August 2021

2003 Meridians Journal article “Diving into Audre Lorde’s ‘Blackstudies’” by Angela Bowen

Angela Bowen

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss8/94

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.
Diving into Audre Lorde’s “Blackstudies”

Origins

The subject matter of Audre Lorde’s poetry is wide-ranging, while her poetry is sometimes deceptively simple. Complexity swaddled in a plain covering, it often contains densely packed, overlaid images and verbal pronouncements, her voice persuasively incantatory, as her message enters sideways, coded and indirect, whispering in your ears and echoing in your head. “Blackstudies” (1974b) is one such poem. It speaks on such multi-vocal and polyphonic levels that each time we return to it, we find ourselves glimpsing a different side of an idea or catching the wisp of an image floating into our consciousness from another direction.

Written in 1973 and published in 1974, “Blackstudies” is one of Lorde’s most significant creations because here, more than in any other poem, she exposes poignantly her terror, pain, and vulnerability in ways that were unusual for the “woman warrior,” a persona Lorde had already begun to adopt by the time the feminist world was making her acquaintance. Yet the feelings, which hold her nearly immobilized, are undergirded with the understanding that beyond her fear is a broader and deeper vision of connectedness with all kinds of different people that she has charged herself with conveying to these young people. The reader, then, accepts her truths and encourages her efforts to overcome her psychic nightmares and fulfill her responsibilities to her students. We accompany her into the Black Studies meetings, where she stumbles “awkwardly,” and, understanding her modifying yet useless tactics, we bear witness. And we sit mute and helpless at her bedside as she battles nightmare demons and...
awakens to don her game face to face her daytime duties. My analysis contextualizes “Blackstudies” within two experiences and in a conversation several years after its publication, where Lorde explains the poem’s genesis to Adrienne Rich (Lorde 1984, 90–91). That conversation and additional Lorde works inform my exploration of the poem’s center, its multiple meanings, and Lorde’s process: her purposeful entwining of a personal/political philosophy of poetry with a pedagogy rooted in relentless self-scrutiny; and a commitment to sharing the outcome of that scrutiny to advance her truth-in-poetry ideology. “Blackstudies” demonstrates her struggle to convey her deepest feelings while simultaneously protecting herself from an overabundance of revelation and its consequent punishment.

It is surprising that a poem as significant as “Blackstudies” has received scant attention although some of her collections have been reviewed, among them Fem in a Land Where Other People Live (1973), The Black Unicorn (1978), Chion Poems: Old and New (1982), and The Marvelous Arithmetic of Distraction (1999). Some literary critics who have reviewed Lorde’s poetry include Amiata F. Ati-ram, Chinuovw, and Gloria (Akasha) Hull. In “Living on the Line, Audre Lorde and Our Dead Behind Us,” Hull delivers deep readings of several selections, among them: “The Art of Response,” “This Urn Contains Earth from German Concentration Camps,” and “Sisters in Artes,” Hull attends briefly to several other poems also, and ends by remiscing us to find new, more provocative ways to discuss black women’s poetry (Wull 1999, 150–72).

Mari Evans had begun finding those ways in her 1984 anthology, Black Women Writers (1950–1980) A Critical Evaluation, where her design allows two different critics to analyze each writer’s work. Both essays on Lorde are rather broad. Jerome Brooks critiques several poems, including “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,” categorizing Lorde’s oeuvre—and her life—as a “preoccupation with the male principle and with power” and an effort “to reach the father, to be transformed into him, and to be his likeness, more son than daughter” (Evans 1984, 270). Joan Martin, in “The Unicorn is Black: Audre Lorde in Retrospect” (Evans 1984, 277–91), mentions “Blackstudies” once, quoting ten lines without critique. She also writes briefly about Lorde’s love poems to women, delivering a message that seems to contradict Lorde’s frequent assertions about the importance of her need to speak as an open lesbian, and the power she derives from that choice. Murielw says that Lorde

110 ANGELA BOWER
makes no secret of her sexual preference for women. More importantly, however, she makes it very clear that her sexual preference is her own business, and she offers no apologies for it, nor does she make any attempts at explanations. One's sexual life, as Lorde sees it, is one's own business: personal and self-chosen, as it should be. (281)

