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The Lesbian Conundrum and the Poetry of Audre Lorde

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This article diagnoses Audre Lorde's lesbian experience as portrayed in her poetry. She describes lesbianism as natural, liberating, political, and creative. Lorde's idea of lesbianism involves women who indulge in erotic relations on the one hand and relations among women who are emotionally, intellectually, and politically liberating on the other. Most radical feminists see lesbianism as sexually fulfilling as it draws women together for intellectual and emotional comfort.

Keywords: Lorde, lesbian problem, creativity, jouissance, matriarchy

Introduction

Lorde's idea of lesbianism involves women who indulge in erotic relations on the one hand and relations among women that are emotionally, intellectually and politically binding on the other. Most radical feminists see lesbianism as sexually fulfilling as it draws women together for intellectual and emotional comfort. Liz Yorke (1999), Luce Irigaray (1980), De Beauvoir (1989), Rochelle Gatlin (1987), Adrienne Rich (1980), and Audre Lorde (1980) have all theorized on this concept.

In her essay "British Lesbian Poetics", Liz Yorke (1999, p. 21) argues that lesbianism springs from the girl's relationship with the mother. Citing Luce Irigaray, who states: "… it is important to remember that women always stand in an archaic and primal relationship with what is known as homosexuality" ("British Lesbian Poetics", p. 21), she sees the girl child's continuous relationship with the mother as the springboard of lesbianism. In *The Second Sex* (De Beauvoir, 1989, p. 407), De Beauvoir believes that women are natural lesbians and only learn heterosexual attitudes because society enforces them. Women, therefore, desire the female body because they spring from it. Thus as she argues, the woman often "feels a certain repulsion for the male body; on the other hand, the female body is for her, as for the male body; an object of desire" (*The Second Sex*, p. 407).

Similarly, Rochelle Gatlin (1987) cites Lillian Faderman (1981) who's *Surpassing the Love of Men* upholds the view that lesbianism involves an erotic connection between women and women's solidarity in sisterhood. Rich (1980) further strengthens this view in her famous article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". She defines lesbian as "… the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion." Rich (1980) uses the term "lesbian continuum" to mean "a range through each woman's life and throughout history of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (p. 648). Lorde (1994), in "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", describes the erotic between women not only as genital sexuality but as "an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of it which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing,

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our loving, our work, our lives." (p. 55). Lesbianism includes genital sexual liaisons but also encapsulates women's unity against patriarchy.

As they argue, lesbianism functions both as an emotional source of bliss and as an arsenal against patriarchy. This means that women who do not engage in genital encounters with other women can resort to lesbianism as a political arsenal to combat patriarchy. Lesbian theoreticians see the necessity for such bonding because patriarchy is congenitally oppressive. Most of them cite Friedrich Engels' (1992) *On the Origin of Family, Private Property and the State* as a sourcebook that captures the fact that the whole idea of family and heterosexuality was constructed to feed the capitalist initiative. Gay critics like Michel Foucault (1980), Guy Hocquengem (1972), and Irigaray (1980) argue in this direction. Foucault (1980) in *The History of Sexuality*, sees heterosexuality as an enforced attitude that fosters the idea of a productive force. Hocquengem (1972) in his book *Homosexual Desire* and Irigaray (1980) in her essay "Women on the Market", both argue that lesbianism is penalised in most cultures because it does not fit the capitalist notion of the labour imperative. Viewing Western societies as enforcing heterosexuality to exclude homosexuality, most gay critics seek to reveal the machinations that construct the negative conception of homosexuality.

In examining Lorde's lesbian poems, therefore, it is good to remember that Lorde's idea of lesbianism involves genital intercourse and much more. Sisterhood is prime to her—that is, women coming together for mutual sustenance in a dominantly patriarchal world. Such relations are politically incumbent on women because they have had to survive in a limiting environment. Her lesbian poems, therefore, cut across sexually exciting encounters to encounters that capture sisterhood.

Lorde's lesbian poems capture many themes, portraying the homophobia and racism that stands in their way and the solace, joy, and electrification of lesbian intercourse. We therefore have four groups of thematic schemes. In the first schema Lorde raises the homophobia lesbians have to cope with in a hostile environment. In the second schema, she charts the experience of racism that vexes relations between lesbians as they attempt to unite across the racial lines. In the third category, she develops the electrifying and intellectual sustainance that emanates from lesbian liaisons. In the last schema she connects lesbianism to a feminine pantheon of deities who sanction and validate lesbian relationships.

