

More >



Table of Contents

- Source
- Notes
- Works Cited

See Also

On Gwendolyn Brooks
 Biography of Gwendolyn Brooks
 The *Paris Review* Perspective
 The Historical and Social Context of Gwendolyn Brooks's Poetry
 The Critical Reception and Influence of Gwendolyn Brooks
 Gwendolyn Brooks and the Epic Tradition
 Close Reading as an Approach to Gwendolyn Brooks's "The *Chicago Defender* Sends a Man to Little Rock"
 Sweet Bombs
 The Satisfaction of What's Difficult in Gwendolyn Brooks's Poetry
 Double Consciousness, Modernism, and Womanist Themes in Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Anniad"
 Heralding the Clear Obscure: Gwendolyn Brooks and Apostrophe
 Dialectics of Desire: War and the Resistive Voice in Gwendolyn Brooks's "Negro Hero" and "Gay Chaps at the Bar"

Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

Reflecting Violence in the Warpland: Gwendolyn Brooks's Riot

by Annette Debo

Annette Debo examines Riot, a poem in which Brooks expresses sympathy for the anger blacks felt after Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. This black unrest resulted in riots that left homes, businesses, and some lives destroyed. Brooks is sympathetic to the violence because it reflects blacks' anger at the injustice of lynching and other types of violence they were forced to endure during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Brooks's objective is to get her audience to acknowledge the history of violence perpetrated against blacks by whites in America. In the essay, Debo provides historical details about John Cabot, a white character in the poem who is killed in the riots, noting Brooks's strategy in centering her poem on him. Cabot becomes an unfortunate representative of all the whites who in the past have hurt or destroyed blacks with impunity, but, ironically, he does not understand the history of violence he represents and therefore does not understand why blacks are enraged. Debo also discusses Brooks's use of the phoenix as a metaphor for the repetition of history as the police, representatives of a justice system that favors whites, revisit violence on blacks. In Riot, Brooks argues that, unless something changes, Americans will be doomed to repeat the cycles of violence that keep the country from finding peace. —M. R. M.

Gwendolyn Brooks opens the second part of *Riot* with the following lines:

The earth is a beautiful place.
 Watermirrors and things to be reflected.
 Goldenrod across the little lagoon.
 (lines 1-3)

Besides affirming the unorthodox beauty of the urban setting, in these lines Brooks provides the metaphor of mirroring for the events chronicled in *Riot*, a series of three poems about the 1968 Chicago riots, which directly followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.¹ These poems refuse the restrictive poetic forms for which Brooks's early poetry is well known and critically rewarded—they are post-1967, that is, after Brooks attended the Second Black Writers' Conference at Fisk University²—and in their sweeping verse, they encompass the white John Cabot who is killed in the riots, the young African Americans who are consumed in the energy and fire of the riot (but who like the phoenix will rise again), the outside white viewers who cannot understand, the "Black Philosopher" who analyzes the events, and the African American lovers who rise like the phoenix. The violence and apparent chaos of this riot are, significantly, caused by African Americans; it is, as Dr. King wrote and Brooks herself quoted in her epigraph, "the language of the unheard." However, if riots are indeed a language, to return to Brooks's metaphor of mirroring, then it is a language learned from white lynchers.

This language of violence and Brooks's implicit condoning of violence in *Riot* provide a probable explanation for the scant attention this poem has received from literary critics outside of three thorough and insightful readings from D. H. Melhem, William H. Hansell, and James D. Sullivan.³ Alternatively, *Riot* has received little critical attention perhaps because it falls in the post-1967 section of Brooks's career. Too often Brooks's poetry is divided into discrete sections rather than considered a continually developing, cohesive body of work. Most frequently, her early poetry, with its intense experimentation in traditional poetic forms, is the material anthologized and critically explored, and her poetry written after 1967, a line Brooks herself drew and critics reinforced, is neglected. However, there are also critics who prefer her later poetry and who call the early poetry "traditional," "accommodationist," or "white" (Clark 85). In contrast, as I read Brooks's early poetry, I find that it, like her later poetry, responds to what she sees happening in the arts and in politics—it is all politically informed.⁴ Like the poems of Langston Hughes, Brooks's work evolves, and her interest in the connection between race and violence is clear both before and after 1967, as is her continual experimentation with form. Her poetry develops; it does not suddenly become "black" after the Fisk Conference, nor does the latter half of her work lack integrity by becoming too simplistic in its form.

