



GOING TO MARS: The Nikki Giovanni Project

**CURRICULUM GUIDE
GRADES: 9-12**

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Dear Educators,

Thank you for attending the California Film Institute's DocLands screening of *Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project*.

We believe this film will be a powerful and engaging text to use in your classroom, and these curricular materials are designed to get students to engage deeply with film by the common-core aligned skills of developing an evidence-based interpretation of a text.

The discussion questions on the following page offer a variety of options for fostering small-group or whole-class dialogue. If your students are already familiar with a process of writing evidence-based interpretive essays, consider using the suggested essay prompt for a short writing piece. Additionally, individual handouts for before, during, and after viewing are provided as stand-alone activities to be used individually or in sequence.

Thank you so much for your tireless work!

Sincerely,

The CAFILM Education Team

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the central issues addressed in this documentary? What has changed between the start and the end?
2. What are some surprising facts you learned from this film? How do these facts shape your understanding of the central issue of the film?
3. Does this documentary feel objective and/or balanced in its presentation of the issues? Why or why not?
4. What did you see in this film that reminds you of other stories from your life or other stories you know?
5. Were there any perspectives relevant to the central issues of the documentary that were not included? How would those voices have changed the film?
6. What are some background details you noticed in this film? How do these details provide information about the time or place in which this film was made?
7. Consider other films you've seen. What makes this film unique or important? What are some connections between this film and other films?
8. What did you find most striking or memorable about Giovanni and her poetry?
9. What changes took place in America during Giovanni's life? What events do you think had the biggest impact on her development as an artist?
10. How do the visual and audio elements of the film enhance the viewer's understanding and appreciation of Giovanni's work?
11. Did you recognize any of the other historic figures who spoke in the film? If so, who were they? If not, who do you think they might have been or what are you wondering about them and their inclusion in the film?

INTERPRETIVE ESSAY PROMPT

1. Compare and contrast Nikki Giovanni's approach to poetry with another poet, musician, or artist of your choice. How are their styles and messages similar or different? What can we learn about art and creativity from exploring these similarities and differences?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Nikki Giovanni

<https://nikki-giovanni.com/>

The official website of Nikki Giovanni.

Poetry Foundation: Nikki Giovanni

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/nikki-giovanni>

The Poetry Foundation page for Nikki Giovanni, featuring biographical information and several poems available to read and download.

A Conversation with Nikki Giovanni

<https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-10531/>

A 2022 video interview with Giovanni, recorded for the release of her picture book *A Library*.

Poet Nikki Giovanni On The Darker Side Of Her Life

<https://www.npr.org/2013/10/29/241605794/poet-nikki-giovanni-on-the-darker-side-of-her-life>

A 2013 National Public Radio interview with Giovanni on the program *Tell Me More*, recorded following the release of her poetry collection *Chasing Utopia*.

STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.2

Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. summary of the text.

ABOUT CAFILM

The nonprofit California Film Institute celebrates and promotes film as art and education through year-round programming at the independent Christopher B. Smith Rafael Film Center, presentation of the acclaimed Mill Valley Film Festival and DocLands Documentary Film Festival, as well as cultivation of the next generation of filmmakers and audiences through CAFILM Education programs.

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GOING TO MARS: The Nikki Giovanni Project

ABOUT THE FILM

"The trip to Mars can only be understood through Black Americans." Legendary poet Nikki Giovanni's revelation is a launching pad to an inspiring exploration of her life and legacy. Through a collision of memories, moments in American history, live readings of her poetry, and impressions of space, Giovanni urges us to imagine a future where Black women lead, and equity is a reality. The filmmakers' Afro-futuristic lens honors Giovanni's complexity and transports us on a journey through Black liberation from the perspective of one of America's most acclaimed and beloved writers, a profound artist and activist.

ABOUT THE DIRECTORS: JOE BREWSTER & MICHÈLE STEPHENSON

Joe Brewster and Michèle Stephenson are life partners and a creative filmmaking team who founded Rada Studio in 2006 with a mission: to think radically about storytelling and disrupt the imaginary in non-fiction spaces. They tell compelling, deeply personal stories created by, for and about Black and Brown communities that reimagine storytelling and its impact. The duo draws on reality, fiction, immersive and hybrid forms of storytelling to build their worlds and narratives.