Lorde's Homophobic Poems

In the first category, the poems chart the homophobia that lesbians experience in a racist, sexist, and heteronormative society. These poems are thus pessimistic portraits that show how ignorance limits the freedom of lesbians. However, their determination to survive prevails. These include the poems "Martha", "Making It", "The Brown Menace", "Memorial I", "Memorial II", "Harriet", "Outlines", and "To Martha" (Lorde, 1997a).

In the poem "Martha" (Lorde, 1997a, p. 41) the speaker shows how her fervent love for her lover, Martha, is violated within a society where violence and destruction are rife. The society is described as a "Tarot House"; that is, the society is compared to a haven for gambling. The television screen further heightens the macabre image of society Martha watches in the hospital: "The bright glue of tragedy plasters all eyes / to a television set in the opposite corner / where a man is dying / step by step / in the American ritual going" (Lorde, 1997a, p. 39). This tragedy is seen in the assassination of Robert Kennedy. The Kennedy brothers were murdered because they sought to abolish differences. The speaker's love and affinity for Martha are contrasted with the macabre and fatal state where Martha is helplessly situated. She is suffering from an accident induced by a homophobic environment: "We scraped together the smashed image of flesh / preparing a memory / No words No words"

(Lorde, 1997a, p. 41). This quote gives us an image of the accident; Martha's flesh has to be scraped up from the site.

Memories of past affectionate liaisons are contrasted with the fatality of Martha's condition. Martha is destroyed by mere prejudice:

> Yes foolish prejudice lies
> I hear you Martha
> that you would never harm my children
> …
> we have loved each other and yes I hope
> we still can
> no Martha I do not know if we shall ever
> sleep in each other's arms again. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 41)

Martha undergoes these torments because she is Black and lesbian. Martha's experience is what is to be expected from the madness that characterises American society: "You cannot get closer to death than this Martha / the nearest you have come to living yourself" (Lorde, 1997a, p. 44). As she cries out for help, the carelessness of the nurses is evoked: "your screams beat against our faces as you yell / begging relief from the blank cruelty / of a thousand nurses" (Lorde, 1997a, p. 39).

Symbols of fire, summer, and the sun, energy generators, are negated to capture the gloom. Martha is placed in a situation where there is no regenerative power: "They said / no hope no dreaming / accept this case of flesh as evidence / of life without fire" (Lorde, 1997a, p. 39). Corollary to the symbol of fire is the sun. The sun sets on their love and dies: "The sun has started south / our season is over" (Lorde, 1997a, p. 39). This poem is a sad reminiscence of the sense of loss that characterises lesbians in a racist and homophobic society.

In the poem "Making It", Lorde celebrates the love between black and white lesbians as they attempt to overcome racism. The poem opens with the image of a tortuous strain as the lovers itch to make contact: "My body arcing across your white place / we mingle color and substance / wanting to mantle your world" (Lorde, 1977a, p. 52). The image of the body arcing may suggest the idea of effort as they try to make contact but also the notion of electrification. This electrification is justified by the term "mantle" in the third line, which suggests heat and warmth. However, this is not always a complete success because many things stand between white and Black women.

> I share my love with you
> but love becomes a lie
> as we suffer through split masks
> seeking the other half self. (Lorde, 1977a, p. 52)

Love between black and white women is possible only as they mask, presenting false personas while acknowledging their racial differences. Such love is marked by incongruity and paradox, as captured in the line "but love becomes a lie", capturing the complex truth involved in interracial relations.

In another poem, "Who Said It Was Simple", Lorde raises this apparent difference that marks black and white women apart; white women are prone to petty racist privileges that separate them from fully understanding the Black cause. Love becomes a lie when the privileges that white women accept without question are not put into focus and analysed.

"The Brown Menace or Poem to the Survival of Roaches" captures the persistence of blacks, women, and lesbians as they reflect their detractors' anger, hatred, and fear. Blacks, lesbians, and other marginalised groups mirror part of the oppressor, which the oppressor seeks to deny. Lorde shows how she and other marginalised people are part of the oppressors so that the oppressors are affiliated with the oppressed in an oxymoronic complex:

> Call me
> your deepest urge
> toward survival
> call me
> and my brothers and sisters
> in the sharp smell of your refusal
> call me
> roach and presumptuous
> nightmare on your white pillow
> your itch to destroy
> the indestructible
> part of yourself. (Lorde, 1977a, p. 149)

Lorde suggests that the oppressor would seek to destroy only his irrational fears and nightmares. The oppressor and oppressed are intertwined in an endless battle. Like the roach, oppressed groups are never extinguished; they outlive any form of carnage that may beset them.