On the contrary, Lorde expresses in numerous venues a viewpoint distinctly opposite Martin's, espousing her lesbian philosophy in personal and political terms. Responding to an interviewer who says that in reading Lorde's love poems, "(it) didn't seem to make much difference whether the poems depicted a relationship between two women, two men, or a man and a woman. . . . The poems do not celebrate the people but the love," Lorde promptly disagrees. "I . . . believe that the love expressed between women is particular and powerful because we have had to love ourselves in order to live; love has been our means of survival. And having been in love with both men and women, I want to resist the temptation to gloss over the differences." Negating unequivocally the primacy of heterosexual relationships, she continues:

We're supposed to see "universal" love as heterosexual. What I insist upon in my work is that there is no such thing as universal love in literature. There is this love in this poem. The poem happens when I, Audre Lorde, poet, deal with the particular instead of the "UNIVERSAL." My power as a person, as a poet, comes from who I am. I am a particular person. The relationships I have had were particular relationships. They helped give me my particular identity, which is the source of my energy. Not to deal with my life in my art is to cut out the font of my strength (Tate 1984, 109).

Speaking with Adrienne Rich, she comments on being an out black lesbian:

One thing (that) has always kept me going . . . is a sense that there are so many ways in which I'm vulnerable. . . . I'm not going to be more vulnerable by putting weapons of silence in my enemies' hands. Being an open lesbian in the Black community is not easy, although being closeted is even harder (Lorde 1984, 99).

In the mythic "Blackstudies, Lorde poetically two experiences that occurred several years apart. One was in 1968 when she was teaching at
Tougaloo College in Mississippi during the heady period of growing black social and cultural pride, with its profound effect on black people and certain black students. That proudly proclaimed black consciousness collided with Lorde's philosophies, providing grist for the poem that arises years later from a deep pit of pain, suppressed until it was resurrected and distilled, becoming the well "from which true poetry springs" (Lorde 1984, 36). The second experience occurred at John Jay College (JJC is part of the City University of New York system), where for two years she worked to create and implement a Black Studies Department with other faculty of color, who subsequently shunned her because of her feminism and lesbianism. Lorde was deeply wounded by her colleagues' shunning, having been comrades with a number of them in the late 1950s and early 1960s when they were easygoing young writers, effortlessly living in a utopian conglomerate of progressive, cross-racial brothers and sisters. Not so much rising above their differences as ignoring them, they supported one another through a loose, shifting bohemian network, sharing artistic work, intellectual conversation, romantic relationships, food, friendship and families. In the mid-to-late 1960s when Black Power entered through one door and feminism through the other, Lorde headed toward freedom, expecting that her comrades would never construe themselves within a narrow, one-dimensional ideology. However, most of her male comrades did just that—and punished her until the end of her life for stepping beyond the pale. She tells Adrienne Rich that when a people share a common oppression, they develop joint defenses for survival but when conflicts arise over other differences, as it did between black men and women, the weapons you have forged together against a common enemy can be turned against each other. "It's a fear that I'm still not free of... the fear of the ex-comrade," (1984, 99-100). That fear, threaded thoroughly throughout "Blackstudies," causes her to write some of its sections in a surreptitious code, with the "devils" and "demons" of her terrifying nightmares serving as metaphoric stand-ins for her ex-comrades from the Black Arts Movement, whom she seems to perceive as looking over her shoulder directly onto her writing pad. Nevertheless, coded though her poem might be, she manages to birth it once it reaches gestation, knowing that "at least my words will be there, something to incite thought, activity" (Tate 1984, 105). Indeed.

"Blackstudies" was completed in 1973, five years after Lorde's Tougaloo
experience, and three years after the beginning of a battle that she and her JJC colleagues waged with the administration over the necessity for and implementation of a Black Studies Department—and the subsequent battle among those same colleagues over who should head the newly-won department. In a speech years later, she pinpoints an unspoken component affecting the outcome:

I was a Black lesbian when I helped organize the fight for the Black Studies Department. . . . Because I was fifteen years younger then and less sure of myself, at one crucial moment I yielded to pressures that said I should step back for a Black man even though I knew him to be a serious error of choice, and I did, and he was. But I was a Black lesbian then (1988, 22).

During the skirmish, Lorde’s rumored lesbianism was used to discredit her, but she “proved it on herself” thereafter (lyric from blues singer Ma Rainey’s sly song about loving women) by publishing “Love Poem” in Ms. Magazine in 1974, then ripping out the page and defiantly tucking it to her office door at JJC (1284, 98–99). Although her lesbianism remains omnipresent throughout the poem, unspoken yet felt—validating and empowering a pervasive heterosexism in the same way that Toni Morrison declares the black presence to be always already there within white American literature, though often unspoken, validating and empowering a ubiquitous racism—Lorde chose not to bring it to the surface (Morrison 1993).

