

# Mindsapes and landscapes: ecocritical readings of “black nature” in Nikki Giovanni’s children’s poetry

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Received 25 April 2025  
Revised 9 June 2025  
Accepted 9 June 2025

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study critically examines Nikki Giovanni’s children’s poetry, highlighting its often-unrecognized complexity compared to her more extensively analyzed adult works. The analysis seeks to dismantle the intricate barriers surrounding themes of cultural identity, race and history textualized in poetic diction, making them accessible for young readers.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Giovanni’s selected works are analyzed through an ecocritical lens to understand the representation of language and landscape in her children’s poetry. This approach helps young readers see nature not just as a backdrop but as an active, integral part of the narrative.

**Findings** – This analysis reveals how Nikki Giovanni’s children’s poetry constructs “Black nature” through dual lenses: as physical landscapes embodying ecological realities and as abstract spaces encoding cultural identity. These imaginative constructs serve as powerful mediators between Black heritage and the natural world, offering young readers both cultural affirmation and ethical frameworks for environmental engagement. The study demonstrates how Giovanni’s work provides readers and educators with unique tools to nurture cultural-ecological awareness through children’s literature.

**Originality/value** – This research makes three original contributions. First, it recovers Giovanni’s children’s poetry as a significant yet understudied dimension of African–American literature. Second, it develops “Black nature” as an innovative critical framework bridging ecocriticism and cultural studies. Third, it establishes children’s poetry as a vital pedagogical resource in higher education for fostering interconnected cultural, emotional and environmental literacies.

**Keywords** African–American poetry, Nikki Giovanni, Black nature, Children’s poetry, Ecocriticism, Eco-poetics

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s represented a crucial cultural renaissance aimed at revitalizing the relationship between poets and their communities during an era when the social relevance of poetry is waning. This movement enthusiastically championed “poetry that celebrated black Americans even as it articulated their age, their dreams, and their vision of a new social order,” coining the phrase “poetry for the people” as both its rallying cry and guiding ethos (Fowler, 1992, p. x). In this milieu, Nikki Giovanni emerged as one of the leading female voices of the movement, her work not only reflecting but also shaping the narrative of the African-American experience.

Yolande Cornelia “Nikki” Giovanni (b. 1943 – d. 2024) is a Grammy-nominated poet, activist, and author whose extensive oeuvre and many accolades, including 20 honorary

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**Funding:** The author is grateful to Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University for supporting this research through sabbatical leave program.

**Competing interests:** The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.



degrees, underscore her critical cultural impact. She most recently held the position of University Distinguished Professor Emerita at Virginia Tech and is recognized for her editorial role at Fisk University's literary magazine. Her poetry represents an authentic distillation of Black life in America, resonating particularly with younger audiences. Giovanni's oeuvre reflects a profound engagement with the intricacies of the African-American identity, embodying the multiplicity of experiences shaped by historical and contemporary realities. Her writings, particularly those aimed at children, encapsulate the essence of "Black nature" and are consciously crafted to assert a sense of identity that transcends the limitations imposed by systemic oppression. The concept of the "mindscape" is pivotal in understanding Giovanni's work, encapsulating her community's thoughts, beliefs, and emotional landscapes. Giovanni's reflections include childhood memories, familial bonds, the legacy of enslavement, and her deep connections to the natural world.

To comprehensively analyze Giovanni's children's poetry through an ecocritical lens, this study posits that investigating the relationship between literature and the physical environment can illuminate vital aspects of cultural identity. Literary ecocriticism, as articulated by [Glotfelty \(1996\)](#), contends that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (p. xix). This framework enables a nuanced exploration of Black culture's thematic, aesthetic, and psychological dimensions since it resonates with Giovanni's works while elucidating the core messages intended for younger generations.

Furthermore, Giovanni addresses the themes of social justice, equality, and the importance of standing up for what is right, introducing these complex ideas in a way that is accessible and inspiring for children. "... [C]hildren, in being part of this sociocultural world, will themselves manipulate and refashion it (its artifacts and language) — as collectors of children's lore and language have found" ([Rudd, 2010](#), p. xiii). Examining children's literature across various cultures highlights the inherent tensions between educational, religious, and political powers and concepts associated with "freedom," particularly those relating to fantasy and imagination. This study articulates this dynamic as fundamentally multi-dimensional in its ecocritical perspectives.

Based on these multiple goals, the analysis unfolds in three distinct stages. Initially, "Black nature" characteristics are delineated through Giovanni's perspectives, uncovering the cultural and historical significances embedded within her portrayals of nature and identity. Subsequently, a theoretical introduction to ecocriticism is combined with its practical application in interpreting Giovanni's poetry. This dual approach allows a more profound understanding of how her work engages with the physical environment and cultural constructs that shape African-American life. Finally, the intrinsic goals of the selected poems are identified, drawing attention to how Giovanni articulates the projections of identity, resilience, and cultural continuity. In concluding this exploration, the focus shifts to the values Giovanni implements in her poetry, particularly those that aim to sustain a primal connection between heritage and nature. By reflecting on her primal "black way of looking at things" ([Fowler, 1992](#), p. 4), this analysis aims to uncover the intersections of environmental consciousness and cultural identity, offering new insights into Giovanni's enduring legacy within the tapestry of American literature. Through this lens, her work reclaims the narrative for Black children. It asserts the importance of acknowledging and celebrating the interplay between identity and the natural world in shaping a more equitable future.

