

**“blessed within my selves”:**

## The Prophetic Visions of Our Lorde

**Flávia Santos de Araújo**

Smith College

### CONTACT:

Flávia Santos de Araújo, Smith College, Northampton, MA.  
fsantosdearaujo@smith.edu

To cite this article:

[Flávia Santos de Araújo. ““blessed within my selves”: The Prophetic Visions of Our Lorde.” *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women’s and Gender Studies*, Fall 2019, vol. 20, pp. 8-31]

### ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the intellectual and poetic work of Audre Lorde and its significance for contemporary global movements for liberation. My discussion considers Lorde’s theorizing of difference and power, as well as her poetic work, as prophetic interventions within the context of the 1960s to the early 1990s. I argue that Lorde’s intellectual and literary work is the result of a black woman’s embodied experiences within the intersections of many struggles—notably, the ones against racism, sexism, and homophobia. This strategic positionality becomes, as I discuss, the centrality of Lorde’s prophetic vision of collective and inclusive liberation: one that permeates past and current movements for freedom across the Americas, influencing contemporary practices of international solidarity and the formation of black feminist thought. Finally, as a framework, this essay shows that Lorde’s prophetic vision—one that is born within a larger context of black diasporic feminist imaginary—teaches us crucial lessons on the decolonial practices and methods embedded in black women’s intellectual and artistic work.

**Keywords:** Audre Lorde, black diasporic feminist thought, poetry.

I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is any one of you.

- Audre Lorde

---

In the evening of March 14, 2018, as I worked in my home office in New England, Facebook notified me of a live streaming event. It was Rio de Janeiro’s council member and human rights activist, Marielle Franco, leading a panel discussion titled “Jovens Negras Movendo as Estruturas” (“Young Black Women Changing Power Structures”). As an elected politician with a radical democratic and feminist agenda, Marielle Franco represented for many (including me) a voice of hope; a voice of denunciation of the atrocities committed by state-sanctioned forces against black and poor people in the *favelas*. I was gladly distracted from my writing into watching that amazing panel. Toward the end of the discussion, Franco chose to conclude by reading the quote in the epigraph from Audre Lorde’s “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” (2007e, p.132). I turned off my computer, knowing Lorde’s prophetic words, reverberating through Franco’s lips, announced new days for Brasil—a renewed leadership of black women in the political scenario and their ancestral desire for justice. The next day, I woke up to the news that Marielle Franco had been brutally assassinated later that night in her car, as she was being taken home by her driver Anderson Gomes, also murdered, in what appears to be a planned attack in the streets of Rio (Araújo, 2018, p. 207-11).

For the next several days, I grieved and angered for the injustice of Franco’s assassination, with thousands of people in Brazil

and all over the world (Caldwell et al., 2018). I also dove into a deep reflection upon the significance of that event for the struggle for liberation, as well as the connections between Franco's political trajectory and Lorde's radicalism. Without a doubt, Franco was a threat to many powerful, violent, and corrupt factions. Her investigations of human rights violations perpetrated in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro resulted in strong indications of the involvement of sectors of the state and federal political leadership and corporative interests with criminal affairs. It is now revealed that the threats to her safety were mounting. But Franco was not afraid. Lorde's words, re-signified by Franco in what would be her last public appearance, signaled the force of a liberatory message across national boundaries, contexts, and realities. This essay follows the impulse of my reflections on the legacy of the radical work of black women activists, intellectuals, and artists for the global movement for human rights. I also write this essay during the days that followed the controversial decision of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute to rescind its decision to honor Angela Davis with the Fred Shuttlesworth Human Rights Award, reportedly due to her activism for Palestinian rights. The Institute rescinded the award days after the Birmingham Holocaust Education Center sent a letter urging the board to reconsider honoring Davis due to her support of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions. The Institute's decision has sparked an open and public conversation about the global solidarity movements for human rights, and the notion of the "indivisibility of justice," as Davis herself highlighted in her response to the Institute's decision (Davis, 2019).

