

Journal of Black Masculinity

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The Journal of Black Masculinity

C. P. Gause, Founder and Editor-In-Chief

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Manuscript submissions, books for review, and correspondence concerning all editorial matters should be sent to: C. P. Gause, Editor, Journal of Black Masculinity, using the contact information below. Manuscripts submitted for publication will be peer-reviewed.

Manuscripts should be submitted in electronic form and should not exceed 35 pages in length (including endnotes and references). Authors should follow the APA Publication Manual, 6th edition (APA Press, 2010). A style guide for preparing manuscripts is located on the JBM website at <http://www.blackmasculinity.com>.

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Breaking Bread with Audre

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Abstract

This project presents an alternative approach for Black women in search of guidance and mentoring from their Black female elders. Traditional methods handing information have shifted, demanding Black women find alternative methods to knowledge transmission. Literature provides one such avenue. By conducting a textual analysis of selected works of Audre Lorde, the author has created a fictional dialogue that uncovers themes and tips to navigate her personal and professional worlds.

You cannot, you cannot use someone else's fire.
You can only use your own.
And in order to do that, you must first be willing to *believe* that you have
it.
(Audre Lorde, emphasis added)

This is the story of how Audre Lorde saved my life. We never met prior to her death, and she didn't even know my name. But, she saved my life. As a Black woman teaching at a southern university and living in the suburbs, I began to feel the intersectionality of my oppressions (Crenshaw, 1989) that threatened to psychologically kill me. I had no idea whom to turn to—who could possibly understand my frustrations? How could I learn to deal with the microaggressions that wear on me every day with the weight of a thousand feathers? Part of my condition was due to my geographic isolation, this much is true. But a larger portion was due to an isolation of consciousness—no longer

having a readily supportive network of friends and colleagues available who understood my viewpoint before I even expressed it. In order to find myself, I lost myself in the writings of Audre Lorde, and in the process discovered my own fire.

Preparing the Meal (Methodology)

Throughout history, in order for Black women to survive their multiple marginality and the resulting tight spaces of their oppression they relied upon faith, social support, body ownership, and unique defense mechanisms (Daly, Jennings, Beckett, & Leashore, 1995; Howard-Vital, 1989; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; St. Jean & Feagin, 1998; Terhune, 2007; Wilson, 2009). These coping methods and strategies were vital in the lives of Black women. They created spaces of support and encouragement within faith communities, sewing circles, civic/social organizations, and in learning communities. These strategies were typically handed down generationally utilizing the rich oral tradition of our ancestors (Bennett Jr., 1988; Daly et al., 1995; Giddings, 1984), and were often included in kitchen table talk, where Black women shared formal and informal warnings and tips on how to navigate the “other” world.

These coping methods are now problematized by the shifting nature of oppression; increased class mobility; greater educational achievement; geographic isolation; and a decline in the sense of community being experienced by some African American scholars as a result of their class mobility (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Tatum, 1987). This has created a void for Black women; particularly, young black women, like myself, who are in the academy and other professions to bring about change, without a foundation in Black Feminist Rhetoric, Critical Race Feminism, Critical Race Theory, and/or Black Feminist/Womanist epistemologies. Many of these women are serving in the role of educator with decreased access to the wisdom and influence of their elders as a guide. This project, for me, provided access to the wisdom and influence of one elder, Audre Lorde, to act as my guide as I tried to make sense of my journey.

Working and learning in environments that continue to privilege empirical data over other forms of knowing, I relied on research to

support and strengthen my resolve to move forward with my vision. The use of narratives, including storytelling, can be traced by from African oral traditions of using storytelling as a way to pass on information and heritage (cite) through current day Black modes of discourse, such as call and response and signifyin (Smitherman, 1977). As a form of research, narratives support the rich nature of humans, and encourage the use of dialogues to allow people to share their stories (Ellis, 2004; Glesne, 2006, Lincoln & Denzin, 1994, 2003). Storytelling is healing, liberating and freeing.