## 2. "Black nature" and Giovanni's mindscape

Nikki Giovanni's children's poetry, particularly her reflections on nature and everyday life, represents a confluence of personal and cultural landscapes. To her, the writing of a poem entails spontaneously capturing the emotional presence of a particular picture in mind:

A poem is a way of capturing a moment. . . . A poem's got to be a single stroke, and I make it the best I can because it's going to live. I feel if only one thing of mine is to survive, it's at least got to be an accurate picture of what I saw. ([Tate, 1983](#), p. 146)

Giovanni's portrayal of nature and her ways of seeing it in her work are crucial as they underscore a duality that resonates within African-American literature. [Dungy \(2009\)](#) asserts that Black nature poetry often encapsulates elements steeped in a legacy of violence and suffering; it "describes moss, rivers, trees, dirt, caves, dogs, fields: elements of an environment steeped in a legacy of violence, forced labor, torture, and death" (p. xxi). Dungy points out that the historical scope of Black American poetry investigated the alignment between man and nature long before the popularity of contemporary ecopoetics was confirmed (p. xxii). *Nature* cannot be separated from the identity of African Americans in terms of race, nationality, and geographical location. The point is that Black culture in America embraces elements of the environment that function simultaneously as realistic or imaginative realities (p. xxiii). The African-American historical legacy provides a crucial backdrop for analyzing Giovanni's work. Her inaugural children's book, [Spin a Soft Black Song \(1971\)](#), marked the beginning of a literary journey that would span decades and culminate in her recent collection, [I Am Loved \(2007\)](#). This trajectory reflects Giovanni's evolution as a poet and underscores the broader cultural and historical narratives shaping African-American identity.

Giovanni's Southern roots play a crucial role in her literary oeuvre. Growing up in Tennessee, she was deeply influenced by the cultural and historical textures of the American South. Her work evokes a sense of place rich in tradition and rhythm and a distinct sense of community. By embedding elements of her Southern heritage within her texts, she celebrates her roots and fosters appreciation for the diverse tapestry of African-American culture. Moreover, Giovanni's contributions to children's literature extend beyond mere storytelling; they also serve as educational tools that introduce young readers to the complexities of race, identity, and belonging. Her simple yet impactful language conveys profound messages about self-love, resilience, and the importance of heritage. In doing so, she empowers her young audience to embrace their identities and understand the significance of their cultural backgrounds.

Giovanni's engagement with her familial and cultural heritage reflects an intrinsic connection between identity, the environment, and the physical space. A metaphorical construct illuminates themes of belonging and security that resonate deeply with the Southern landscape. By intertwining personal narratives with elements of the natural world, Giovanni creates a rich mosaic that speaks to the profound themes of identity, heritage, and the enduring impact of place. Ultimately, Giovanni's children's poetry invites young and old readers to engage with nature, not simply as a backdrop but as a repository of cultural significance and personal history.

### 3. Methodology

Giovanni's poetry is distinctive in its use of rhythms and sound patterns that connect us to a cultural heritage, encompassing histories and experiences. These metrics are preserved in a language rich in symbols and representations of the physical world, creating possibilities for readers to think, imagine, and interpret. The study of Giovanni's children's literature requires the selection of appropriate critical techniques and discourses. In children's poetry, [Karen Coats \(2013, p. 133\)](#) posits that a place always exists for theory and critique, underscoring the importance of understanding the uses of children's poetry in order to accurately interpret its meaning.

Therefore, Giovanni's selected works will be closely read through an ecocritical lens. Ecocriticism studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment ([Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii](#)). William Rueckert first coined the term in the late 1970s, and it became prominent in the '80s and '90s. As an interdisciplinary approach, ecocriticism draws from natural sciences, literary studies, anthropology, and history to analyze the cultural constructions of nature. The ecocritical theory reveals the representations of nature, landscapes, animals, ecological crises, and the human-nature relationship ([Glotfelty, 1996, p. xx](#)). To Rueckert, a poem has "a stored energy" and "... that reading is an energy transfer

and that critics and teachers act as mediators between poetry and the biosphere, releasing the energy and the information stored in poetry so that it may flow through the human community and be translated into social action” (Glotfelty, 1996, xxviii).

Ecocriticism is a useful, interpretative framework to comprehend the representation of language and landscape in Giovanni’s children’s poetry. Drawing from the Romantic ideology and the pastoral, Wordsworth (1802) explains nature as a simple, rustic life in which fundamental human emotions are evoked. These feelings are deeply intertwined with beautiful and enduring forms of nature (p. viii). This romanticized perception of nature (outer nature) seeks enduring and timeless pleasure in poetry while portraying nature (inner nature) itself. As a romantic poet valuing nature as a source of imagination, Blake (1799) emphasizes in his letter (edited in Keynes’s book in 1925) that nature inspires human imagination, stating that “Nature is imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees. As the Eye is formed, such are its Powers”. Nature’s power acts on the human mind, prompting reactions expressed through eco-poetry and reflecting multiple realities.