Codes and Concealment

Lorde had practiced concealment since age twelve, when she began writing in coded poetry to herself in her journal. Thus, journal writing became a lifelong, almost daily habit—and her first conscious act of truth-telling. Over the years her journal yielded many poems. Lorde scholar Chinonso writes: “Some of her finest poems, such as “Litanies For Survival,” began as journal entries” (Braxton and McLaughlin 1990, 372). In “Litanies,” Lorde lists numerous fears: that “we may never eat again,” that “the sun will not rise in the morning” that “our words will not be heard . . .”; and ends by cautioning us not to remain silent because “we were never meant to survive,” so we need to speak while we’re alive (BU 1997, 255–56). “Power”
articulates her rage about the acquittal of a white police officer who shot and killed a ten-year-old black boy, Clifford Glover, who was walking with his father. Hearing the verdict on her car radio, she pulled over and recorded her reaction in her journal (Tate 1984, 111), her rage fueled by the fact that there was one black woman on the jury, who “...let go / the first real power she ever had,” claiming, “They convinced me” (BOS 1997, 215-16). Glover is woven throughout her oeuvre, appearing periodically as a name, a shadow, his ghost becoming metaphor for all neglected, starving children. In “A Woman/Dirge for Wasted Children,” dedicated to Clifford, she writes: “Centuries of wasted children / warred and whored and slaughtered / anoint me guardian / for life” (BOS 1997, 228). To “...My Daughter The Junkie On A Train,” who, nodding off, cannot hear her lament, the poet can offer only compassion (NTHS 1997, 103). “Mother’s sage” is one of her most frequent poetic choices for linking personal and political responsibility to the next generation. Lorde’s pedagogy, operating beyond the classroom, exuding from the pages of her entire oeuvre, is manifested in the 1973 poem, “For Each of You,” which begins, “Be who you are and will be,” and ends, “Speak proudly to your children / where ever you may find them / tell them / you are the offspring of slaves / and your mother was / a princess / in darkness” (FAWNP 1997, 59–60). Social protest and art are inseparable for Lorde: “...the beautiful words (poetry) had to serve the purpose of saving my life, or I would have died” (Tate 1984, 108). Therefore, she had to force herself to re-live transformative incidents, “distilling experiences from which true poetry springs,” regardless of what that distillation revealed or how she might need to code the resultant poetry for protection, whether of herself or others (Lorde 1984, 86). Her protective device in “Blackstudies” reveals the subterranean level of her fear.

“Blackstudies” is a psycho/sociological study in fear of being rejected by students as an “inauthentic” black woman because of her marriage to a white man; of failing in her attempt to explain her wider vision of the world to students deeply immersed in their 1960s pride of solidarity in “Blackness”; and of the painful shunning she endures (her defiance notwithstanding) at the hands of the Black Arts Movement hierarchy, who are sitting in meetings where she fears speaking (but does so, as she must) because her words will be “shred(ded) ... and wherever they fall” ... denials spring up that she will ... “pay for” (1997, 156). Thus, while admitting freely her fear of the students’ opprobrium through the mantra,
“I am afraid . . .” “I fear . . .,” she is so terror-struck by her colleagues that she can write about them only in a self-protective language that maintains her cover of nightmare demons.

Lorde’s needs were two-fold: to channel her feelings directly into poetry and keep the meaning opaque for protection. She developed this tactic in her youth to thwart her mother, who suspected that Lorde was revealing family secrets, while Lorde suspected her mother of snooping in her journal. This habit of concealment allows her to expel her feelings but often leaves readers in the dark whenever she is hiding something. In the alternating cantos within “Blackstudies,” those where she is writing about her fear of the students’ interrogation are decidedly more transparent than those where she is poetizing her interactions with and feelings about the Black Studies group. When she is writing the poem, five years after Tougaloo, the journal allows her to recapture her emotions and convey the dread she had felt. She tells an interviewer: “My journal entries focus on things I feel . . . sometimes I cannot even read my journals because there is so much pain and rage in them . . . Then (in order for a poem to emerge) . . . it has to be re-felt” (Tate 1964, 117–12).

Having recaptured the feelings from Tougaloo, integrated them into her being, and utilized them in the poem, she sees the experience as pivotal to her teaching and writing but has never revisited there; thus the Tougaloo experience remains a singular event. However, while writing the poem in 1973, she is still working at JC, where the Black Studies meetings occurred (the department now established), and continuing to suffer the same ostracism that gave birth to the nightmares she experienced three years previously—and might still be experiencing even as she poetizes them.