Other poems that capture the homophobia lesbians suffer are the poems "Memorial I" and "Memorial II". Lorde reflects nostalgically in these poems about her dead friend and potential lover, Genevieve. As she states in one of her interviews, all "Memorial" poems are dedicated to her friend and potential lover, Genevieve. In *Zami*, she captures this regret. They never made love. Apart from this regret, Lorde felt guilty for not stopping Genny from committing suicide. In one of these poems, she imagines Genny coming back into life and allowing her to vindicate herself of blame:

> but we shall sit here softly
> beneath two different years
> and the rich earth between us
> shall drink our tears. (Lorde, 1977a, p. 206)

In "Memorial I", Lorde questions Genny as they stare at each other. Lorde appears here to ascertain the guilt she felt at her death. She asks:

> Genevieve
> what are you seeing
> in my mirror this morning
> peering out from behind my eyes
> like a hungry bird
> are you seeking for the girl
> I have grown less and less
> To resemble. (Lorde, 1977a, p. 207)

These lines suggest Lorde's guilt. She had had a premonition about Genny's plan to commit suicide but was forced to respect her parents by letting Genevieve out the day she committed suicide. The lines "Are you seeking

the shape of a girl / I have grown less and less to resemble" suggest her transformation from a friend into an indifferent being. Genny, therefore, appears to her as a ghost that haunts her. She will wish to see her in flight, mounting the skies, because her image is blinding, terrifying:

> I wish I could see you again
> far from me even
> birdlike
> flying into the sun
> your eyes
> blind me Genevieve. (Lorde, 1977a, p. 207)

This poem, "Memorial II", presents an image in which Lorde is faced with the ghost of Genny that exposes her helplessness and guilt. Although she saw Genny heading for her grave, she was powerless.

"Memorial I" and "Memorial II" capture Lorde's undying love and commitment to her friend and lover—Genevieve. In *Zami*, she states: "Things I never did with Genevieve: Let our bodies touch and tell the passions that we felt, make love" (Lorde, 1977b, p. 97). She regrets that they never had the chance to make love, which portrays her pathos at losing a lover.

The poem "Harriet" captures the separation of two lesbians because of severe homophobia. The environment is so hostile that love becomes almost impossible. Lesbians are defined by homophobes who do all to violate their freedom. The poem opens thus:

> Harriet there was always somebody calling us crazy
> Or mean or stuck-up or evil or black
> Or black
> And we were
> Nappy girls quick as cuttlefish
> Scurrying for cover. (Lorde, 1977a, p. 245)

The fragility of lesbians described as "Nappy" and "Scurrying for cover" is contrasted with the hostile and generalised homophobia: "There was always somebody calling us crazy." The poem ends with one of Lorde's most pessimistic portraits. Severe homophobia disrupts bonding between women:

> I remember you Harriet
> Before we were broken apart
> We dreamed the crossed swords
> Of warrior queens
> While we avoid each other's eyes
> And we learned to know lonely
> As the earth learns to know dead
> Harriet, Harriet
> What name shall we call ourselves now
> Our mother is gone? (Lorde, 1977a, p. 245)

This pessimistic portraiture is because the two never had their dream come true. They dreamed of "Warrior queens" but never succeeded because they were not properly invoked. Here, the speaker alludes to the Amazon warriors of ancient Dahomey. The rhetorical question that ends the poem, "What name shall we call ourselves now / Our mother is gone?" suggests this lack of a female arsenal to rely on. In future poems, however, Lorde will fill this void by charging lesbian associations with mythological beings.

