



## ARTS &amp; CULTURE

# Civil rights leaders, members of local arts community react to death of Nikki Giovanni, acclaimed poet and activist

by **Tashi McQueen** AFRO Political Writer

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Poets, musicians and creatives of every genre joined authors, activists and legislators in mourning the death of Yolande Cornelia “Nikki” Giovanni Jr. this week. The celebrated poet, author and activist died Dec. 9 at 81 years old after a recent diagnosis of lung cancer.

“She was a disruptor, a revealer and a healer of the Black spirit,” said Janince Short, a professor and coordinator of the theatre arts program at Morgan State University. “The first time I discovered “Ego-Tripping,” I thought, ‘That’s what I want to be when I grow up.’ I wanted to be ‘bad’ enough to possess the ego. Her mission was accomplished in a stellar way and her work will remain a mecca.”



Giovanni speaks on Jan. 27, 1996, shortly after the release of her book, "The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni," published the same month. (AFRO file photos)

Giovanni was born in Knoxville, Tenn. on June 7, 1943, and was raised in Cincinnati, Ohio. She graduated from Fisk University with a degree in history in 1967. Initially gaining recognition during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, her poems became a voice for African Americans and Black people worldwide. During that time she began to rise as a leading author and poet, earning her name as the "Poet of the Black Revolution."

**Jacob "Black Chakra" Mayberry**, a Baltimore-based poet, told the *AFRO* he felt a deep connection to the words of Giovanni. Though his favorite poem by Giovanni is a tribute to the late rapper Tupac Shakur, titled "All Eyez On You," similar to Short, Mayberry said "Ego-Tripping" had a significant impact on him.

"Many schools teach the classic, 'Ego Tripping' " he said. "While other students were reading what they regarded as just a piece of writing, I picked up that it was an encoded message to those with the poet

spirit— a message of power and a challenge to empower.”

Mayberry said Black artists of today can continue Giovanni’s legacy of merging art and activism by realizing “their expression is a statement of revolution.”



Nikki Giovanni, author of notable works such as “Black Judgement” and “Those Who Ride the Night Winds,” speaks on Dec. 4, 1993. (AFRO file photos)

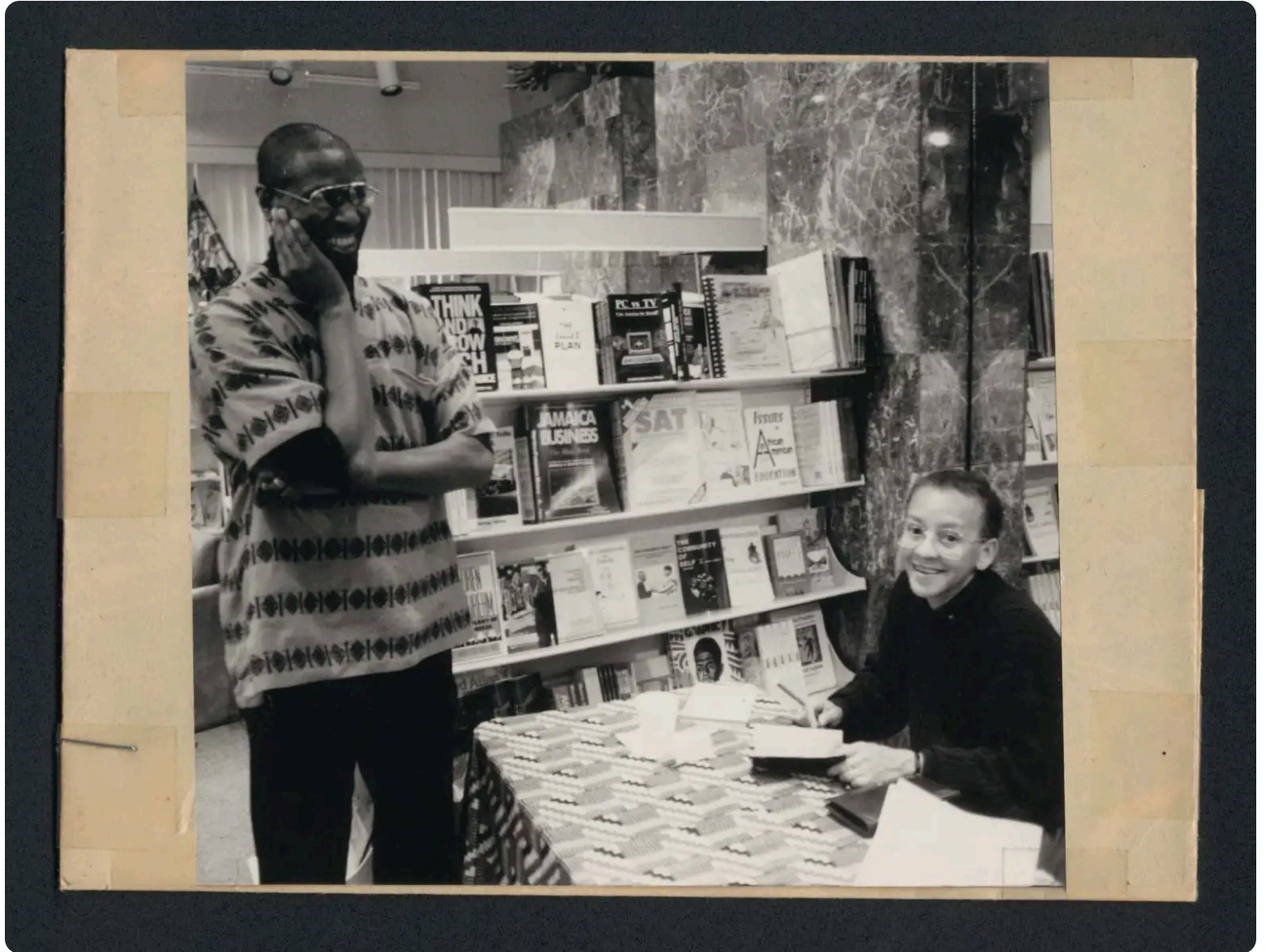
“Art from the mind of the oppressed is a sword to the heart of the oppressor,” he said.

