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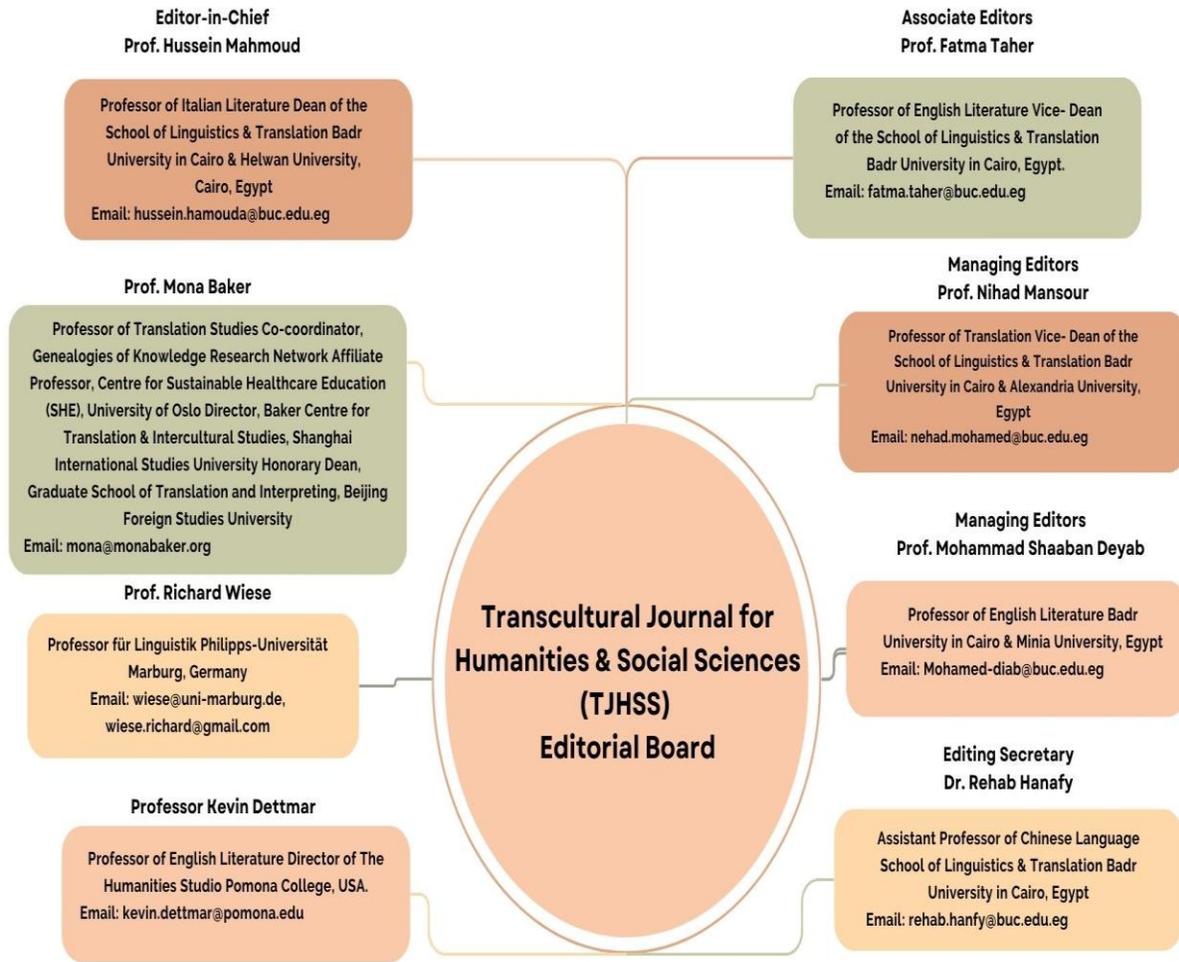
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## Dialogical Triads and Dynamic Identity in Gwendolyn Brooks's Poetry