Never having taught until she was invited to Tougaloo, she soon realized that teaching, along with poetry, would be her life’s work. She tells Rich about her fear of telling her students that her husband was white.

But I had to do it if we were going to be able to work together. The only thing I had was honesty and openness. And it was absolutely necessary for me to declare, as terrified as I was, “The father of my children is white.” And what that meant in Tougaloo to those young Black people then, to talk about myself openly and deal with their hostility, their sense of disillusionment . . . was very hard (Lorde 1984, 90).

If Lorde feared telling her students she was married to a white man, how much more frightened she might have been had she felt it necessary to
revealed that she was also falling in love with a white woman right there at Tougaloo. Writing the poem five years after the experience, and even discussing it with Rich eleven years afterward, Lorde manages to convey the feelings, for she had cultivated an ability to “cram out in the world of
the poem for days at a time,” which enabled her to infuse the poem with
the immediacy of the terrifying event which had been gestating within her
until it ripened sufficiently for her to wrench it free and craft the mytho-

Exploring the Title

Combining “Black” and “Studies” into one word and lowering the “s”
forges a connection between the discipline of Black Studies, within or
outside of academia, while it also signifies on blacks’ ways of “studying”
one another. Black people recognize each other’s humanity by looking one
another in the face, just as they have throughout time, even when whites
generally saw blacks not as individuals but as a “vat of homogenized
chocolate milk” (Lorde 1984, 136). Thus, one of the deepest insults one
black person can render another is the statement, delivered with an eye-
roll and a slight turning away of the head or torso, “I ain’t studyin’ you”
(meaning: I’m not even thinking about you; you’re not worth it.). The
students, however, are worth everything to Lorde, so she is studying them
while they study her: this northern black woman, demanding that they
explore their feelings about everything, including Lorde herself, as they
attempt to reach deep within to write the deeply personal poetry she is
demanding from them. In an assignment for the class, a woman student
writes the haiku: “I’m tired of my skin / not for the color but the box it
keeps me in” (Lorde archives, courtesy Spelman College).

Another element in the title may reflect her lifelong yearning for an
“ancestral home,” some “place” that virtually any other group of Ameri-
cans besides African Americans and Caribbeans can claim. Chitosole
addresses this phenomenon:

(Forced displacement of Blacks resulted in a sense of self that often
was culturally contradictory and fragmented in a hostile, dominant
society. The Black diaspora experience required an acceptance of
fragmentation and adaptation as critical to survival (1990, 35).)

116 ANGELA BOWEN
The “Blackstudies” here, then, is her determination to forge a connection with her African heritage: researching ancient myths for more than two decades; traveling to West Africa with her partner and two children in the mid-1970s; absorbing diaspora stories into her being to create new myths of a feminist vision to strengthen herself for the continuing battles.

Concomitantly, her rejection of the patriarchal Catholic religion of her youth left her with the need to formulate a cosmology in which to center her deep sense of spirituality and love of ritual. Creating her own special relationships with the deities, she chose Afrikene as her special goddess. Lorde’s diaspora connection is apparent throughout The Black Unicorn, her mythic African Lesbian Feminist collection of 1978. In “215th Street and Abomey,” the speaker, walking the snowy streets of Harlem, sees Sebouline “printed in the back of my head” (BU 1997, 241). In “Meet,” she bids farewell to an African woman she is making love with: “. . . and I forgot to tell you I have heard you calling across this land / in my blood before meeting / . . . When we meet again / will you put your hands upon me / will I ride you over our lands / will we sleep beneath trees in the rain?” (BU 357). Her yearning for a homeland is drenched in sorrow in “Bicentennial Poem #11,000,000”:

I know
the boundaries of my nation lie
within myself
but when I see old movies
of the final liberation of Paris
with French tanks rumbling over land
that is their own again
and old French men weeping
hats over their hearts
singing a triumphant national anthem
My eyes fill up with muddy tears
that have no earth to fall upon.” (BU 304)

Black Unicorn reveals the extent of her research. When she was writing "Blackstudies" in 1973, having not yet fleshed out the names and origins of her African deities and their specific—sometimes multiple—functions, she wrote imagistically, describing: “. . . blind dancers who balance great
dolls on their shoulders” (1953). However, the 1978 arrival of The Black Unicorn made it clear that she owned the historical/mythological deities sufficiently to channel a aby of them, mostly female, through her consciousness and weave African Orishas into her poetry in meaningful ways that function both poetically and purposefully—playful, punishing, impish, and erotic.