In another lesbian-charged poem wrought with pessimism, Lorde questions her relationship with Frances Clayton, her lesbian partner for 16 years. Lesbians are always viewed as the most racially tolerant because of their dedication to liberation struggles. The poem "Outlines" captures her experiment with Frances as they lived together in a society that is both against interracial relations and, more significantly, against homosexuals. Lorde states:

> A Black woman and a White woman
> charter our courses close
> in a sea of calculated distance
> warned away by reefs of hidden anger
> histories rallied against us
> the friendly face of cheap alliance. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 367)

These lines capture the rift of difference that lies between the races. Their histories are so different that common ground is hardly ever arrived at. The lack of understanding between black and white women makes any possible alliance between them feeble. They can only put up: "the friendly face of cheap alliance." As the following line suggests, only a lesbian liaison can bridge the gap:

> A Black woman and a White woman
> In the open fact of our loving. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 362)

Lorde will capture the love interracial lesbian couples engage in amidst all kinds of homophobic gestures. As it turns out in the end, only a decision to a determined position can offer assurance:

> I trace the curve of your jaw
> with a lover's finger
> knowing the hardest battle
> is only the first
> how to do what we need for our loving
> with honor and in love
> we have chosen each other
> and the edge of each other's battles
> the war is the same
> if we lose
> somebody women's blood will congeal
> upon a dead planet
> if we win
> there is no telling. (Lorde, 1997a, pp. 365-366)

Lesbian engagement, then, offers a possibility of uniting black and white into a common front, as such, marking a point from which honest dialogue can ensue and inform the community.

Lorde's Poems of Jouissance

Lorde's second category of lesbian poems is far from the pessimism of the former. These poems capture the "jouissance" that emanates from lesbian coupling. Here, sexual pleasure does not necessarily arise from contact with the vaginas. As Luce Irigary (1980, p. 100) makes clear in *This Sex Which Is Not On*e, a woman has sexual organs just about everywhere. A woman is also capable of auto-eroticism; that is, the female is always touching herself: "A woman 'touches herself' constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is

composed of two lips which embrace continually" (Irigary, 1998, p. 100). Imagine the absence of a lover is in itself an act of sexual pleasure since the female has the ability of auto-eroticism. Parts of the body, like the fingers, the tongue, and the labia, become sexual zones of equal importance. Among these poems are: "Sowing", "On a Night of the Full Moon", "Love Poem", "The Winds of Orisha", "Meet", "Walking Our Boundaries", "Woman", "Recreation", and "Fog Reports". Putting women at the centre of the erotic charge frees them entirely from patriarchal bias, offering them a haven to be independent and creative.

In the poem "Sowing", Lorde compares the act of ploughing the earth with lesbian sex. Dominant images of the sun, rain, and soil are merged with her hands (trope for the spade) that caress the earth as she sows the seeds:

> I have finished planting the tomatoes
> in this brief sun after the rains
> now there is brown earth under my fingernails
> and sun full on my skin
> with my head thick as honey
> the tips of my fingers are stinging
> from the rich earth
> but more so from the lack of your body. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 51)

The speaker's act of sowing engenders a desire for her lover. Woman's archetypal trope as the "Earth-Mother" is here invoked as Lorde compares the fertilisation and regenerative power of the earth with that of women. This trope is also developed in the poem "Oaxaca", in which women as tropes for the earth are weary work for men, who have to plough hard. Although actual erotic intercourse does not occur, the act is suggested as the speaker imagines a liaison with her lover:

> I have been to this place before
> where blood seething commanded
> my fingers fresh from the earth
> dream of plowing a furrow
> whose name should be you. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 19)

Lorde's lesbian butch role that dominated her lesbian liaisons is raised here, as we shall see in subsequent poems. In the prologue to *Zami*, Lorde announces her desire to be both man and woman:

> I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me—to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks. (Lorde, 1997b, p. 7)

We shall find her asserting the masculine role much more often as she seeks always to enter into the crevices of her lovers.

The poems "Woman", "Meet", "On a Night of the Full Moon", "Love Poem", and "Recreation" capture the solace, joy, and electrification that emanates from lesbian bonding: In "Woman", she writes:

> I dream of a place between your breasts
> To build my house like a haven
> Where I plant crops
> An endless harvest
> Where the commonest rock
> Is moonstone and ebony opal. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 297)

This poem's imagery is full of imaginative energy. The speaker imagines a paradise where she can feel comfortable, where seemingly insignificant objects like rocks can become precious stones like "opal" and "moonstone", and where labor never ends and the rewards are limitless. Lesbians contend that their sexual encounters are more extended and produce more intense pleasure. They also view it as a spiritual mastery that is reciprocal. The poem "Meet" evokes actual intercourse:

> Coming to rest
> in the open mirrors of your demanded body
> I will be black light as you lie against me
> I will be heavy as August over your hair
> our rivers flow from the same sea
> and I promise to leave you again
> full of amazement and our illuminations
> dealt through the short tongue of color
> or the taste of each other's skin as it hung
> from our childhood mouths.
>
> When we meet again
> will you put your hands upon me
> will I ride you over our lands
> You shall get young as I lick your stomach
> hot and at rest before we move off again. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 257)

The energy she expresses in "Meet" is specific to lesbian sexual encounters. In a lesbian sex act, the pictures "Open Mirrors", "Black light", "Rivers flow", "Short tongue of color", "Ride you over", and "I lick your stomach" all come together and complement one another. This touch conjures up images of exhilaration: "amazements" and "illuminations". Lesbian contact brings back memories of childhood: "Or taste of each other's skin as it hung from our childhood mouths," suggesting that a lesbian relationship is the source of a primal connection with the mother.

Lesbian inquiry gives rise to an intense brilliance that is captured in "On a Night of the Full Moon". Lorde refers to moon imagery connected to women's menstrual cycle. According to mythology, the moon is a source of fertility and takes on the form of a serpent to mate with women. To validate lesbianism, Lorde uses this symbolic feminine figure, which can fertilize women as members of the feminine energy. She awakens the childlike ties to the mother's body in the first four lines of the poem:

> Out of my flesh that hungers
> and my mouth that knows
> comes the shape I am seeking
> for reason. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 172)

The speaker thirsts for the taste of milk and longs for the warmth, which builds in her mind the "shape" she must embrace to be whole. Her flesh seeks contact with the flesh she knows, and this is her mother's flesh. This hunger arouses the urge for contact:

> The curve of your waiting body
> fits my waiting hands
> your breasts warm as sunlight
> your lips quick as a birds

between your thighs the sweet
sharp taste of limes. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 172)

The speaker examines her partner, noting how her hands trace her bodily curves and how her breasts give out sunlight thanks to the hands, tongue, and lips producing: "…the sweet /sharp taste of limes" from between her thighs. Her Lorde brings cunnilingus to the center of lesbian intercourse by highlighting its exhilarating rewards: "Darkly rising / my eyes / judging your roundness / delightful / the moon speaks." The intercourse ends with complete elation.

Similarly, Lorde depicts the bond between a woman's body and the ground in "Love Poem". She suggests that a woman's body is a symbol of fertile soil. Here, she draws parallels with Wole Soyinka, who bestows praises on her daughter "Moremi" in his poem "Dedication" (Soyinka, 1975, p. 161). But unlike Soyinka, who promotes heterosexuality by highlighting women's innate connection to the soil, Lorde presents women as the essence of reproduction. Lorde's women are not passive valleys and hills waiting patiently for the plow but active agents participating in their fertilization.

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. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 127)

In the opening stanza, the speaker shows her primal relationship with the earth as she demands fertility and jouissance: "Make sky flow honey out of my hips." She elaborates on the image of a woman laid down in wait and inviting a partner with hips "Rigid as mountains / spread over a valley / carved out by the mouth of rain". This image of a woman with rigid hips lying down in wait is followed by the climax when the act of love begins:

And I knew when I entered her, I was
high wind in her forest hollow
fingers whispering sound
honey flowed
from the split cup
impale 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. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 127)

Vibrant sexual imagery that conveys a fierce lesbian love permeates these sentences. The intense cunnilingus act at the core of lesbian love is encapsulated in this line: "Honey flowed / from the split cup / impale on a lance of tongues" (Lorde, 1997a, p. 127). The speaker enters her lover's body with her breath, tongue, and fingers. She "swings out over the earth / over and over / again", just as birds search for herrings to eat and a youngster longs for their mother's breasts (Lorde, 1997a, p. 127), suggesting her insatiable appetite.

In "Walking Our Boundaries", the speaker again compares a lesbian relationship with the earth and nature. It captures two lovers as they inspect their garden in spring. As the sun rises, driving away the frost of winter, the speaker imagines her lover igniting her sensuality that lay dormant and unsatisfied by comparing their bodies to the dead leaves that need burning and transformation into energy:

Your hand
falls off the apple bark
like casual fire
along my back
my shoulders are dead leaves
waiting to be burned
to life. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 261)

Lesbian intercourse can burn away the frost of loneliness, and as spring replaces winter, lesbian love replaces loneliness and want.