This project interrogated narratives created by Audre Lorde for its usefulness in providing answers to my questions. Lorde, who recognized that “language is also a place of struggle,” wrote to create spaces of resistance. For her (and for me), writing was not an option, it was a necessity. Lorde (2007) states “poetry is not a luxury; it is a vital necessity for our existence” (p. 37). Writing allows me to grapple with issues in safety and security, safely detangling my thoughts, my feelings and my reactions in privacy. It provides an outlet for feelings and thoughts, that threatened to kill me if kept inside. Writing saved me.

Setting the Table (Methods)

I chose books by Audre Lorde that I had read before and somehow “spoke” to me. I realized if I were to gain freedom through this process, I would have to find it in bits and pieces. I re-read all the texts this time stopping and reflecting on words, phrases, sentences, and thoughts that gave me pause. I underlined them all—the words that served as kindling to the fire within my being. If I was so inclined I made additional notations in the margins of the texts. I read a chapter at a time, and when the chapter was complete I pulled out my red journal.

I began my journey towards freedom with my red journal and my favorite fine point black pen. I went back through the chapters of all the selected works from Lorde and hand wrote the quotes that spoke like thunder and the one that whispered ever so lightly to me. I knew this process would be crucial for several reasons. In order to examine the intertextuality of the selected texts, I had to know them backwards and

forwards; scribing also gave me an opportunity to notice the finer details of her writing.

This process also provided the opportunity to notice what words she emphasized, when she chose to capitalize words (white, black, etc); and finally, scribing allowed her words to flow between my mind and my heart. A connection was made as I wrote her very words. The words naturally flowed from my fingers to the tip of my favorite fine point black pen. It was then that I realized that I began to own a piece of it—my inquiry project and the lived experiences of the texts. In between the quotes I wrote my thoughts, experiences and feelings that awakened by the very act of writing.

The process was a long and arduous one. Sometimes it took three hours to document two pages, sometimes after an hour, I had only one line. I repeated this process until I reached saturation in reading, and had completed at the minimum the two texts. Next, I went through the journal and typed the quotes into a word document, again stopping to pause and reflect on the uniqueness of each statement or how it fit within the author's overarching theme. Did her themes "speak" to each other? How would I interpret those themes? Throughout this process it was like I had my grandmother's wisdom once again at my disposal, only this time she was able to give me hints on a new kind of survival--academic.

The typed quotes were printed and read again, this time not only for clarity but also to situate the themes within the larger scope of the project. As I read the quotes, I decided where and how I thought they fit within this inquiry project, sometimes in multiple places, and I made note of that above the quotes in bold letters. Themes were then grouped by similarity, contrast, and intertextuality. This became my data set. From the themes, my notes and my reflections in between the quotes, I conducted a secondary and textual analysis of *Sister Outsider* (2007) and *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde* (2009).

To fully explicate and tease out Lorde's themes, I have written a fictional dialogue, as if I were sitting across the kitchen table from her. This autoethnographic approach (Ellis, 2004) allowed me to engage in a discourse with Lorde regarding topics I felt to be pressing—belonging, survival, and power. This dialogue is a combination of my interpretation

of how Audre Lorde would answer my questions, and direct quotes if she were sitting across the table from me. The information is gathered primarily from *Sister Outsider* (2007) and *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde* (2009). To remain true to the organic nature of this dialogue, there are no citations throughout.

Breaking Bread with Audre

SR: Thank you for so much for giving so much information via your work. Historical coping tools used by Black women continue to shift, and I am searching for ways to continue to survive both inside and outside of the academy. What can you share with me about survival?

Lorde: “The first and most vital lesson [is] that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings.”

SR: What do you mean by that?

Lorde: It is important to recognize that survival, the term, can be viewed as a tool. If you think you’re surviving, you are just getting by. Yes, you may be alive, but in what form? Do you not want to thrive? Will you be brain-dead, your ideas co-opted and used against yourself and our people? Ultimately, you need to decide what survival means to you. For me it “is the ability to encompass difference, to encompass change without destruction.”

SR: That’s right, I guess I never really thought about it, but your work really awakened something inside of me that I think was destroyed—was dead. Survival is complex, and I believe there were parts of myself that I had allowed to die. I was so busy trying to make sure I knew all the rules of the game; I drifted away from some core pieces of me.