In this article, I extend the discussion of violence in *Riot* through a sociohistorical analysis that allows the 1960's violence inscribed in this poem and advocated by the Black Aesthetic its proper position in the long history of American violence. My argument opens with the contention that Brooks's metaphor of mirroring is pivotal in *Riot* because it connects the 1968 riots to the

"A Material Collapse That Is Construction": History and Counter-Memory in Gwendolyn Brooks's *In the Mecca*

A Prophet Overheard: A Juxtapositional Reading of Gwendolyn Brooks's "In the Mecca"

"My Newish Voice": Rethinking Black Power in Gwendolyn Brooks's Whirlwind

Signifying *Afrika*: Gwendolyn Brooks's Later Poetry

Killing John Cabot and Publishing Black

"The Kindergarten of New Consciousness":

Gwendolyn Brooks and the Social Construction of Childhood

Chronology of Gwendolyn Brooks's Life

Works by Gwendolyn Brooks

Bibliography

violence aimed at African Americans since their arrival in the Americas in the sixteenth century. The 1960's riots were caused by white racism, and mirror the white-initiated violence. Following that point, I place the 1968 riots in the continuum of violent protest in American history. For many oppressed groups, riots have been a way of achieving political power. The 1968 riots were part of an American protest tradition that began when English settlers refused to pay their taxes to an oppressive power. Instead of constituting un-Americanness, African Americans were also rejecting political powerlessness in a particularly American way. Brooks is not validating anarchy by representing the riots positively; rather, she is presenting the riot as a valid method for achieving political reform. After historically positioning the riots, I use the research of sociologists to argue that because the 1968 riots were politically successful, they had positive effects on the African American community, which translates in *Riot* into the creation of a new type of people and strong intimate relationships. Brooks's long poem ends with celebration because the riots were empowering; they offered confidence and engendered love. *Riot*, a scandalous poem in 1968, was in part neglected by critics because it advocates (black) violence as an avenue for social change in US race relations, but contextualizing the poem's events in American history defuses that perspective and allows *Riot* a fairer hearing.

* * *

In *Riot*, Brooks connects the violent image of African Americans lashing out in a riot to the violence historically inflicted upon them in the "warland" (which in Brooksonian poetic technique can read as "warp land," "war land," or even "warped land") through the "watermirrors" that reflect—sometimes clearly, sometimes distorted by ripples—the truth of nature and the truth of violence ("The Third" 2).⁵ The "things to be reflected" through the violence of riots are the moments of white mob violence, generally lynchings, inflicted upon the African American community. Even in her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* published in 1945, Brooks inscribes in "Ballad of Pearl May Lee" the satiric voice of a woman whose lover is lynched for consensual sex with a white woman who afterward cries rape (*Blacks* 60-63). In an interview, even though she is directly commenting on colorism, Brooks stipulates that this poem is about "rage," "woman rage" (Tate 43). Her critique of white lynch violence strengthens over time, and in 1960 her volume *The Bean Eaters* covers the lynching of Emmett Till in "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" and "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till"; the would-be lynchers during the 1957 Arkansas school integration in "The *Chicago Defender* Sends a Man to Little Rock"; and a lynch mob during neighborhood integration in "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" (*Blacks* 333-39, 340, 346-48, 376-78).

However, the 1968 riots were not viewed as a reflection of white mob violence but rather as an outrageous explosion. In Brooks's poem, the riot's outside (white) watchers say, "But WHY do These People offend *themselves*?" rejecting the fact that riots form in response to past and continuing white violence, and refusing to acknowledge their own culpability ("The Third" 99). The 1968 report of the Kerner Commission—a presidential commission convened to explain the 1960's riots—flatly states that "the events of the summer of 1967 are in large part the culmination of 300 years of racial prejudice" (95), and the more liberal sociologists immediately studying the riots connected them to the larger patterns of white-initiated violence beginning with slavery.⁶ Louis H. Masotti, for example, traces American racial violence through six phases: suppression of African American slavery and slave revolts; lynching of African Americans; white-dominated riots aimed at African American persons; white-dominated riots in which African Americans fought back; and African American-dominated riots aimed at white property (99-127). Clearly, five of the six patterns identify the violence as initiated and controlled by white Americans.