In this context, how do we define nature to understand what a landscape signifies and its role as a cause-and-effect mechanism in Giovanni’s children’s poetry? Modern green writer Soper (2000) outlines three roles of “nature” in ecological discourses in her article “The Idea of Nature” (from her book *What is Nature?*). She distinguishes these as follows: First, the metaphysical concept defines nature as everything nonhuman. Second, the realist concept of “structures, processes, and causal powers” views human interactions with the environment and among themselves. Third, the “lay” or “surface” concept contrasts nature with urbanity (landscape, wilderness, countryside, rurality) (p. 125). According to Soper (2000), these discourses are interconnected and dependent. In its broadest sense, ecocriticism studies the relationship between humans and non-humans throughout human cultural history, critically analyzing the term “human” itself (Garrard, 2004, p. 4). It is “both a critical method and an ethical discourse that focuses on the interconnections between nature and culture as expressed in language, literature, and the plastic arts” (Rudd, 2010, p. 168).

The interrelationship between human beings and their natural environment is indispensable, underscoring the significance of the ecocentric philosophy that places humans and nature on equal footing. This perspective starkly contrasts the traditional anthropocentric attitude, prioritizing human needs over ecological considerations. Notably, ecocentrism and anthropocentrism represent two fundamentally opposing viewpoints on the relationship between humans and the natural world. Ecocentrism places intrinsic value on all living organisms and their environments, advocating for protecting and preserving nature for its own sake. In contrast, anthropocentrism considers humans the central and most significant entities, prioritizing human needs and interests above those of other species and the environment.

Giovanni’s ecocentric reflections on nature highlight the beauty of ordinary moments while serving as a conduit for examining the historical and social realities that African-Americans face. Her poetry’s vivid imagery and thematic choices are deeply rooted in her experiences growing up in Knoxville, Tennessee. This locale provides a physical backdrop for her poetic narratives and a broader cultural heritage and community context.

The warm and inviting imagery in poems such as “Knoxville, Tennessee” highlights a nostalgic longing for the simplicity and security of childhood, making her poetry accessible and engaging for young readers. Giovanni’s portrayal of summertime experiences—playing barefoot, spending time with her grandmother, and indulging in natural pleasures—illuminates personal and collective memories that resonate across generations. Moreover, Giovanni’s poetic voice weaves a rich mosaic of familial connections and cultural legacies, imbuing her work with personal and communal significance. Giovanni’s poetry captures the essence of childhood uniquely and captivately. Her poems are simple yet profound, speaking to the heart of every child, regardless of age or background. Her exploration of the joys and challenges of growing up, the importance of family and friends, and the beauty of the natural world is evident. Giovanni’s children’s poetry is a testament to her talent and deep understanding of human experience. In her selected poems, the Black environment is verbalized through rhythmic

words, visualized through images, and empathized with collective and communicative lessons regarding significance and effect. Moreover, these collections address the future generations of Black people. Across her collections of children's verse, from *Spin a Soft Black Song* (1971) to her most recent, *I Am Loved* (2007), Giovanni consistently celebrates memories of childhood, Black origins, feelings of love and gratitude, and other sociopolitical realities using ecological incantations of Black nature: past, present, and future.

This study highlights the themes and accessibility, language and style, illustrations, and emotional depth in selected poems from *Spin a Soft Black Song* (1971), *Ego-tripping and Other Poems for Young People* (1973, republished in 1993), *The Sun is So Quiet* (1996b), *The Genie in the Jar* (1996a), and *I Am Loved* (2007). Language and its signs, imagery and reflections, and music and emotional effects underscore the significance of this landscape as the foundation for observing the poet's cultural heritage and experiences. Giovanni's poetry transforms these observations into a sustainable poetic source for learning and connecting with others. Moreover, Giovanni's poetic diction, figures, and formal devices are meant to enact rather than merely represent the immediate experience of non-human nature. These include birds, stars, sun, rainbows, and nights that directly impact the sense of aural effects. This reflective and intellectual aspect of Giovanni's poetry coincides, defining her ecopoetics. As Knickerbocker (2012) emphasized in his introduction to *Ecopoetics*, "poetry and our close reading of it demand that we focus our thinking, pay attention with all of our senses and grow in imagination. Healing our relationship to the earth demands exactly the same" (p. 18).

Accordingly, an ecocritical discourse analysis of the poems unfolds the cultural reading of "nature" while closing the gap between the word and the world. As an emerging interdisciplinary paradigm within literary studies, ecocriticism has developed several methodological approaches for conducting discourse analyses of African-American nature. The ecocritical paradigm targeted in this study involves three key methods. The first is the thematic analysis of images and figures and their critical role in the cultural shaping of nature. Second, the study of language and its rhythm emphasizes its aesthetic role in creating an evocative poetic discourse. The third is the pragmatic and ethical evaluation of natural projections and the values they preserve for generations to appreciate. Hiltner (2015) explains, "environmental critics explore how nature and the natural world are imagined through literary texts. Such literary presentations are, incidentally, not only generated by particular cultures, they play a significant role in generating those cultures" (p. xiii).