Lorde: It is important that you do know the game, “for in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the

language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection.” Given what you’ve told me about your upbringing, time in private schools, hostile college environment, and (congratulations) tenure-track position, you’ve had to learn how to be a little bit like them. Not just to protect you, but also your children. Also your children.

SR: That’s right, you know I had my first child as a single parent in college, and I think I was afraid for her. I’ve always been afraid for all of them, and stuck with my choices. Raise them in the suburbs, or in the “hood.” I hate that I have to make a call on that. Hate it.

Lorde: Being a Black mother is hard, and it’s your responsibility to teach your children how to survive. “And survival is the greatest gift of love. Sometimes, for Black mothers it is the only gift possible, and tenderness gets lost”

SR: Yes, I know. The kids think I’m harsh sometimes, and they often ask me why I am so angry. You know, I tell them, I don’t know any other way to be!

Lorde: As parents, we teach our children continuously, through our words, our actions, and our non-actions. “My mother taught me to survive from a very early age by her own example. Her silence also taught me isolation fury, mistrust, self-rejection, and sadness. My survival lay in learning how to use weapons she gave me, also, to fight against those things within myself, unnamed.” A lot my writing has become healing as a result, and as I note in my essay, “Poetry is not a luxury.” When you are hurt, you need to find a way to heal. Perhaps we are also mourning the loss of our childhood and the loss of mothering; which is a luxury that Black parents just can’t give sometimes, and that we may no longer be able to receive.

SR: I think you may be onto something there. Mourning the loss of a mother is big for me. I haven't lived near my family since for over 25 years, I had to use your advice and "learn to mother" myself. But, even in doing so, I still felt angry . . .

Lorde: And that's fine, feel anger, feel anything . . . you have to allow yourself time for the mourning, the anger, your losses. As Black women we must remember that "the piece we paid for learning survival was our childhood. We were never allowed to be children. It is the right of children to be able to play at living for a little while, but for a Black child, every act can have deadly serious consequences, and for a Black girl child, even more so." You've not been allowed to be a child, and you don't have a mother anymore. So acknowledge, embrace, own your feelings . . . and don't separate them from your mind . . ." Now when males or patriarchal thinkers (whether male or female) reject that combination, then we're truncated. Rationality is not unnecessary. It serves to get from this place to that place. But if you don't honor those places, then the road is meaningless. Too often, that's what happens with the worship of rationality and that circular, academic, analytic thinking. But ultimately, I don't see feel/think as a dichotomy. I see them as a choice of ways and combinations."

SR: Be careful of the "mind/body" dichotomy hooks refers to?

Lorde: Yes, it's better to be angry than to not feel anything at all. You see, feeling is key to your liberation. "The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free." Your freedom, all of our freedom, is wrapped up in feeling . . . connecting and conquering the dark places within our souls we've been to afraid to touch. Anger being one of them.

SR: There's such a negative stereotype on anger, and so many labels on Black women as angry. From a counseling perspective, I love teaching about anger, mostly because it is often referred to

as a secondary emotion. The students immediately disagree, and then we get to the process of learning . . . showing them how to connect the dots! Taking examples of when they were “angry” and having them examine them to find out the underlying emotion—pain, frustration, hurt, jealousy. There’s always an underlying emotion.

Lorde: Anger does get a bad rap, but it shouldn’t. Anger is fine; it’s hate that is dangerous. And to me there is a difference. To me “anger [is] a passion of displeasure that may be excessive or misplaced but not necessarily harmful. Hatred [is] an emotional habit or attitude of mind in which aversion is coupled with ill will. Anger, used, does not destroy. Hate does.”

SR: I think I needed to hear that. I notice you use the word “passion” when describing anger.

Lorde: Yes, it is a “passion of displeasure” –you feel it deeply, passionately. But it still doesn’t destroy you, if you use it.

SR: I think I’ve left a lot of anger floating around in me, unused. Going, with my secondary emotion theory, I would have to say that the bulk of my anger is based on hurt—both personal and systemic.