Fathoming the Poem

Lorde divides “Blackstudies” into cantos. Canto I grounds the poem in the major fear she is suffering, with the mantra “I am afraid” showing up four times within five stanzas. Canto II introduces the “devils” and “demons” awaiting her for their nightly episodes. A carefully coded message in III delivers a sly jab at the poet, “A.B.,” who “has written his children upon women.” In IV, she returns to the “demon” metaphor, zeroing in on one whom she calls “their demon father,” leaving the investigative reader to fill in the culprit’s identity. Canto V concludes the poem.

“Blackstudies” begins with the speaker located in an ancient African village, perched in a high place swept by “a chill wind,” apprehensively watching activity on the ground below, while she is also sitting, in the material now, inside a classroom on the seventeenth floor, “bottom pinned to a table,” preparing to face her students, whose impatient presence she feels on the other side of the door as they wait to speak with her. By placing her speaker simultaneously within these two settings, she transports the reader not only between the two locales but also across time, holding us easily in both places throughout the poem. Petrified, the speaker sits gathering her courage to approach the students waiting with “questions that feel like judgements . . .” She fears being seen as a sellout, weak in her “Blackness” because she trespassed the color line. Indeed, her own judgments swirl within her as she “. . . eat(s) perpetual watermelon inside my own head.” The poet’s early admission of her fear and her constant reiteration, “I am afraid,” contribute to a poetry of truth, the words becoming a mantra exuding a miasma of fear surrounding speaker and reader alike.

Lorde employs images linking her to her African ancestry, to mysticism, and to god(dess) lore. However, she distinguishes between what she sees as strong and empowering connections to a noble African past—and by

118 ANGELA BOWEN
extension to the best of her African/Caribbean/American roots—and connections that are dangerous, facile, false. Wanting from her “high perch” in the village, she is “chilled” by the

... bearers of wood
    carved in the image of old and mistaken gods
(who) labor in search of weapons...

She anticipates that the bearers of wood (students), mistrusting old habits for new truths, will use the searched-for weapons against her because they have embraced and now bear the images of those “... old and mistaken gods”: narrow nationalism, segregation, ethnocentrism, fear of differences. The bearers are shaping the wood into weapons that will wound and devastate her silence, withdrawal, rejection, scorn, anger, exorcism...
(153).

As Lorde conveys her sense of terror to Adrienne Rich eleven years after the incident, Rich states: “It must have been particularly hard since you knew by then that the marriage was going nowhere. It’s like having to defend something that was not in itself defensible.” Lorde responds: “What I was defending was something that needed defense. And this moved it out of “I’m defending Ed because I want to live with him.” It was, “I’m defending this relationship because we have a right to examine it and try it!” (Lorde 1984a, 40). However, making that declaration to Rich in 1979 was infinitely easier than making it to her students in 1968. Lorde, as poet, knew that time, in and of itself, did not produce knowledge. That one had to struggle over time to wrest knowledge from one’s often inchoate experience, then share it whenever possible. Thus, Lorde’s speaker declares, “I do not want to lie.” She would not pretend to her students that embracing Blackness would protect them.

... I have loved other
tall young women deep into their colour
who now crawl over a bleached earth
bent into question marks
ending a sentence of men
who pretended to be brave (1997, 153).

The women in the speaker’s universe had put all their eggs into the Blackness basket, believing in men who declared that they knew some-
thing the women did not; now, scarred from the consequences of their
naïveté, they are emerging to question the wisdom of those men who
"pretend(ed) to be brave." Reaching back to her African forebears, the
speaker claims kinship with the ancient myth makers with lines in their
hands similar to hers, storytellers destined to leave legends behind:

The palms of my hands have black marks running across them.
So are signed makers of myth
who are sworn through our blood to give
legend (153)

She is passing along lessons, honoring a pact with the past while creating
new legends that her "children" will pass along one day. Now the poet/
teacher returns to the trope of the cold wind sweeping through the high
place from which the speaker feels herself falling and condemned; even so,
her story (this poem) will live on:

though I fall through cold wind condemned
to nursing old gods for a new heart
debtless and without colour
while my flesh is covered by mouths
whose noise keeps my real wants secret (153-54).