In the poem "Recreation", Lorde compares writing to a lesbian erotic act. Lesbian love generates poetry as lovers write/ride their emotions into each other: "my body / writes into your flesh / the poem / you make of me" (Lorde, 1997a, p. 296). Lesbian sex is sensual work that produces intellectual and artistic creation. Unlike heterosexual sex, which is simplified by the penile contact between the sexual parts, lesbian sex is not uncomplicated and therefore needs an engagement of the mind that is challenging. This explains why most societies have never condemned lesbians because they think sex cannot occur without a phallus. Lesbian love, therefore, necessitates an engagement of the body and the mind. The poem opens:

Coming together
it is easier to work
after our bodies
meet
paper and pen
neither care nor profit
whether we write or not
but as your body moves
under my hands
charged and waiting
we cut the leash. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 296)

The lines "paper and pen / neither care nor profit / whether we write or not" suggest a nullification of paper and pen, which patriarchy had sought to appropriate. The phrase, "we cut the leash", indicates their breakthrough against patriarchal restrictions. We are given a picture of body parts working on each other: "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" (Lorde, 1997a, p. 296). Creation or creativity is possible without "paper and pen", as lesbian bodies are capable of making poetry as they work with each other. The reciprocal nature of lesbian love is captured in the chiasmus—"I made you / and take you made / into me" (Lorde, 1997a, p. 296). Lesbian love, therefore, is creative and challenging because women must explore the body to uncover the hidden controllers of ecstasy alien to the heterosexual world.

Lorde's Mythical Queers

Another category of Lorde's lesbian poems captures her portrayal of mythical deities who sanction lesbian love. These deities, as influential and spiritual figures, must be queer in a society which denies women attributes of power, creativity, and eminence. Lesbians, radical feminists, and feminist myth critics take recourse to a pantheon of female deities or witches that have shown their independent spirit in history. As powerful and self-reliant women, lesbians are extraordinary because they are ready to suffer to assert themselves. Although

patriarchy is almost indomitable, lesbians dare to challenge and deconstruct its hegemonic structures of propaganda and manipulation. Their power springs from other female goddesses, legends, and even victimised women who dared and challenged heterosexuality. The poems "The Winds of Orisha", "Meet", "Letter for Jan", "Sowing", and "On a Night of the Full Moon" capture this link between lesbian love and the feminine pantheon of goddesses and legends.

"The Winds of Orisha" is a mythologically charged poem that links mythology and lesbian eroticism. The poem opens with the rhetorical question, "How many of its women ache to bear their stories / robust and screaming like the earth erupting grain." The women are imaged as imprisoned but bustling with the zeal to speak out. Their captivity is captured in images that visualise enclosure and struggle as the women "thrash in padded chains mute as bottles", with "hands fluttering traces of resistance". By comparing the stories, the women wish to tell with the earth erupting grain in the simile—"robust and screaming like the earth erupting grain", the speaker relates women to their primal archetype—the earth goddess. The speaker will therefore go ahead to invoke mythological figures like Yemanja to free them and give them the power of speech wrenched by patriarchy. By so doing, the speaker is transformed by assuming and transmitting the forces of the deities. This transformation is enforced by a lesbian liaison thus:

> Impatient legends speak through my flesh
> changing this earth's formation
> spreading
> I will become myself
> an incantation
> dark raucous many-shaped characters
> leaping back and forth across bland pages
> and mother Yemanja raises her breast to begin my labour
> near water
> the beautiful Oshun and I lie down together
> in the heat of her body truth my voice comes stronger. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 90)

As the lines: "and mother Yemanja raises her breast to begin my labour / near water / the beautiful Oshun and I lie down together / in the heat of her body truth my voice comes stronger" suggest, the speaker gets her power both from mother Yemanja and Oshun. Yemanja gives her the taste of milk from her breasts, something she later seeks in her liaison with Oshun. As radical feminists argue, the desire for the female body springs from the girl's primary relationship with the mother (Flax, 1988). The speaker functions like an antenna that transmits the energy of the deities but, at the same time, partakes in lesbian erotic acts with Oshun. By so doing, the speaker displaces the world characterised by a phallogocentric worldview and invokes a female-centred world. As she copulates with the goddess—Oshun, she draws from the fountain of Oshun's power and becomes one with her.