More specifically, William Howarth's *Some Principles of Ecocriticism* (1996) provides guiding principles from the four disciplines of ecology to analyze Giovanni's ecological discourse. Specifically, these principles combine ecology, ethics, language, and criticism to offer a theory and method for exploring *nature* in literature. First, according to Howarth, the interdisciplinary science of *ecology* is crucial for describing "the relations between nature and culture." Second, the "applied philosophy of *ethics* [emphasis added]" offers ways to mediate historical social conflicts. Third, *language* theory examines "how words represent human and nonhuman life." Finally, *criticism* evaluates "the quality and integrity of works and promotes their dissemination" (Howarth, 1996, p. 71). Each discipline emphasizes the dynamic relationship between nature and literature as mutually influential. Giovanni's interpretation of the outer landscape, which reflects how cultural values and sociohistorical contexts shape her mindscape, is embedded into her children's poetry. Each principle is explained in detail to analyze the selected poems, highlighting their cultural (ecology), ethical (philosophical), aesthetic (language), and assessment (criticism) dimensions. Based on Howarth's four principles (1996), the multiple readings of Giovanni's poetry are explored sequentially.

#### 4. The multidimensional perspectives of Giovanni's "Black nature"

##### 4.1 The cultural dimension: themes of "Black" identity

Howarth (1996) explores how cultural narratives and literary works reflect and influence our perceptions of nature, examining how literature can celebrate the beauty of the natural

world and critique human actions that harm it. In “Knoxville, Tennessee,” Giovanni captures the essence of summer through a child’s lens, evoking a sense of warmth and community that transcends the physical landscape. The poem illustrates life’s simple pleasures: eating fresh vegetables, spending time with the family, and enjoying the freedom of a sunlit day. This vivid portrayal highlights the importance of familial bonds and cultural heritage. Giovanni’s tactile imagery conveys the joy of the season and an underlying sense of security that contrasts sharply with the historical context from which her identity emerges. Through the motif of barefootedness, Giovanni evokes an intrinsic connection to the earth, suggesting a relationship grounded in safety and carefree exploration, freed from the shackles of generational trauma: “and go to the mountains with/your grandmother/and go barefooted/and be warm/all the time/not only when you go to bed/and sleep” (*Ego-tripping*, 1993, p. 40).

This poem embodies the duality in Giovanni’s work, where nature symbolizes comfort and acknowledgment of her community’s historical struggles. The grandmother figure, who provides sustenance and love, bridges the past and the present, encapsulating an enduring connection to ancestry and tradition. Giovanni’s reflections on her family’s storytelling traditions reinforce this linkage by revealing the intergenerational transmission of wisdom and cultural identity. By invoking these familial ties and sensory experiences, Giovanni celebrates the beauty of nature while asserting the necessity of recognizing the historical contexts that render such beauty poignant.

The “challenge” for ecocritics is to “keep one eye on the ways in which nature is culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists” (Garrard, 2004, p. 10). Multiple features characterize Giovanni’s children’s poetry. This study explores the complex themes of identity, race, and history. These themes are important and worth explaining to break the complex barriers and make them less sophisticated for younger readers. Many of her poems instill a sense of pride in African-American heritage and culture.

“Nikki-Rosa” is one of Nikki Giovanni’s most famous poems, republished in her *Ego-tripping and Other Poems for Young People* (1993). The autobiographical poem reflects on Giovanni’s childhood experiences, emphasizing the joy and richness of her family life despite poverty and racism. Giovanni’s poetry often explores themes of Black identity and African roots, demonstrating her deep connection to her heritage and commitment to celebrating Black culture. As a prominent voice in the Black Arts Movement, Giovanni advocates for social justice through her works. She highlights the richness of African-American experiences: “childhood remembrances are always a drag/if you’re Black” (1993, p. 46). This line sets the poem’s tone and highlights Black childhood’s unique challenges and perspectives. Giovanni emphasizes that despite economic hardships, the richness of family life and cultural identity truly matter, “and though you’re poor, it isn’t poverty that concerns you.” “Black love is Black wealth” is a powerful line that encapsulates the idea that love and familial bonds are the true wealth in the Black community, countering materialism. Giovanni critiques the misrepresentation of Black experiences by those outside the community, underscoring the importance of authentic voices in telling these stories: “I really hope no white person ever has cause/ to write about me/because they never understand” how “Black” love is their “wealth” (1993, p. 46).

In “I Am a Mirror” (1996), Ashley Bryan (the illustrator) centers a real inset mirror against a colorful background of vibrant shapes amid natural landscapes. “I reflect the strengths/Of my people/And for that alone/I am loved” (lines 18–21) concludes Giovanni’s ode to Black ancestry and intergenerational resilience, encourages the child to look in the mirror on the page, think about grandparents and ancestors who have come before them, gain strength from their stories, and know that they are loved. Through her powerful and evocative verses, Giovanni preserves African-American heritage, including great ancestral values, aspirations, and faith:

I am a mirror  
I reflect the grace  
Of my mother  
The tenacity  
Of my grandmother  
The patience  
Of my grandfather  
The sweat  
Of my great-grandmother  
The hope  
Of my great-grandfather  
The songs  
Of my ancestors  
The prayers  
Of those on the auction block  
The bravery  
Of those in the middle passage (*I Am Loved*, 2007)