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**Abstract:** African American poetry has long served as a powerful platform for exploring the complexities of identity within a society marked by racial injustice and discrimination. Gwendolyn Brooks, a celebrated poet and Pulitzer Prize winner, emerges as a prominent figure in this tradition. Her work captures the diverse voices and experiences of Black communities in America. Thus, the objective of this paper is to examine the representation of identity in Brooks's poetry through the lens of Herman's dialogical self theory (DST) and Peter Raggatt's positioning theory. The paper argues that Brooks's poetry challenges the concept of a static, singular identity by portraying the self and culture as a dynamic interplay of multiple self-positions engaged in dialogue. It proposes that Brooks's poetry serves as a reflection of the diverse self-repertoire within African American society. Furthermore, the psychoanalytical reading of Brooks's poetry helps to locate what Hermans and Raggatt call "the personal chronotopes" and "dialogical triads" in these poems. The paper highlights the interplay between I-positions and counter-positions and the role the ambiguous signifiers play in these triads. The analysis reveals that the discussed poems embody both reflexive and social forms of positioning, and the dynamic nature of the African American identity. By employing DST and positioning theory, the paper proposes that Brooks's poetry reflects the multifaceted nature of African American experiences within the broader context of American society.

**Key Words:** African American poetry, multiplicity of the self, dialogical self-theory, personal chronotopes, positioning theory.

### Introduction:

Identity and its formation have been important topics discussed in African American poetry, which plays a pivotal role in depicting and exploring the multifaceted nature of black identity within the broader context of American society. From the earliest slave narratives to contemporary works, African American writers have utilized their literary voices to illuminate the complexities, struggles, and triumphs of the African American experience. Their writings present a diverse range of perspectives, themes, and artistic techniques that mirror the rich tapestry of African American culture. One of the prominent African American poets whose poetry reflects this rich experience is Gwendolyn Brooks.

Brooks, an iconic figure in American literature, stands as a testament to the diverse and rich experiences of African Americans and the multiplicity of voices they bring to the literary landscape. Born in 1917 in Kansas and raised in the predominantly African American community of Chicago, Brooks witnessed firsthand the socioeconomic disparities, racial discrimination, and cultural vibrancy of African American communities that shaped her poetic expression. According to H. D. Melhem, "Brooks's poetry partakes in a dynamic continuum. Cultural cross-fertilization and... its resulting "hybrid vigor" have fostered greatness in British and

American literature” (228). In an interview with George Stavros, Brooks acknowledges the diversity of African American writing; she contends that the black writer “has the American experience and he also has the black experience; so, he’s very rich” (20).

This “dynamic continuum” of multiracial societies has been addressed by recent psychological theories which approach the structure of the self as a product (at least partially) of its social context. The dialogical self theory is an important psychological theory that attempts to interpret identity in the age of globalization. The theory challenges the idea of a fixed identity and provides a valuable framework for exploring identity development, self-structure, interpersonal communication, and the influence of social and cultural factors on the construction of the self.

The current paper is an attempt to read some selected poems by Gwendolyn Brooks in light of Herman’s dialogical self theory (DST) and Peter Raggatt’s positioning theory. The paper argues that Brooks’s poetry presents the self and culture as a multiplicity of positions among which dialogical relationships are established. The paper proposes that in her poetry, Brooks presents what Hermans and Raggatt call multiplicity of the self. Her poetry challenges the concept of simplistic or fixed identity and represents identity structure as a reflection of the multifaceted social structure of American society.

### **Theoretical background**

DST, formulated by the Dutch psychologist Hubert Hermans, constitutes a psychological framework that investigates the intricate nature of the self as a manifold of internal voices and perspectives that engage in ongoing dialogues. Hermans and colleagues assert that the self is not a cohesive and immutable entity, but rather a sophisticated system comprised of interconnected selves; drawing inspiration from the original Jamesian conceptions of the self and the Bakhtinian polyphonic metaphor, they have developed a conceptualization of “the self as a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions” (“The Dialogical Self beyond Individualism” 174). This encompasses not only one’s physical being and cognitive faculties, but also encompasses possessions such as clothing and housing, familial and social relationships, ancestral heritage, reputation, and creative output.

