

The Maternal, the Lesbian and the Political: Explorations of the Erotic in Audre Lorde's Poetry

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I. Introduction

Audre Lorde develops her ideas about poetry and the erotic in her essays "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" (1977) and "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1978), which were collected in her book *Sister Outsider* (1984). Before analysing the presence of erotic aspects in Lorde's poetry, I will comment upon the reflections and thoughts she offers in these influential pieces of prose.

In "Poetry Is Not a Luxury", Lorde describes poetry as a means of expressing experience and feeling. Thus, she can articulate her deepest perceptions without losing sight of the communities she belongs to. Lorde rejects the ivory tower as the traditional refuge of poets because, above all, she wishes her writing to get across to those people whose voices have been traditionally repressed and to empower black women, who have often lacked models and voices specifically addressed to them. Poetry encourages a scrutiny of the inner parts of ourselves which connects us with "an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling" (1984, 37). For Lorde, then, poetry becomes a necessity because it grants initial contact with language, which can eventually be made into ideas and into action. Through the exploration of these deep feelings and experiences, people have the opportunity to face their internal differences and realize the plurality of their selves. Thus, they learn to accept diversity within themselves, and in others as well. In her poetry, Lorde tries to encourage respect of difference as a positive element and as the basis for an enriching dialogue between human beings. She rejects poetry as "sterile word play" (1984, 37) which, in turn, she relates to "the white fathers" (1984, 37). Art for art's sake does not make sense to Lorde. Besides, she considers that conception a real luxury for those who, like herself, are trying to define themselves in their own words and to escape from imposed identities.

The essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" is linked to "Poetry Is Not a Luxury". Lorde identifies the erotic as "a considered source of power and information within our lives" (1984, 53). The erotic provides "the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person" (1984, 56), as well as "the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (1984, 56). Lorde sees it as a capacity that tempers the individualistic sense of self, and encourages resistance to atomism, opening up an entire realm of human understanding otherwise unavailable. Besides, she identifies this source of power and information as female—"it lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane" (1984, 53), and it is "an assertion of the lifeforce of women" (1984, 56).

Lorde's search for the erotic is neither a claim about hedonism, or purely physical pleasure, nor is it circumscribed to the sexual. On the contrary, she argues against such characterizations of the erotic and distinguishes between the erotic and the pornographic. Pornography represents the division of sensation and feeling, whereas, according to Ruth Ginzberg, Lorde's notion of the erotic is a yearning to integrate or to connect that which subjectively seems separate (74). Lorde applies this not only to the creation of personal relationships between and among individuals, but also to the establishment of connections in social and political aspects of one's own life and work. The understanding of the erotic as the will to connect is related to the recognition of difference as a source of empowerment and dialogue in all aspects of life.

As we have seen, Lorde distances herself from the conception of poetry as an aesthetic play. Through poetry she learned the importance of language in order to define herself and to articulate the plurality of her selves, which contributed to her survival in a hostile environment. Her poetic voice is addressed primarily to women because she thinks that there are already too many voices for men. Lorde intends to promote dialogue and a positive appreciation of difference among women and in society; she renames the erotic in her poetry, placing it beyond the limits of the sexual. As she reappropriates it, the erotic becomes a center of energy and authority from which she could break open the constraints imposed by patriarchal society and could believe in a new future (Lauter 401). With this in mind, I have chosen three aspects of Lorde's poetry where I believe the erotic drive she defines in her above-mentioned essay can be appreciated: her relationship with her mother, the articulation of her lesbian self, and her use of a warrior construct to signify the connection between the erotic and the political.

II. The Maternal and the Erotic

As Alicia Ostriker points out, the poet is a daughter and the poet may be a mother (179). The theme of mother-child relationship has proven extraordinarily intense in contemporary women's poetry. There comes a time when the child needs to break the bond with her mother in order to become an autonomous being. But once it is broken, she wants to recover it because without it she

is not whole. Another reason for the intensity of the mother-child poem is that it explores a primal erotic relationship on which perhaps all others are modelled. Usually, the daughter's first knowledge of warmth, tenderness and nourishment comes from her mother. It is on that intimacy that her life once depended and her child's life depends on it as well (Ostriker 179).