The poet emphasizes the importance of knowing and celebrating one's roots and history. As an African-American poet, she perceives nature as a cultural construct with which she acts and interacts. Giovanni assertively points out the fact that "the first Black child born in what would become the United States was a Black female. The first poet. But more, I believe the first voice to be lifted in song was the voice of a Black woman" whose role was to transform the "faith of the fathers" across generations (1994, p. 419). Giovanni shows how the poet thinks of children as constituents of their nation's future, whereas Black mothers are cultural reservoirs that reconstruct the other half of the United States. Her poems are lyrical poetry about how the Black faith is transformed. She meets and projects the Black community in her own "black way of looking at things" and within her "own cultural environment" (Fowler, 1992, p. 4). She states that she: "prefer[s] to call [her]self a black writer" (p. 3), and she feels honored by her Black origin although she is American: "I am an American Black. Period... I am not a hyphenated American, regardless of how others have defined themselves... For me, the noun is Black, and American is the adjective" (Giovanni, 1994a, b, p. 424).

It is essential to understand what a poem communicates through a story, a written word, and a picture, as well as its possible effect. The most fruitful readings of children's literature are those "concerned with the analysis of narrative, discourse in general, and the cultural structures reflected in texts" (Hunt, 1999, p. 10). Therefore, reading the components of Giovanni's children's poetry can identify it as a resource of African-American culture embedded in ecopoetics, in which responses to and uses of nature are strongly manifested. In this regard, Elder (2002) points out that poetry is analogous to the human self, body, and mind, arguing that it "derives from the living earth as surely as our human bodies and minds do. The health and beauty of culture are ultimately inseparable from those of nature . . . Poetry itself can manifest the intricate, adaptive, and evolving balance of an ecosystem" (p. ix).

"Leaves" symbolizes the vital connection between the roots of a tree and its leaves, serving as a metaphor for the resilience of Black history and culture, which provides strength and support to successive generations during challenging times: "I hope you'll be the one/Standing at the root/Holding out your arms/To gently catch/My fall" (*I Am Loved*, 2007; lines 5–9).

#### 4.2 The ethical dimension: sociohistorical interactions

Howarth (1996) argues that ecocriticism should analyze texts and advocate for ethical, environmental practices involving recognizing the moral implications of our interactions with nature and striving to promote sustainability and conservation through literary and cultural discourse. Moreover, he believes that ecocriticism plays a role in inspiring sociopolitical changes. By highlighting such issues and promoting ecological awareness, literature can motivate individuals and communities to act toward protecting the environment. Thus,

ecology presents ethical choices that affect the land and people. From this perspective, Giovanni's mindscape stresses the ethics learned from or imaginatively embedded in the environment. Accordingly, her poetry shapes new ways of looking at things with new ethics that save and promise future change for the land and its people, echoes Leopold's words that "All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. . . The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (1949, p. 204).

African-American poetry is metaphoric of its nature, planted in the garden and soil from which the poets come, creating "a convincing and naturalizing rhetoric: poetic production is a garden that not only has an important heritage, but also a viable future, in its metaphoric fruits and seeds" (Lynes, 2009, p. 193). Importantly, children's poetry is the product of adult issues, both cultural and sociopolitical. Giovanni explores children's poems within the critical and historical conversations surrounding adult poetry, arguing that children's poetry is a crucial part of American poetic tradition, particularly that of Black Americans. Black American children have absorbed folk, fairy tales, and oral tradition elements.

These themes make her poetry enjoyable and impactful. She entertains young readers with valuable life lessons: "I shoot the moment, capture feelings with my poems" (Fowler, 1992, p. 185). She uses poetry as a medium for self-expression, prioritizing content over structure and caring more about the message than delivery.

The poet in "Racing Against the Sun" portrays Black hopes and dreams as something to be achieved sooner than seems possible. The "sun" is used as a metaphor for hope and dreams, symbolizing the desire to realize them even faster: "I ride the rainbow . . . spinning around/ blending . . . bending . . . down the through the stars/winding my way . . . to the ocean of Dreams/Racing against the sun" (*The Sun is So Quiet*, 1996b, p. 29). Natural images, rainbows, stars, the ocean, wind, and the sun are all essential. They encapsulate the poet's messages of overcoming challenges and finding empowerment while facing time, hoping to achieve future accomplishments of freedom and peace. The prevailing natural beauty reflects Giovanni's transcendent thoughts, deliberately conveying her inner messages with blank spaces in each line.

The poet's nickname, "Nikki Rosa" was given to her by her sister when they were children. The nickname reflects the themes of childhood and personal memories in her poetry. Giovanni encourages young Black readers to believe in themselves and their abilities, despite the feelings of humiliation "you are always a drag/if you're Black," or if "you're poor" (*Ego-tripping*, 1993, p. 46). The readers must be happily united because "Black love is Black wealth" (p. 47). The suburb of "Woodlawn" and the subdivision of "Hollydale" are places in Cincinnati referred to in the poem because they prevented African-Americans from homeownership for racial reasons.

"Ego-tripping" (1973) was a poem written after Giovanni's first trip to Africa in 1972. It recognized that ancient African civilizations (Egyptians, Carthaginians, and Ethiopians) had contributed to the greatness of Europe's Greek and Roman civilizations. The poem suggests that an imaginary female god trips over an enormous ego.