In another article, “Dialogical Self: Toward a Theory,” Hermans argues that “the brain is a community of agents or voices that, at its higher levels, may entertain mutual dialogical relationships, with one voice being more dominant or active than the other voice” (251). Self-positions, both external and internal, are engaged in ongoing dialogues, reflecting the dynamic and multifaceted nature of the self, and creating new I-positions or repositioning the existing ones. In this dynamic self-repertoire, or “self-society,” individuals construct their sense of self through micro-dialogues, which involve negotiation, conflict, and integration of various self-positions. Another distinctive feature of the dialogical self is its combination of temporal and spatial characteristics. Time and space are equally important; while time constitutes the narrative structure of the self, “the spatial nature of the self is expressed in the words, ‘position’ and ‘positioning,’ terms that suggest ... more dynamic and flexible referents than the traditional term ‘role.’” (249-252)

Backing Herman’s concept of the dialogical self and the dynamic process of positioning, Peter Raggatt proposes a positioning theory that differentiates between two types of positioning: social and reflexive. While reflexive/personal positioning “reflects how people construct and narrate their own lives in a moral framework, social positioning reflects the force of cultural and institutional prescriptions that

define and limit the boundaries of the self.” He proposes that positioning theory offers valuable insights on how positioning influences individuals' self-positions and the manner in which individuals position themselves in relation to others. Positioning is interpreted by Raggatt as “social-discursive and not just personal dynamic coordinates, and the two approaches share an uneasy co-existence across the literature.” (“Forms of Positioning” 358-359)

Raggatt goes on to assert that the process of positioning should not be oversimplified as a “dialogical dyad” or a mere dialogue between two entities, namely an I-position and a counter-position. Rather, he argues, positioning necessitates a third component, a social mediator referred to as an “ambiguous signifier” which actively participates in the dialogical positioning process and facilitates the emergence of novel I-positions. Hence, he introduces the concept of the “dialogical triad,” which encompasses an I-position, a counter position, and an ambiguous signifier (“Time–space Matrix” 109). In the same article, Raggatt proposes that the ambiguous signifier has three important features: “(i) it makes links to the social, the outside world; (ii) as a mediator, it makes movement (between positions) possible; and (iii) it has ambiguous or multi-stable meaning values” (109). This triadic structure is crucial for understanding the complexity of the positioning process and the role played by the mediator in fostering the development of fresh perspectives and I-positions. Raggatt also argues that “positioning appears to: (i) happen in conversations, (ii) form in our relationships, (iii) emerge in the stories we tell, and (iv) get imposed by the political and social order” (“Forms of Positioning” 361).

Furthermore, Raggatt borrows Bakhtin’s concept of “chronotopes” to represent “a space-time matrix” of the triadic structure that characterizes the positioning processes: “individuals navigate and negotiate their I-positions in relation to others, cultural rules, norms, and “unfolding storylines” through micro-dialogues. Through these dialogical triads, the formation, transformation, and reconfiguration of personal chronotopes occur (“Personal Chronotopes” 250).

### **Chronotopes and dialogical triads in Brooks**

Brooks prominently features the rich experience of African American society, women, men, and black children, along with diverse portrayals of virtuous, impoverished, violent, and victimized black individuals, shedding light on the multifaceted experiences and challenges faced by the African American community. Her poetry vividly reflects the social complexities she has personally encountered, representing multifaceted realities. Brooks’s “reader will discover the crystallization of the feelings and the lived experience of Gwendolyn Brooks in her poetry” (Raynaud 141). As she declares in an interview with Hull and Gallagher, her poetry echoes her personal experience which consists of all what she has experienced and observed: “You speak of things you know, things you feel, things you have personally observed. (Observation I feel is an aspect of experience). You ’ll find my personal interpretation of hundreds of things that are life things” (“Update on Part One” 95).