This sense that all desire threads back ultimately to the erotic mother, together with the ambivalence of maternal attachment prevails in the poems where Lorde depicts her relationship with her mother. This ambivalence is present in most women's poems, where the mother is either perceived as a powerful person or seen, by the daughter-poet, as a powerless figure who, in a patriarchal world, has transmitted to the poet all her weaknesses (Ostriker 188). Lorde's experience of women growing up black in a cultural desert affected her most deeply by destroying her mother's capacity to love herself and therefore to accept her daughter (Lauter 406). This shows the double function of powerlessness and self-hatred imposed on mother and daughter when the factor of race augments that of gender. However, in Lorde's poems this angry division enables a future reunion—real and visionary—which is made possible through the erotic. The erotic both changes the light through which Lorde perceives her mother, and affirms that maternal legacy as a source of her creativity and of her survival in a hostile environment. In these poems, the differences between Lorde and her mother Linda are not considered a barrier but a stimulus for the exploration and reflection upon the daughter's relationship with her mother. The result is a humane and realistic portrait of the maternal figure, where a sense of connection and compassion prevails over the trouble that marked their relationship. Without hiding these silences and difficulties, Lorde learns from Linda new ways and words to name reality. From her mother's silences, she realizes the importance of language. To become a poet, Lorde chooses an attitude of active denomination, and moves from Linda's oral poetry to the written text, from her West Indian songs to poems, from silence to language and from language to action.

Throughout Lorde's work, we find many poems where she expresses a deep maternal feeling full of sensuality. In "Black Mother Woman" (*From a Land Where Other People Live* 16), Lorde shows her mother's influence in the development of her identity. There have been difficult moments in Lorde's relationship with her mother. However, this poem has a grateful mood. The poet evokes her mother's defensiveness towards her: "in the center of furies / hanging me / with deep breasts and wiry hair" (ll. 10-12). But Linda cannot keep this attitude for long, and the poem reveals her weaknesses and her internal fight between offering love and teaching her daughter how to survive in a hostile environment, "with your own split flesh / and long suffering eyes" (ll. 13-14). According to Lorde, Linda's strategies are "myths of little worth" (l. 15), which the poet will transform into something different and worthy for other women. In the last stanza, Lorde is ready to use this maternal legacy to improve her life conditions. The poet feels able to overcome Linda's internal divisions,

and to define herself in a positive way, by showing strength instead of weakness, “beautiful tough as chestnut / stanchion against nightmares of weakness” (ll. 21-22).

In the poem “Mawu” (*Our Dead Behind Us* 26), the presence of illness and the threat of near death builds the bridge between mother and daughter. Lorde associates her sick mother with the powerful figure of the goddess Mawulisa who, according to the traditions of Dahomey, is the creator of the universe. The poet shows a loving attitude towards her, “you are the first face of love remembered” (l. 2). The fact of “your angriest looks” (l. 4), and “your betrayals” (l. 15) does not prevent their reunion—“we make peace with the women / we shall never become” (ll. 13-14). Lorde acknowledges that her mother is a permanent part of herself, “So long as your death is a leaving / it will never be my last” (l. 20-21). In the last stanza, Lorde displays her gratitude to her mother’s fundamental lesson: survival.

I have survived
 the gifts still puzzling me
 as in the voice of my departing mother
 antique and querulous
 flashes of old toughness shine through like stars
 teaching me how to die insisting
 death is not a disease. (ll. 25-31)

This poem summarizes Lorde’s complex relationship with her mother. Lorde sees her mother “in the death grasp” (l. 8), and at that point, “your angriest looks” (l. 4) turn into “your last most beautiful / silence” (ll. 9-10). The proximity of death and the fear of her mother’s passing away intensifies Lorde’s wish to connect with her. Besides, her use of gerunds and terms related with memory and time emphasizes the idea of a life coming to an end; consequently the desired connection with her mother will have to be nourished only in her mind and writing.

We find poems where Lorde portrays the erotic as a mythical black mother. This figure, according to Estella Lauter, embodies many mythologized aspects of human creativity and represents Lorde’s attempt to change patriarchal symbolic codes at the level of myth, as well as her attempt to open creativity to everyone, at the same time that she claims it for women. Thus, Lorde allows blacks and whites, women and men, to reconceive this erotic energy in terms that allow for social action (Lauter 406-407). One may wonder how change can be encouraged through poetry and myth. Lorde’s answer is that without changing our myths, we are unlikely to be able to change our lives.