I was born in the congo  
I walked to the fertile crescent and built  
the sphinx  
I designed a pyramid so tough that a star  
that only glows every one hundred years falls  
into the center giving divine perfect light  
(*Ego-tripping*, 1993, p. 3)

Bringing ancient civilizations to modern poetry resonates with the core of the ecological/ethical reading of history, ancient lands, and the essential role of poetry in correcting sociopolitical concepts at present, bridging all race and gender conflicts in African-America.

Since “ego-tripping” was written in 1973, it has been Giovanni’s signature poem. The poet uses hyperbole to create an image of an intelligent, exuberant, and accomplished Black woman: “My oldest daughter is nefertiti/the tears from my birth pains/created the Nile/I am a beautiful woman” (p. 4). For the poet, this image whose “strength flows ever on” must replace the passive one belittling the Black girls. She continues stressing a positive description of the woman: “I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal” (p. 5).

This poem has been widely read, performed, and sung by audiences, especially the concluding lines: “I mean . . . I . . . can fly/like a bird in the sky/ . . .” (p. 5). The book includes illustrations by George Ford that offer positive images for children that reflect the feeling of Black pride. Her visionary image transcends gender restrictions and restraints. This poem is an ultimate statement on the power of women to change the world creatively. Giovanni’s childhood was hard as she witnessed the cruel realities of racism, yet “all the while [she] was ‘quite happy’” (p. 47). This poem is an artifact created by the poet about her childhood. She portrays her childhood, although challenging, as a quest to shape the memories she wishes to retain, which ultimately is “Black love is Black wealth.” The words and language used signify the power of imagination that no punctuation can pause.

The poem “No Heaven” reflects the poet’s understanding that Black American life is enjoyable, although challenging, especially when love and appreciation for nature are embraced. Giovanni’s language is simple and profound, making the poem accessible yet profoundly moving. The poem intertwines the outer elements of rainfall and sunshine with the daily inner routines of baking bread and cakes. This imagery extends into the night with the “owls’ singing.” As the poet immerses herself in nature’s beauty, her tears provide comfort, allowing her dreams to persist and ultimately end with a smile of joy. Giovanni often writes from a personal perspective, and this poem, in particular, reflects her thoughts and feelings about mortality and the enduring legacy of love.

How can there be  
No heaven  
When rain falls  
gently on the grass  
When sunshine scampers  
across my toes  
When corn bakes  
into bread  
When wheat melts  
into cake  
When shadows  
cool  
And owls  
call  
And little finches  
eat upside  
down  
How can there be?  
No Heaven  
When tears comfort  
When dreams caress  
When you smile  
at me (*I Am Loved*, 2007)

Furthermore, “Mommies” and “Daddies” poems are also significant for Black people because of their meanings and ethical values. Even the selection of the titles emphasizes closeness and the passion the parents have for their children: “MOMMIES/make you brush your teeth/and put your old clothes on/and clean the room/and call you from the playground/ . . . and tuck you in at night/and kiss you” (*Spin a Soft Black Song*, 1971, p. 11). A sense of gratitude and respect for mommies is enhanced beyond the lines. “Daddies” poem follows the previous one in its

order in the book, insinuating similar significance for the fathers: “tell you GET OUT AND FIGHT AND/DON’T COME BACK TILL YOU WIN” (p. 13). Giovanni urges the children to appreciate their fathers as they empower them to overcome difficulties while rejecting weakness and cowardice. For the poet, the fathers “teach [their kids] how to walk and wear a hat” (*Spin a Soft Black Song*, 1971, p. 11), underlining the social disciplines and confidence. Eco-politically, Giovanni strives to “close the gap between word and world” (Knickerbocker, 2012, p. 9), making powerful ethical claims out of language.

#### 4.3 *The aesthetic dimension: language, figures, and music*

Henderson (1972) explains in his book *Understanding the New Black Poetry* that Black music means “essentially the vast fluid body of Black song— spirituals, shouts, gospel songs, field cries, blues, pop songs by Black, and, in addition, jazz . . . and non-jazz music by Black composers who *consciously or unconsciously* [emphasis added] draw upon the Black musical tradition” (p. 31). Black poetry is musical in its use of sound, language, and rhythm. The song and the song’s makers are often the poems’ subjects, ultimately providing a storehouse of referents, metaphors, and allusion for the African-American poets (Brown, 2005, p. 66). Black Arts poets such as Giovanni prefer to align themselves and their poetry with African-American sonic traditions, as opposed to the restricting conventions of White and European-centric literary traditions (Rambsy, 2011, p. 4). Among Giovanni’s styles, she drew on music in her poetry by adapting song forms, tonal memory as a poetic structure or an assumed emotional response, and language from jazz life. Considering language and style, Giovanni’s use of colloquial language and rhythm, influenced by jazz and blues, is celebrated for its authenticity and musicality. However, some critics believe this style can sometimes overshadow clarity, making it challenging for children to understand the deeper meanings.

