

80 | Audre Lorde: vignettes and mental conversations

Gail Lewis

introduction

For my mother and Pat Parker

Audre Lorde, African American, is a writer. She is a professor of English at Hunter College of the City University of New York, where in 1987 she became the first woman to be a Thomas Hunter Professor. So important is she to the students at Hunter that when they established a women's poetry centre there, the students named it after Lorde. She has published thirteen volumes of work and in 1974 her book of poetry, *From A Land Where Other People Live* (Lorde, 1973), was nominated for the National Book Award. She is also a lesbian, feminist and activist poet, who dedicates her work to an acceptance, understanding and use of difference in the struggle to change the world. Seemingly simple, this work is practically, intellectually and emotionally enormous because it involves the creation of new ways of seeing and being from within the interstices, the very fabric, of our current social realities. She is a poet and as such there is both an aural and visual quality to all her works including her essays and biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Lorde, 1982a). The texture of her writing, the rhythms and tones of her voice and the economy, precision, yet multiplicity of meaning of her words, are those of the poet. To fully comprehend her, to *feel* the impact of her work, one needs to hear her, if not in the person then to be able to conjure up her voice. To *hear* how she delivers the words that we can see on the written page.

How then is it possible to write in connection with Lorde in the absence of the voice and when, for much of the time, I find her poems beyond the bounds of my comprehension? Surely it is both audacious and partial, and can only lead to a one-sided and superficial engagement with her work. Well that might be the case if this were an exercise in literary criticism, but it is not. Rather it is part of a longer piece which attempts to critically engage with a small part of Lorde's work. Edward Said defines criticism as the task occupying itself 'with the intrinsic conditions on which knowledge is made possible' (Said, 1983: 182). Clearly this essay is not concerned with this. Rather the impetus comes

from a desire to consider some of the ways in which I, a black lesbian, living in London, converse with and attempt to use Lorde's work when I am trying to come to grips with things that befuddle or concern me. By engaging with Lorde's work in an effort to develop a greater understanding of the requirements of change, my article is a personal tribute to the importance of the work of this woman. Nothing more or less than this.

mothering

It's the winter of 1983, seven months after our mother's death, and my sister, my grandmother and I are in New Jersey to visit my mother's sister. It's good to be in the States; even better to be able to talk with my aunt about my mother's illness and death; and great to see my friend from New York. Somehow being in the country my mother loved so much aids the slow and painful process of waking up to both the reality of her absence and that of her continued and loving presence. My intellect does nothing to help me through, my sensibilities do everything, later I'll be able to make better sense of the Swirl of confused emotions, even the despair. For the moment the need of and comfort from ritual is sharp: a candle in St Patrick's cathedral (much to the incomprehension of my sister and grandmother) and a quiet dinner in an Indian restaurant in Brooklyn with my sister, my friend and some of the other women from Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. Audre Lorde is one of the women. We say hello and proceed to order; we talk about publishing; the state of racism in the USA and Britain; compare Brooklyn to Brixton; the West Indian bakery round the corner to that uptown in Harlem, and proceed to eat. Audre plays mother and we all settle, in varying degrees of comfort and ease, under her wing.

This was the setting in which I first met Audre Lorde, 'founding mother of Black feminism', as a recent radio profile called her (Lorde, 1988), and it is this which structures my memory of the emotions running through that evening. Certainly, memory tells me, there was that curious mix of contradictory feelings often directed towards our mothers – respect, grudging indulgence and deference, irritation and a kind of reticence, as though we were not, for the time being, quite grown up anymore. There is a kind of ambivalence through which, prism-like, our love is projected and refracted. Perhaps this is in part the result of the scrutiny with which our mothers see us and love us. Because the scrutiny of Audre's perception is a necessary and guiding force for her, she engages with us in the same way as this, carefully watching the speakers as she listens, absorbing and considering the things they are saying, watching their movements as if she were 'listening' not just with her ears but with her eyes as well. She once remarked that, as a child, her poor vision resulted in light breaking down into its component parts, giving her an entry into the colour within light (Lorde, 1988). Perhaps it is this which enables her to see the connexions that can lie behind

difference. Certainly it was this poor vision, this physical condition, which led to her intense scrutiny of things and people. Her perception is both powerful and a little frightening.