In Brooks’s writings, it is difficult to differentiate the personal experience from its social context. The “I” and the third person often fuse. Her autobiography, as Raynaud asserts, “is not a text where the narrator’s “I” takes control of the narrative from start to finish; on the contrary, it could be said that it is an autobiography intermittently written in the third person, for Gwendolyn Brooks often uses the identity she has for the others” (“Update on Part One” 152). Like her autobiography, Brooks' poetry seamlessly blends her internal world with the external one. Her poetry



positions (the black and the white American) are not “warring;” they are in a dialogical relation. These two self-positions form a “personal chronotope” in which blackness is the main I-position and white America is the counter position. Choosing to write traditional literary poetic forms fosters a dialogue between these seemingly contradictory I-positions of Brooks’s self. So, blackness, white America, and poetry form a dialogical triad where poetry serves as the “ambiguous signifier” that helps to form a dialogue with the other two positions (black America and white America). Poetry helps Brooks to bridge the two opposing self-positions and to create an important personal chronotope of an African American poet, that uniquely contributes to her identity.

Poetry, as an ambiguous signifier, complies with the two features Raggatt addresses in his positioning theory (“Time-space” 114); first, it serves as a connection with the social and external world, solidifying Brooks’s reputation as a distinguished writer. Second, it acts as a mediator, capable of representing the experiences and perspectives of both black and white American I-positions in this personal chronotope. At the same time, poetry has “multi-stable meaning values;” it rejects white racism against black people, but at the same time it addresses the liberal whites. The dialogicality and the dynamic nature of this triad allows Brooks to navigate freely between different I-positions of the chronotope of an African American poet, and to negotiate the complexities of her own experiences within the broader context of a racially divided society.

### **Positions and counter-positions in Brooks’s poetry**

Brooks’s poetry comes to express this dynamic multiplicity of the self in modern American society. It presents a realistic depiction of African American self-repertoire and reflects the dialogicality of multiple voices or I-positions that interact with each other in a micro-positioning process. Like Brooks herself, most of her characters own a complex self-repertoire that consists of I-positions as well as counter-positions, reflecting the rich experience of African Americans. In addition, Brooks’s poetry moves beyond the black/white dichotomy, embracing a more comprehensive exploration of counter-positioning through a range of social contrasts, such as educated/uneducated, rich/poor, righteous/ froward, male/female, and young/old. These types of dichotomies exist side-by-side in the African American self-repertoire. They occupy I-positions and counter-positions in the chronotopes of the African Americans. Brooks’s poetry presents these seemingly contradicted I-positions in a dialogical relationship. In “a song in the front yard,” the young female speaker who belongs to a middle-class African American family, admits that she loves “bad” people; she even wants to be like these “bad” blacks; it is fun:

My mother, she tells me that Johnnie Mae  
Will grow up to be a bad woman.  
That George ’ll be taken to Jail soon or late  
(On account of last winter he sold our back gate).  
But I say it’s fine. Honest, I do.  
And I’d like to be a bad woman, too. (30)

In the previous lines, the I-position of an educated middle-class girl goes well with a counter-position of poor bad friends. The speaker of the poem doesn't see the qualities that her mother labels as "bad" as being negative attributes. Instead, she is drawn to the freedom and individuality that she associates with "bad" people.

In another poem, “We Real Cool,” Brooks presents a poignant exploration of the complexities of the African American self-repertoire. The poem explores the life

and mindset of a group of young African Americans. The speakers of the poem, a group of young black men, brag about leading a reckless lifestyle, such as skipping school, staying out late, and drinking. While they assert their dominant I-position as defiant and wild, the structure of the poem, simultaneously, unmask another counter-position of vulnerability and despair. Though the short fast beats of the lines represent the speakers' boldness and self-confidence, the unstressed pronoun at the end of each line reflects their fragility, especially when it disappears at the last line. The complexity of the self-repertoire is apparent; the speakers enjoy life to the last drop but they "die soon." The poem presents the young speakers' defiance, and at the same time creates a sense of sympathy with them as innocent and victims:

We real cool. We  
 Left school. We  
 Lurk late. We  
 Strike straight. We  
 .....  
 Jazz June. We  
 Die soon. (87)

