Audre Lorde: Black Feminist Visionary and “Mytho-poet”
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Abstract
Les études dans le domaine de la littérature noire aux États-Unis révèlent des problèmes aigus de race et de genre, mettant à jour les pressions existant sur l’esprit et la confiance en soi des Noirs. Si tout cela n’est pas verbalisé, ces pressions peuvent mener à l’émergence d’un complexe d’infériorité et à des dépressions. Audre Lorde, poétesse et visionnaire noire, fait un pas de géant en traitant de ces questions et en faisant surgir tout un panthéon de symboles mythologiques dans sa poésie. Pour elle, le culte et la connaissance du mythe permettront d’une part une meilleure connaissance de l’histoire, et d’autre part, la naissance de nouvelles valeurs.
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Studies in black literature in the United States reveal acute problems of race and gender, showing how these pressures bear on the black mind, black consciousness and black self-esteem. These problems if left unsolved may lead to feelings of self-loathing, inferiority complex and in acute cases of mental breakdown. Recognizing these pressures and addressing them becomes a matter of urgency to black writers. Audre Lorde, as a black visionary and “mytho-poet”, makes a gigantic attempt towards explaining these phenomena by invoking a pantheon of mythological symbols. Mythical elements are for Lorde a vital part of black culture, they are models for ritual and cultural behavior. For her, an understanding of Myth as a dominant form of black ancestral worship might allow blacks to achieve a better understanding of history on the one hand, and on the other, create new values and meaning from its rich reservoirs.

Lorde therefore assumes the position of a high priestess, interceding between the goddesses of Africa and her audience. Invoking and worshipping the matriarchal deities of Western African ancient Kingdoms like Ghana, Mali, Songhay and Nigeria, she evokes the rich cultures of Africa. Black people in the Diaspora carried memories of the ancestors and the power of naming spirits across the Atlantic. Despite the cruel abuse and dehumanizing effects of slavery, blacks succeeded in constructing forms of communal expression—spirituals, the blues, the jazz music, inter alia—keep alive their archetypal consciousness. In her works Lorde maintains this creativity, drawing from African mythology.
As a black visionary, Lorde traveled to Africa where she renewed her ties with the goddesses of Africa. Dissatisfied with “conventional” religion, Lorde sought to re-create one that would reflect black people. Rochelle Gatlin states in *American Women Writers Since 1945* that:

Feminist radicals consider themselves as an exodus community outside the established religions, and their practices are based on pagan traditions and their own imaginations. Instead of churches, radicals form covers or affinity groups¹.

Radical feminists look outside Christianity for religious inspiration, as for them, Christianity is as oppressive as any other institution constructed by patriarchy. Lorde identifies with these radicals. As feminist radicals, they research into ancient cultures which provide plentiful evidence of goddess worship and a possible correlation between female deities and matriarchy. Although many radical feminists do not insist on the actual existence of a Golden Age of Matriarchy, they use any evidence of female power to create new potent symbols. In most cases the goddess serves not as an object of worship, but rather as an affirmation of feminine power, being an incarnation of the female body and of the concept of women’s solidarity. Lorde’s “From the House of Yemanja” alludes to Yemanja, the mother of all other gods in Yoruba mythology. She invokes her to come to the rescue of women: “Mother I need your blackness now/ as the August earth needs rain”².

Apart from feminists, black critics also saw the need for black visionary poets. They needed black writers who could write a literature characteristic of Africa and of the black experience. The assertion of blackness in America was needed to reinforce militancy and the black audience famished for poets who could challenge the existing oppression, and construct a new and genuine black literature. These new writers would be saviors, martyrs to the black cause. Audre Lorde emerged as a voice that could illustrate this black desire.

**Lorde’s status as a visionary**

Lorde’s rebellion against racism and sexism was present in her poetic mythology. Her whole career as a writer was actually governed by rebellion and self-assertion: she rebelled against white supremacy, against patriarchy and then against racism. As an African visionary poet living in America she tried to free all Blacks from the fractures of white misogyny and xenophobia, and then promoted blackness, femininity and homosexuality. Blacks can reclaim their ancestry and culture and thus

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threaten the white race into being more tolerant. For her, the feminists' role was to present lesbianism as a political option that would threaten the male establishment into recognizing the place of the woman. African mythology was the answer that could nurture this search for a more welcoming and accommodating society.