Lorde: “It is easier to be angry than to hurt. Anger is what I do best. It is easier to be furious than to be yearning.” And, over time and through my reading of The I Ching, I realized that even those things I was angry about—little girls dying, black boys failing, black women hating each other—that I had little control over, I needed to recognize and withdraw. And anger is not unique to you! “Women of Color in America have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say

symphony rather than cacophony because we have had to learn to orchestrate these furies so that they do not tear us apart. We have had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this difficult lesson did not survive. And part of my anger is always in libation for my fallen sisters.”

SR: So I need to find out how to use my anger, all my emotions really, for strength within my daily life?

Lorde: Yes, and one of the first steps will be to love yourself. Attack the “passion of displeasure” with the passion of love. Self-love will mean facing all your feelings, owning them, using them. Defining yourself. Embracing your sisters. Finding your voice. Claiming your power. Understanding the oppression you’ve internalized and swallowed and spit it back up. And reconcile the contradictions that are within you, that are within all of us. Self-love is critical to our survival.

SR: Yes, those are all pieces I feel I need help in, and areas in which I feel our ancestors recognized we needed to work on. When you look at the early work of slave women, writers of the harlem renaissance, calls for action, etc., there was this urgency for change for action—even though not perfect, that is missing now. Now there’s a complacency it seems.

Lorde: It is urgent that we love ourselves. “We have to love ourselves and we (Black people) have to love every piece of our brothers and sisters.”

SR: That’s critical, you’re right. I have to love me. And I have to love my brothers and sisters.

Lorde: “every piece.”

SR: Every piece?

Lorde: Yes, one of the downfalls of the Black community has been homophobia. We can't pick and choose which parts of people we'll love.

SR: I agree. When I was in college, I was . . . ummm . . . different. I had a different perspective on a lot of things. I wore two buttons on my bookbag all through college. One from Brother Malcolm X stating "by any means necessary," and a button of your quote "Silence is the voice of complicity." I always felt that if someone will talk about one group with me in the room, they'll talk about Blacks, women, Latinos, etc. . . . whatever group is their target du jour. I had an interesting experience this summer regarding a choice to be silent or to speak up. I participated in the National Council for Black Studies Summer Institute for PhD students. I was thrilled to be selected, and excited about what I knew would be an intellectually stimulating and enriching think-tank.

Lorde: That sounds like a great opportunity.

SR: For the most part it was, but as we discuss the need for solidarity and self-love, I will share two disappointing pieces.

Lorde: Okay.

SR: The first incident happened when a challenged a "brother" on gay-bashing as he discussed the Harlem Renaissance. This "gentleman" was another institute participant, and, well, over the top. He wanted to be the alpha dog, if you know what I mean. But I was one of the older participants, with a lot of lived experience to share. When I challenged him, he barked back that there were no gays during the Harlem Renaissance, and it didn't matter either way. Then one of the male facilitators says "we're Black first" . . . and the men rally around this. Including a well-known Black male scholar, who was there to facilitate a session later that afternoon.

Lorde: So, in an environment you thought would be supportive of every piece of who you are, you felt attacked.

SR: Yes, it's like you can never let your guard down. Never. Anyway, I resisted. I challenged. I said to the group, that I could not privilege one piece of myself over another piece. And, even if I could, I wouldn't. The room was silent. There were no women facilitators there to support me. The other young women in the room were silent. But afterwards, one by one they sought me out to say that they agreed. And the young man, he didn't speak or look at me for the rest of the conference.

Lorde: That's exactly what I mean. "There is always someone asking you to underline one piece of yourself—whether it's Black, woman, mother, dyke, teacher, etc—because that's the piece that they need to key in to. They want to dismiss everything else. But once you do that, then you've lost, because then you become acquired or bought by that particular essence of yourself and you've denied yourself all of the energy that it takes to keep all those others in jail. Only by learning to live in harmony with your contradictions can you keep it all afloat."

SR: That's how I felt exactly, I felt dismissed. And angry. But I persevered. I wanted to leave, I wanted to run and hide. I questioned myself, you know, no one else is speaking. The next day, a female facilitator led a discussion on Black women's literature, in particular the piece *The Color Purple*. As her allotted time was about to expire, a Black male again spoke up, took over really. He shared his sense of disappointment with Alice Walker for not showing more positive Black males in her novel. His five minute diatribe on this took us right to the lunch hour. Our afternoon session would be led by a man. Again. Something deep within me stirred, and I think I felt the beginnings of the connection you speak of (self-love+voice+feeling=power). Somehow, I felt powerful enough to approach him, someone I once idolized, and challenge him on that statement. But more

than that, I raised the irony that the last voice we heard from during the small section we (Black women) had was a BLACK MALE . . . talking about how bad a Black woman has treated them.