In this essay, I want to offer an analysis of Lorde's prophetic intervention and transnational legacy. I establish that Lorde's intellectual and literary work is the result of a black woman's embodied experiences within the intersections of many struggles—notably, the ones against racism, sexism, and homophobia. As such, the ma-

teriality of that embodiment allowed Lorde to navigate across geopolitical spaces as a “sister outsider,” embracing the contradictions, vulnerability, and strength of a multi-faceted self. This strategic positionality becomes, I argue, the centrality of Lorde’s prophetic vision of collective and inclusive liberation: one that permeates past and current movements, influencing and shaping the work of those who, like Marielle Franco, desire and fight for the right of being their whole selves in the world. Much has been already said about Lorde’s legacy in shaping black feminist theoretical frameworks, particularly in regard to her conceptualization of difference in her essays, speeches, and activist work. However, Lorde’s poetry continues to be regarded as a matter for literary analysis only, and rarely as an integral part of her theoretical/intellectual framework. I want to highlight Lorde’s use of language—both in her literary and non-fictional work—as an exercise of the erotic force, as she defined it: in its capacity to allow for an exploration of deepest sources of knowledge within the self. In that exercise, Lorde has created a philosophical understanding of wholeness which centers the experiences of black women and women of color—one that embraces the very complexities these experiences highlight. It is precisely this philosophical understanding, I argue, that made it possible for Lorde’s framework to become so powerful across different diasporic formations.

### At the Crossroads: Audre Lorde and the Notion of Intersectionality

In 1977, Audre Lorde addressed a captivated audience at the Modern Language Association’s “Lesbian and Literature” panel in Chicago, Illinois. The address was later published as one of the essays in *Sister Outsider*, titled “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” and it highlighted Lorde’s examination of what it means

to have a commitment to the powerful use of language to break the silences that immobilize us. In that address, Lorde positioned herself in all her multiplicity:

---

Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am a woman, because I am black, because I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work, come to ask you, are you doing yours? (2007b, p. 41)

---

The fact that Lorde consistently self-defined as a “black woman warrior poet”—sometimes adding the words “lesbian,” “mother,” “teacher” to the sequence—is a personal stance of articulating the many parts of her identity, linking all of them to a broader African diasporic foreground. It is also a political stance to affirm that these many layers are inseparable from her sense of wholeness, her politics, and her poetics. In several of Lorde’s interviews, speeches, and essays, she emphasized her multi-faceted self as a double-strategic move: it placed her own “self” in a dialogic relationship with those located in different positions of power; and, it freed an ostracized, stigmatized, silenced, multiple “self” from the margins to the center of her intellectual and artistic work. This way of positioning oneself in the world is, for instance, what the black feminists who wrote the Combahee River Collective statement in 1977 called “identity politics” (1979, p. 7). In regard to Lorde’s vision, the recognition of her own right to be in her fully embodied “self” corresponds to the type of radical politics the Combahee River Collective had crafted in the 1970s—one that would forever leave its mark in contemporary feminist theory. Even though Lorde rejected the idea that she wrote theory, her conceptualization of difference and power; her understanding of a wholistic form of liberation; and her black feminist diasporic framework are definite contributions to the formation of black feminist thought.

The “warrior poet” navigated various political and artistic spaces throughout her dynamic and productive life, embodying an identity politics that was at times controversial—and always an expression of the poet’s vision of justice and freedom. Her passion fueled her work as it fueled her personal life. Ultimately, her passion nurtured her survival against oppression and against cancer, enabling her to become one of the most prolific black writers in the U.S. of the late twentieth century. As such, Lorde built alliances with multiple social, political and artistic movements and organizations between the 1960s and the early 1990s: the Black Arts/Black Power Movement; the women’s and LGBTQ movements; the anti-apartheid sisterhood in South Africa; the anti-colonialist and anti-militarization movements in the Caribbean; the Afro-German women’s coalition; the Kitchen Table Women of Color Press enterprise—just to name a few. An avid writer, Lorde kept a relentless writing routine that included poetry, speeches, essays, and an engaged correspondence with collaborators, colleagues, and close friends. Lorde’s vast correspondence collection housed at the Spelman College archives of the Women’s Research & Resource Center documents her engagement with well-known black women intellectuals of the time such as Pat Parker, June Jordan, Gloria Joseph, Barbara Smith, and Cheryl Clarke (Betsch & Sheftall, 2014). These epistolary conversations often mirrored essays that would later be published in different versions, even though many still remain as unpublished drafts. Julie R. Enszer (2018) has recently edited a book that gathers the correspondence exchanged between Audre Lorde and Pat Parker over the course of fifteen years. That exchange illustrates how Lorde and Parker were invested in supporting an intersecting vision of black feminist and black lesbian feminist future through community and the literature they were trying to create.