### **Dialogical triads and positioning in Brooks's poetry**

DST not only provides a comprehensive understanding of how individuals navigate their positions and counter-positions through micro-dialogues, but it also illustrates how new self-positions emerge in social interactions (Raggatt, "Forms of Positioning" 358). Raggatt argues that positioning (whether reflexive or social) occurs when micro-dialogues are performed between self-positions; when the dominant self-position recognizes and forms a dialogue with other I-positions and counter-positions ("Positioning: Dialogical Voice" 776). It takes place when two voices compete for dominance creating a point of uncertainty or conflict in the self. Often, the social context provides this dyadic relation with ambiguous signifiers as a catalyst to empower one of these conflicting I-positions over the others, creating new personal chronotopes ("Time-Space Matrix" 109-110).

Brooks's narrative poem "Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi," is a good example of what Raggatt calls reflexive positioning through a micro-dialogue. Though the poem seems to have a third-person narrator, at some point in the poem, the narrator's voice fuses with the protagonist's to represent a new I-position in the protagonist's personal chronotopes.

The poem starts with a white female protagonist trying to set one of her personal chronotope to look like a "ballad." The chronotope represents the well-known story of a white princess, attacked by a "dark villain," and rescued by the white "Fine Prince." The story starts with the protagonist celebrating her I-position as "the milk-white maid, the 'maid mild' / Of the ballad," a position that Western culture "has set her to in the school." This I-position does not stand alone by itself; it has to be rescued from the violence of a counter position, "the Dark Villain" by another white I-position (her husband, or rather the "Fine Prince").

Herself: the milk-white maid, the "maid mild"  
 Of the ballad. Pursued  
 By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince.  
 The Happiness-Ever-After. (88)

This personal chronotope, which "from the first ... had been like a / Ballad," sets the black villain as a counter position whose "menace possessed undisputed breath,

undisputed height, / And best of all, when history was cluttered/ With the bones of many eaten knights and princesses” (89).

Though the protagonist’s main I-position of the “milk-white maid,” tries to reset her self-repertoire in accordance with the ballad as she has been taught at school, something seems wrong. The I-position of the protagonist as “a Mississippi Mother” does not accept the image of the little black boy as a criminal: “But there was something about the matter of the Dark Villain. /He should have been older” (89). The dialogical self-society of the ballad has been interrupted by the image of “the dark villain” who turns out to be a mere child not an adult as it is supposed to be in the ballad. This position of the child does not fit into a dialogical triad of the ballad of a white princess/a white prince/and a dark villain. “The fun was disturbed, then all but nullified/ When the Dark Villain was a blackish child/ Of fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty” (89).

The personal chronotope of the traditional “milk-white maid” ballad is wobbled by the ambiguity of the boy’s I-position as an innocent child. A process of repositioning becomes necessary to rearrange the dialogic relation among these I-positions. The first I-position to be relocated is that of the husband: “It occurred to her that there may have been something / Ridiculous in the picture of the Fine Prince.” The protagonist, here, spots “something ridiculous” about the “Fine Prince,” “rushing / with his heavy companion to hack down (unhorsed)/ that little foe.” As poem proceeds, the I-position of “The Fine Prince,” who was initially portrayed as the heroic figure of the ballad, undergoes a transformation, assuming the “Big Fella” persona, a formidable individual characterized by anxiety and aggression, extending to the protagonist’s own children: “Instantly / The Fine Prince leaned across the table and slapped / The small and smiling criminal” (90).

The second I-position to change is that of the “maid mild / Of the ballad.” In this micro-dialogue, the voice of the speaker is not the white princess anymore; a different voice appears in the poem; a voice of a mother who does not only see the dark villain as an innocent child just like her own “small and smiling criminal,” but sympathizes with him as well:

That boy must have been surprised! For  
These were grown-ups. Grown-ups were supposed to be wise.