In the light of this past and continuing abuse, the 1960's riots should have come as no surprise. The real oddity is that they were aimed at property and not explicitly at white persons. Furthermore, the Kerner Report blames white Americans for developing and sustaining black ghettos, where the riots occurred, and the insightful question, "What white 'interests' came into play in the ghetto during and after the great migration which had not been significant theretofore?" was asked by Richard E. Rubenstein to try to account for the existence and proliferation of ghettos (122). His answers are disquieting. "First," he claims, "ghetto land, which had not been considered valuable before 1945, rose in value dramatically in the 1950s," creating incentive for white Americans with real estate connections ("suppliers, builders, bankers, construction workers, speculators, brokers, landlords") to sustain the overcrowded, poorly maintained housing (122). Second, the new and growing population created new consumers, most of whom had to pay exorbitant credit rates since their income was limited and unstable. Third, African Americans largely supported the Democratic political party, "whose principal interest, as far as Negroes were concerned, was to provide just enough direct benefits to keep ghetto votes in line" (122-25). In sum, Rubenstein compellingly argues that many white Americans economically preyed upon the surging population of northern African Americans,

providing substantial evidence of white culpability in creating the economic inequities that caused the 1960's riots. Again, the Kerner Report corroborates: "White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II" (91).

In the first part of *Riot*, also entitled "Riot," Brooks unerringly pins the blame for the riots on privileged white Americans through their representative John Cabot. Cabot's very name connects him to the Italian explorer John Cabot, whose "discovery" of North America supported English claims to the continent, as well as to the Christian heretic John Wycliffe, a chief forerunner of the Protestant Reformation.⁷ Brooks describes Cabot through his physical whiteness, his ostentatious possessions, his extravagant habits, and his panic at finding himself in the riot's path:

all whitebluerose below his golden hair,
 wrapped richly in right linen and right wool,
 almost forgot his Jaguar and Lake Bluff;
 almost forgot Grandtully (which is The
 Best Thing That Ever Happened To Scotch), almost
 forgot the sculpture at the Richard Gray
 and Distelheim; the kidney pie at Maxim's,
 the Grenadine de Boeuf at Maison Henri.
 Because the Negroes were coming
 down the
 street.

(lines 2-12)

Cabot sees "blackness" in definitive opposition to himself—in color, in class, in sophistication, in taste—and chooses not to recognize his own guilt in the economic and racial inequities of his country; he drives his Jaguar to his elite suburban home; and he dies "expensively" in the riot (31). Thoroughly a European American with his response of "*Que tu es grossier!*" (How gross you are!) to the rioters, Cabot, in his own mind innocent of any wrongdoing, calls to "any handy angel" to deliver him (lines 18, 23).⁸ However, as the mob reaches him, an "old/averted doubt jerked forward decently"; Cabot is aware, as the civil rights organizers claimed, that his lifestyle is made possible through denying basic material and spiritual needs to others, particularly African Americans (lines 28-29). In their oppression lies the wealth of the US as well as that of Cabot. In exquisite parody, his dying line is "Lord!/ Forgive these niggahs that know not what/ they do," a rendition of Jesus's dying words laced with racism and no sense of repentance, or even acceptance, for his own sins (33-35).

* * *

As white Americans cracked down on the 1960's rioters with increasing police force and decried the riots as un-American, they overlooked how collective violence has consistently been a way of achieving political change throughout the history of the United States. Masotti even asserts that "violence is an integral part of the American way of life. Major social changes in this country, including the assimilation of many minority groups, have, almost without exception, been accompanied by violence" (138). Americans' first violent act, according to Howard Zinn, was waging war against the British. He testifies that "this was accomplished by seven years of warfare, in which 25,000 in the Continental Army were killed, about one out of every eight men who served. To judge the extent of this violence one would have to consider that the same ratio of dead in our present population [in 1967] would amount to a death list of one and a half-million" (qtd. in Masotti et al. 138). Like Zinn and Masotti, Rubenstein proclaims violence to be very American, and debunks what he terms "the myth of peaceful progress." Claiming that this myth developed during the Cold War when the US fabricated a peaceful past to help justify its political model, Rubenstein describes the United States as a nation of radically disparate peoples living "their differences peaceably." He argues that "either because the land was fertile or the people hard-working, or because no true aristocracy or proletariat ever developed on American soil, or because the two-party system worked so well," the extensive US middle class is composed of groups that have achieved "power, prosperity and respectability merely by playing the game according to the rules... . The result, it was said, was something unique in world history—real progress without violent group conflict. In such an America there was no need—there never had been a need—for political violence" (5-6).