During my visit to Spelman College’s archives, I had the opportunity to identify how Lorde strategized to build coalitions in order

to address controversial issues which, for her, had to be part of social agendas more broadly. As she made her way into the black literary circles in New York in the 1960s, Lorde remarked the resistance she felt from those she sarcastically called “the black establishment writers.” In a letter to Gloria Joseph on January 11, 1978, Lorde reflects upon the beginning of her career as a writer:

---

The fact that I lived in the Village and slept with women (both common knowledge) AND wasn't bothered by either of these facts, or didn't consider them shameful, earned me a position of pariah among the black establishment writers. And that pre-dated my finding my genuine poetic voice (SL, ALC, Box 2).

---

Despite that “position of pariah”—or maybe because of that—Lorde persisted to affirm her place as a black, woman, warrior poet, carving out her status as a “sister outsider”. As such, she collaborated with Langston Hughes, publishing one of her first poems in his edited volume *New Negro Poets* in 1962. Her career, as much as her “outsiderness,” is consolidated in the 1970s after the publication of her first two poetry anthologies *The First Cities* (1968) by Poets Press, and *Cables to Rage* (1970) by Broadside Press, a pioneering Black Arts publishing company of leading U.S. black writers, run by Dudley Randall at the time. Randall, then, becomes one of the few black publishers who Lorde recognized as a literary ally at the time. Despite his patronage, in an interview with Adrienne Rich in 1979, Lorde told the story of how her piece entitled “Love Poem” (later published in the 1973 anthology *From a Land Where Other People Live*) was vetoed by Broadside Press for being explicitly about a relationship between two women lovers (Hall, 2004, p. 60-62). In the same interview, Lorde expressed how she felt about the ways in which homophobia played out in the black community:

---

I was always feeling my back against the wall, because as bad as it is now, the idea of open lesbianism in the black community—I mean, we’ve moved miles in a very short time...But in the early seventies it was totally horrible (Hall, 2004, p. 61).

---

The 1970s marks a period in which black cultural nationalism becomes a strong ideology in the arts and politics of the black movement in the U.S.— an ideology that defined gays and lesbians as threatening outsiders of the black community. In her examination of the Black Power movement era, Cheryl Clarke (1983) criticizes the inability of the “black male intellectuals and politicians” of the time to expand their analytical and revolutionary framework (p. 197). The “failure to transform” on the part of the black intelligentsia resided, according to Clarke, in a failure to examine their own political vision and the ways that vision may have supported the “designs” of “the custodians of white male privilege” the movement wanted to defy (p. 197). In the background of the black liberation struggle, the Black Power (male) intellectuals, Clarke highlights, exhibited in their discourse and praxis “the homophobia of the patriarchal slave-masters” (p. 198).

It is within and against this ideological background described by Cheryl Clarke that Lorde relentlessly positioned herself as a black-woman-lesbian-warrior-poet. From that intersectional position, Lorde theorized about difference and sexual politics and their relationship with women’s struggle for survival and liberation. Locating oneself at those crossroads brought a feeling of isolation, at times, that for Lorde was shared among black women writers confronting sexism and homophobia from within the circle. In another portion of her letter to Gloria Joseph, Lorde talked about the mechanisms of invisibility and isolation black women writers faced during the black literary movement of the 1960s:

---

The frightful isolation of black women who wrote anything else but 'trendy' black poems in the 60s is and will be always a source of pain to me. It is not that the poems were not being written, but that they were not being printed nor read (SL, ALC, Box 2).

---

In her essay "Learning from the 60s", Lorde's analysis of the black liberation movement did not dismiss the crucial contributions those "vital years" made to the existence of black communities, as well as the possibilities the movement opened up for disenfranchised groups (2007f, p. 136). However, her assessment pushed the boundaries of the dominant ideology informing the movement in order to deconstruct its "monolithic solutions to racism, to sexism, and to homophobia" (2007f, p. 136). Lorde defied the ideological limitations of the 1960s movement and its shortcomings in developing an effective work across differences. Furthermore, Lorde's analysis helped expand the boundaries of solidarity practices, adding a bold critique of the issue of difference and power within black organizations.