Throughout her lifetime Giovanni made sure to give voice to the oppressed and take action. She made appearances on Soul!, a Black arts show from the late 1960s and early 1970s, where she gained popularity for interviewing notable figures such as James Baldwin and Muhammed Ali.



Giovanni received seven NAACP Image Awards, wrote three New York and Los Angeles Times best selling books and became one of Oprah Winfrey's 25 "Living Legends." She also served as a distinguished professor in the English Department at Virginia Tech for over three decades.

In 2024 she earned an Emmy for exceptional merit in documentary filmmaking for "Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project."



Hodari Abdul Ali (left), CEO of Pyramid Books, shares a moment with Nikki Giovanni at a book signing circa 1992. (AFRO file photos)

Her work had a significant impact on producer, songwriter and film scorer James McKinney.

McKinney told the *AFRO* that Giovanni's work inspired him to "give life" to his "thoughts, lyrics and poetry as brilliantly and boldly as she was able—and to do it with the same wisdom and intentional love



that she did.”

“She had a great love for people, and a strong sense of truth to share her love and understanding with African Americans— she did it with a unique and witty style too,” said McKinney, who is a Drexel University professor of both Music Industry and Music and Fine Arts.

McKinney crossed paths with Giovanni as an undergraduate student at Howard University in the late 80s and early 90s, when he played piano and keyboard behind her for a few performances.

Still today, he is moved not only by her artistry, but her activism as well.



An AFRO Archives photo shows Nikki Giovanni on July 21, 1973, the same year she published "Ego Tripping and Other Poems for Young Readers." (AFRO file photos)

"It's incredibly impactful and important when Black artists like Momma Giovanni choose to share their talent and genius with a clear intention of activism. What makes her work stand out even more is that she did this not just for people to hear, but specifically for Black people to hear, learn and grow from," said



McKinney. “This choice—this commitment to activism through art—is profound. It’s something she, and many activists, deliberately embraced, but not all great artists choose this path. There’s a deep giving and sacrifice in making that choice, and that’s part of what makes her so special to us.”

“She gave us the gift of her poetry – yes – but even more, she gave us the intention to teach, inspire and activate,” he added.

McKinney shared that while his parents always had Giovanni’s work in their home, his study of her poems while at Howard yielded jewels like “Things That Go Together” and “That Day.”

“I’d like to believe that these studies influenced my professional work as a record producer and songwriter. But more than that, her activism shaped my understanding of myself as an African American and inspired my own efforts at activism, even from my humble position,” said McKinney.

Activist, author and poet Ebony Payne-English spoke on how Giovanni inspired her as a writer.



Nikki Giovanni (front, left) joins Coldstream Park Elementary School students from Ms. Sherby Simmons' (front, right) second grade class during a promotional stop at Coppin College on Sept. 1, 1973. The class surprised Giovanni by reciting some of their favorite poems from the legendary writer. (AFRO file photos)

"I met Nikki Giovanni the year I began my poetry career nearly 21 years ago and the moment is still as impactful today as it was then," said Payne-English. "She loved Black people. She loved Black women. She showed us daily. She saved space for us in every crevice of her body of work. I am eternally grateful for her life and legacy. May she forever reign."

Giovanni's fortitude and dedication caught the attention of many, including the women of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc., who invited her to become an honorary member of the organization in 1973.

Tei Street, a member of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. and motivational speaker, shared how Giovanni influenced her as a young African-American girl in the sixth grade.



“Before I knew what a Delta was, I knew what it meant to see myself as part of the African diaspora and what it means to be a strong Black woman,” said Street. “As a Black woman, Soror Nikki Giovanni helped me know, ‘I am so perfect, so divine, so ethereal, so surreal I cannot be comprehended except by my permission.’”





Leaders of the literary world, advocates for civil and human rights and creatives around the globe are mourning the death of Nikki Giovanni, a renowned poet, educator and public speaker. Giovanni died at 81 on Dec. 9 after being diagnosed with lung cancer earlier in the year. (AFRO File Photo)

At one of her final public appearances, Giovanni spoke about her hopes for the presidential election, the social climate in America and her battle with cancer.

“I don’t ever want it said that ‘she fought,’” said Giovanni, at the renaming of the Banneker-Douglass-Tubman Museum, an African-American history museum based in Annapolis, Md., on Nov. 1. “I’m not fighting lung cancer, I’m trying to find a way to live with it.”

Maryland Gov. Wes Moore (D), who also attended the museum event, shared his thoughts on her passing on behalf of himself and Dawn Moore, the first lady of Maryland, in a statement.

Moore described Giovanni as a “literary giant whose words and actions have been a powerful force for justice and empowerment.”

“Her words have touched countless lives and will continue to echo through generations,” he said. “We are grateful for her contributions to our culture, our country and our collective consciousness. May she rest in peace.”