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### Nikky Finney's Writerly Goals

In an interview, Nikky Finney stated, "There are so many children in the world who need loving, whether I gave birth to them or not, there are so many words, stories, and ideas that need birthing and I want to be that person" (Naimon). Even though she does not have any of her own children, she uses her writing to share her legacy, just as a mother would do for her child.

Finney's hope is that someone who has been subjected to discrimination due to their race, sexuality, or being a part of any other minority group, would be able to find comfort and a sense of belonging in her poems. Ever since she was young, she knew that her job was to be a poet.

She would carry around a pencil and write about the events occurring in her daily life (Naimon). Many of her poems have proven to achieve her dream of sharing issues that are prominent in her life. Through her ability to create art with her words, Nikky Finney's poem, "Magnolia Garden Homes, High Noon, Unit #144, Parking Lot H", achieves the ability to inspire others that might not feel that they can express their truest self.

"Magnolia Garden Homes, High Noon, Unit #144, Parking Lot H" is a poem that Finney wrote in response to a photo as part of the Southbound Project. She was sent a series of photos by the Halsey Art Institute to choose a few to create poems to accompany them ("Poems – Southbound Project"). This particular photo was of a black, queer couple embracing each other with the sun shining on them, surrounded by lush, green trees. Finney was drawn to this photo

for a few different reasons. One was that she and Preston Gannaway, the photographer, have parallels in their works. They both use their artistic abilities to highlight stories of diversity in an elegant way. The photo originated in a project that Gannaway produced to showcase the diversity of the Hampton Roads area of Virginia (“Preston Gannaway – Southbound Project”). Most of the photos in the series take place in Norfolk, Virginia, a port city that holds the world's largest Naval base. This makes the city and its surrounding cities full of cultural diversity. Gannaway captures this in her photos just as Finney gracefully captures minority groups in her works.

In “Magnolia Garden Homes, High Noon, Unit #144, Parking Lot H”, Finney is not focused on a single minority group. According to a study, intersectionality is one of the best ways to view overlap in inequalities in minority groups. Finney’s poem is not just exploring queer people or black people. The couple being discussed don’t experience only one type of inequality – they are both queer and black, so they experience the inequalities felt by both groups. According to the same study on anti-queer violence, LGBTQ+ people of color are more likely to be subjected to violence than white queer people. There are a few individuals listed in the poem that have been historically discriminatory to people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community. One example is the “blue barking orders” (27). Minority groups have been subjected to discrimination by the police throughout history and in recent events. There are news articles reporting on people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community being wrongly incarcerated and killed on the streets. This creates fear in minority groups towards the police in their own neighborhoods. Another individual to fear is the “old man in window #142, his arm and Bible outstretched like / Twin crosses in the air” (5-6). Queer people generally face intolerance from older generations, especially those that are deeply religious. They claim that

God does not accept and appreciate the LGBTQ+ community. This has created a feeling of unacceptance in their community, especially in the South.

In contrast to the descriptions of the hateful individuals, Finney richly captures the beauty of the couple's love for each other. She uses metaphors and imagery to compare the couple to conventionally beautiful things. They are the art, "the bass & drumroll", "Magnolia Gardens", and "obelisks", and the sun is the artist that creates them. When Finney is comparing the couple to an obelisk, it is an ironic comparison to the statues generally found in the South, where the Southbound project took place. Common statues in the South are of popular Confederate generals who were in favor of de-humanizing black people. Another beautiful image that is painted through Finney's words are of the flowers. When people look at a garden, they are immediately drawn to the beauty of the flowers and how their delicate blossoms are scattered throughout the lush, green leaves. They also symbolize growth and change, which are two of Finney's motifs in her book. These same motifs are also seen in the hotbeds incorporated into the book to break up the poems.

Finney is reflected in this poem as she is queer and a person of color herself. She understands what it is like to feel unaccepted in the world and what it is like to find safety in another person. In 2002, she wrote a poem that is not associated with this book called "Sex". She discusses her relationship with her sexuality and her mom. While she knew her parents loved her, this poem expresses that she did not feel that her mom accepted her entire true self. There are some parallels in the poem with "Magnolia Garden Homes, High Noon, Unit #144, Parking Lot H". They both have imagery to natural phenomena like flowers and weather. "Sex" was written almost 20 years before the poem in her most recent book. The change in time reflects her progression in her viewpoint on being a queer individual. The earlier poem puts her sexuality in

more of a negative light, while the one written about the couple is written in a more positive and uplifting manner. This is where another example of growth is reflected in her own life.

Another poem in her book, “Abalone 2”, also suggests that she had a childhood where she did not feel that she could be her authentic self. Her parents were not necessarily accepting towards her Uncle Bobby, a homosexual man, so she also felt that she would be accepted by them. He was someone that Finney looked up to because he had stood up for what he believed in – rather than fighting in the Vietnam War, he made black baby dolls as a form of his service. The baby dolls that she played with were able to have the same skin color that she had and she felt liberated by it. At a young age, she did not understand how such a man of Bobby’s character could not be accepted in his own brother’s house. Eventually, she came to understand that he was outcast because of who he loved. It made it more difficult to see her parents as the greatest of role models as they could not appreciate all the sides of her. She dedicated this book to him as he was the role model in her life, the one who made her feel the most like she belonged in this world.

One more poem in her book that has to do with Finney feeling as if her sexuality made her feel excluded includes her dad at a later stage in her life. This poem is “Hotbed 18”. Her father was experiencing mental degradation and was having a difficult time remembering and comprehending information. This was also before she had met her now wife, yet her father asked her, “is your wife coming over?” (13). In this moment, many conflicting emotions must have traveled through her mind. She might have been relieved that her father had finally accepted her sexuality. It also meant, though, that he had to be in a deteriorated mental state to accept who she really was.

Finney’s work is so powerful because it is about topics that she can relate to so deeply. The reason that Finney chose this picture to create a narrative about is probably because she

could see herself in it. She knew what it was like to not feel fully accepted by the outside world. Whether it is by society as a whole or loved ones. She has, however, grown to appreciate herself in its most authentic form due to people in her life like Uncle Bobby. She uses her writing skills in “Magnolia Garden Homes, High Noon, Unit #144, Parking Lot H” to express her understanding towards people like herself. She hopes that they understand that even if they do not have people in their immediate lives, like Uncle Bobby, she is that person for them.

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Dear Reader,

This poem struck me, as I felt a drawn to the image that was accompanied by it. After I read the poem, I really enjoyed it and wanted to do more research. When I did, I discovered why the image looked so familiar. It was taken by an artist that did a photography series in my hometown and I had studied her in my high school art class. This made me even more interested in exploring the project more. I really enjoyed the process of researching Finney's life and her writing. Even though I cannot personally relate to her, I have friends who can, and I hope that this poem has made me relate to them more. This is why I chose to write more about this poem and evaluate Finney's life experiences.

If I were to spend more time on this piece, I would find a better way to make a transition between my conclusion and the ideas that I discussed beforehand. It seems abrupt to me, and I would try to find a way to make it more seamless.