In her poem "Between Ourselves" (first published in *The Black Unicorn* in 1978), Lorde gives voice to a poetic subject who faces those challenges and limitations, as she grapples with what solidarity really means for black people. The first stanza of the poem juxtaposes two images—one in the past and the other in the present—by using a shared element of liminal location, as the poetic subject finds herself "walking into rooms." First, the image evokes a room with "one or two black faces," and the poetic subject's desire to seek out those few who looked like her, a desire to break the isolation of being singled-out: "... contact or reassurance or a sign/ I was not alone" (Lorde 1997, p. 223). That past experience is then compared with a present moment at which the poetic subject is "walking into rooms/ full of black faces/ that would destroy me for any difference" (Lorde

1997, p. 223). The juxtaposition of these experiences marks the poetic subject’s moment of epiphany—one that illuminates her understanding of herself and of those around her. Lorde’s poem complicates the notion of the black community as a trope for racial solidarity, since, for the poetic subject, being one among many other black bodies does not bring a sense of reassurance or belonging. Instead, it emphasizes other elements of difference used to surveil and ostracize her own sense of being.

In realizing the context of surveillance of her body—and the aspects that make that body different—Lorde’s poetic subject performs what Sarah J. Cervenak identifies as an “enactment of black female philosophical desire,” or a practice of “wandering” (2014, p. 2). Following Cervenak’s idea, I want to suggest that Lorde’s poetic subject is actively engaged with imagining the possibilities of being “stripped of all pretense” (1997, p. 223). In that philosophical wandering, there is a traffic of inquiries: what principles count for the making of black communities?; how is the notion of black solidarity shaped?; who gets to fit into “the words/ of easy blackness for salvation”? At the liminal space of a room entrance, Lorde positions her poetic subject in a productive philosophical crossroads, both contemplative and restless. Definitely, a prophetic moment: “When you impale me/ upon your lances of narrow blackness/ before you hear my heart speak/ mourn your own borrowed blood/ your own borrowed visions” (Lorde 1997, p. 224). The power of these lines relies on its graphic imagery which invokes impalement as a gesture of punishment for outcasts and traitors. The poetic subject projects the inevitable consequence of grief when our vision of community does not embrace a heart-felt listening practice, a genuine and generous curiosity for mutual understanding. At the crossroads of her philosophical musings, the poetic subject writes her own sense of self, while she rejects being written by others. The poem ends with a crucial reminder: “we each wear many changes inside of our skin”

(1997, p. 224). It seems that Lorde's poem signals the philosophical trope in African American culture and politics of the "changing same," at the same time it reveals the multi-faceted and endless possibilities of difference each one of us carries.

Drawing from elements of the Yoruba cosmology—in invocations of the orishas Eshu, Orishala, and Shapona—the poem highlights that "our own borrowed visions" and "lances of narrow blackness" should not become the obstacles for learning to work together across differences. The imagery Lorde uses for the poem is based on deities that promote both creation and destruction; bridges and gaps; healing and disease. Lorde's poetic construction signals the complexities of self and communities and everything inhabiting liminality, the spaces "between ourselves" that can be used for our salvation or annihilation. Here, the poetic voice prophetically declares: "if we do not stop killing/ the other in ourselves/ the self that we hate/ in others/ soon we shall all lie/ in the same direction" (Lorde, 1997, p. 325). In highlighting the question of difference and the need to build coalitions, Lorde's affirmation of her positionality became a key element in her analytical framework of the complex imbrications of sexism, racism, and homophobia. Within this context, Lorde's framework anticipated the work of legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term "intersectionality" in her explanation of the concept in 1989.

In recent times, it is possible to witness how Lorde's legacy has impacted national and international social movements which use the notion of "intersectionality" as an organizational and philosophical principle. For instance, since its beginnings in 2013, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement—initiated by a hashtag and call to action by three queer black women activists, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometi—has resulted in re-conceptualizations of grassroots organizing, becoming a global network with coalitions with Palestinian liberation movements, and other move-

ments against state-sanctioned violence and anti-black systemic discrimination. In her memoir *When They Call You a Terrorist: A Black Lives Matter Memoir* (2018), Patrisse Khan-Cullors highlights how, at age 14, reading Audre Lorde provided her “a feeling of connection and spirit... a center to find myself,” when everything else around her seemed to impose a judgement (if not a punishment) for being black, for being a woman, for being queer (2018, p. 71-3). Khan-Cullors continues to explain how Lorde’s vision of oneness provided her perspective and excitement about “becoming my truest self”—a legacy in the philosophical framework of Lorde’s notion of embodied differences. This acknowledgement seems to resonate with the BLM movement at-large as a queer- and transgender-affirming network, guided by principles of collectiveness, globalism, empathy, and love. In its statement, the movement emphasizes: “we acknowledge, respect, and celebrate differences and commonalities” (“What We Believe,” BLM web), which is a reverberation of what Lorde has affirmed in “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference”:

---

Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation (2007d, p. 115).