Here again Lorde employs apo-leitana, conveying a multiple message. The
speaker's legend (story, poem) will live although she must pay the price of
being condemned to falling through cold wind and simultaneously con-
demned to nursing old gods to uncover a new heart for herself—and for
those students willing to grapple with growth. She must nurse (heal) these
old gods within the old minds of her young students (emphasis added).
The new heart that she gains for herself and them will be freed from the
burdens of color, free of old debts she never signed for and so is not obli-
gated to pay, and free of old gods she refuses to worship. Noisy mouths
feed on her (growing strong by nursing at her breasts), yammering their
need while her own wants—among them, the erotic love between women
—remain secret. Earlier, sitting upon the table, the narrator spoke of:

young girls assaulting my door
with curse rags
stiff with their mothers old secrets

120 ANGELA BOWEN
covering up their new promise
with old desires no longer their need
with old satisfactions they never enjoyed... (153)

She makes apt metaphorical use of “the curse,” the secret shameful bleeding
that arrived monthly, needing to be soaked up with old cloths, which
stiffened with the blood. Young women, she implies, no longer need to use
these methods; times have changed. The speaker is determined to help
them throw off the “curse rags” of their mothers’ old ways of thinking—
silences, myriad closets, fear of change, hostility to differences—and move
into their own newer possibilities, for she believes that the old desires have
held no more satisfactions for them than for her.

She fears that the students will turn against her the very gifts of ques-
tioning and breaking silence that she has taught them.

I am afraid
that the mouths I feed will turn against me
will refuse to swallow in the silence
I am warning them to avoid
I am afraid
they will kernel me out like a walnut
extracting the nourishing seed
as my husk stains their lips
with the mixed colours of my pain (154).

What complex irony in her being “afraid... (they) will refuse to swallow in
the silence she is warning them to avoid” (emphasis added). She, who has
exhorted them to speak, now fears that they will turn against her the very
outspokenness she has promoted. She has been down this road before,
having learned the danger of training rebels. In one of Lorde’s essays she
comments on her daughter Beth at fifteen, who complains angrily that
Lorde and her partner Frances consider themselves to be so different from
other parents because they are lesbians, but they are just like all other
parents. Lorde points out the difficulty of training children to speak up for
themselves, then realizing that they have learned their lesson so well that
they turn it effectively against you (1988, 45).

Lorde’s struggle to be honest with her students was clashing against her
legitimate fears. Would they be too unyielding—too angry at white
supremacists who drove the Jackson, Mississippi, road shooting onto the campus at will; too enmeshed in the feverish web of their newly-donned Black Power garb; too expectant that she be their iconic black woman messiah—to grasp the suffering and sorrows she had endured in shaping the nuanced tools of self-scrutiny, self-revelation, and willingness to change that she was attempting, at great personal cost, to share with them? Having comprehended from her earliest days that there is no homogenous “Black Community,” Lorde knew also what price she would pay for being the students’ harbinger of complication. The speaker sits pondering, "*, , , choosing the voice / in which my children will hear my prayers above the wind." Returning to the metaphor of her lined hands, by which she designates herself a mythmaker, she sees the students:

unencumbered by the weight of my remembered sorrows
by the weight of my remembered sorrows
they will use my legends to shape their own language
and make it ruler
measuring the distance between my hungers
and their own purpose (1997, 154).

Brilliant power and inconvertible sadness emanate from the echoing effect of the lines, “unencumbered by the weight of my remembered sorrows by the weight of my remembered sorrows... *” In the first line, the reader feels the carefree “children” following the roads without the weight of the narrator’s sorrows hanging over them, but immediately throwing off the word “unencumbered,” she weighs back in with her burden of remembered sorrows, which the children will need to remember also—at least long enough to make use of them, if for no more purpose than to “shape their own language” by “using her legends.” However, no bitterness attaches to the speaker’s acknowledgment that as they use her legends to shape their own language, they will also jettison whatever they do not need (for, indeed, not only will they have the weight of their own sorrows to bear, but they will also be following her earlier advice to move beyond whatever impedes their growth, including some of their mothers’ old ways). Rather she fears that they will throw away too much too soon; that not only will they make their language “ruler” (ruling by means of their own consciously selected language), they will also use that language/ruler as a measuring device to put distance between the speaker’s hungers—for voice, for clarity, for change, for understanding, for remembrance—and

122  ANGELA BOWEN
their own purpose. The period after "purpose" is the reader's only signal that the speaker is breaking her momentum, pausing only fractionally before taking us through a new doorway, for no space break occurs, only the next line, where she introduces yet another fear as she begins acquainting us with the horror that used to await her nightly in the world of bad dreams:

I am afraid
They will discard my most ancient nightmares
where the fallen gods became demon
instead of dust (154).

