his trousers, Brooks may very well find the black man to be, in an important respect, more free.

In an interview concerning literary tradition, Brooks was asked about her sonnets. The sequence of twelve sonnets “Gay Chaps at the Bar,” in A Street in Bronzeville, presents various experiences of African American soldiers who served during World War II. Speaking metaphorically, suggesting that form is an extension of content, Brooks stated that the poems employ off-rhyme to deal with “an off-rhyme situation” (Report from Part One 156). This situation may have been the fact that African American soldiers were treated unequally in the segregated U.S. armed forces and given noncombat and nonleadership positions. Tragically, segregation and lynching continued even after the soldiers returned (Stanford 184). “Gay Chaps at the Bar” is replete with irony and thereby points to the absurdity in the soldiers’ treatment. The use of irony is also extensive in the war poetry of some early twentieth-century poets, including Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Thomas Hardy.

Some of the diction and imagery in Brooks’s sequence also has ties to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British poetry, and the sonnets include few contemporary references and mention no battles or countries; instead, universal themes of war, death, and love emerge. This is an important part of the poet’s subliminal message: black soldiers are no different from white soldiers and should not receive separate and unequal treatment. Race relations are dealt with directly in the sonnet “the white troops had their orders but the Negroes looked like men.” Brooks considers the absurdity of separating the remains of the dead based on race. She writes in the sestet:
A box for dark men and a box for Other—
Would often find the contents had been scrambled,
Or even switched. Who really gave two figs?
Neither the earth nor heaven ever trembled.
And there was nothing startling in the weather.

(10-14)

By invoking conventional seventeenth-century imagery that alludes to metaphysical and existential certainties, Brooks renders distinctions based on race absurd in two respects: first, straightforwardly, through the analogies in the images and, second, metaphorically, through the enduring quality of these conventional images in the history of poetry. However, Brooks also takes subtle liberties with traditional sonnet structure, particularly through the use of half-rhyme and through the relationship between the rhyme structure and the volta. In addition, as Stacy Carson Hubbard insightfully argues, by appropriating this strictly structured genre to “embody questions of race and gender,” Brooks confronts her reader with the “the ideological power of form itself, as well as the subversions which that same power makes possible” (63).

Many of the poems in Brooks’s second book, *Annie Allen* (1949), employ traditional forms, which Madhubuti has criticized. He maintains that the poems focus on “poetic style” rather than on African American history or culture, thereby implicitly addressing a white audience; these remarks are followed by his strong praise for her poetry from 1967 forward (Brooks, *Report from Part One* 17). B. J. Bolden, on the other hand, claims that in “Annie Allen, Brooks dares to mock poetic conventions and address the ill-treatment of a young naive ghetto girl by infusing her consciousness with the lofty diction and romantic imagery of classical poetry” (89).

The collection, which comprises three parts—“Notes from the Childhood and the Girlhood,” “The Anniad,” and “The Womanhood”—is the coming-of-age story of Annie, who is confronted by racism and sexism. The first section includes ballads and variations of the sonnet.
“The Anniad” is in seven-line stanzas recalling octava rima and rhyme royal. It echoes the mock-heroic style of eighteenth-century poets, but the tale is realistic and tragic. By ironically using European poetic convention to convey Annie’s sad fate, in which the realization of her dream is inverted, Brooks suggests the culpability of white male narratives. In the sonnet sequence in “The Womanhood,” Brooks’s speaker’s words are cast in sonnets to present arguments against the institution of poverty and to highlight the limitations it imposes on African American women and their children.

Several poems in *The Bean Eaters* (1960), Brooks’s third collection, deal with the murders of blacks by racist whites, with a focus on women’s perspectives. “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till” mourn the death of Emmett Till, who was brutally tortured and murdered and whose body was mutilated beyond recognition in 1955 in Money, Mississippi. The fourteen-year-old boy from the South Side of Chicago was accused of whistling at a white woman. An all-white jury acquitted the men who were charged with his death. Photographs of Till’s body appeared in the *Chicago Defender*, as his mother had an open-casket viewing for thousands to witness. This horrific sight helped press forward the urgency of the Civil Rights movement and had no small impact on Brooks. The companion poems diacritically present the problem of treating atrocity within the confines of a literary form.

