

Lifting Veils: An Interview with Jaki Shelton Green

Jaki Shelton Green is a highly visible figure in North Carolina, putting her many talents to use in a variety of contexts within the state and beyond. Ms. Green is the author of several poetry collections, including *Masks* (1981), *Dead on Arrival* (1983; reissued as *Dead on Arrival and New Poems* in 1996), *Swiss Time* (1990), and *Conjure Blues* (1996). Her play *Blue Opal* and the chapter she contributed to *Pete & Shirley: The Great Tar Heel Novel* (a collaborative fiction project published in 1995) demonstrate the range of her literary interests. Ms. Green also regularly gives dynamic readings of her work and teaches highly popular workshops on the personal and the political aspects of writing. A tireless activist, she sits on the advisory board of a number of arts, education, and social justice organizations—including the North Carolina Arts Advocacy Commission, the Paul Green Foundation, and the Orange County Literacy Council—and maintains a consultancy specializing in nonprofit board training. She has won awards ranging from NAACP Mother of the Year to Orange County Outstanding Professional and Business Woman of the Year. Most recently, in December 2003, the state awarded her the North Carolina Award in Literature, one of the highest civilian honors it can bestow. Carolina Wren Press published a new collection of her poetry, *Singing a Tree into Dance* (2004), to commemorate this achievement.

Ms. Green spoke with me in her home in Mebane for a generous part of the day on May 21, 2004. After serving tea and delicious apple-walnut bread, she answered my questions.

ES: You dedicated both *Dead on Arrival* and *conjure blues* to your maternal grandmother, and several of the poems in *conjure blues*, in particular, reference her or grandmother-figures more generally. I've read that she charged you with telling your ancestors' stories, which led finally to your becoming a writer. How did she become so significant to your life and writing? Were you very close to her growing up?

JSG: I was my grandmother's favorite grandchild. We spent every day together, when I was not in school, during the summer. She was a wild woman. She was fun; she was very tiny and was a woman of the earth, a nature woman. My grandmother could walk outdoors and identify every grass, every tree, every leaf. My grandmother knew when to strip bark and how to use bark, whether you should use the roots or the leaves of a particular medicinal plant. She was always present in a very large way. She loved to fish. She was a gardener. I tell people that she was the first horticulturist that I met. She had an incredible green thumb. She loved

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living things and, like my grandmother, I too love the outdoors and love having living things in the house. She loved beauty. She loved the texture of nice things. So there was that side of her, and then there was the very feminine, girly side of her that came out with the tea parties that she and her older girlfriends would do. That's the openness that I grew up with: open not to fear things that are different. To be a risk-taker. To stand outside of who you are. To widen your lens of how you view your world and how you invite other people's perspectives into that world.

ES: I see all of that in your poetry. So she's a big influence on your work, in that sense.

JSG: I saw her making art. I saw her making art in her yard, her gardens. The way she laid out her Sunday clothes: the suit, the gloves, the lace petticoat, the patent leather shoes—all of the trimmings of what it means to be a woman who is respected and a woman who has self-respect and self-love.

ES: So for a long time, you had this strong female influence in your life.

JSG: Many. I mean, my mother's two sisters were schoolteachers; my mother's middle sister who is still alive—she's ninety-two years old—she went to NYU when women weren't going to college, much less going to NYU. She lived in the International House, back in the forties, then went to Bank Street Teachers' College. One of the joys of my childhood was, in the summer, my uncle Irvin would drive her up to NYU or Columbia or Bank Street, because, back then, black schoolteachers never had enough education. In the summers, when their white counterparts were vacationing at their mountain homes or their beach homes, or visiting family, or just being home having a vacation, Negro teachers, or colored teachers, in the state of North Carolina had to get one more certificate. So here's an aunt who is, like, maybe two hours away from having a doctorate, because of all of the graduate school work she did every single year. For her, it was in New York, so my uncle would drive her back and forth and she would be there for these six-week programs and we would get to "go North" and we would often stop in Baltimore to visit relatives. My summers were just fabulous! Also it was a time when the older women in the neighborhood would congregate on each other's porches and everybody had a front porch. That's why I have an "outdoor living room" [set up in her carport]—it's my front porch and it's where my sister—women friends gather.

ES: These women—friends and family—are so central to your work. Reading through your books, I find pages and pages of these powerful, sensual women, who at times seem to bear all the pain of the world in their bodies. These are not women who reject men, sexually or otherwise, but they constantly seek and find their identity, or maybe their strength, in a matriarchal or maternal lineage or in female communities like the one you've just been talking about. What is the source of these women's strength?

JSG: One source was this incredibly strong sense of community—that these women were all connected by familial relations, or the church. These were women who had birthed each

other's children, who had served as midwives for each other's children! I would say their faith, their sense of who they were. They were women who were poor, many of them were hard laborers, but they were dignified. That dignity itself is a connector. And they never let you forget during hard times, during times of sorrow, during crises, that you were to hold your head up and be dignified. And place, place is very important in how it shows up and how one is raised and views the world. There are so many stories inside of my head, because there are so many people inside of my psyche, many of whom have transitioned, that I want to keep—I want to tell their stories. Not necessarily their stories, but a story of a story of them.