Just before dawn, the devils woke her, trampling her flesh into fruit that would burst in the sun until she:

... came to despise every evening
fearing a strange god at the fall of each night
and when my mother punished me
by sending me to bed without my prayers
I had no names for darkness (155).

Nevertheless, she wants the students to neither discard nor discount her ancient nightmares, which she, weary woman warrior, has wrestled through night after horrific night. The power and knowledge she has gained in those solitary struggles she offers now, even as she fears that her children will not accept all that she has learned at such great cost, but will pick and choose, leaving behind the most difficult parts, those that she feels they most need to know. Steeling herself for her ordeal, the maker of myth "do(es) not know":

... whose words protected me
whose tales or tears prepared me
for this trial on the 17th floor

Almost ready now. Time to get moving:

Chill winds swirl around these high bleak places.
It is the time when the bearer of hard news
is destroyed for the message
when it is heard (155).

Sly, that little, "when it is heard." How many ways has Lorde insisted on the necessity to speak "even at the risk of having (one's) words bruised or
misunderstood” (1984, 40). Or not heard: “...and when we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard/not welcomed...” (1997, 256).

The poet holds the reader captive in the speaker's head, entangled in subtle sexual metaphors, which she overlays with an indulgence of bragadocio

Their (her students') demon father rode me just before daylight
I learned his tongue as he reached
for my hands at dawn
before he could touch the palms of my hands
to devour my children
I ate him
and left his bones rute in the noon sun.

Even as she cleverly “surrendered” to the demon, who “rode” her, she refused him access to the palms of her hands, for, by touching them, he would eradicate the roads which her children, and his, needed to follow in charting the road to freedom so that they would not wander down unmarked roads and be devoured by false gods, which she knows him, and all of his kind, to be. The “learned his tongue” (by whatever means necessary) in order to speak his language to her needy children, in whose ears he had been murmuring misinformation, and, as he reached for her hands—and the knowledge and history the lines in her hands indicate—, like the sphinx who eats the man who cannot answer her riddle, the speaker ate the demon/monster and left him mute, his bones bleaching and drying in the sun (emphasis added). Now he can never speak to her children again; the warrior woman has passed through her terror and wasted him.

The speaker begins moving toward the door:

Now all the words in my legend come garbled except anguish.
Visions of chitterlings I never ate
strangle me in a nightmare of leaders
at crowded meetings to study our problems
I move awkward and ladylike
through four centuries of unused bathubs
that never smile
not even an apologetic grin (156)
This significant weave of messages combines chitterlings (pig intestines, which she “never ate”) and the “leaders” (white administrators and Black nationalists) who are strangling her, each group in its own way, with the past and present. Her lines cleverly do double duty as she “move(s) awkward and ladylike” in a nightmare of leaders at crowded meetings to study our problems,” the “our” referring to the black faculty, who are a “problem” to the administration (white masters for four centuries), who must be convinced of the necessity for the Black Studies program. However, the “brothers” are no cleaner than the administrators, for they too are using the “Master’s Tools” against women without even an apologetic grin to signal the slightest acknowledgment of their betrayal, or at least, she implies, their lack of hygiene (1997, 156). Lorde has said of them, “Over and over . . . in the 60s I was asked to justify my existence and my work, because I was a woman, because I was a Lesbian, because I was not a separatist, because some piece of me was not acceptable” (1984, 143).

The speaker describes her passive/aggressive rebellion against the obligatory pressure she feels to attend certain newly-created Black nationalist holidays:

I worry on nationalist holidays
make a fetish of lateness
with limp unbelievable excuses
shunning the use of pronouns
as an indirect assault (1997, 156)

Arriving late to holidays celebrating Blackness, while offering lame excuses that no one believes, is enviroused with the insult she feels when hearing pronouns used in ways that validate only heterosexual relationships. The narrator, her lesbianism a subtle subtext sitting just under the epidermis of the poem, feels so invalidated by the exclusivity of the pronouns that she refuses to use them. What absolute care it must take to shun pronouns altogether. The question left for this reader is what the speaker uses in place of the rejected pronouns, if anything, since it is difficult even to use pronouns. Perhaps, however, the difficulty does not exist for Lorde, who is not necessarily loyal to the most conventionally accepted syntax. She defies it, even.