Shared poetic language mirrors and amplifies human emotion through rhythm and other sonic qualities that exceed any conceptual understanding of a linguistically meaningful message. It may calm or excite, but its chief function is to unite. “Children’s poetry forms the foundation of this process by transforming the body’s processes into a special way of using language for communal bonding, enabling the holding environment to reach beyond a parent and a child into a larger social form, that has the power to comfort and bind us together” (Coats, 2013, p. 140). With an all-encompassing discourse analysis, the poet’s linguistic and figurative devices are interpreted to uncover the cultural, social, or political interests of the Black environment, which in the end aims to indirectly nudge Black children’s consciousness to a more ethical state that could shape their behavior in the future. In “dance poem” (uncapitalized), she teaches the children to sing a Black song: “All you children gather round/we will dance and we will whorl/we will dance to our own song/we must spin to our own world/we must spin a soft Black song” (*Spin a Soft Black Song*, 1971, p. 4). The sensuous kinetic images of “dance” and “spin” add musicality to the song. At the same time, the sound devices of onomatopoeia in “whorl” invite a reflective, sensuous (imaginative) consideration of the intellect (reality). Furthermore, illustrations by George Martins in the book add even more liveliness and visual engagement for young readers.

Ecocritics perceive nature as a coherent concept that develops over time and space and possesses distinct attributes shaped by the speaker’s cultural context to convey specific connotations. Giovanni’s poetry uses blues and jazz music endowed with conceptual meanings of the Black community that emphasize self-sufficiency, integrity, and internal wholeness. Therefore, this section focuses on the reading of poems to define the types of music used to convey the cultural connotations of Black nature.

The ability to speak language and think symbolically distinguishes humans from nonhuman beings. In her *Ecopoetics*, Knickerbocker (2012) places metaphor at the origin of the human relationship with nature and vice versa: “. . . at the origin of our relationship with nature lies metaphor; at the origin of our use of metaphor lies nature” (p. 4). That is why in

poetry, nature is represented as a cultural construct actualized at the level of a poem's linguistic and literary structures (Alexander, 2009, p. 3). The power of language to make nature matter to us depends precisely on how "appropriately informed and complex ways" can explore the significance and the possible meanings of the concept of nature. Ecocritics presuppose reconsidering the cognitive approach to the literary texts to manifest the interrelationship between culture and literature with the dimension of nature (Zapf, 2006, p. 50).

In the ecocritical analysis, Knickerbocker (2012) strongly asserts that ecological poetry "posits a relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Poems best succeed at awakening one to the natural world through the emotive and rhetorical power they have over readers, and this power derives from the particular form that content takes" (p. 3). Thus, Giovanni skillfully captures the readers' imagination, drawing them into her fantasy world through the beauty of the landscape in "Kidnap Poem" (*I Am Loved*, 2007). The poet engages readers with rhythmic and melodic aspects of nature using selective and effective sensory imagery. She intentionally omits punctuation and capitalization to create a fast lyric rhythm.

ever been kidnapped  
by a poet  
if i were a poet  
i'd kidnap you  
put you in my phrases and meter  
you to jones beach  
or maybe coney island  
or maybe just to my house  
lyric you in lilacs  
dash you in the rain  
blend into the beach  
to complement my see  
play the lyre for you  
ode you with my love song  
anything to win you  
wrap you in red Black green  
show you off to mama  
yeah if i were a poet i'd kid  
nap you (*I Am Loved*, 2007)

She is "a renowned poet who, by utilizing startling imagery uniquely her own, attempts to open young people's minds-to connect herself with them and connect them to living" (Hamilton, 1993, p. ix). She is also a professor who cares about the uses of art and her work. To Bradford (2010), children's texts "both reflect and promote cultural values and practices" and thus, they inevitably "disclose conceptions of and attitudes to race, ethnicity, colonialism, and postcolonialism, responding to the discourses and practices of the societies where they are produced" (p. 39). She demonstrates an in-depth understanding of children's direct and vivid visual relationships with nature, informed by her clear recollections of her childhood experiences:

But I am the baby in the family, and I think babies look at life a little differently . . . And I think that as a baby — you know, if you look at the number of writers, it is amazing how many of us are babies in the family -how many of us are either only children or the youngest child because those are the people who have to watch (Giovanni, 2014).

As a poet, Giovanni possesses a unique poetic language that bridges the written page and oral performance. Her selected diction, with its performative quality, reflects the essence of Black culture, as shown in "A Song of a Blackbird":

We look for words:  
intelligent intense  
chocolate warm

ambitious cautious  
to describe a person  
We design monuments:  
the Pyramids the Taj Mahal  
the Lincoln Memorial the Empire State Building  
the Wrigley Building Coffins  
to say someone was loved  
We sing a sad blue  
Song  
We sing a river — no — bridge  
Song  
We sing a Song of a Blackbird  
To say  
You will be missed. (*I Am Loved*, 2007).

In this poem, Giovanni acknowledges children’s heightened auditory sensitivity and appreciates how rhythmic language and sounds create a unique and engaging environment for them. Her poetic diction highlights the essential elements of a language rich in rhythms and patterned sounds, reflective of Black American nature and culture. Giovanni aspires to a better future for her community, achieved through the young Black readers. As Coats (2013) emphasizes, the significance of rhymes lies in fostering positive “social functioning”, enabling children to “participate in a communal ritual”, develop empathy, and create “a coherent culture” (p. 139). Giovanni’s poetic diction transcends mere textual representation of nature. It embodies a profound abstraction aimed at cultural, ethical, and pragmatic development within the Black community, while its textual depictions enhance humanity’s connection with nature. Thus, language serves as a powerful tool for transformation and the medium for creating meaning, allowing for the development of concepts of “nature, culture, and the human”. At the same time, their textual representations shape human–nature relationships (Mayer, 2006, p. 112).