How then should I write of the relevance of Lorde's work? It feels alien to write of this. I cannot own it, this concept of being a writer, however momentarily. The piece makes demands of me. I must work to produce it (my mother always knew I was lazy but not a coward), and Lorde would expect – no, demand – nothing less than work, than the best of oneself. Like a mother, one might say that she has adopted the concern that we 'make the best of ourselves'. Only for her it is a kind of political motto stemming from the belief that it is through the pursuit of the best of and in oneself that the seeds of change may spring.

For Audre Lorde is a mother. Not only of that multi-faceted complex of black feminisms (we cannot speak of it in the singular), but also in the sense that she has as her concern the construction of futures. One of the identities she owns and uses in the struggle to change the order of things is that of 'mother', and she does so in a double sense. One as a 'real' mother of woman and man children. The other in a metaphorical sense, as a 'mother' of black lesbians, and feminists, and black people and others of us struggling to own the present. Her aim is that our individual and collective futures may be different and not mere repetitions of the current choicelessness. Gods of our own selves is what she would have us be. Ain't that something.

But she does not stop there. In her work she gives us some insight into her view of what the responsibilities accompanying motherhood are and reminds us that what constitutes motherhood is contested territory, a contest in which the combatants are not confined to mothers and children. Rather 'motherhood' is a terrain in which the defining content itself is battled over among mothers themselves:

I can see your daughter walking down streets of love
in revelation;
but raising her up to be a correct little sister
is doing your mama's job all over again,
And who did you make on the edge of Harlem's winter
hard and black
While the inside was undetermined
swirls of color and need
shifting, remembering
were you making another self to rediscover
in a new house and a new name
in a new place next to a river of blood
or were you putting the past together
pooling everything learned

into a new and continuous woman
divorced
from the old shit we share
and shared and sharing need not share again?

(Lorde, 1982b: 56)

Mothers then bear the awesome responsibility of gathering the past into a pedagogical package, not as a means of controlling but rather as a gift from which their children may fashion their own visions, their own selves.

Since then
I can only distinguish
one thread within running hours
you, flowing through selves
toward you

(Lorde, 1982b: 13).

What more beautiful gift for the child, what greater source of joy for the mother?

Listen (as Dylan Thomas says) to the challenge in that. The challenge to those of us who are actually mothers; the challenge to the heterosexist order of things which opposes the categories 'mother' and 'lesbian'. The challenge to those of us whose political and life experience is older, and maybe wider, to both recognize our responsibility to analyse and pass on the lessons of that experience, and yet to work with and learn from those who follow us. For it is only by doing so that together we deliver the possibility of self-determined futures. Since we bequeath what we do today we owe it to ourselves and our inheritors that we leave the best that we can.

It has rained for five days
running
the world is
a round puddle
of sunless water
where small islands are only beginning
to cope
a young boy
in my garden
is bailing out water
from his flower patch
when I ask him why
he tells me
young seeds that have not seen sun
forget
and drown easily

(Lorde, 1978: 45).

Whilst Lorde uses her position as a mother as a metaphor for the responsibilities we have to our collective daughters, nieces, etc., she is also concerned that our sons and nephews are not denied their birthrights and have the possibility of self-definition. In this aspect of her work she challenges black men to take care of business and accept their responsibilities towards the younger generations. She writes:

I wish to raise a Black man who will not be destroyed by, nor settle for, those corruptions called *power* by the white fathers who mean his destruction as surely as they mean mine. I wish to raise a Black man who will recognise that the legitimate objects of his hostility are not women, but the particulars of a structure that programs him to fear and despise women as well as his own Black self.