Lorde: Yes, you see once you love yourself enough, find your voice, acknowledge the “black mother” within you . . . you have begun to re-claim your power!

SR: Yea, it was surreal. It was great. Over lunch I noticed the male elders who run NCBS discussing the implications of homophobia, so that was cool. You know, to plant a seed and start discussion. And, as a result of my other observation, we spent an additional hour after lunch allowing my sister to finish up her presentation. It was phenomenal. I felt energized, renewed. And not how I thought I would be.

Lorde: We need those experiences. We need to stand up for and defend our “multiplicities of selves.” “As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as a meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of an externally-imposed definition.”

SR: Yes, your concept of “multiplicities of selves” really resonates with me. I tried to approach this in an earlier paper I wrote, but I used the term “identity” and approached it from a counseling perspective. But you have captured what I was trying to say. That when people force me to choose, interact with only

the piece of me they desire . . . then I begin to feel trapped by those “externally-imposed definitions” and that’s how I developed the phrase “psychological tight spaces” and later shortened it to “tight spaces.”

Lorde: “With respect to myself specifically, I feel that not to be open about any of the different ‘people’ within my identity, particularly the “mes” who are challenged by a status quo, is to invite myself and other women, by my example to live a lie. In other words, I would be giving in to a myth of sameness which I think can destroy us.” So, it’s kind of interesting that you wore that button all throughout college “Silence is the voice of complicity.” If I am silent about who I am, or don’t speak up in defense of others (even if it’s other pieces of me!) . . . I am complicit.

SR: Yes, I finally got that. I still have the button. It’s on a singing frog in my office. It reminds me daily not to leave my voice at the door when I come to work! Now that I work at a HBCU in the south I am constantly reminded that Black heterosexual male privilege rules. There is a belief in the hierarchy of oppression on this campus, and many HBCUs.

Lorde: It is important that we work at abolishing “horizontal hostility.” Although “the tactic of encouraging horizontal hostility to becloud more pressing issues of oppression is by no means new, nor limited to relations between women. The same tactic is used to encourage separation between Black women and Black men. In discussions around the hiring and firing of Black faculty at universities, the charge is frequently heard that Black women are more easily hired than are Black men. For this reason, Black women’s promotion and tenure are not considered important since they are only taking jobs away from Black men.”

SR: Yes, I see that working at a HBCU comes with a unique set of problems, the crabs in a barrel syndrome, if you will. There is

very little room for difference at a HBCU. You Black. Just be Black.

Lorde: Yes, it's true, that there are lots of similarities shared among people who share a cultural background, however "in order to work together we (Black people) do not have to become a mix of indistinguishable particles resembling a vat of homogenized chocolate milk."

SR: I think that's the expectation, and I walk around that campus feeling like an outsider as well. Needing, wanting more from the others on campus. Students, faculty and staff. The campus is without feeling, and in such an environment the pursuit of liberation can be difficult. I am on a campus where, for the most part, feminism is still a dirty word and women are invisible. The other Black women on campus have not formed a community that I am aware of, and as eagerly as I search for survival tools for life; I am also aware that if I am going to maintain longevity in the academy I will also need to develop survival skills, some may be the same, some may be different.

Lorde: In academia, and in life, "the failure . . . to recognize differences as a crucial strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower."

SR: And the "define and empower" must be for all! Black men and women, straight and gay, white women, all.

Lorde: Ultimately, yes. "Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged."

SR: Personal power through difference and connection. No matter what we need each other ultimately. I guess I was hopeful that working at a HBCU would be different. That I wouldn't be invisible and that sisterhood would come. I would build and find networks. We have a lot of Black women in key positions on campus, but they still work twice as hard as the men to prove . . . I don't know what

Lorde: Yes, oh my yes. I am familiar with the atmosphere of HBCUs from my time at Tougaloo. Definitely an interesting dynamic and example of how deeply entrenched the oppressor can become in one's soul. And for liberation, for your survival to get back to your original question, Black women will need to "move against not only those forces which dehumanizes from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves." And remember, survival is about growth and change.