Then, using copious evidence, Rubenstein debunks "the myth of peaceful progress," demonstrating instead that collective violence is "neither un-American nor, in every case, unnecessary and useless" (9). He designates as collective violence the American Indian resistance against European settlers stealing their land; the 18th-century "debtor farmer" revolts that included the Shays Rebellion and the Whiskey Rebellion; violence between Americans during the Revolution; the Civil War and the subsequent guerrilla warfare; 19th-century labor

rebellions; 19th-century nativist violence against the Irish, Italians, and Jews; and, finally, the 1960's violence (24-33)—rebellions that had varying degrees of success but that were all thoroughly American.

Therefore, if the riot constitutes an authentically American act, rather than an aberration in American history, what was the civil rights era riot, and who was its perpetrator? The 1960's riots were, according to Robert M. Fogelson, “articulate protests against genuine grievances in the black ghettos” rather than “meaningless outbursts,” as many city officials interpreted them (22, 14). They were a legitimate rebellion against “economic deprivation, consumer exploitation, inferior education, racial discrimination, and so forth” from a desperate people who had exhausted other avenues of protest (Fogelson 22). Particularly testifying to their purposeful nature is their target; the rioters attacked real property, the symbol of prosperity that they had been denied. Also significant is who participated in the riots. Rioters were not, as initially assumed, from a criminal underclass, nor were the riots planned and executed by political militants—sociologists have conclusively disproved those theories. Instead, “the picture that emerged was that the rioters were not drawn from one particular social class. Every stratum of the ghetto contributed its share of rioters” (Sears and McConahay 25). Additionally, many of the people who did not participate, while decrying the devastation, still sympathized with the rioters, as Brooks apparently did. The “dream deferred,” in Langston Hughes’s words, did explode in the 1960s (“Harlem [2]” 1).

In a 1970 interview, Brooks spoke about *Riot*, revealing her own feelings of sympathy for the rioters, anger against white Americans, and empathy for the young African Americans protesting entrenched and pervasive racism. She reported that she had in mind King’s proclamation that “A riot is the language of the unheard.” One riot photograph in particular drew her attention: consuming fully one-half of a news sheet, it depicted “a throng of young men in their teens coming down the street ... and they looked so alive and so annunciatory. It occurred to me to wonder how a certain kind of young white man faced with such a throng and faced with his own confrontation with his own innards would react” (Drotning 174). The space where these allegedly threatening young black men emerge with their message of the new black power, then, is the warland of the riots, a battleground where African Americans finally fought back with collective violence. Brooks supports, arguably even celebrates, that recuperation of power, asserting, “Nobody gets excited about white power, and black power merely means that black people who have been weak and helpless for so long will no longer be so. I’m all for that” (Drotning 174).

The collective violence itself is covered in “The Third Sermon on the Warland,” the second part of *Riot*, which establishes the controlling metaphor of the phoenix: “in Egyptian mythology, a bird which lived for five hundred years and then consumed itself in fire, rising renewed from the ashes” (epigraph). Under this metaphor, African Americans were brought to the land that is now the US almost 500 years ago and are now ready for a phoenix-like birth process. The community is consumed by fire during the riots, but Brooks emphasizes the fire’s constructive possibilities: if the community burns, then it will be re-born whole and beautiful afterward. The lines “Lies are told and legends made./ Phoenix rises unafraid” (lines 104-05) contain the essence of the riot: it is a moment of fire and explosion that will lead to wholeness.⁹