(Lorde, 1984: 74)

As the mother of her son Lorde tells us that her starting point for achieving this aim is to teach her son to acknowledge, take responsibility for, and respect his own *feelings*. For when, as an adult, the distance between them as man and woman is fully and sharply defined, this lesson will be all he has left of her. It will provide the tools from which he can make his self-definition without premising that on the subordination and oppression of others. What Lorde is concerned with here is the fact that the difference between them as woman and man is a socially constructed one. As such it requires conscious action on the part of those who occupy the spaces 'mother' and 'son' to break down the barriers which, at present, preclude empathetic and respectful communication between them. At present a mother's ability to equip her son with an alternative or subversive discourse within which his views of and relations with women are framed is limited. Other black men, however, can provide a more continuous and sympathetic support system, and it is this work that Lorde challenges them to do. In conversation with James Baldwin, Lorde asked him how he was meeting his responsibility of speaking to the sons of black America. In response Baldwin did not have much to say, despite his tremendous importance as a purveyor of much-needed representations of African-American life in the northern states, which spoke to many of us children of the diaspora.

In asking this question, Lorde generalized the demand many black feminists have been making of those men who say they are concerned with turning the world around, that they take care of intergenerational business. I am not sure if Baldwin's *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (Baldwin, 1985) was written before or after that question to him; either way, perhaps this book was in part one indirect way in which he sought to meet that responsibility. But others have taken up the call. Joe Beam, our respected and thanked brother who died in December 1988, consciously

responded to her challenge, saying:

Black men aren't any less sexist than other men ... and as I look at my writing that's one of my charges, which she (Lorde) has given me. To speak to other black men as best as I can to begin creating a dialogue.

(Lorde, 1988).

Of course Joe Beam was an out and progressive gay man and he knew not only that he owed much to black lesbian and heterosexual feminists for being able to be out, but also that he was never going to be liberated while black women, all women, were abused and battered and oppressed within the hierarchy of relations called the status quo.

Like many of us, Beam was a child of one generation responding to and hoping to extend the work begun by earlier ones, so that the next might follow with ever-broadening visions. But the relationship between generations, actual or metaphorical, is contradictory. Certainly relations between parents and children, if that is the analogy and identity we are adopting, are unequal, and as a result we do often feel ambivalent towards our parents even when we acknowledge and respect what they have given us. So maybe the use of the identity of 'mother' is not unproblematic, even when it is used in the pursuit of transforming social relations.

There are two levels of unease that I have which are at least in part the result of the fact that I am childless and of the age where we resist passing over from being 'young', and anyway have no appropriate rite of passage to entice us. Such is the time and place. My points follow from each other but are not of the same import. The first concerns the extent to which the adoption of the categories 'mother'/'child', older/younger generation, are at once exclusive and reified. Let me expand. Despite the tensions, ambivalences and contradictions within the parent/child relation there is a suggestion of belongingness, of an 'us' and a 'them', and by extension of an 'other' into which 'outsiders', in this case 'nonmothers/nonchildren', fall. Perhaps the use of familial terminology and metaphor has felt comfortable to black people of the diaspora because of our condition in 'the west'. Certainly use of such imagery has served as both a sign of community and a mobilizer to action: think of the action of black women as 'mothers' in defence of the young of our communities in, for example, antipolicing or education campaigns.

But what of those amongst us for whom the label or identity of 'mother', actual or symbolic, not only does not fit but excludes from the orbit of political dialogue? After all, isn't it this dialogue that we hope to achieve? The problem lies in charting a course between stultifying and oppressive assumptions or homogeneity and the equally debilitating and oppressive ascriptions of 'otherness'. What concerns me is the extent to which it is possible to chart

this course towards *dialogue* if one acts according to an identity as 'mother', given that within the relation one is assuming, one is adopting the position of the powerful? I mean, hell, there comes a time when 'children' resent being directed by their 'mothers' and so cannot hear them, no matter what the content of the conversation.

The second point has to do with the strategic implications which derive from the first. If we are adopting familial categories which are contradictory and unequal, how will we achieve the harmonization of community and class that we need to achieve our aims of freedom? How will we even be able to hear and respect the differences in our visions of freedom and the futures we want if we adopt categories as though they themselves were unproblematic? If we want to influence not only people's capacity for fulfilment, but also the way that they think and act (isn't that at least a part of what Lorde challenged Baldwin to do?), then don't we have to subvert and redefine the very identities, which also propel us to action, in order that we may constantly move toward ever-broadening visions of freedom?