---

Other contemporary social movements, such as Say Her Name, engage with the struggle to end anti-black violence, expanding its scope and explicitly addressing intersectionality of gender, class and disability that play out on black women’s and girls’ bodies. In a recent article in *Yes! Magazine*, Kristin Moe outlines a picture of current organizations that uses the concept of intersectionality not only to identify “the interactions between different forms of oppression,”

but also “a way of describing the solution” (2014). Among the organizations cited by Moe, one can see the extension of issues they address and the extension to which they maximize the use of social media to build alliances and foster visibility. Moe’s article cites, for instance, the Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project (Oakland, CA) and the youth-led social and environmental justice organizations at Power Shift Network.

The guiding principles of such movements and organizations reflect aspects of the intersectional work black queer feminists, such as Lorde and those of the Combahee River Collective, committed themselves to developing decades earlier. In fact, Lorde’s considerations of the question of difference and structures of power debunked the falsehood behind the notion of what she called “hierarchy of oppression.” Lorde recognized that any attacks on black people of the diaspora and on women were intrinsically connected with the subjugation of other marginalized populations by a system all of us in society contribute to sustain, in one way or another. In wrestling with what Angela Davis has termed “the indivisibility of justice,” Lorde launched questions that take us beyond theory: “I ask myself as well as each one of you, exactly what alteration in the particular fabric of my everyday life does this connection call for? ... In what way do I contribute to the subjugation of any part of those who I define as my people?” (2007f, p. 139). One of the tools she used to respond to those incisive questions was the poetic language, for “Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless, so it can be thought” (2007a, p. 37).

## The Word of Our Lorde: The Power of Language and the Uses of the Erotic

As a poet, Lorde was profoundly committed to the use of language—its effects and affect. In particular, Lorde’s understanding that language should be used as revelation gives evidence to a com-

mitment to speaking truth to power, “... even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood” (2007b, p. 40). This commitment is also situated within the context of Lorde’s dealing with the probability of cancer and breast surgery—both of which were confirmed at different moments of her life. As a cancer survivor, Lorde became even more aware of the urgency of speaking her truth: it seemed there was never enough time; that poetry, as life, was embedded in a profound sense of immediacy, which shifted her perspective over and relationship with her fears (of rejection, neglect, backlash, and pain). In her 1977 address in Chicago, Lorde’s conclusion was as simple as it was profound: “I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you” (2007b, p. 41). The implications of that conclusion are complex and ever-changing. In her essay/speech, Lorde herself offered another set of questions that generations of feminist activists and intellectuals have been grappling with all along; those questions felt as urgent then as they do now: “What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? 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?” (2007b, p. 41).

Two central pillars sustain Lorde’s poetic project. First, the idea of poetry as “illumination”: a source of light over “those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized” (2007a, p. 36). Thus, Lorde’s poetry is, in many ways, shining light to those ideas she theorized about in her intellectual work—the connections are often seamless. The second pillar of Lorde’s poetic work is the role of the poet as the nurturer of that source of light: the “Black Mother within each one of us”; the visionary who dares to use language to charter that “revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom” (2007a, p. 38). In that sense, Lorde’s poetry-making is

deeply interlaced with her sense of self; her impulse for social change; and her political existence in the face of annihilation.

The urgency in Lorde’s demand for breaking silences and taking action is iconically present in her poem “A Litany of Survival” (first published in *The Black Unicorn*). The poetic structure mimics as a prayer in a call and response format— as the title suggests— with a series of invocations, and invites the repetition of the central verse: “We were never meant to survive” (Lorde, 1997, p. 255). In a kind of interpolation, in-between the repetition of such verse, the poetic voice juxtaposes this statement with contradictory truths about the survival of “those of us standing upon the constant edges of decisions/ crucial and alone/ ... imprinted with fear” (Lorde, 1997, p. 255). The poem becomes, therefore, a reminder of the strength and resilience of “those of us who cannot indulge/ the passing dreams of choice”; an invocation to resistance when “the heavy-footed hoped to silence us” (Lorde, 1997, p. 255). Finally, more than a humble supplication to the Lord’s intervention, our Lorde’s litany relies heavily on the inner power that “can breed futures”— the “instant” and “triumph” of breaking all the silences, in spite of fear.