In a highly symbolic short narrative, the first poem portrays the woman who made the accusations against Till and hints at her second thoughts as she watches her children and her husband, one of the murderers. The glimmerings of the woman’s sense of guilt come to light as a bloody redness infuses everything she sees. She also perceives a troubling violence in her husband as he slaps one of his sons after the child threw a jar at his brother. This pairing of brothers symbolically plays out the violence visited upon blacks by their white brothers. In addition, through the pairing of mothers in the title, Brooks points to the in-
justice in their fates. The final line mentions “the last quatrain,” which introduces the poem that follows, “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till.”

This short poem, which describes Till’s mother, simmers in understatement and other forms of irony. The title “The Last Quatrain” suggests earlier quatrains, which in fact are not presented; this intimates the poet’s hesitation to attempt to put into an art form unimaginable atrocity. The use of the technical term “quatrain” raises the subject of the relationship between high art and the actual, in this case actual horrendous violence. The particular structure of Brooks’s poem, its brevity and inclusion of concrete visual images, places it in the tradition of modern imagist poetry; however, its subject matter and the unstated narrative of events represents a major departure from the art-for-art’s-sake orientation of various poems by Ezra Pound, H. D., and other modernist writers. Color imagery—“tint of pulled taffy,” “red room,” “black coffee,” “windy grays,” and “red prairie”—instead conveys the dual tragedy of the murder: that it was based on color and that Till’s corpse was the manifestation of appalling colors (2, 3, 4, 7, 8).

“The Ballad of Rudolph Reed,” although a narrative, also relies heavily on imagery as it pursues white-on-black violence. It begins, “Rudolph Reed was oaken” (1). He is oaken in that he is not deterred by the hostility of his neighbors, even as he is flexible in his ability to improve his circumstances and move into a white neighborhood. After several incidents of vandalism, upon the injury of his daughter Reed retaliates by injuring several whites before he is called “nigger” and murdered. The poem is in traditional ballad form with an abcb rhyme scheme. Brooks’s tale is an emblem for the actual situation in Chicago during the 1950s. On the edge of Chicago’s South Side, the Trumbull Park Housing Projects provided hundreds of desirable apartments for lower-class families. When African Americans began to move in, white resistance and outbreaks of violence endured for months (Bol- den 158).

*In the Mecca* (1968), which also addresses issues of housing, sig-
naled a major shift in Brooks’s use of traditional poetic form. The long poem “In the Mecca” comprises 807 lines in 56 stanzas of variable line length; it is followed by the sequence “After Mecca,” which includes poems honoring Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X, several dedications for landmarks in Chicago, a short sequence titled “The Blackstone Rangers,” and other poems. “The Blackstone Rangers” is named after a gang to which Brooks was introduced and for the members of which she held poetry workshops. She praises this group, the youths and their girlfriends, feared by whites and many blacks; in the second poem in the sequence, “The Leaders,” Brooks proclaims, “Their country is a Nation on no map” (10). In the Mecca, her final book published by a white press, was written for an African American audience.

Mrs. Sallie Smith, the mother of nine children, is the protagonist of “In the Mecca.” She returns home one day from her job as a domestic and discovers one of her children is missing. She searches throughout the apartment building and eventually finds her murdered daughter. As one critic notes, the search for the lost child “reveals the detritus of a failed socioeconomic system, a failed art, a failed religion, and their spawn of isolation and rage. A general want of caritas, Brooks’s major theme here, defensively mirrors deficiencies of the white environment and reflects the Black Mecca as a microcosm” (Melhem, Heroism 17).

The name rings with irony. Built in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Mecca was a tenement in the South Side that was razed in the course of urban renewal projects during the early 1950s (Melhem, Gwendolyn Brooks 158).