A practical example. In Britain over the last fifteen years or so black women have been organizing as women and feminists to change not just the state of race and class relations, but also the state of gender relations within our various communities. More and more women have become involved in that process, coming from various backgrounds and offering a variety of methods and analyses for action. Sometimes it has been exciting, at others depressing, but always challenging. Those of us 'older' women – in the 'mother's' role – often refer to a whole other group of women, as diverse as we are, as 'younger women coming up'. An ambivalent phrase, with at least a hint of condescension. But what I find the most disturbing in this is that we 'older' women sometimes talk and act as though we expect these 'younger' women to follow exactly in our footsteps, adopting the same concerns and tactics, and if they don't then we often tend to dismiss their concerns and *contributions* to black women's struggle and development in this country.

Certainly, after a black women's forum, organized by Sheba Feminist Publishers as part of the 1989 Feminist Book Fortnight, many of the women present, who had been involved in establishing the Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) in the late 1970s, felt an enormous amount of despondency because so much of the discussion was taken up with what they considered basics, things assumed to have been settled once and for all. Obviously one does not want to continually go over old ground, but two things seem to me to arise from this. One is that it is wrong to see the asking of the same questions as repeat performance, because 1989 is not 1979 and the answers we come up with, collectively, will not be the same. Nor indeed will the process by which we do so necessarily be the same. The other is that if we do regard the asking of old questions in this way, surely we absolve ourselves of

any responsibility of examining our past contributions, including the many mistakes we made. I believe breaking down the barrier between those of the OWAAD generation and women who came after us to be one of the most urgent political tasks facing black women concerned with questions of gender and sexuality. I think using Lorde's work can help us move in the right direction, but if not examined closely can also help to lock us in an impasse that we seem to have created.

difference and contradiction

London, October 1987 – The Shaw Theatre is full of black women who have come to hear Audre Lorde. The atmosphere is pregnant with expectancy. Many women contribute to the event which has been organized to celebrate Lorde in aid of Azania. It is a tribute to the work that Lorde and others in SISA, Sisterhood in Support of Sisters in South Africa, have been doing in solidarity with sisters in South Africa (Azania). Though focusing on Audre we celebrate the urge to freedom of the people of South Africa, we celebrate ourselves. Some of us think of other parts of the globe also – Sri Lanka, Lebanon and Palestine, Guatemala – but these are not mentioned. Finally Lorde comes on to read. She includes her poem 'For the Record' (Lorde, 1986: 63–64). It jars. I wonder if others feel as I do: that the only equivalence between Eleanor Bumpers and Indira Gandhi is the manner of the death, nothing else. But who will question her authority?

April 1989, 95 die at Hillsborough. They had wanted to watch football. It was a Saturday – free time, their time. The media, orchestrated by the police attempt to debase them and their deaths: hooligans, drunk, animals, Liverpoolians – the messages are a scourge on our eyes, our compassion. Later the tables will turn, we will know a little more of the truth, and the resurrected humanity of the dead and bereaved will rise to haunt its would-be assassins. The portrayal of people as animals to be coralled and penned, of people to be despised, invokes images of slavery. So does its refusal. We black people know this. We lesbians and gays know this. That day football died. Liverpool died. We died.

Subverting and redefining the politics of 'difference' is Lorde's work. To destroy the mission whereby the many are reduced to the one is the thread which binds her politics, aesthetics, love. The recognition of difference is both a means to begin to undermine the system that exploits and oppresses, and a mechanism through which we might come to know and construct our visions. But more than this, for Lorde a redefined politics of difference is also a strategy for harmonizing, without threat or subordination, the diverse impulses to freedom felt by the oppressed and

exploited. In one of the few essays where exploitation in the Marxist sense is alluded to she writes:

Institutionalised rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion.