Quilting is another thing that connects these women. There were circles: there was a missionary circle, there were the quilters. My grandmother and her girlfriends loved to fish. Now, they were these little prim and proper, veiled, pill-box hat-wearing, gloved women on Sundays, with their little pearls and their crêpe-de-chine dresses, with their little lace-embroidered collars and their little lace-up pumps. But they loved to fish. I have fond memories of being on fishbanks with them and understanding that they really knew the science of the earth and the waters and what lived in the waters. They could look at the water and tell if the fish were gonna be biting. If the water was too muddy, or if there was too much sun, they knew. They knew—they'd wake up and say "Today's a good fishing day. Cora, get your poles."

ES: You said earlier that you don't want to tell people's stories, but rather you want to tell "a story of their stories." That's a really interesting way of putting it.

JSG: Because I don't know what they would name the truth of their story. I don't want to make it up. I have to tell the story of my story of them.

ES: A lot of people, when they think of art as a means of recording memory, think of it in terms of really "getting down what happened." Your poetry creates a wonderful blur between reality and fantasy, between the day-to-day world and a world of magical, healing possibilities. Do you know how you achieve this effect in your writing?

JSG: I think the question is more about . . . texture. It's a texture of what I see that creates that kind of realm of fantasy. Because as a child, I always felt like I was looking through a veil at everything. I always believed that there was something in between me looking and what I saw. That there was—this is kind of strange—that there was always something there, like this veil, this gauziness. That there was something going on behind what I was looking at. And when you're a child, you realize that's true: you hear your parents talking about one thing, but they're really talking about something else. And photographs speak to me that way. In the other room, there's a photograph of my mother and her girlfriends, taken long ago. There's a story behind that picture. So when I'm writing, it's like I want to turn the words and look at the back side of the words. And that's where I go. I think that what comes back is that texture. A lot of people, the more they put on, the more they reveal themselves. We think of lifting veils, disrobing, dismantling, stripping down to bareness. But for me, I grew up watching the other side of that. The more cover, the more scarves, the more curtains, the more I saw.

ES: Veils and scarves make such a constant theme throughout your poetry. But I'm thinking in particular of your poem "lifting veils," which appears in your new chapbook, *singing a tree into dance*. You use the hijab to connect a woman here, possibly yourself, with an Arabic, Middle Eastern woman. Can you talk about that poem in relation to what you were saying about veils?

JSG: When I think of the hijab, I don't just think of it as a head covering. And as a Muslim woman, I have this conversation frequently, because I don't wear hijab. I do cover, but rarely. For me, it's more the hijab of the spirit. It's not enough to be covered according to a rule and your spirit is just diseased with anger or bitterness or fear or self-pity. So the hijab, to me, is that covering, that skin you show up in every day, and, for me, it should be inviting, it should be embracing, it should be courteous, it should be unconditional, it should be non-judgmental, it should be sweet. That's the hijab that I try to wear, that it is my intention to wear. You know, you can be a scarf-wearing bitch [laughs]—and look very pious. I've always been fascinated with fabrics, with textiles, and what they mean in different cultures. In the South, cotton was king, so if you were an antebellum white woman of means, you had cotton and that was tough stuff! In some cultures, it's silk. In some cultures, it's linen; in some cultures, it's wool. And typically it is women who are working with the natural fibers of the weaving, the making. All of those metaphors kind of show up for me when I'm writing. I try to think of that pen as a piece of a loom or a crocheting needle that's always lifting these veils, and yet, always tucking them back in.

ES: Who has been an influence on your writing?

JSG: Lot of people! [Laughs]. And it's interesting, because every time people ask me this question I say it really wasn't writers.

ES: And that's a completely legitimate answer.

JSG: But in terms of writers, I love Alice Walker. I love Zora Neale Hurston. As a child growing up, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer—the classics. Gwendolyn Brooks. Then I discovered Audre Lorde, [John Edgar] Wideman, Michael Harper. I read a lot—I read everything: *The Axioms of [Kwame] Nkrumah*, Franz Fanon, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. So here I was growing up in rural Efland, North Carolina at the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement—I grew up right slap dab in the heart of it—and it was a time of self-discovery. So I read everything black I could get my hands on.

But I wanted to go backward. There were the contemporary writers like Sonia Sanchez and LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], and I read them also, but I wanted to go back. My grandmother remembered George Moses Horton, because George Moses Horton's relatives were in the AME Church conference that my grandmother was in and she would see his relatives at these conferences and his poetry was always read. So I wanted to go back and to look at the older writers, like Georgia Douglas Johnson and James Weldon Johnson.