In the poem “125th Street and Abomey” (*The Black Unicorn* 12), Lorde invokes Seboullisa, a black goddess, creator of the universe according to the traditions of the African kingdom of Dahomey. First, she stresses her spiritual bonds with the goddess by representing her as a source of support and creativity:

“give me the woman strength / of tongue in this cold season” (ll. 21-22). In the last lines, Lorde portrays her relationship with the goddess in an ambiguous way:

Seboulisa mother goddess with one breast
eaten away by worms of sorrow and loss
see me now
your severed daughter
laughing our name into echo
all the world shall remember. (ll. 32-37)

On the one hand, Lorde identifies herself with Seboulisa at a physical level when she calls herself “your severed daughter” (l. 35), which means “your daughter with the severed off breast”. Like the goddess, Lorde only has one breast, a result of a mastectomy. The identification with Seboulisa could be the result of an erotic drive to assume her powerful features as a black figure; consequently, Lorde could show the world Seboulisa’s legacy “laughing our name into echo” (l. 36). But “your severed daughter” could also mean the one separated from her but now returning home and joining her voice with Seboulisa’s. As Lynda Koolish points out, according to the latter interpretation, Lorde would then highlight this double experience of simultaneous belonging and expatriation, of difference and identification (39).

In “From the House of Yemanjá” (*The Black Unicorn* 6), the poet’s mother is divided, “one dark and rich and hidden / in the ivory hungers of the other” (ll. 12-13), but the daughter invokes a whole identity by associating her with the African goddess Yemanjá,

Mother I need
mother I need
mother I need your blackness now
as the august earth needs rain. (ll. 27-30)

This mythical link helps Lorde to appreciate and represent blackness as a healing element that provides the erotic energy to achieve a close connection with her mother and to avoid victimization.

III. Audre Lorde’s Lesbian Eros

Audre Lorde has always placed her racial and sexual identities at the center of her own self-definition, without feeling the need to justify either her race or her sex. She attributes her own understanding of the erotic to her rejection of “an exclusively european-american male ... mode of living and sensation” (1984, 59), and includes a specifically lesbian Eros in her poetry, which does not belong to a phallocratic conceptual scheme.

Lorde’s lesbian poetry attempts to construct a language which revises the

representation of women in literary discourse and claims a positive revaluation of the female body whose sexuality is lived *in other terms* (Yorke, 1991a 28-29). This lesbian Eros is portrayed mainly in her love poems, where she uses the erotic to celebrate the woman-to-woman bond as a bond between one subject and another. She also describes the end of certain relationships and regrets the subsequent loss of the erotic connection. Her love relationships with other women call into question the hierarchical structures of the nuclear family, where conventional subject-object modes of relating still prevail (Yorke, 1991a 33-34).

Lorde's lesbian poems also share a process of revisionary mythmaking whose aim is to encourage a vast cultural change in the social, religious, political and sexual realms. One of the myths revised is that of the muse, which concerns the maker of poetry—in this case Lorde, particularly when she portrays a lesbian Eros. The muse has been a central symbolic aspect of the male literary imagination. The muse, traditionally a female figure, possesses the poet—a male figure—who, during the act of creating poetry, resorts to a language of submission and dominance to describe their relationship. According to Mary Carruthers, in the myth of lesbian poets such as Lorde, the muse remains female, which changes the relationship of the poet to her poetry. The poet's relationship with her muse is not one of possession but of communal bonding (295-96). The female lovers of her life that Lorde acknowledges as muses are not depicted as "others". On the contrary, through her relationships with them, Lorde seeks to recreate and re-experience wholeness. The lesbian erotic link removes the barriers—geographical, physical, and those of the heart—between two subjects, in the face of factors that divide women (race, class, and sexual preference) and in the face of danger and violence.

"Bridge Through My Window" (*The First Cities*) is one of the first love poems where Lorde refers to a female lover. The poet and her lover are two shores which need each other to feel at home: "We are each of us both shore-lines" (l. 7). The erotic element is related with images of bonding: "Joined our bodies have passage into one / Without a merging / As this slim necklace anchored into night" (ll. 11-13), "Oh bridge my sister bless me before I sleep" (l. 3). Both lovers are survivors in a foreign country, hoping their erotic link will make them feel at ease with themselves, having reached "the right land" (l. 9) and "passage ... home" (ll. 11-15).