(Lorde, 1984: 115)

One is reminded here of the opposition between capital's desire for a pool of easily substitutable and homogeneous labour power and its need to maintain divisions between the suppliers of that labour power, workers. We are reminded of how, outside the 'factory', oppression turns around the loci of dehumanized inferiors, constructed as a hierarchy of oppositions: white/black, male/female, heterosexual/lesbian/gay, old/young, able/disabled. So, in Lorde's analysis, just as the recognition and acceptance of difference outside the 'factory' becomes a way of turning that system of 'seeing' around and replacing it with a system where 'human' difference is joyously embraced, so too inside the 'factory'. Such an approach to the use of difference as a means to unity is particularly pertinent to black people in Britain at the moment. And this not only because, as the identities of 'English' and 'British' crumble, the question of whether we can be both black and 'British' refocuses with particular sharpness. As we carve out black British identities and forms of expression, we have to deconstruct the old and established axioms of our various communities about what it means to be black (a struggle not new to the many black lesbians and gays who have been told that it is not possible to be both) just as much as we have to fight over the terrains of the forms and uses of 'ethnicity' and our rights to civil society and the state. To put it in another way, we are putting ourselves both in (i.e., 'Britishness') and out (i.e., 'Blackness') of the picture as it has been traditionally drawn. We are subverting accepted notions of both what it means to be British and black and redefining the agenda and terrain of black struggle. To paraphrase Lorde, who argues the sentiment in terms of restricting notions of sisterhood, we are moving beyond the pretence of a homogeneity of experience, a notion of blackness that does not exist, whilst simultaneously subverting and refusing the label of 'other'.

For black women in Britain, and especially for black lesbians, this task is both enormous and vital if we are to be able to construct our lives without fear. It is not easy and often it is lonely, for we have to place ourselves within the orbit of concentric circles, unsure which way the forces will pull, and it is tiring. More than this we have to try to do it without giving any ammunition to the power

structure which would have us fight with our own, that would tell us that Hillsborough is not to do with us, and immigration and racism not to do with Hillsborough.

In this Lorde is a source of direction and a source of strength. Moreover she has warned of the costs of silence. She also knows that the task is not simple because the ideological and material hierarchy of dominant/subordinate has eaten its way into the fabric of consciousness held and manifested by the exploited and oppressed. She has described the consequences of our acceptance of the vision of the world given by the powers that be. She has warned us that acceptance of this vision results in us extinguishing the urge to freedom under the delusion of our security in the power system. The essay and speeches in *Sister Outsider* (1984) are all about this, so are many of her poems. Here is one illustration:

Down Wall Street
the students marched for peace
Above, construction workers looking on remembered
how it was for them in the old days
before their closed shop white security
and daddy pays the bills
so they climbed down the girders
and taught their sons a lesson
called Marx as a victim of the generation gap
called I grew up the hard way so will you
called
the limits of sentimental vision.
When the passion play was over
and the dust had cleared on Wall Street
500 Union workers together with police
had mopped up Foley Square
with 2000 of their striking sons who broke and ran
before their fathers chains.

Look here Karl Marx
the apocalyptic vision of amerika!
Workers rise and win
and have not lost their chains
but swing them
side by side with the billyciubs in blue
securing Wall Street
against the striking students.

(Lorde, 1982b: 85–86)

So in equipping ourselves to transcend the history and experience of division, a politics of difference is an essential tool. But sometimes the pain has dulled our sense of self so much that it makes it impossible to respond to the suffering and brutality experienced by others. Why didn't we black people, lesbians, gays, women, rise up as of one voice and condemn the attempt by the police and others to rewrite and justify the tactics used at Hillsborough when it led to so many deaths? Why didn't football fans rise up and condemn the attacks made during the European cup last year in Germany on black, Arab and Turkish people by some of the English who said they were fans? How do we forgive those whom we hold responsible for the pain and turmoil that bloodies our collective histories, so that we can move across the divides and grieve at another's pain and loss, in order that we can act in future to prevent repeat performances?