The riot itself is recreated in a montage of images. It begins with the peaceful image of “goldenrod across the little lagoon” (line 3), recalling Brooks’s deployment of the common daisy as a metaphor for beauty in her novel *Maud Martha* (rpt. in *Blacks*). But on West Madison Street is Jessie’s Kitchen, where customers are now watching the “crazy flowers” “spreading/ and hissing *This is/ it*” (lines 20, 21-23). A sudden pause strikes the neighborhood as the riot begins. Then “the young men run” (line 24). They loot stores but steal selectively, choosing the African American Melvin Van Peebles over the white Bing Crosby. Young people, “BEANLESS,” “long-stomped, long-straddled”—in other words, desperately poor, beaten down, and “straddled” by white Americans for nearly 500 years, with no sophisticated analysis of their situation, simply join in, stealing a radio with which to listen to artists like James Brown (33). Brooks’s choice of James Brown is notable; she continually emphasizes African American artists and cultures in the rioters’ decision, signifying that their choices are not haphazard. Fires are set, candles “curse—/ inverting the deeps of the darkness” (lines 49-50). Then arrives “The Law,” and the rioters scatter (line 56). After the National Guard and the guns arrive, an African American woman, a mother, a lover, “a gut gal” dies (line 71). Who has killed her is unexplained, but she dies directly after the Guard arrives, and the newspaper reports that “Nine die” in all (line 80). The *Sun-Times* also offers to check out rumors, an indication of the shadowy nature of riots; few facts exist beyond the death toll. Refusing to participate are the Rangers, a well-known Chicago gang with the savvy not to join the explosion; they refuse to be crucified again. They “merely

peer and purr,/ and pass the Passion over” (lines 92-93). In short, not gangs, not criminals, not even militant activists, but ordinary people protest their poverty and political powerlessness through the riot.

Interspersed with the riot’s participants is the Black Philosopher who interprets the events as they happen. Initially, the Black Philosopher provides a rationale for the riot: “Our chains are in the keep of the Keeper/ in a labeled cabinet/ on the second shelf by the cookies” (lines 5-7). The gluttonous white Americans, whose only interest is in gorging on the sweet parts of life, refuse to hear the rattling of the chains and instead “crunch” their cookies (11). Militantly, the Philosopher suggests that they should listen better because the music is named “‘A/ Death Song For You Before You Die,’” as has just happened to Cabot (lines 12-13). At the poem’s end, the Philosopher offers additional insights. She describes the riot’s participants:

“There they came to life and exulted,
the hurt mute.
Then it was over.
The dust, as they say, settled.”
(lines 107-10)

In these lines, Brooks captures the nature of a riot: the participants roar to life, speaking when before they were unheard, and then, in a matter of days, it is over. What remains is the phoenix’s re-birth, which happens in the final part of *Riot*.

* * *

A suggestive result of the 1960s riots was a surge in self-esteem among African Americans. Over the twentieth century, according to sociologists, African American identity changed from “the racial self-hatred characteristic of the predominantly southern black population of 1900 to the more positive black identity of today’s [1973] black militants” (Sears and McConahay 188). After studying the 1965 riot in Watts, California, David O. Sears and John B. McConahay argue that a major legacy of the riot was “increased pride in blackness” : “Blacks’ image of blackness became notably more positive over time, following the riot. Black pride was particularly strong among the New Urban Blacks. It appeared to have become a core mainstream value in the contemporary northern urban ghetto, where the best educated and best informed blacks showed the highest levels of black pride” (195).

Brooks taps into this new formulation of black identity and pride in the last part of *Riot*, “An Aspect of Love, Alive in the Ice and Fire,” a celebratory poem of human intimacy made possible by the riots. Brooks’s title alludes to Robert Frost’s poem “Fire and Ice,” which considers whether the world will end through fire (passion, desire) or ice (ire, hate). Brooks borrows Frost’s meditation on the world’s end to insert her pair of lovers into the apocryphal scene created by the riot. After the violence and chaos, what is to be celebrated and valorized is the connection between people, especially between heterosexual lovers. She opens the poem with “It is the morning of our love,” not the evening; the world and the day are just beginning (line 1).¹⁰ Like the phoenix that rises from ashes, this couple thrives in a new world, on a street that is now “imperturbable,” unrocked by violence (line 25). They are concerned with themselves, with their own love. The chaos of the outside world makes possible this relationship because besides living in a new world, these are new people. Both are strong in confidence—confidence produced by fighting back, by standing up against oppression. The male partner, for example, is “a lion/ in African velvet ... level, lean,/ remote” (lines 14-16). The pair embodies the fight that has taken place in the street; they are created by the ice and fire, but they live within it and beyond it: “This is the shining joy;/ the time of not-to-end” (lines 20-21). It is in allowing these final lines of tranquility, strength, and love that the battle has made the difference.