SR: Growth and change. I feel a lot of resistance around this concept. There is fear of change and growth because it's new, it's uncomfortable.

Lorde: Yes, it is uncomfortable, because "change means growth, and growth can be painful. But we sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals. For Black and white, old and young, lesbian and heterosexual women alike, this can mean new paths to our survival." But reaching across difference is so crucial; we need that community, that sisterhood. I often think about how my life would've been different if I had the opportunity to make connections with other women. I am saddened to think about how Angelian Grimke, a black lesbian poet during the Harlem Renaissance, died alone. Isolated. I was across town struggling in isolation at Hunter College. We both thought we were alone, but we could've supported each other, helped each other, and guided

each other through. “I think of what it could have meant in terms of sisterhood and survival for each one of us to have known of the other’s existence for me to have her words and her wisdom, and for her to have known I needed them! It is so crucial for each one of us to know she is not alone.”

SR: That’s what strikes me most about your writing. It reminds me that I am not alone. Your words and your wisdom are here, through your literature, anytime I need them. That’s a powerful piece of the power of language that can’t be denied.

Lorde: You are right, language is powerful, and it can bring a whole community together or tear one apart! But for me “poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity for our existence.” It is “through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.”

SR: So, for you language holds one of the keys to my survival?

Lorde: Yes, for our survival. “Each one of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation.”

SR: “the transformation of silence into language and action.” This phrase reminds me of the Frierian concept of praxis hooks discusses when she talks about her work in the classroom. And, you believe strongly in the usefulness of destroying our silences and finding our voice as a liberatory tool.

Lorde: Yes. Over time “I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made

verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.”

SR: That is one of your more well-known quotes, but it doesn’t diminish its effect, if you really read it. And you use very powerful, deliberate language when you speak and write.

Lorde: I have to. If we are to move through this process we have to recognize that silence and fear are not going to liberate us. They did not liberate our ancestors. They spoke and wrote and ran—with the risk of physical death. For me, for us, we risk a spiritual death if we don’t speak. I am aware that “there are so many ways in which I’m vulnerable and cannot help but be vulnerable, I’m not going to be more vulnerable by putting weapons of silence in my enemies’ hands.”

SR: If I view language as a tool for liberation and survival, then I guess it makes sense that silence could be a weapon. I never really connected those dots consciously, although I think subconsciously I must have, otherwise why would I keep a college button for twenty-five years?

Lorde: Yes, and if you buy into the silence, the obedience, the docility than you become easier to manipulate. You begin to accept the “many facets of our oppression as women.” And for us, for women of Color, we have to recognize that to white women we are the “other, the outsider whose experience is too alien to comprehend.”

SR: Yes, “the other.” I think this describes some of my feelings when I moved into the suburbs, joined tennis teams, went to pre-school playdates . . . with moms that didn’t look like me. No one ever says it. Ever. But I can feel it. I am welcome, as long as I behave. I guess sometimes I feel like the token Black family in our community!

Lorde: Be mindful that the “tokenism that is sometimes extended to us is not an invitation to own power.”

SR: I thought I could belong, if I “played nice.” But daily, I was swallowing things subconsciously; caught up in my world. Tricked by the plate of “equity” placed before me.

Lorde: And that’s not just you. “It is easier for white women to believe the dangerous fantasy that if you are good enough, pretty enough, sweet enough, quiet enough, teach the children to behave, hate the right people, and marry the right man, then you will be allowed to co-exist with patriarchy in relative peace.”

SR: Yes, fifteen years I’ve wasted hoping to be allowed to “co-exist” in “relative peace.”

Lorde: No experience is ever wasted. Without that realization, without having experienced it, you could not be a witness for it. “Unless one lives and loves in the trenches it is difficult to remember that the war against dehumanization is ceaseless.”