.....  
Waited the baby full of tantrums. (89)

While, the “milk-white” maid’s voice is silenced, another voice of a mother takes control of the micro-dialogue in the poem. Through the voice of the protagonist, now a mother, the black boy appears to be shocked and astonished by the exaggerated violent reaction of the grownups. Giving a voice to the boy indicates that the position of the black boy is internalized to occupy a new important I-position in the protagonist’s self-repertoire, almost identical with her own child, “the small and smiling criminal.” Like the black boy, the protagonist appears to be scared, insecure, and weak. Besides being afraid that her husband might belittle her: “For sometimes she fancied he looked at her as though/ Measuring her,” the protagonist feels too weak to protect her own children from the ferocity of their “Big Fella:”

She did not speak. When the HAND  
Came down and away, and she could look at her child,  
At her baby-child,  
She could think only of blood.

.....  
The children were whimpering now.

Such bits of tots. And she, their mother,  
 Could not protect them. She looked at her shoulders, still  
 Gripped in the claim of his hands. She tried, but could not resist. (92-93)

While the positions related to the chronotope of “the ballad” fade away, new I-positions related to motherhood chronotope emerge. In this new chronotope, the white “Fine Prince” is set as an aggressive male counter-position. The black boy together with the protagonist’s children occupy an important inner I-position, while her dominant I-position turns to be an insecure mother, identified with the mother of the black boy: “Then a sickness heaved within her. ... / But his mouth would not go away and neither would the / Decapitated exclamation points in that Other Woman’s eyes” (93). The “decapitated exclamation points in that Other Woman’s eyes” moved into the protagonist to end the poem expressing her hatred for “the Fine Prince,” who appears to be the real source for violence. The last lines of the poem describe the emotional turmoil of both mothers (the black and the white) as if they are one. It is not clear which mother the lines refer to:

She did not scream.  
 She stood there.  
 But a hatred for him burst into glorious flower,  
 And its perfume enclasped them--big,  
 Bigger than all magnolias. (93)

The poem is a process of “reflexive positioning.” The micro-dialogue dismantles the chronotope of the “ballad” and creates a new personal chronotope which includes an I-position of a mother and a counter position of a violent “Big Fella,” while the black boy serves as an ambiguous signifier.

As mentioned before, Raggatt argues that chronotopes emerges either in the story we tell which is a reflexive process, or in our relationships which is a social positioning. While Brooks’s “The Bronzeville Mother,” represents a reflexive positioning, the “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed,” represents a social positioning. In “The Ballad of Rudolph Reed,” the protagonist’s personal chronotope does not change due to some reflexive positioning or a micro-dialogue. The poem rather presents a kind of social positioning where the force of cultural and institutional prescriptions “define and limit the boundaries of the self.”

The poem is a narrative in which the main character, Rudolph Reed, is portrayed as a strong African American man and a devoted family person.

Rudolph Reed was oaken.  
 His wife was oaken too.  
 And his two good girls and his good little man  
 Oakened as they grew. (105)

The first stanza introduces Rudolph’s self-repertoire that consists of different I-positions in a harmonious dialogical relationship. The first chronotope we encounter is Rudolph’s family. In this chronotope, the dominant I-position is that of a strong black loving father who is compared to the resilience of an oak tree. He has his strong black loving wife, and his good strong black children. It seems to be a perfect chronotope for a strong black family.

Rudolph has other personal positions that add to this perfect chronotope. He is a hardworking man whose only dream is to find a decent house where he can live in dignity with his wife and his three children.

I am not hungry for berries.  
 I am not hungry for bread.

But hungry hungry for a house  
Where at night a man in bed

“May never hear the plaster  
Stir as if in pain.  
May never hear the roaches  
Falling like fat rain. (106)

This perfect chronotope stands against external social context of scarcity and poverty that creates Rudolph’s I-position as a guard whose only goal is to protect his own family: “Where never wife and children need /Go blinking through the gloom.” Rudolph is portrayed as a strong man who is ready to defend his family and to fight for his home: “All I know is I shall know it, / And fight for it when I find it” (106).

In Rudolph’s case it is the social racism against blacks that triggers the change of the personal chronotopes. When Rudolph finds his dream house, he does not take heed that it is located in a white neighborhood where he and his family look “oakener/ Than others in the nation” (106). Rudolph’s external social context of a racist neighborhood furthers the dismantling the family chronotope and the repositioning of his self-repertoire.