* * *

The remaining question is why *Riot*, as well as the entire post-1967 partition of Brooks’s career, has not received more critical attention. The violence discussed here is certainly a factor. To accept this poem is perhaps a tacit acceptance of violence as a necessary part of the Civil Rights movement when the national holiday belongs to Dr. King, who rejected riots as a profitable vehicle for social change. In *Riot*, Brooks joins a throng of militant voices demanding immediate social change. Sounding outrageous, her voice reads the riots as positive and does not call for a cessation of violence; instead, violence creates tangible political and personal gains. She sounds much like Malcolm X, who said about the language of the white man, “Let’s learn his language. If his language is with a shotgun, get a shotgun. Yes, I said if he only understands the language of a rifle, get a rifle. If he only understands the language of a rope, get a rope” (108).¹¹ She sounds much like Amiri Baraka, who demands “‘poems that kill./ Assassin poems, Poems that shoot/ guns” (lines 19-21). She sounds much like Stokely Carmichael with his call for “black power,” like H. Rap Brown, like Medgar Evers, like Bobby

Seale, like many militant black voices who terrified white America, as illustrated by a 1967 advertisement from a large manufacturing concern, an advertisement echoed by others published in police journals:

The New Bauer Ordinance Armored Police Car will stop 30-06 rifle bullets at point blank range. It has a 360 turret that will mount a machine gun, riot gun, water cannon, flamethrower and grenade launcher. The body is protected by high voltage electricity. The body is designed to protect against Molotov Cocktails and the vehicle carries sufficient water and foaming agents to put out gasoline fires. Can be used to control riots or just to patrol the tough districts. Plenty of room in the back for stretchers or to take in those unruly prisoners. This vehicle was designed by the same people who designed the XM706 (tank) now being used in Viet Nam. (qtd. in Masotti et al. 1)

Similarly frightened by the riots and the militant voices, the FBI reacted with intense surveillance and persecution of contentious individuals. Likewise, literary critics may have found this material intimidating. Even Brooks later softened positions she had taken during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Besides the threatening content, one of the most pervasive criticisms of Brooks's later poetry is that she overly simplified its form. However, that criticism cannot easily be made of *Riot*, the complex structure of which, particularly in "The Third Sermon on the Warpland," has meant its critical neglect or assessment as ineffective.¹² In contrast, I believe it to be at least as successful as the other two sections, if not more, because its form mirrors the chaotic form of a riot, becoming an exquisite manipulation of form, like Brooks's earlier poetry but without the conventional European poetic types. This section is disjointed, much is left unexplained, and Brooks uses many obscure local references. *Riot* is precisely what and how a riot is—local, chaotic, explosive, fragmentary. The imagery jumps from the Black Philosopher predicting the action to a local restaurant where people watch the riot, to the young men looting stores, to the fires being lit, to the police's arrival, to the death of a mother, to a newspaper ad promising rumor confirmation, to the restrained Rangers, to the clueless white observers, and, finally, back to the Black Philosopher. Refusing to synthesize the material for her readers, Brooks offers glimpses of the riot, simultaneous events that are only later sorted into a linear story for retelling even by the historians. Readers are inundated by the disparate images, piling upon each other fast and furious, with no transitions, no warnings, and no explanations. Our confusion is akin to the country's confusion in 1968 as it watched its urban centers explode.

By 1977 Brooks herself was disappointed in *Riot*. "*Riot* was really an effort at communication with a lot of people. I didn't succeed except in patches," Brooks said (Hull and Gallagher 33). But perhaps she could not have succeeded because of its timing, too close to the very real conflagrations of the 1960's riots. Perhaps as we look back from the twenty-first century, our view is clearer. The riots no longer pose such a frightening vision and can instead be viewed more fairly in the American tradition of violence that appears sometimes necessary for social change. Living on the south side of Chicago, Brooks knew the conditions that caused the uprisings as well as the wellspring of grief and explosion of frustration that followed the assassination of Dr. King. More than any other figure, King stood for nonviolence, and when white Americans responded even to him with bullets, the "unheard," as he phrased it, suddenly and loudly were heard.