Born into a family and a society wrought with tensions, she soon realized that “difference” was the main cause of conflict. She first learned that she was black and as such could not have an equal place with Whites. Afterwards she discovered that as a female she could not have the same opportunities as males. As an independent and vocal woman, Lorde would not be accepted in the American society without fighting for her rights. Rebelling against the injustices that plague Blacks, women and lesbians, she craved for a peaceful place to live, for the company of people who would accept her true nature. American white society disowned her because she was black; the black male community downgraded her because she was a female, and the black community rebuffed her as a lesbian. Her search for a community that would accept her, became for Lorde, an urgent and mandatory requirement for survival. In her desperate search, she discovered West African mythology. The myths and legends of West African culture offered her a community she could live in, be useful in without having to change her personality. This new-found Zion, this new link to the roots would give her the voice to educate her black community, and more particularly her black sisters living in America, and to tell them how to develop self-esteem and self-reliance. It would remind these women that they used to be warriors, heroines, priestesses in African cultural history. As such, it would give women a renewed strength to fight against oppression.

For Lorde, the mother-bond is fundamental for survival. Human beings must pay allegiance to motherhood because maternity is the oldest form of family. Wilfred L. Guerin states in A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature that:

Lorde asks us to seek the Black mother in each of us, that is, to rely on intuition rather than analysis, to place private needs over others, and to see African culture’s emphasis upon the mother-bond as an alternative way of thinking in a white patriarchal culture³.

Guerin goes on to state that feminist myth critics center their discussions on the Great Mother and other female images and goddesses, viewing these figures as radical “others” who can offer a way to struggle against patriarchal oppression. Major feminist critics define myth as the key literary and critical form for African-American women to assert

themselves. They blame male myth critics for leaving women out of their classification. Guerin cites Annis Pratt and Adrienne Rich as prominent myth critics who insist that patriarchy downgrades and oppresses women because men fear the terrible and wonderful powers of the woman. Annis Pratt’s “Overview” on myths in *The Oxford Companion To Women’s Writing in the United States*, upholds this view. She states:

> Although the Christian church and the European ruling classes tried to destroy people’s access to myths and legends that celebrate nature, the human body, and the sexual, medical, and military prowess of women, traces of European pagan culture remained in folklore, literature, and the arts. After hundreds of years of religious repression and suppression of indigenous cultures by imported classicism, many Europeans and Euro-Americans are unaware of their mythological and their religious heritage.

Audre Lorde then, in invoking the goddesses and spirits of her original continent, is stressing the primary role of the woman. Mary Jane Sherfey’s article “The Theory of Female Sexuality” in *Sisterhood is Powerful*, emphasizes woman’s primary role and sexual power. She states that primitive women enjoyed a strong and adventurous sexuality, and often had to cope alone with their parental role. With the development of agriculture, however, men saw the need for a settled community and made laws that restricted woman’s sexuality. Although her article points to the fact that it was mandatory for woman’s sex drive to be controlled, feminists argue that the restrictions were intimidating and inhuman. A woman has a right to her body, they argue.

Myth therefore can teach women how to empower themselves thereby helping minorities to reorganize and reorientate themselves within the dominant culture they live in. Annis Pratt echoes this point, when she says:

> Stories about mythic goddesses and legendary women magicians, adventurers, and warriors empower woman by suggesting apatriarchal psychological possibilities for women’s lives. They invoke women’s inner strengths in response to patterns of behavior that are radically different from the gender norms of twentieth century American patriarchy.

Pratt acknowledges Audre Lorde’s endeavor at myth transmission, "Audre Lorde seeks community and self-empowerment by celebrating

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6 Davidson, *op. cit.*, 599.
the gods and goddesses of her Yoruba heritage”. West African mythology like that of the Native American Indian, points to the fact that feminine typologies brought about Creation. However, patriarchy has systematically replaced this old matriarchal mythology with male figures. The case of the Akan in Ghana is a glaring example. Lorde evokes figures like Mawulisa, Orisha, Seboulisa, Yemanja and all goddesses, indicating that femininity was at the center of creation, rather than the predominantly male god of the white supremacist culture. Why do women then feel belittled and downgraded when they have these great spiritual figures to admire and worship? Linking up with these ancestral spirits would benefit black women and enlighten their male sons through their transmission of an oral heritage valorizing women.