The poem "On A Night of The Full Moon" (*Cables to Rage* 25) displays a very explicit sensuality. We find a chain of smells and tastes, shapes and forms that perfectly fit one another: "The curve of your waiting body / fits my waiting hand" (ll. 5-6). Most of the vocabulary Lorde uses refers to the body, suggesting the idea of roundness, "flesh" (l. 1), "mouth" (l. 2), "body" (l. 5), "hand" (l. 6), "lips" (l.8), "thighs" (l. 9). The boundaries between the two lovers have been dissolved; the erotic is a bridge that allows physical and spiritual connection:

And I would be the moon
spoken over your beckoning flesh
breaking against reservations
beaching thought
my hands at your high tide
over and under inside you (ll. 19-24)

Through the use of these lesbian images, Lorde begins to define her sexual identity in an explicit way which will continue in her following collections of poems.

But it is in "Love Poem" (*New York Head Shop and Museum* 26), one of her most famous poems, where she accurately and explicitly describes lesbian sexual experience which, according to Estella Casto, generates fresh language, most careful at its most erotic (161). It also illustrates the link between female eroticism and creativity. The poet-lover becomes an earth mother-creator *on* and *in* the body of her beloved. The first lines pray for richness and honey:

Speak earth and bless me
with what is richest
make sky flow honey out of my hips
rigid as mountains
spread over a valley
carved out by the mouth of rain (ll. 1-6)

Through her union with her lover, Lorde creates the sky from her hips, valleys from her mouth; she becomes "high wind in her forests hollow / fingers whispering sound" (ll. 8-9), and celebrates her erotic connection to her lover and the universe, as we appreciate in the following stanzas:

And I knew when I entered her I was
high wind in her forests hollow
fingers whispering sound
honey flowed
from the split cup
impaled on a lance of tongues
on the tips of her breasts on her navel
and my breath
howling into her entrances
through lungs of pain.

Greedy as herring-gulls
or a child
I swing out
over the earth
over and over
again. (ll. 7-18)

The author is more interested in communicating an erotic feeling than in projecting a powerful persona. Liz Yorke has suggested that here Lorde uses the image of the warrior woman from which she derives the evocative symbolism of mouth/tongue/word, images which are intrinsically linked to the warrior cluster of lance/sword/knives (1991, 201). I consider these images as a way of intensifying the experience of her erotic connection with her lesbian lover. She also explores her sexual identity and shows the pain and pleasure involved in a lesbian relationship as in any other love relationship, whether heterosexual or homosexual. Thus, Lorde manages to articulate her lesbian self without the connotations of deviancy that have usually surrounded the manifestations of a lesbian sexuality.

Lorde used this poem to put an end to the rumours about her sexual orientation, which were going round the College where she was teaching at that point. By publicly defining her sexuality, she wished to avoid its use as a personal weapon against her. This poem marked a turning point in Lorde's understanding of her power, which lay in her willingness to articulate the feelings that made her most vulnerable in her own, as well as the dominant, culture.

In the poem "Recreation" (*The Black Unicorn* 81) the sexual relationship is the source of creativity for the poet and her lover. Represented as paper and pen, their intimate communication and connection is expressed with words related to writing, such as "images" (l. 13), "write" (l. 16), "word countries" (l. 14), "poem" (l. 17). As the poet's words become flesh, so the lover's flesh becomes words:

you create me against your thighs
 hilly with images
 moving through our word countries
 my body
 writes into your flesh
 the poem
 you make of me. (ll. 12-18)

The erotic communion leads to both lovers' personal plenitude, reflected in the following lines of the last stanza of the poem: "I love you flesh into blossom / I made you / and take you made / into me" (ll. 21-22), where the fluidity of the self and merging with the other make wholeness possible.

IV. The Erotic and the Political: Audre Lorde's Warrior Construct

As I have already mentioned in the "Introduction", Lorde portrays the erotic as an empowering creative energy of decisive importance in all areas of life. It transcends the traditional oppositions between rational knowledge and intuitive feeling, connecting the personal and the political. Through the erotic, Lorde names many aspects of her own and other people's experience, with the intention of promoting a change and an improvement in human relationships

and of encouraging responsible action in personal, political and social life. Lorde also views the erotic as a source of energy for the necessary struggle and revolt against oppression from political and social power structures (Friedman 395). This combative dimension helps to sustain the anger which energizes fight against tyranny.