SR: Yes, I thought that I could just focus on “making it.” You know, having “the dream.” But I was so foolish! I don’t want the dream, I want my dream. It just didn’t feel right, it was starting to feel forced. Once I got everything the dream said I needed: a husband, a house, cars, cat, dog, three kids. I still felt this emptiness, this yearning to do more. Fulfill my dream.

Lorde: You were indeed feeling trapped. “Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows ‘that is not me’ . . . It is within this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around differences, some of which we ourselves may

be practicing.” It sounds like you realized you were not being true to you, and by doing so and not recognize the ways in which you were privileged you became part of the oppression of others.

SR: And it’s a rude awakening. Although I don’t think I was one hundred percent asleep, for me it was more like a coma. So, I guess it’s been like a re-awakening, a re-birth.

Lorde: Yes, that’s fine. That’s good. You, like all of us, have had to adapt. Now, you must take this experience and use it. Use all your experiences. This is “one of the most basic Black survival skills . . . the ability to change, to metabolize experience, good or ill, into something that is useful, lasting, effective.” Now that you have had the experience, what will you DO with it. You speak of your dream. How will you define that? How will you define you?

SR: How will I define me?

Lorde: Yes, you are in a battle for survival, but before you build your army, your community of support; you have to know your position on the battlefield. You won’t know this until you know you. And if you know you, define you, and then you won’t be swallowed up by other’s definitions of who you should be. It’s something that I had to discover, and then live by . . . that “if I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.”

SR: That’s powerful.

Lorde: And, it’s true! “If we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment.” So, you see it’s not really an option. “As Black women we have the right and responsibility to define ourselves and to seek our allies in common cause.” Once you define yourself, accept yourself, love yourself, you can begin to reach across, back and through to others to build your community of

support, knowing that “nothing [you] accept about [your]self can be used against [you] to diminish [you].”

SR: So self-love, self-definition is another vital component of survival?

Lorde: Yes, and using it then to help you face your fears to build alliances. You will have to learn to be “open and self-protective” at the same time?

SR: How can that be? How can I guard myself while welcoming you in to help me build the community I need?

Lorde: It will take determination and practice, but I imagine you’ve done this to a certain extent in your life already. “Black women who survive have a head start on learning how to be open and self-protective at the same time. One secret is to ask as many people as possible for help, depending on all of them and none of them at the same time. Some will help, others cannot.” “Where does our power lie and how do we school ourselves to use it in the service of what we believe?” It lies within, but you must be in touch with it. You “must be in touch with our own ancient roads in which lies deep power for each woman” and “as we come more in touch with our ancient, non-European consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge, and therefore lasting action comes.”

SR: Thanks so much for taking this journey with me. It has truly been transformative.

Lorde: You are welcome my sister, you are welcome. Remember as you continue on your personal and political journey that “there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new

combinations extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves—along with the renewed courage to try them out.”

After the Meal

This dialogue was an unplanned cathartic experience indicative of an inquiry project. Not only was I unsure of what I would discover at the start of my journey, I did not know exactly how the analysis would look. I started this analysis with an idea in mind to use each theme as a subheading, and explain Lorde’s definition for each of them. Five minutes into the analysis, the dialogue began in my head, and I decided to allow it to flow. This was the right angle to take to explore Lorde, because it was effortless. Lorde’s overarching theme of survival (physical and psychological) is accomplished through the acquisition and use of power. Reclaiming our power involves the following: voice (language, feelings); adaptability; and self-love (self-definition, multiplicities of self, sisterhood).

The theme of power involves finding our voice, embracing adaptability, and self-love. Our ultimate power lies inside each of us, and always has. It lies dormant, waiting for us to recognize, own, unleash and embrace it. What we know intuitively is often counterattacked through dominant discourses that fear that we will find ourselves within ourselves. This view of intuitive knowledge has been termed many things: the Black poet within, mother-wit, and la facultad (Anzaldúa, 1987). Regardless of how we name it, its basic premise remains the same. If we are able to acknowledge, unlock, and use our feelings to connect to our inner power we will find our liberation.