Wilfred L. Guerin states that, “myths are by nature collective and communal, they bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities”. In analyzing Lorde as a “mytho-poet”, we shall try to see how the typologies that she employs are those that can bind blacks together “in common psychological and spiritual activities”. By invoking these typologies and implanting them in America, Lorde is not just experimenting. Many of these mythical symbols had been carried by her forefathers and many still persist in the United States and the Caribbean. By bringing this pattern to her people, she is merely trying to trigger that link between African mythology and the collective archetypal consciousness of the black people. Blacks have latent archetypal typologies that can be re-awakened, and this is the task Lorde sets herself.

Lorde’s mythical and legendary poems cover a wide range of themes: the portrait of a void of that ancestral link with the spiritual powers in poem “Solstice”, the celebration of blackness, likening it to the earth and the mother goddess Yemanja, in the poem “From the House of Yemanja”, woman’s solidarity as in the poem “Dahomey”. In her presentation of each of these themes, there is the underlying message that a re-connection with African culture is beneficial to the black Diaspora.

In “Solstice”, Lorde portrays the suffering of the black people and blames them for neglecting their ancestral spirits who, starved and angry, have left them. We can read:

Our skins are empty
They have been vacated by the spirits
Who are angered by our reluctance

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7 Davidson, op. cit., 601.
8 Guerin, op. cit, 149.
To feed them⁹.

The speaker is determined, however, to shed her shame and the alien imposters and to embrace her roots. She says:

I will eat the last sign of my weakness remove the scars of old childhood wars and dare to enter the forest whistling like a snake that has fed the chameleon for changes. I shall be forever¹⁰.

Wishing to forget the scars of trying to be white and conform to the dominant culture, she wishes now to go back to her roots and original culture. The spiritual void in the Blacks must be filled for them to be free.

Celebrating blackness is one of the themes Lorde handles well in “From the House of Yemanja”. Beginning from her own family in which her mother’s forlorn desire for whiteness and her father’s blackness was an issue of constant anxiety, Lorde says that she was black and therefore not her mother’s favorite. Her mother, “[...] hid out a perfect daughter/who was not me”¹⁰. Lorde then beseeches the goddess Yemanja, mother of all other gods and goddesses, to give her the glory and pride of being black. She cries out:

Mother I need
Mother I need
Mother I need your blackness now
As the august earth needs rain¹¹.

Because she has a spiritual likeness with the goddess Yemanja, she can be proud of her heritage and not dream of whiteness as her mother did.

In another poem, “Dahomey”, Lorde portrays the theme of female solidarity. She begs Seboulisa—the goddess of Abomey—to give them strength. Together, working with other women, they mock Eshu’s symbol, a huge erect phallus.

In the dooryard of the brass workers four women joined together dying cloth mock Eshu’s iron quiver standing erect and flamingly familiar in their dooryard mute as a porcupine in a forest of lead […]¹².

⁹ Lorde, op. cit., 177.
¹⁰ Idem.
¹² Idem.
Tacit in this mockery of Eshu’s huge erect penis which women as priests of Eshu wear attached to their waists, is a sign that they can contain, master and even overcome male aggressiveness. As women, they can cope without men. In a similar light, she again portrays female solidarity and power in the poem “125th street and Abomey”. In this poem, she offers libations to Seboulisa, and beseeches her to give her the power of the Amazon women. The Amazon women were warriors who guarded and fought under the protection of the panther kings of ancient Dahomey. In their culture, women were not enjoined from shedding blood. The speaker opens the poem by stressing Seboulisa’s link with consciousness by comparing it with the Akai coiffure.

Head bent, walking through snow
I see you Seboulisa
Printed inside the back of my head
like marks of the newly wrapped Akai
That kept my sleep fruitful in Dahomey.13.