The disillusionment and anger conveyed in “In the Mecca” reflects the zeitgeist of the era. Several major events in the United States in the early and mid-1960s drew much public attention and, in some cases, large public outcry: the Vietnam War, the murder of civil rights workers in Mississippi in 1964, the iconic “I Have a Dream” speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Medgar Evers, a major figure in the NAACP, in 1963 (Melhem, Gwendolyn Brooks 156). In addition, in 1966 Stokely Car-
michael, the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), issued a call for African Americans to break away from King’s nonviolence; Carmichael was a central figure in the Black Power movement and a strong advocate of pan-Africanism. The speeches of Malcolm X and his murder in 1965 had a significant impact in the emergence of these movements. They dismissed the philosophy and actions of the blacks and whites of the Civil Rights movement (Kent 196).

Brooks was in the midst of writing *In the Mecca* when she attended the Second Black Writers’ Conference at Fisk University in April 1967. The conference, in which Brooks herself participated, included speeches, poetry readings, and other performances by historians, poets, and other writers; the performance poetry of Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) epitomized the spirit of the gathering, and he would soon be at the epicenter of the Black Arts movement. Brooks later claimed that after hearing Baraka’s cry “Up against the wall, white man!” she knew “there is indeed a new black today. . . . And he is understood by no white” (*Report from Part One* 85). Brooks would go on to publish strictly with black presses with a black audience in mind and in the spirit of the Black Arts movement. The movement flourished in the 1960s and associated itself with the Black Power movement, which celebrated African Americans and African culture and attacked white racism and seats of power. Brooks’s new poetry would retain her predilection for irony and attention to the nuances of language.

The collection *Riot* was published in 1969 by Broadside Press, a black press run by Dudley Randall, a strong Black Arts advocate. The collection includes “Riot” and “The Third Sermon on the Warpland,” and was published shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968 and the subsequent riots that took place in several American cities. “Riot” presents a portrait of a racist white man from an old, wealthy American family that was in the slave trade and in the rum and opium markets. Cabot, an object of derision, is “all white-bluerose below his golden hair” (2). When a group of blacks approach
him in the street, he thinks them “sweaty and unpretty” and “not discreet” (11, 15). As he is destroyed in the riot’s “smoke and fire” (28), in biting irony Brooks reveals his final words: “‘Lord!/ Forgive these nigger that know not what they do’” (29-30). The corruption of Christ’s words upon his crucifixion, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34), bores to the center of white hypocrisy in the treatment of blacks. The reference to the Bible also places the riot within a larger apocalyptic vision.9

“The Third Sermon on the Warpland” is informed by a similar vision. The poem is more than one hundred lines long and is told by a narrator and several other voices, including “The Black Philosopher,” a child, a passage from a newspaper, “A White Philosopher,” whites in general, and members of the Blackstone Rangers. As in other long modernist poems, no transitions link the voices; Brooks thus creates a fractured narrative, and a collage effect emerges. Unlike other poems in this genre, however, the references are primarily to African American culture, and the intended audience is black. The epigraph presents a dictionary definition of “phoenix” that refers to the word’s source in Egyptian mythology, and through this reference Brooks implicitly advocates for pan-Africanism.

The poet’s association of African American liberty with African identity also arises in “Young Heroes,” published in Family Pictures (1970). In this collection, Brooks presents portraits of men she admires. One of the young heroes is Keorapetse Kgositsile, a South African poet and activist who lived in Chicago. In humorous but telling lines, Brooks quotes one of his works’ titles, “‘MY NAME IS AFRIKA!’” and responds, “Well, every fella’s a Foreign Country./ This Foreign Country speaks to You,” which resonates on many levels (35, 36-37). If “You” is the reader, then Afrika is speaking to the reader; if “You” refers to Kgositsile, then “This Foreign Country” may be the United States. Through the ambiguity Brooks both explicitly and implicitly calls attention to African identity and its relationship to America.10
In 1971 Brooks took trips to Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and later to Accra and Kumasi in Ghana. Although she was greatly inspired by these trips, she faced some disappointment. Annette Debo points out that she was “identified as an ‘Afro-American’ by Africans and thus situated as an outsider in their country, despite her appearance and heritage”; consequently, while Brooks was “impressed with the African people and their definitive place in the world, she [did] not find the Black unity for which she hoped” (171). Nevertheless, partly in response to her visits to Africa, she addressed apartheid in poems such as “The Near-Johannesburg Boy,” “Winnie,” and “Song of Winnie.” After a thoughtful discussion of the references to Africa in Brooks’s poetry, Debo concludes: “In the end Afrika is an expansive signifier—a linguistic tie to African languages, a center of Blackness, an inspiration, and an appellation” (179).