Voice involves the ability to acknowledge your feelings, and address and conquer the fear that keeps us standing still. It also involves destroying the silences the slowly choke us. Lorde (2007) believes that to “suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance” (p. 58), which then places additional power in the hands of our enemies. If we begin to suppress truths, and allow ourselves to be externally defined we begin to accept and become complicit in our oppression as women. Instead of silence, Lorde (2007) challenges us by asking

What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps . . . because I am myself—a Black woman warrior poet doing my work—come to ask you, are you doing yours. (pp. 41-42)

Silence, according to Lorde, is deadly. You may not physically die from it, but you surely will never *live* in it.

Feelings are a large theme in the work of Audre Lorde. As a Black feminist lesbian poet, she disconnected and re-connected with her selves and her community multiple times. All of which demanded she acknowledge her feelings. If we acknowledge our feelings then we can use them to increase our power. We have a finite amount of energy, and if we are consciously or subconsciously using it to suppress truths, we will never discover our full potential.

Whether discussing feelings, or a personal challenge, Lorde (2007) believes that “one of the most basic Black survival skills is the ability to change, to metabolize experience, good or ill, into something that is useful, lasting, effective” (p. 135). This gift will, and has, allowed Blacks and other marginalized groups resistance domination, and create pockets of liberation.

Discovering and using voice demands an engagement in self-love and self-definition. Several of Lorde’s well-known poems reflect the theme of self-definition. Once we have discovered and learned to love ourselves, we will be in a better position to recognize the importance of sisterhood and the damage inflicted when we participate in what Lorde termed “horizontal hostility.” Regarding self-love and acceptance Lorde (2007) states

Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me to diminish me. I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself. (p. 147)

Discovering the power we hold within will only occur when we embrace the multiplicities of ourselves. When we deny, and alter these

pieces, energy that could be used towards our creative missions is dissipated. We need to utilize our energy towards our personal liberation, recognizing any pieces of oppression we have swallowed and fighting to destroy that within us.

With respect to myself specifically, I feel that not to be open about any of the different ‘people’ within my identity, particularly the “mes” who are challenged by a status quo, is to invite myself and other women, by my example to live a lie. In other words, I would be giving in to a myth of sameness which I think can destroy us. (Lorde, 2007, p. 118) It is clear from the quote above that Lorde recognizes the multiplicities of self as an integral part of liberation.

Embracing ourselves will also allow us to conquer the fears that prevent us from embracing our sisters and brothers. In particular, Lorde writes extensively about the importance of sisterhood as a liberatory tool. Lack of sisterhood drains energy that could be used for our liberation. In addition, sisterhood forms a collective groups, a shared well-spring (Evans, 2007), that allows Black women to finally commune and lift each other to freedom. Lorde is not just concerned with a sisterhood between Black women, although she addresses this quite extensively throughout her poems. This is in response to the harsh outsider position she was often thrust into by her “sisters” because of her lesbianism, interracial marriage, unpermed hair, etc. Lorde also writes about and recognized the interdependence of *all* women to reach freedom. She states “interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative” (Lorde, 2007, p. 111).

Clearing the table

This experience has been overwhelming for me. It is like I have met, studied and apprenticed with my sister Audre. The spiritual connection we formed cannot be fully explicated on paper, nor should it be. I own it, it’s mine, and selfishly there are pieces that I need for just me. For Lorde survival came through a grand theme of power, which would be unleashed by discovering our voice (language, feelings), utilizing our adaptability, and recognizing self-love (self-definition, multiplicities of self, and sisterhood).

This analysis has allowed me the opportunity not only to discover more about the impact of the discourse of Audre Lorde's writings, but also about myself and the discourse I am creating with this document. Lorde's themes of personal survival via power continue to resonate with my soul. Her sub-themes of voice, adaptability, and self-love provide several of the necessary tools I need in my toolbox of survival. The dialogue, an organic intellectual experience, allowed me to flush out several main themes and ideas through praxis. As I was writing the dialogue, I was practicing self-love, abolishing silence to reclaim my voice, and learning how to use my experiences to impact my future (adaptability).

I move forward now, armed with new information, a newer perspective and a renewed outlook on life. I will continue to lean on my ancestors for information and strategies, and find comfort in knowing that perhaps someday someone will engage with invite me to dine at their kitchen table.

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Biography

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