She overlays lesbophobia with skin-color prejudice, which has existed as an intracultural and internalized oppression within black society since
slavery days, and remains so. The poet collapses time, enabling her speaker to address simultaneously her students’ needs, her own current “real wants,” and her unmet childhood desire:

whatever skin I have left
unbetrayed by scorching
uncovered by mouths that shriek
but do not speak my real wants
glistens and twinkles blinding all beholders

“But I just washed them, Mommy!” (156)

Her exclamatory “But I just washed them, Mommy!” recalls the poet’s childhood longing for tenderness and acceptance. Lorde was not only the darkest of three sisters, but rebellious as well: “Did bad mean Black? The endless scrubbing with lemon juice in the cracks and crevices of my ripening, darkening body. And oh, the sins of my dark elbows and knees, my guns and nipples, the folds of my neck and the curves of my armpit!” Yet for some others she was too light: “The hands that grab at me from behind the stairwell are Black hands. Boys’ hands, punching, rubbing, pinching, pulling at my dress. I hurl the garbage bag I’m carrying into the ashcan and jerk away, fleeing back upstairs. Hoots follow me. “That’s right, you better run, you ugly yaller bitch, just wait!” Obviously, color was relative. (1984a, 149)

Feeling not Black enough, but knowing she is just as Black as she will ever be, all things considered, the speaker arrives finally at the door:

The chill wind is beating down from the high places.
My students wait outside my door
searching, condemning, listening
for what I am sworn to tell them
for what they least want to hear

clogging the only exit from the 17th floor
begging in their garbled language
beyond judgement or understanding
“oh speak to us now mother for soon
we will not need you
only your memory

teaching us questions.”
Stepping into my self

126 ANGELA BOWEN
I open the door 
and leap groundward
wondering
what shall they carve for weapons

Lorde leaves the reader at the scene of the poem wondering, along with
the speaker, about the outcome of the encounter. This is not only an
intensely useful literary device but a brilliant piece of theatre as well. An
honest fadeout rather than a tidy end to this litany of fear and dread seems
an entirely appropriate way for us to depart the scene, just as we used to
exit the theatre after a scary horror movie. The difference is that here, we
carry away something useful in our lives; something we can chew on and
return to at will to clear up a detail or discover whether, if turned a differ-
en way, a certain section might yield a different interpretation.

Conclusion

Lorde's resurrection of the Tougaloo incident and her shaping of it into
this layered and tornred allegorical tale that also implicates the Black
nationalists she had to confront on a daily basis, even as she was writing
about them, is compelling, as is her use of the images of unnamed African
deki's she was still researching at the time. All of Lorde is in this poem:
her vulnerability, her courage, her integrity, her wit, and her willingness to
tough it out and do the right thing. But ultimately, at its heart, this poem is
all about feelings. I once heard an interviewer ask Lorde what a certain
poem meant. "What do you mean what does it mean?" she roared in
response. "The only question is 'How does it make you feel?'" (Abod, 1986).

Notes

I am grateful to the Meridian reviewers for their careful reading and valuable,
insightful suggestions. Thanks also to M. Jacqui Alexander and Jennifer Abod for
their support, encouragement, and helpful remarks on earlier versions of this
article.

The use of lower case "black" or capitalized "Black" is not stable but is driven
by its use within context. When applying the word in general terms or referring to
a black individual, black people or black culture, I use the lower case. When
relating it to a department, a movement, or a political or ideological stance such as
nationalism, I capitalize it. Since Audre Lorde consistently capitalized it, all direct
quotes by Lorde obviously follow that style.

DIVING INTO AUDRE LORDE'S "BLACKSTUDIES" 127

Published by Virtual Commons - Bridgewater State University, 2021
1. "Blackstudies" was first published in 1974 in Lorde’s Sourth book, New York Head Shop and Museum (Detroit: Broadside Press). However, regardless of original publication dates, the citation dates in this article for all of Lorde’s poems, including “Blackstudies,” refer to The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde, 1977 (see “Works Cited”). The source books of several poems are indicated occasionally as a means of placing the poems within the historical period of the events that precipitated Lorde’s writing them. These books, but not their dates of publication, are indicated within the text by initials, as follows: From A Land Where Other People Live (FAWOLL); New York Head Shop and Museum (NYSHS); Between Our Selves (BOS); and The Black Unicorn (BU).

2. When Lorde describes this incident to A. Rich in Sisser Outsider (1984), she mistakenly recalls its date as 1970. However, the publication in ms. was 1974.

3. Toni Morrison’s book-length essay, Playing in the Dark, addresses the black presence, whether named and acknowledged or invisible, within white American literature. See “Works Cited” for complete information.

Works Cited
Bowen: 2003 Meridians Journal article "Diving into Audre Lorde's 'Blackstudies'" by Angela Bowen