In the poetry of her final years, Brooks continued to call upon her poetic imagination to create portraits of African Americans. These portraits capture moments and movements in American history, particularly African American history. By confronting issues of race, gender, and class, her poems are reflections of the social, political, and artistic worlds of African Americans from the 1930s to the end of the twentieth century. In addition, by borrowing from African American oral and written literary traditions as well as from European literary traditions, Brooks made a remarkable contribution to the history of recent American poetry. It is very likely that in future discussions of twentieth-century American poetry, the work of Gwendolyn Brooks will be given extensive treatment, possibly even more than the work of the seminal poets who captured her imagination as a young woman.

Notes
1. Elizabeth Alexander was the inaugural poet for the forty-fourth president of the United States, Barack Obama. Coincidentally, President Obama’s political experience includes work as an activist in Chicago’s South Side and as a state senator for Illinois’s thirteenth district, which covers the same area of the city.
2. See also Gwendolyn Brooks and Working Writers (edited by Jacqueline Imani Bryant), The Chicago Collective: Poems for and Inspired by Gwendolyn Brooks (Stephen Caldwell Wright), and To Gwen with Love: An Anthology Dedicated to Gwendolyn Brooks (edited by Patricia L. Brown, Don L. Lee, and Francis Ward).

3. These discussions include articles by Barbara Christian and Valerie Frazier.

4. For further consideration of Brooks’s literary background, including the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Melvin B. Tolson, Robert E. Hayden, Emily Dickinson, and Wallace Stevens, see “‘Down the Whirlwind of Good Rage’: An Introduction to Gwendolyn Brooks” by Maria K. Mootry.

5. For further discussion of Chicago writers, see “‘Down the Whirlwind of Good Rage’” by Mootry and American Voices of the Chicago Renaissance and “From Chicago Renaissance to Chicago Renaissance: The Poetry of Fenton Johnson” by Lisa Woolley. Woolley supports and problematizes the argument that there were two successive Chicago Renaissances, a white one that included Carl Sandburg, Theodore Dreiser, and Edgar Lee Masters and a black one that included Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Richard Wright.

6. Lynching in the United States was instituted by slave owners as a means to control slaves through murder and terror. The practice continued long after emancipation and into the mid-twentieth century. In the final decades of the nineteenth century alone, several thousand people, mainly blacks, were lynched in the United States. Although lynchings most often sprang from accusations of murder or robbery, it was “the sexual fears, guilt, and fantasies of white men and sometimes women (and to an almost negligible degree the actions of black men) play[ing] a role in lynching [that] became a central motif in literary representations” (Callahan 465). This motif is borne out in Brooks’s treatments of lynching in “Ballad of Pearl May Lee,” “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon,” and “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till.”

7. In addition, grotesque racism persisted not only among individuals but also within institutions. For example, as Jennifer C. James notes, “the War Department insisted that black blood donations not be given to white soldiers in spite of the American Medical Association’s and Red Cross’s protestations that theories of ‘tainted’ black blood had no basis in science” (James 236). See James’s discussion of Brooks’s sonnet (237).

8. For further discussion of the Second Black Writers’ Conference at Fisk University, see George E. Kent’s A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks (194-202). For further discussion of the poets of the Black Arts movement, see William W. Cook’s “The Black Arts Poets.”


10. In 1971 Brooks compiled A Broadside Treasury, 1965-1970, one of the best collections of the works of poets associated with the Black Arts movement. The volume includes poetry by several dozen writers, including Don L. Lee, Walter Bradford, and Keorapetse Kgotsitise, all of whom Brooks addresses in “Young Heroes.” The collection also includes a large group of poems honoring the slain Malcolm X and a poem by Brooks eulogizing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that appeared in the Chicago Daily News the day after his death.
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