In her poetry, Lorde has often used a warrior construct to channel this anger and to denounce the oppressive situation of misery, injustice and discrimination in which many persons, particularly women of color, live their lives. By defining herself as a warrior and by using images of women as warriors, Lorde supports and shares these women's struggle in the face of oppression and racial and sexual discrimination. Many of her early poems contain these female martial images, such as "warrior queens" ("Harriet", *The Black Unicorn* 21), "like a warrior woman" ("Chorus", *The Black Unicorn* 44) "like my warrior sisters" ("125th street and Abomey", *The Black Unicorn* 12). According to Mary DeShazer, at times this word "warrior" becomes an emblem of hope for future generations while, in other instances, it evokes centuries of history of African women's resistance to white authorities and other forces of suppression (266). In recent poems, where Lorde supports women and children engaged in global struggles for liberation in South Africa, Grenada, Chile, etc., the term "warrior" is often associated with imagery of war – arms, guns, battles, etc. The presence of women as fighters in some of these poems is contradictory. On the one hand, Lorde condemns the violence and oppression many women suffer; on the other, she justifies the warrior spirit of these women and their use of arms to fight the oppressor, who is always white and male.

The poem "Sisters in Arms" (*Our Dead Behind Us* 3) illustrates the complexity of Lorde's use of the warrior construct. Sexuality and political struggle interact, as Lorde describes sharing her bed and arms with a South African woman. The poet however is unable to help her lover in the guerrilla, "I could not return with you to bury the body / reconstruct your nightly cardboards" (ll. 6-7), "I could not plant the other limpet mine / against a wall at the railroad station" (ll. 9-10). Consequently, she offers her lover the only help she can: to buy her "... a ticket to Durban / on my American Express" (ll. 13-14), which is incompatible with the fact that Lorde wants to break the economic ties that guarantee South Africa's existence. Back in her own country, in the second stanza the poem reveals Lorde's fury at the South African government's continuing atrocities against its black people, and the USA's complicity with those facts: "the New York Times finally mentions your country / a half-page story / of the first white south african killed in the 'unrest'" (ll. 20-22). In the second half of this stanza, Lorde remembers the moments spent with her lover in South Africa: "we were two Black women touching our flame / and we left our dead behind us" (ll. 33-34). Lorde lets her lover's words inside the poem, as a way to establish a lasting link between them for the future. These words transmit the necessity of war: "Someday you will come to my country / and we will fight side by side?" (ll. 46-47). To conclude the poem, Lorde mentions

queen Mmanthatsi's story, who was "a warrior queen and leader of the Tlkwa (Sotho) people during the *mfcane* (crushing), one of the greatest crises in southern African history: "The Sotho now live in the Orange Fee State, S.A." (*Our Dead Behind Us* 5). The presence of this figure has to do with women's struggle to achieve racial identity and is related to the poet and her lover's political commitment.

This poem's title refers to the concepts of solidarity between the two lovers, and of violence against the oppressor. By glorifying the armed struggle, Lorde is contradicting her well-known saying that "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (*Sister Outsider* 110). The recognition of anger as a positive transforming force which originates in the erotic can only be rooted in the experience of connection through love. Otherwise this erotic element inside each one of us should cease to be regarded as an empowering element and life-giving force.

V. Conclusion

Audre Lorde understands the erotic as an empowering element which awakens and opens us to the other. It is essentially an energy of relation, of connection-making. Lorde applies this concept to the creation of connections in the personal, social and political aspects of one's own life and work. For her, the erotic allows individuals to confront their internal divisions as well as those elements that separate them from the others. Lorde relates the erotic to the recognition of difference as a source of empowerment and dialogue in all life situations.

We appreciate the erotic as a healing element in the poems where Lorde depicts her relationship with her mother. Through the erotic, Lorde is able to overcome the trouble that had marked their relationship, and develops a sense of connection with her. Also, she acknowledges her maternal legacy as a source of her creativity and of her survival in a hostile environment. In her love poems, Lorde uses the erotic to define herself as a lesbian and to celebrate the woman-to-woman bond as between one subject and another. Thus, she questions conventional subject-object modes of relating, and offers a positive reevaluation of the female body whose sexuality is not lived in heterosexual terms. Lorde also considers the erotic as the bridge between the personal and the political, and as a way to encourage responsible action in social life. The erotic provides the energy to fight against oppression. Despite some contradictions, Lorde's images of women as warriors display this erotic energy used by the author in order to denounce the condition of misery, injustice and discrimination in which many persons, particularly women, live their lives.

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