Seboulisa is engraved on her archetypal consciousness, and she re-awakens this vital part of herself. Seboulisa will give her power to:

Take my fear of being alone
Like my warrior sisters
Who rode in defense of your queendom
Disguised and apart
Give me the woman strength
Of tongue in this cold season14.

Seboulisa then, can come to the rescue of all Blacks who woo her, empowering them as she empowered the Amazon warriors. In another poem on the same theme “The Women of Dan Dance with Swords in Their Hands”, she invokes these legendary figures—the Amazon Warriors—to give her strength.

Pain and suffering because of the course of the black liberation is one of those themes for which Lorde invokes legendary typologies. In “For Assata”—New Brunswick Prison, 1977—the speaker stares at Assata’s picture and discovers a degeneration of her physical features because of the torture undergone in prison. She dreams of Assata’s freedom as a victory for all black people, Assata being a black militant. Assata is a warrior sister because she fights against injustices too. The speaker alludes to great women heroines, Joan of Arc and Yaa Asantewa:

13 Lorde, op. cit., 10.
14 Ibid, 12.
Joan of Arc led many successful battles against the English just as Yaa Asantewa, an Ashanti Queenmother, led several successful battles against British invasion. These great heroines are behind Assata; they will give her the spiritual strength to bear pain and suffering, and in the end, achieve freedom.

Internal division within the black community is for Lorde, a great cause for dismay. Pure blacks look at the colored as hybrids and as sell-outs. Men look down on women. Some black men believe that any white man can have access to any black woman just by asking. As such, they view black women as cheap and as a group who ally with the oppressor. In the poem “Between Ourselves”, Lorde x-rays this concern. The speaker is wondering who to turn to when her black brethren seek to destroy her because of her difference. She calls the god-Orishala—the god who gives form to humans before they are born—and asks why blacks like her mother cannot be satisfied with Orishala’s work. Is Orishala wrong in making them black? (Notice that albinos are white and are under the special attention of Orishala). The speaker goes on to say that although her ancestors sold her into slavery, she will not curse them, by whistling their names besides the shrine. The speaker forgives her ancestors. She calls on Blacks to forgive and accommodate difference. They should not write her name before Shapona’s shrine because they all are Eshu’s children. In conclusion, the speaker warns her black community that it is suicide for Blacks to fight Blacks. She warns that self-hatred will put them in the hands of Eshidale’s priests, who will bury them by jumping off the ground and landing on their heads. That is to say that they will be buried like those who commit suicide.

By employing mythical and legendary typologies to inform a wide range of themes, Lorde brings her audience into full participation with their ancestry. She portrays the spiritual emptiness of black people as in “Solstice”. Blacks feel empty because they attempt to embrace the religion of people who are antagonistic to them, and who had used that same religion as a tool of enslavement against them. Embracing a set of beliefs that are antithetical to what the Blacks really are, wastes and plunders the Blacks, leaves them with a sense of “wan witlessness”. Re-connecting with this pantheon of deities will awaken the black man’s real spiritual ties. This lack and search for the African’s spiritual belonging is an issue of great urgency to most black writers. Ishmael Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo x-rays a black spiritual advocate’s quest to rescue a true black religious script from the hands of white defilers.

Celebrating blackness in poems like “Coal” and “From the House of Yemanja”, Lorde contributes to instilling self-esteem. By re-creating a society in which blackness is normal and natural, in which gods and goddesses can be invoked to give strength and essence to Blacks, African-Americans can attain self-reliance. By showing imprisonment, pain and
suffering as virtues that raise militants to martyrdom as in “For Assata”, Blacks can be ready to face the challenges of asserting themselves, even at the risk of death.

As for women, presenting them with a catalogue of goddesses and heroines, can enable them to regain confidence in themselves. West African myths and sagas present the woman as primary to Creation. Many West African societies had been governed by matriarchy. Figures like Mawulisa, Orisha, Yemanja, who are at the center of creation and life, validate the primacy of women. Legendary typologies like the Amazon warriors, and Yaa Asantenwa, female heroines who fought in the defense of their countries, dispel western myths about women’s powerlessness. As such, Lorde as a “mytho-poet”, instills self-esteem and self-reliance in her own race.

**Works cited**


**Because of the value of this article as testimony, the editor has decided to publish it with only minor modifications of style and language.**