This vexed and tortuous question is one that Lorde addresses in what is perhaps one of her most profound and beautifully constructed pieces of work – the poem 'Afterimages'. The poem is centred around two events which take place in Jackson, Mississippi, – the lynching of Emmett Till and, twenty-four years later, the despair of a white woman at the destruction of her home by the flooding of a river. In this poem Lorde forcefully reminds us that past atrocities imposed on one people by another lead to enduring destruction. She recreates the atmosphere of terror produced by the media images of Till's murder, veiled warnings to black people that any one of us is a potential lynching victim if we dare to 'step out of line'. But more than this – and this is where the power of the poem lies – she describes the difficulty she has in transcending the memory of pain in order to be able to meet another woman in her time of loss and destruction. Like most of her poems it is not easy to grasp at first, but as one gains entry into it, its force and the horrors of its implications hit you fully. It is a long poem and needs to be read in its entirety, but the first verse conveys much of its overall sentiment.

However the image enters
its force remains within
my eyes
rockstrewn caves where dragonfish evolve
wild for life, relentless and acquisitive
learning to survive
where there is no food
my eyes are always hungry
and remembering
however the image enters
its force remains.
A white woman stands bereft and empty
a black boy hacked into murderous lesson

recalled in me forever
like a lurch of earth on the edge of sleep
etched into my visions
food for dragonfish that learn
to live upon whatever they must eat
fused images beneath my pain.

(Lorde, 1982b: 102–105)

Clearly then, Lorde's work, the questions she asks, are useful resources in our struggle to rise to the task of creating our humanity and to find unity in difference. This struggle is as much about a refutation of essentialism as it is against enforced homogeneity. In this respect I find difficulties in her work. In part this springs from her notion of 'human' difference. Because just as our differences (whether used against us or by us, on their terms or ours) are socially constructed, so I believe is our 'humanity'. Perhaps the only 'essential' element which we all share is that we do indeed construct our humanity, which is why it is diverse and, thank God(!), subject to alteration. Our selves are constructed out of our quest for humanity.

In contrast to this way of looking at things, Lorde talks of 'the human differences between us', 'our human differences as equals', or the 'effects upon human behaviour and expectation', as though what constitutes 'human' is a given, is unproblematic. But just as some of us believe (following Foucault) that there is no prior existence of sexuality outside the social matrix within which we practice our sexual relationships, the same may be true of our humanness. That is, that one of the forms in which we enact or construct our humanity is through the production and reproduction of differences. To say this is to suggest that we come to terms with and use differences amongst us not to reveal human essences once the layers of oppression have been lifted, but in order to construct visions of what our humanities might become. If, as a collectivity, black people in Britain respond to the slander of the Hillsborough people with a ringing condemnation of the slanderers, *in spite* of the racism of some of the terraces, *in spite* of the terror that some of those who went to Germany last year imposed on black people, are we not constructing our humanity rather than expressing it? When any group takes up the fight of those deemed to be 'not us', do they not do the same? It may be that such responses are mobilized by a recognition of the connections which arise from the fact that many of us are different from 'the mythical norm' (Lorde, 1984: 116), but that mobilization is not an indication of an essential humanity. In the end love and security are just as constructed as hate and fear. People then, in all the diverse forms of humanity, have to be historicized, socialized and politicized, and this is a process not an essence.

Lorde is at times aware of this, as her frequent criticism of white feminists who believe that their experience and analysis is the one which is constitutive of

'womanhood' shows. But in her critique she stops just short of challenging the category 'woman', and suggests that all that is needed is for 'woman' to be racialized (or for that matter 'black' to be gendered) and sexualized along a continuum of sexual orientations. Of course this limitation is, I think, something that many of us black feminists, on both sides of the Atlantic, have shared. The time has come for us to try and move beyond it. In Lorde's schema the category 'woman' will simply be given greater depth and breadth – but it will not be deconstructed and redefined. The agenda will not be radically reconstituted. This quote from "'Age, Race, Class, and Sex.'" Women Redefining Difference', shows what I am talking about:

As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of color become 'other', the outsider whose experience and tradition is too 'alien' to comprehend. An example of this is the signal absence of the experience of women of color as a resource for women's studies courses.... This is a very complex question, but I believe one of the reasons white women have such difficulty reading Black women's work is because of their reluctance to see Black women as women and different from themselves. To examine Black women's literature effectively requires that we be seen as whole people in our actual complexities – as individuals, as women, as human – rather than as one of those problematic but familiar stereotypes provided in this society in place of genuine images of Black women.