In Giovanni’s selected children’s collections, the illustrations and drawings of different painters reflect her mental images. Giovanni fosters the growth of memory, which implies improving possible future outcomes by visualizing past, present, and foreseen events. To her, creating order and changing the unpleasant lives of Black people in America is a dream. Giovanni’s aestheticization of the landscape and her ways of looking at things take the reader away from the realm of real nature, designating it “as a legitimate object of artistic assumption” (Byerly, 1996, p. 53). For this aesthetic reason, we, as readers, are involved in a delightful yet challenging form of play in picture books. During this engagement, we must address abstract concepts using logic, intuition, and imagination (Doonan, 1993, p. 7).

Giovanni’s profound body of poetic images, metaphors, and symbols are prior means of communication with Black children’s world rather than focusing on forming the wording of the poems. For instance, “The Stars” is an example of the figurative language of nature, with “the stars” being symbolic of the new generation who quietly “dance the ballet of the night” and “hustle through the night” (*The Sun is So Quiet*, 1996b, p. 26). And in “Because” the poet addresses the young readers with a continuous rhythm and without any single pause, drawing the listener’s attention to the musicality of the blues song (short lines, specific stressed sounds, repetitions, and high/low rhythms) and its embedded meanings over textual aesthetics:

I wrote a poem  
for you because  
you are  
my little boy  
I wrote a poem  
for you because  
you are  
my darling daughter  
and in this poem

I sang a song  
that says  
as time goes on  
I am you  
and you are me  
and that's how life  
goes on (*I Am Loved*, 2007).

Giovanni often employs musical references that [Henderson \(1972\)](#) recognized early on as the primary structural device of Black Arts poetry. In *The Genie in the Jar*, she celebrates Black women as she combines the Arabian-derived *genie* or *jinn* figure with the fairy tale about Sleeping Beauty: “take a genie/and put her in a jar/wrap the sky around her” (*The Genie in the Jar*, 1996a). In the poem, however, the jar protects the *genie* who is a music maker: “listen to her sing/sing a Black song our Black song/ from the Black loom” (lines 29–31). The poet weaves her music “singing .../ from the Black loom” (lines 32–33). Here, the poet presents the musician as mythical and spiritual in the form of a jazz song. Nature is observed in different ways. Giovanni’s ecocentric attitude toward nature values nonhuman life to protect human beings, especially Black women.

## 5. Conclusions

Overall, this study enhances the appreciation of Nikki Giovanni’s children’s poetry and opens new avenues for research and discussion in literary studies. The effect of children’s poetry should not be momentary, nor should it close their bodily pleasure. Instead, its readers must convey its message, connecting them with their people, culture, and experience through musical, imaginative, and ethical links. Giovanni’s Black landscape is a medium that brings the past into the present, to be relived even in the future, acting as the bond to connect Black children with their history and its realities. The Black environment is verbalized in rhythmic words, visualized in images, and empathized with collective and communicative lessons regarding their significance and effects.

Giovanni’s mindscape should be understood through a close reading of its language and its signs, images and reflections, music, and emotional effects, confirming the significance of this landscape as a foundation from which the poet observes her culture and experiences and as a product manipulated in words and rhythms to become a sustainable poetic source of learning from and connecting to others. As [Hamilton \(1993\)](#) concludes, “She was, indeed, the Princess of Black Poetry. And her poetry readings, packed with young and old alike, were astonishing rhythms of her voice seeing into life and into us who lived it, looking us in the eye” (p. x). Giovanni’s children’s poetry collections make a great addition to any child’s bookshelf to encourage appreciation for poetry and art and celebrate the closeness of family relationships in the Black community.

This study offers significant contributions to the field of literary studies. First, it expands the scope of literary criticism by focusing on Nikki Giovanni’s children’s poetry, thereby addressing a notable gap in the existing literature. The text highlights the significance of critically analyzing children’s literature, which is often overlooked in favor of adult literature. Emphasizing this aspect can encourage scholars to explore and appreciate children’s poetry more deeply.

Introducing ecocriticism as a theoretical framework for analyzing Giovanni’s work offers a new perspective. This approach can inspire further research into how children’s literature represents environmental themes and cultural landscapes, broadening ecocritical studies’ scope. Furthermore, this examination of Giovanni’s poetry within cultural and sociohistorical contexts enriches the understanding of African-American literature and its appeal to children. It underscores the role of children’s poetry in reflecting on and shaping cultural identity, which can be a valuable resource for studies in cultural and ethnic literature. By integrating cultural, ethical, and aesthetic analyses, this study offers interdisciplinary insights that can benefit fields

such as education, sociology, and cultural studies. Integrating these insights demonstrates how literature can be a medium for conveying complex cultural and ethical messages to younger generations.

This study emphasizes the representation of Black nature and culture in children's literature. This focus on diversity contributes to ongoing discussions on inclusivity in literature and the importance of diverse voices in shaping young readers' perspectives. Moreover, the findings on the pragmatic influence of Giovanni's poetry can inform educational practices. Educators and curriculum developers can use these insights to incorporate diverse and rich texts into their teaching materials to foster a more inclusive and representative educational environment.

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