(UN)DRESSING BLACK NATIONALISM:
NIKKI GIOVANNI’S (COUNTER)REVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

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Rage is to writers what water is to fish. A laid-back writer is like an orgasmic prostitute – an anomaly – something that doesn’t quite fit.¹

Critics have noted that in common with Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove and Audre Lorde, Giovanni has raged against race, gender, and class divisions in American society.² While a protest voice rings loudest in poems such as “The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro” with its chants of “Can you kill nigger / Huh? Nigger can you / kill”, it is also present in two of Giovanni’s most erotic poems – “Seduction” and “Beautiful Black Men”. This essay will explore the notion that Giovanni is not putting rage aside in these poems, but, by employing erotic scenarios and erotic imagery, sets out to seduce the reader into hearing her protest message. These “seductions” will be analysed in relation to other forms of performance in these poems, in particular, performed blackness and masculinity. The significance of undressing and dressing, respectively, in “Seduction” and “Beautiful Black Men”, will be examined in the light of black nationalist rhetoric, symbols of the black power movement, and ideals of black masculinity promoted by Motown recording stars of the 1960s.

Stripping the tease
“Seduction” is all about breaking rules. For one thing, the woman not only strips off her own clothes, she also strips off those of the man in the

¹ Nikki Giovanni, Sacred Cows and Other Edibles, New York, 1988, 31.
² See Ekaterini Georgoudaki, Race, Gender, and Class Perspectives in the Works of Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove, Nikki Giovanni, and Audre Lorde, Thessaloniki, 1991.
room. For another, the implication from the poem’s title is that the woman’s intent is to get the man to have sex with her. An actual stripper’s performance is not a means to an end but is from start to finish a tease. “The premise of the act”, Dahlia Schweitzer writes in “Striptease: The Art of Spectacle and Transgression”, “is to imply what both the performer and the spectator know will never come – sexual fruition and exposure”. In this respect, the woman stripping in Giovanni’s poem breaks with convention. In another way, however, she is comparable to paid strippers in terms of being threatening because, like them, she appears “to be available on a grand scale” which defies most social norms and symbolizes her “freedom from social control”. Symbolized by her nudity, the major social norm the speaker of “Seduction” defies is invisibility. Furthermore, by stripping the man, she both literally and figuratively exposes the masculinist emphasis of black nationalism.

If one accepts the view of Sasha Weitmen that the mutual giving of bodies is “the ultimate token, the proof and the guarantor of the reality of the experience of being – or of having once been – together”, withdrawing one’s body, or rejecting someone else’s, should signify the end, or, absence, of that reality. The rejection of the woman in “Seduction”, however, does not contribute to an image of a defeated, sad, or lonely woman. If there is a pathetic figure in the poem, it is the man who takes no notice of the woman’s nakedness or his own. If the woman alone had been naked, then his unresponsiveness could imply a lack of sexual interest thereby reflecting badly on her sexual attractiveness. But, by not initially noticing his own nakedness, the man appears to be self-absorbed to a comic extreme. Although his lack of arousal implies her failure to seduce him, the final lines of the poem in which he addresses her and what she is doing – “Nikki, / isn’t this counterrevolutionary ... ?” – indicate that she does finally succeed in getting his attention. By then, however, the scene has turned from being erotic to comic. Giovanni achieves this effect through the juxtaposition of two contrasting images –

4 Ibid., 69.