(Lorde, 1984: 117–118)

Perhaps my point becomes a little clearer if we concentrate on her reference to 'genuine images of Black women'. For surely the question is begged as to what such images would be. Images of black women cleaners, nurses or conductresses? Militant black women confronting fascists and racists? Black lesbians sporting some of the more problematic SM regalia such as slave/mistress? Battered black women? Black mother, girls, academics? Exactly what is a 'genuine image' and, beyond anatomical constants, how do these relate to the construction of diverse and self-defined womanhoods? It is these questions which are raised more than addressed in much of Lorde's work and it is these questions which I feel are as central to our struggle for self-defined humanity as is the struggle against racism, exploitation, women's oppression, homophobia and heterosexism.

Questions such as these not only help to move us away from essentialism, but also force us to stop seeing all women as somehow equivalent in their position in the world, They urge us to consider how we decide and measure the relationships between women whilst simultaneously refusing to use methods commensurate with the existing power structure. Yet Lorde, despite her exploration of the tenacity of division in 'AfterImages', often fails to distinguish between women who occupy very different and opposing positions within the power structure. This is why the poem 'For the Record' jarred so when I heard Audre read it that October afternoon in London.

Call out the colored girls
and the ones who call themselves Black
and the ones who hate the word nigger
and the ones who are very pale

Who will count the big fleshy women
the grandmother weighing 22 stone
with the rusty braids
and a gap-toothed scowl
who wasn't afraid of Armageddon
the first shotgun blast tore her right arm off
the one with the butcher knife
the second blew out her heart
through the back of her chest
and I am going to keep writing it down
how they carried her body out of the house
dress torn up around her waist
uncovered
past tenants and the neighborhood children
a mountain of Black Woman
and I am going to keep telling this
if it kills me
and it might in ways I am
learning

The next day Indira Gandhi
was shot down in her garden
and I wonder what these two 67-year-old
colored girls
are saying to each other now
planning their return
and they weren't even
sisters.

(Lorde, 1986: 63–64)

I do not believe we are in the business of making equivalences between people because they share the same sex, are both 'colored', and the manner of their death is similar. Rather we need to be looking for a common interest in undermining systems of oppression and exploitation. Yet Lorde, in refusing to allow the memory of Eleanor Bumpers to be lost, seems to be saying that the murder, sex and colour of these two women mean they should occupy a similar place in a popular, self-defined and progressive women's history. But surely the only thing which these women did have in common was a shared biology and death. Nothing

else. One was a poor and dispossessed black woman, subjected to institutionalized humiliation and marginalization. The other, in stark contrast, was the head of the world's tenth industrial power and was responsible for the dispossession, humiliation and marginalization of millions of Indian Eleanor Bumpers.

Gandhi's introduction of a state of emergency led to conditions similar to those currently prevailing under the South African state of emergency. The rights of workers and peasants to organize were suspended, fundamentalist movements were encouraged at the expense of democratic movements, and the Indian economy was further opened up to US investment and control. In addition to this we should never forget that Indira Gandhi was in power when the programme of enforced sterilization was introduced in the 1970s in which ten million women and men were sterilized. Gandhi may have been martyred by her death but this does not negate the fact she was an enemy of the Eleanor Bumpers of this world. That both were murdered does not make them socially equivalent. Those of us who wish to urge the move towards freedom along, to make the conditions for self-definition and control possible, cannot be in the business of applauding, however subtly or indirectly, women who because of their own place in the power structure, stand against us in this.

Despite tendencies to essentialism, Audre Lorde offers much to progressive feminism, to the struggle for black liberation, and to the general struggle to create a world where difference does not mean subordination, and where the need to eat does not mean exploitation. She offers us her vision of a new world and of at least some of the elements that need to be considered to achieve it. She also challenges us to use her work to push forward in our visions of what we want to be. She challenges us to act, which will include arguing the point, standing up to be counted. But perhaps more important than any of this, she offers us her work as an out and proud black lesbian so that in those moments when we think we are alone, we can know that there is at least one other. Another who dared, and who survived, and who created.

author biography

Gail Lewis is thirty-eight, lives in London and has been involved in black and feminist politics for many years.

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