Stephenson and Brewster's feature documentary, *Going To Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project*, won the 2023 Sundance US Documentary Grand Jury Prize, and *American Promise*, won the Jury Prize at Sundance in 2013. *American Promise* was also nominated for three Emmys, and their work, *Stateless*, was nominated for a Canadian Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary. Their magical realist virtual reality trilogy series, *The Changing Same*, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and won Best Immersive Narrative Story at the Tribeca Festival. The project was also nominated for an Emmy in the Outstanding Interactive Media Innovative category; their fourth project to be Emmy nominated. Brewster has been a Spirit Award Nominee, and Stephenson is a Creative Capital Artist. Both filmmakers are Guggenheim fellows and members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science.



BEFORE VIEWING: ANTICIPATION GUIDE

Directions:

Before watching the films, respond to this anticipation guide to consider some of the themes in the film. Read each statement below. If you agree with the statement, explain why in the left-hand box under the Agree column. If you disagree, explain why in the box under the Disagree column.

AGREE	STATEMENT	DISAGREE
	Poetry can serve as a catalyst for social change.	
	Women artists and artists of color face unique challenges and obstacles.	
	Most serious poets, especially poets concerned with social justice, lack a sense of humor.	

DURING VIEWING: EMPATHY MAP

Directions: As you watch the film *Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project*, pay attention to Nikki Giovanni's experiences, thoughts, emotions, actions, and words and record your observations in the appropriate quadrant of this empathy map.

THINK

What might Giovanni be thinking as she experiences various events in the film? What are her core beliefs, values, and ideas?



SAY

What words or phrases, or lines of poetry does Giovanni speak that resonate with you? What messages does she communicate through her poetry or in her conversations with others?

FEEL

What emotions might Giovanni be experiencing during different periods throughout her life? How might she feel about her past experiences, her poetry, or her activism?

DO

What actions does Giovanni take in response to different situations or challenges in the film? How does she use her poetry or activism to create change or make an impact?

AFTER VIEWING: RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Directions:

Respond to each question, referring to specific scenes, events, and dialogue from the film as evidence for your interpretation.

1. What is the significance of the title *Going to Mars*? What does the image of going to Mars mean to Giovanni and what is her interest in space travel?

2. Do you think the challenges faced by Nikki Giovanni as a Black woman in America are still relevant today? Explain your reasoning.

3. What personal connections did you make to Nikki Giovanni's work or experiences? How did the film inspire you to think differently about your own life or community?

4. In one of the early interviews in the film, Giovanni describes that the most important word for her is "duty." What aspects of her life and work reflect the importance she places on duty?

5. Revisit your responses on the Anticipation Guide. Has your opinion on any statement changed? Explain what details from the movie either changed or affirmed your prior knowledge and beliefs.

AFTER VIEWING: FOUR C'S

Directions:

Respond to each prompt in complete sentences, citing specific scenes, events, and dialogue from the film as evidence for your response.

CONNECTIONS

What connections do you draw between the film and your own life or your other learning?

CHALLENGE

What ideas, positions, or assumptions do you want to challenge or debate in the film?

CONCEPTS

What key concepts or ideas do you think are important and worth holding on to from the film?

CHANGES

What changes in attitudes, thinking, or action are suggested by the film, either for you or others?

Adapted from Harvard Project Zero's Thinking Routine Toolbox:

<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/resources/the-4-cs>

EXTENSION ACTIVITY: CONNECTING PAST AND FUTURE THROUGH POETRY

Directions:

In the film *Going to Mars: The Nikki Giovanni Project*, we see how Nikki Giovanni's perspective on the future, and a vision that centers Black women, draws on the social conditions of the past and present. Taking inspiration from her poem "Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea: We're Going to Mars," which is read in the film, write your own poem connecting something from the past to a vision for the future.

Through writing and optional illustration, you will express your creativity and originality while also exploring important themes of cultural heritage and social struggle.