Just as the riots were not an anomaly in American history but instead part of a disquieting US tradition of violence, *Riot* is not an anomaly in Brooks's body of work or even notably different from her pre-1967 poetry. As she said, "No, I have not abandoned beauty, or lyricism, and I don't consider myself a polemical poet. I'm a black poet, and I write about what I see, what interests me, and I'm seeing new things. Many things that I'm seeing now I was blind to before, but I don't sit down at the table and say, 'Lyricism is out.' No, I just continue to write about what confronts me" (*Report* 151). However, the riots were controversial, escaping reasonable assessments, as the police reacted ever more strongly. The literary response imitated the prevailing political winds, and *Riot* was not anthologized; it was read by few and dismissed by most.

In 1971, Addison Gayle, Jr., wrote in *The Black Aesthetic* that "the serious black artist of today is at war with the American society as few have been through American history" (1872), a statement that calls for the same revolution that Maulana Karenga advocates in his prevailing definition of the Black Aesthetic. Brooks must be allowed, by critics, to evolve into the space defined by Gayle and Karenga.¹³ At the same time, however, the violence that she chronicles in *Riot* and her other later poetry should not be seen as extraordinary, even if critics like Gayle and Karenga saw themselves as involved in a uniquely violent revolution. On the contrary, the violence was reasonable, given the perpetual threat of overwhelming white racist violence, and it was particularly American, following the models of many oppressed groups who gained

political power through the last resort of violent action. In the end, for Brooks, the violence produces confident, loving people who exist in “the shining joy;/ the time of not-to-end” (“An Aspect” lines 20-21); they embody the phoenix risen from the ashes.

Source

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Notes

- [1] 1. *Riot's* table of contents describes the work as “a poem in three parts.” These three are listed as “Riot,” “The Third Sermon on the Warpland,” and “An Aspect of Love, Alive in the Ice and Fire.” For documentation, line numbers begin again in each part because they are reprinted individually.
- [2] 2. See Brooks, *Report* 84-86, for a description of her experience at the Fisk conference.
- [3] 3. For brief treatments of *Riot*, see Kent and Shaw. Also see Furman, who, I argue, misreads the poem in her claims that for Brooks, “the most tragic aspect of riots is that black people are the victims” and that Brooks’s “people do not rise again” (6, 7).
- [4] 4. See Bolden for a persuasive reading of the political nature of Brooks’s early poetry.
- [5] 5. Miller interprets “the warpland,” also named in Brooks’s “The Sermon on the Warpland” and “The Second Sermon on the Warpland,” as “not geographical place but military design—a ‘war planned’—and the problem of distortion, the ‘warp land’” (156).
- [6] 6. The report of the Kerner Commission and the Kerner Report both refer to the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.
- [7] 7. See Melhem for an intricate gloss of Brooks’s allusions to John Cabot and John Wycliffe.
- [8] 8. Hansell makes the interesting point that “the rioters and John Cabot literally speak different languages” (“The Role” 22).
- [9] 9. See Shaw for more analysis of the poem’s re-birth theme.
- [10] 10. Brooks removed this line from later reprints of the poem. She explains: “I had to remove the first line—‘It is the morning of our love’—when Carolyn Rodgers called to tell me she had found it opening a Rod McKuen poem in *Listen to the Warm*. Even though I wrote mine first!—as can be seen in the hard-cover edition of *Riot*, which includes a dated script-version of the poem. Such a horror is every writer’s nightmare. Poets, doubt any ‘inevitability’” (*Report* 187).
- [11] 11. Hansell noted the similarities between Brooks and Malcolm X (“The Role” 22).
- [12] 12. See Kent 237.
- [13] 13. See Hansell’s “The Poet-Militant and Foreshadowings of a Black Mystique: Poems in the Second Period of Gwendolyn Brooks” for a delineation of three periods in Brooks’s poetry. See Taylor for one of the few more evolutionary readings of the development of her poetry.

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