Without a doubt, Audre Lorde’s inquiries were inscribed within a tradition of black women’s intellectual questioning of the ways black communities, leaders, and movements reproduce patriarchal modes of social life. Before Lorde, black women intellectuals and activists such as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Anna Julia Cooper—among others—questioned what it means to be racially marked black and gendered female within the U.S. social, economic, and political fabric. This legacy has sparked deeper inquiry into the sexual roles assigned to black women, which follow the very patriarchal formulas of exploitation and control the black liberation struggle should dismantle. The socio-cultural contexts of regulation of

black women’s bodies in the diaspora become highly significant in Audre Lorde’s intellectual and poetic work. Her essay “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” represents an important theorizing tool that helps re-define the ontological and epistemological meanings of black women’s erotic power not only in the context of the U.S., but also across the African diaspora. Lorde’s appreciation of that inner source of power—historically, privately, and publicly mis-used and abused—aims at bringing to light the erotic as “a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough” (2007c, p. 54).

It is crucial to note, therefore, that Lorde conceives the notion of the erotic as an element of women’s inner life—a “well” dug into the depth of one’s interiority—available to be explored on one’s own terms, at the service of one’s own liberation (and here, Lorde is particularly addressing women of color and lesbian women). Conceived as such, Lorde’s theoretical framework for the erotic as an inner source of power is, in and of itself, a radical philosophical concept. In its radicalism, Lorde’s erotic challenges the longstanding dichotomy between mind/rationality and body/emotionality, determined by the Western philosophical traditions of the Enlightenment, such as the Kantian notion that the mind shapes and structures human experiences. For Lorde, the erotic is “the energy to pursue genuine change within our world”; it is the “nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (2007c, p. 56). Within that framework, the erotic is as political as it is personal; it is as physical as it is spiritual; it is, at the same time, a resource for self-empowerment and a catalyst for collective change. That is why women empowered by what Lorde conceived as the erotic are so “dangerous” to those systems that oppress them. The erotic remains a source of power for women to regain the courage to explore, with honesty, our deepest feelings and, by doing so, we become less willing to ac-

cept the terms offered by an oppressive system that render us powerless and voiceless (2007c, p. 56). As Kevin Quashie has highlighted, “This philosophical declaration collates true knowing with embodiment, a thesis that reassures Lorde’s celebration of self-centeredness earlier in the book” (2018, p. 75).

Audre Lorde’s deliberate portrayal of eroticism—a woman-centered eroticism, to be more precise—extends to the notion of community building and partnership. Sensuality and sexual desire are included in that notion, but these are not exclusive elements of the ways women build alliances with one another. In *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde’s vision of the erotic as transformative power is imprinted in several poetic constructions that depict scenarios of profound bonds among women in female manifestations of spiritual and political strength. In the poem “Woman” (Lorde, 1997, p. 297), for instance, the female body becomes the imagined and desired sanctuary where material and immaterial needs can be met: “... where I plant crops/ in your body/ an endless harvest.” The specificity where this “house like a haven” can be built—a place between your breasts—connects with notions such as shelter, nurture, and care, all of which may also relate to the idea of motherhood or a female protective figure. But this precious haven of abundance also harbors a beautiful, rich and profound erotic image. The cultivated body of the “woman” becomes the fertile soil from which gemstones are harvested (“where the commonest rock/ is moonstone and ebony opal”), nourishing the poetic subject with pleasure and satisfaction: “giving milk to all of my hungers/ and your night comes down upon me/ like a nurturing rain”.

In fact, in *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde consistently renders images related to planting, gardening, and cultivating the land to refer to cycles, seasons, and changes in the quality of relationships with different female figures. For instance, in the poem “In Margaret’s Gar-

den” (Lorde, 1997, p. 268-9), the passing of time is mirrored by how the poetic subject witnesses the transformations in the inner and outer life of a “sister.” Those inner and outer transformations are reflected in the ways Margaret’s garden is perceived by the poetic subject: a physical and political growth that cycles through blooming season when “protest sprang”; to a “new garden of strong smells” and “aloneness”; to the mourning of “the innocence of beginnings.” The kind of complicity and intimacy that enables the poetic subject to see and feel her “sister” throughout three cycles of emotional state—blooming, in solitude, and in grief—are sustained by the erotic energy invested in this relationship over time, as described by Lorde: a resource “firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (2007c, p. 53). With the same dedication one tends to a garden in all its newness and beginnings; challenges and shifts; in its waiting and trying times, the poetic subject declares to her sister a profound commitment to their ever-changing connection—a declaration that comes full circle in the final lines of the poem: “I feel your sadness/ deep in the center of me.” The poem, thus, becomes a declaration of a witness in full recognition of her sister’s most private struggles and feelings. In this relationship between sisters, the poetic subject evokes an exchange embedded in feeling one another, which is, indeed, knowing one another. The mutual knowledge depicted here is only available through the quality of this exchange—through the use of the erotic as “the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (2007c, p. 56).