The white neighbors don’t really welcome the Reeds; first, there is a denial of Rudolph’s right to live in their neighborhood:

The agent’s steep and steady stare  
Corroded to a grin.  
*Why, you black old, tough old hell of a man,  
Move your family in!* (106)

In the beginning of the poem, Rudolph ignores this racism; he externalizes the position of the white neighbors and excludes them from his self-repertoire as he has what he wants, his wife and his three children together in a house where they are “too joyous to notice” this hatred and too busy with their new house with “windows everywhere/ And a beautiful banistered stair/ And a front yard for flowers and a back yard for grass” ( 107).

However, the racist attitude of the neighbors against the Reeds escalates. The neighbors start violence against the Reeds by throwing rocks at their new house: “The first night, a rock, big as two fists. / The second, a rock big as three.”

The third night, a silvery ring of glass.  
Patience ached to endure.  
But he looked, and lo! small Mabel’s blood  
Was staining her gaze so pure. (107)

Rudolph’s sense of joy and security does not last for long when he sees his beloved little child gets hurt. Here, the racial aggressive neighborhood is the “ambiguous signifier” that dismantles the personal chronotope of the family, dominated by an I-position of a peaceful family man, and creates a chronotope of a black man in a racial neighborhood. In this new chronotope, the I-position of a strong “oaken” “fighter,” which used to be a silent counter-position, is now the dominant I-position:

Then up did rise our Rudolph Reed  
And pressed the hand of his wife,  
And went to the door with a thirty-four  
And a beastly butcher knife.

He ran like a mad thing into the night.  
And the words in his mouth were stinking.

By the time he had hurt his first white man  
He was no longer thinking.

By the time he had hurt his fourth white man  
Rudolph Reed was dead.  
His neighbors gathered and kicked his corpse.  
“Nigger—” his neighbors said. (107-108)

Rudolph’s self-repertoire is threatened and faced with violent neighborhood. A dialogical triad is formed resulting in a social positioning and the “rise” of new chronotope in which the strong violent I-position of Rudolph takes control. In this chronotope Rudolph rises as an “oaken” “nigger” “fighter” who takes his neighbors as dangerous enemies and starts killing them one by one, unable to stop.

The development of the character of Rudolph Reed throughout the poem resembles what Raggatt classifies as micro-social positioning where an external power plays the role of ambiguous signifier. The dialogical triad takes place between Rudolph’s I-position of a peaceful ambitious family man, his counter-position of a strong “oaken” fighter, with his racist violent neighbors as the “ambiguous signifier.” The poem ends with a new chronotope of a “Nigger—” who is hated by his neighbors.

### **Conclusion**

Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry serves as a profound embodiment of the authentic African American experience, capturing its intricate dimensions with remarkable depth. Through the application of Herman's and Raggatt's DST and positioning theories, one can see that Brooks’s poetry reflects the complexity of her self-repertoire. Brooks skillfully reflects the expansive range of her own self-repertoire and her distinctive chronotope as an African American poet who embraces both her black identity and her white American self-position, as evidenced by her deliberate utilization of traditional white poetic forms which play the role of “the ambiguous signifier” in this dialogical triad.

Moreover, the characters depicted in Brooks's poetry exemplify Herman's concept of the multiplicity of the self. The protagonists in "Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi" and "The Ballad of Rudolph Reed" exhibit rich self-repertoires comprised of multiple I-positions. These characters navigate various forms of positioning, resulting in diverse personal chronotopes that encompass diverse roles such as a princess vs. a mother and a loving father vs. a fighter. The characters’ dynamic identities undergo positioning processes wherein the I-positions are reconfigured, giving rise to new personal chronotopes. This reconfiguration of the self-repertoire happens through dialogical triads that encompasses an I-position, a counter position, and an ambiguous signifier which is always linked to an external social context. Whereas the poems exemplify different types of positioning processes (social and reflexive), the micro-dialogues among the dialogical triads result in diverse personal chronotopes that undergo continuous change and development exposing dynamic identities.

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