1. After watching the film, reflect on how Giovanni channels her experiences and observations of social issues into her poetry.
2. Think about your own identity, heritage, and community struggles, and the stories or histories that are important to you. Consider how these elements can be connected to a vision for the future.
3. Write a poem that connects your cultural past to a vision for the future, inspired by Nikki Giovanni. Your poem should be at least eight lines long and can be written in any poetic form or style of your choice.
4. Use descriptive language and vivid imagery to convey your ideas and emotions. Think about how you can use literary devices such as metaphor, simile, or personification to make your poem more powerful.
5. Optional: Create an accompanying illustration that reflects the theme of your poem. You can use art materials such as markers or colored pencils to create a visual representation of your ideas.
6. Share your poem and illustration with your class, either through a class presentation or by displaying your work in a classroom gallery.



ABOUT FILM FESTIVALS



An opening night screening at the Mill Valley Film Festival.

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What is a film festival?

A film festival is an event in which multiple movies are presented over the course of one or several days. Depending on the size of the festival, all of the screenings may take place in a single theater or may involve multiple venues throughout a city. Festivals also include special events like panel discussions with filmmakers and actors. Typically, filmmakers submit their works to a festival, where a team of curators selects the best entries for inclusion in the festival. For independent and international filmmakers, festivals are often an important way to raise awareness of a film, generate an audience, and/or attract a studio to purchase the rights to distribute a film in a wider release. Acceptance into a major festival can add significant prestige to a film, with some festival awards (such as the Cannes Film Festival's Palme d'Or) considered among the highest honors a film can receive.

There are many film festivals through-

out the world, with some focusing on particular themes, such as highlighting LGBTQ films/filmmakers, specific cultural groups, or particular genres. While some of the more famous festivals may be in distant locations, there are hundreds of small festivals spread through every corner of the world and, increasingly, festivals are using streaming access to make it easier for the public to view their curated programs.

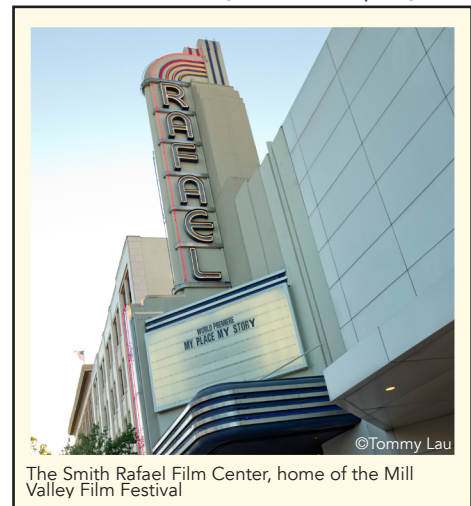
History of the Mill Valley Film Festival

Since founding the Mill Valley Film Festival in 1977, Executive Director Mark Fishkin has shepherded this once small, three-day showcase into an eleven-day, internationally acclaimed cinema event presenting a wide variety of new films from around the world in an engaged, community setting.

The festival has an impressive track record of launching new films and new filmmakers, and has earned a reputation as a filmmakers' festival

by celebrating the best in American independent and foreign films, alongside high-profile and prestigious award contenders. The relaxed and non-competitive atmosphere surrounding MVFF, gives filmmakers and audiences alike the opportunity to share their work and experiences in a collaborative and convivial setting.

Each year the festival welcomes more than 200 filmmakers, representing more than 50 countries. Screening sections include world cinema, US cinema, documentaries, family films, and shorts programs. Annual festival initiatives include Active Cinema, a forum for films that aim to engage audiences and transform ideas into action; Mind the Gap, a platform for inclusion and equity; and ¡Viva el Cine!, a showcase of Latin American and Spanish-language films.. Festival guests also enjoy an exciting selection of Tributes, Spotlights and Galas throughout the program.



The Smith Rafael Film Center, home of the Mill Valley Film Festival

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Questions to Consider:

1. What is the purpose of a film festival? What are the benefits for filmmakers? For the audience? For the community?
2. How might the films at a festival differ from the films available to watch at your local movie theater?
3. What qualities do you think festival curators might look for in a film? If you are watching a festival film with a class/school group, what aspects of the film do you think made it appealing to the curators?

Get Involved!

Many film festivals, including the Mill Valley Film Festival, have student film categories. If you are a filmmaker, explore FilmFreeway (www.filmfreeway.com) for a database of worldwide film festivals where you can submit your film. The call for entries for MVFF opens in late February and closes in June. Youth filmmakers do not have to pay an entry fee. MVFF also offers many opportunities for volunteering. Find out more at <https://www.cafilm.org/volunteer/>.