Cautiously, Farah Jasmine Griffin reminds us that Lorde’s notion of the erotic is “an important but problematic site of reclamation for black women” (1996, p. 526). Griffin acknowledges Lorde’s pioneering perspective in black feminist criticism—one that claims the erotic as a foundation for resistance. However, for Griffin, unless the historical legacy by which the black female body has been constructed as “over-sexed” is confronted, “it is almost impossible to

construct an alternative that seeks to claim the erotic and its potential for resistance” (1996, p. 526). I agree with Griffin’s assessment, but I argue that this confrontation is already ingrained in Audre Lorde’s rendition of the erotic. In transforming the black female body and liberating the erotic as a source of power and knowledge, Lorde’s conceptualization performs an action of re-definition of what eroticism can be; how it can be used on one’s own terms, at the service of one’s own well-being, and repurposed to social transformation and community healing. Or as Lorde explains: “... allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense” (2007c, p. 58).

Indeed, black women’s bodies have been historically defined within paradigms of impurity, deviant desire, or ungoverned sexual impulse (Spillers, 1987; Omolade, 1995; Collins, 2005). Lorde’s conceptualization of the erotic dismantles those paradigms primarily by centering black women themselves as the agents of their own bodies and desires. Moreover, Lorde’s notion of the erotic as power cannot be confined to the realm of sex or pornography. The domain of the pornographic represents a reductive, manipulative, and trivialized idea of “plasticized sensation” (2007b, p. 53). Limited to the idea of sex, the erotic is made into immediate sensation that does not account for other vital areas of our lives—our work, our capacity for joy, our sense of self, our pursuit of happiness in community.

Different from those historical distortions of the black female body, what we see in Lorde’s work is the use of images that evoke the erotic force as a political and poetic source for empowerment: a force nurtured by a desire for a world truly transformed, where our differences are not used to separate us. Visionary black women of the diaspora have long dreamed that another world is possible. From Audre Lorde to Marielle Franco—and many others before them—

black women of the diaspora have been in the forefront of change, working hard to make that other world come true, sometimes even paying with their lives. Like Lorde, Franco gathered all those intersections of being multiple in the world. It is no wonder she turned to Lorde’s vision to echo her desire for liberation of all of our chains.

## A Final Blessing

Lorde’s (re)imaginings of the world—her prophetic visions—contemplate the possibility of using difference to create another way to understand power: one that considers liberation within the intersections of multiple ways of being; a liberation that is as physical as it is intellectual and spiritual. As the bridge of our differences, the erotic enables us to want and create a world that includes all of us in our whole selves. In the 1970s, Lorde highlighted that it is, indeed, our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate our differences that is the main factor that brings us apart. For the warrior poet, the obstacle relies in our tendency to see difference as threatening rather than an enriching dynamic of human force. As a framework, Lorde’s prophetic vision—one that is born within a larger context of black diasporic feminist imaginary—teaches us crucial lessons on the decolonial practices and methods embedded in black women’s intellectual and artistic work.

As the world currently faces the retrenchment of fascist-like ideologies of hatred and authoritarianism; as we now see the imposition of policies that criminalize forms of existence considered outside of the norm; Lorde’s remarks seem as relevant today as they were in the past. For that reason, I want to conclude by evoking Lorde’s imagery of fragmentation in her poem “Outside” (1997, p. 279-80). In doing so, I also invoke Lorde’s prophetic vision of a world that acknowledges all of our differences and contradictions, but that, at the same time, is able to wrap us all in an embrace. In

concluding, I make this prophetic poem my offering at the crossroads of difficult times; when hope becomes (almost?) an impossibility on the face of death and destruction. Like an *ipadê* in *Candomblé* (an offering to the Eshu at the beginning of religious rituals), my offering symbolizes my own desire (a prayer?) for another world—one that is envisioned in Lorde’s prophecies.

The poem chronicles the poetic subject’s journey from a childhood of “genuine confusion” into the development of a sense of indivisible “parts,” “images,” “shapes,” “pieces,” and “faces.” Here, as the title of the poem suggests, the poetic subject embodies a fragmented self whose image does not fit in any pre-assigned frame. However, Lorde’s poetic subject seems to embrace the notion of the outsider as a strategy that enables self-naming and self-definition. Despite growing up in a “genuine confusion” generated by racial stereotypes, according to which “all things natural are strange,” the poetic subject recognizes her own difference, her blackness, as the “marrow meaning meat” of her “bones confusion.” Marked by a questionable blackness of a mixed-race heritage (“mother bright and a father brown”), the outsider in Lorde’s poem adopts a position of vulnerability as the very strategy to build one’s own sense of self from a deep desire for self-recognition, self-acceptance, and self-love: “... and the pieces I stumble and fall over/ I still record as proof that I am beautiful/ ... for most of all I am blessed within my selves.”

From a voluntary exposure of the tender parts of the self, Lorde’s poetry, as well as her intellectual work, is constantly reclaiming that liminal space as a location of self-empowerment where fragmentations and dislocations are actually part of the whole, materialized in the very existence of the body. Lorde’s prophetic vision reminds us of what it means to be “outside”: it simply means to be human, complex, multiple and yet whole. And isn’t that a kind of blessing?

## REFERENCES

- Araújo, F. S. (2018). Marielle, Presente! *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 17(1), 207-211. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/706752>
- Betsch, J. C., Guy-Sheftall, B. (2014, February 27). Audre Lorde and Spelman College. *The Feminist Wire*. Retrieved from <https://thefeministwire.com/2014/02/audre-lorde-selman-college>
- Caldwell, K. L., Paschel, T. S., Perry, K., Smith, C. (2018, March 23). On the Imperative of Transnational Solidarity: A U.S. Black Feminist Statement on the Assassination of Marielle Franco. *The Black Scholar*. Retrieved from <https://www.theblackscholar.org>
- Cervenak, S. J. *Wandering: Philosophical Performances of Racial and Sexual Freedom*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2014.
- Clarke, C. (2000). The Failure to Transform. In. Barbara Smith (Ed.), *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (pp. 197–208). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Collins, P. H. (2005). *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Combahee River Collective: A Black Feminist Statement. (1979). *Off Our Backs* 9(6), 6-8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25792966>
- Davis, A. (2019, January 9). Statement on the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/notes/angela-davis>
- Enszer, J. R. (2018). *Sister Love: The Letters of Audre Lorde and Pat Parker 1974-1989*. New Haven, CT: A Midsummer Night's Press.
- Griffin, F. J. (1996). Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery. *Callaloo* 19(2), 519-536. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299218>
- Hall, J. W. (Ed). (2004). *Conversations with Audre Lorde*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004.
- Lorde, A. Letter to Gloria Joseph. (1978, January 11). Audre Lorde Papers; 2; 1.1.045A; Spelman College Archives.
- Lorde, A. (1997). *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Lorde, A. (2007a). Poetry Is Not a Luxury. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (pp. 36-39). New York: Crossing Press.

- Lorde, A. (2007b). The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (pp. 40-44). New York: Crossing Press.
- Lorde, A. (2007c). The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (pp. 53-59). New York: Crossing Press.
- Lorde, A. (2007d). Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (pp. 114-123). New York: Crossing Press.
- Lorde, A. (2007e). The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism. In Audre Lorde. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (pp. 124-133). New York: Crossing Press.
- Lorde, A. (2007f). Learning from the 60s. In Audre Lorde. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (pp. 134-144). New York: Crossing Press.
- Moe, K. (2014, April 4). Get Intersectional! (Or, Why Your Movement Can't Go It Alone). *Yes! Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.yesmagazine.org>
- Omolade, B. (1995). Hearts of Darkness. In Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Ed.), *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (pp. 362-378). New York: The New Press, 1995.
- Quashie, K. (2018). To Be (a) One: Notes on Coupling and Black Female Audacity. *Differences* 29(2), 68–95. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-6999774>
- Smethurst, J. E. (2005). *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Spillers, H. J. (1987). Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book. *Diacritics* 17(2), 65–81. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-6999774>
- What We Believe. (n.d.). Retrieve from <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/what-we-believe>

## RESUME

Dr. Flávia Santos de Araújo is a literary and cultural studies scholar. She holds a doctorate and a master’s degree in Afro-American studies from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Dr. Araújo is working on a book manuscript that explores the development of black feminist criticism across the Americas through the study of two iconic black writers: Audre Lorde (U.S./Caribbean) and Miriam Alves (Brazil). Currently a lecturer at Smith College’s department of Africana Studies, Dr. Araújo’s teaching includes topics on U.S. African American literature and culture, African diaspora women’s literature, Afro-Brazilian culture, and black/women of color feminisms.