In the poem "Meet", Lorde merges myth and lesbian sex as the goddess Seboulisa foretells their love. The poem is an erotically charged image of lesbian love, which is heightened by the symbol of the moon and the solstice:

> Woman when we meet in the solstice
> high over halfway between your world and mine
> rimmed with full moon and no more excuses
> your red hair burned my fingers as I spread you
> tasting your ruff down to sweetness. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 267)

Images of pubic hairs touching and burning, and the taste of body parts reinforce the experience of woman-to-woman love. Visual and tactile feelings are triggered when we read: “your hair burned my fingers as I spread you / tasting your ruff down to sweetness.” Mawulisa herself, (the Dahomean female-male sky-goddess-god principle), sanctions such love in the line “Mawulisa foretells our bodies as our hands touch and learn”. Drawing their spring of joy from Africa, the “milk” of their love comes from the ditches of Chile and Ouagadougou. By drawing the source of their love from Africa, Lorde invokes the lesbian warrior Amazons of Abomey and, as such, spiritually becomes contemporaneous with them. Images of the solstice and the moon characterise the atmosphere. Images of body parts: pubic hair burning, calling voices, tongues, and woman’s body as tropes for the earth, all merge into the act of lesbian coupling. Symbols of the goddess Mawulisa and the priestess Larteh endorse and empower the women.

In “Letter for Jan”, the speaker confronts an interlocutor who is afraid of engaging in lesbian relations. The speaker, in a series of allusions and images, struggles to dispel the fears of her interlocutor. We read:

> No I don’t think you were chicken not to speak
> I think you
> afraid I was mama as laser
> seeking to eat out or change your substance
> Mawulisa bent on destruction by threat
> who might cover you
> in a thick cloud of guilty symbols
> smelling of sandalwood and old buffalo musk
> of fiery offerings in the new moon’ chalice
> that would seduce you open
> turning erotic and delightful as you
> went under for the third time. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 302)

The speaker is empowered by the deity, Mawulisa, who is feared because of ignorance and the lack of dialogue. She, however, shows her openness to love other women. The stanza:

> I do not even know
> who looks like you
> of all the sisters who come to me
> at night
> we touch each other in secret places
> draw old signs and stories
> upon each each other’s back and proofread
> each other’s ancient copy. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 302)

suggests the speaker’s openness to women as they make love and partake of women’s ancient history. The speaker’s interlocutor is afraid because she is not prone to understanding the connections between femaleness and myth. We can sum up the analysis of this poem by stating the speaker’s desire for commerce:

> When all the time
> I would have loved you
> speaking
> being a woman full of loving
> turned on
> and a little bit raunchy

and heavy
with my own black song. (Lorde, 1997a, p. 303)

Conclusion

This paper captures Lorde's development of her maternal and matriarchal leaning into a political arsenal. By accepting those parts of her that are considered deviant and queer by the dominant hegemony, she derives the power to deconstruct the whole notion of difference. Feminist theoreticians have seen this maternal tie as the centre of female power and creativity. Chodorow (1998), Flax (1988) and Benjamin (1998) have all theorised on this concept, arguing for a reappraisal of the woman's tie to the mother. Although this bond with the mother is not always cordial, as we have it in the case of Lorde herself, it is essential to the individuation of the personality. As Chodorow (1998, p. 8) puts it: "but one can be separate from and similar to someone at the same time". Flax (1998, p. 27) will argue that the first body we know intimately is the female body: "our relation with our own body is mediated through our continuing ambivalence about separating and differentiating from her".

Lord's poetry captures lesbianism as a problem consisting of pain and gains, capturing many themes: homophobia and racism on the one hand and jouissance and intellection on the other.

In the first category, the poems chart the homophobia that lesbians experience in a racist, sexist, and hetero-normative society. These poems are thus pessimistic portraits that show how ignorance limits the freedom of lesbians. However, their determination to survive prevails. These include the lyrics "Martha", "Making It", "The Brown Menace", "Memorial I", "Memorial II", "Harriet", "Outlines", and "To Martha". In the poem "Harriet", she charts how homophobia restricts the freedom of gay women.

The second schema of Lorde's poems captures the idea of racism and how lesbian acts try to ignore and overcome this dividing force. Lesbian associations seem to be the only force linking women across boundaries because it places women at the centre. Lorde's lesbian relationships were predominantly interracial. In the poems "Making it", "Fog Report", "Outlines", and "The Brown Menace", she shows how lesbian bonding between the races can be both problematic and liberating.

Lorde's third category of lesbian poems is far from the pessimism of the former. These poems capture the "jouissance" that emanates from lesbianism. Here, sexual pleasure does not necessarily arise from contact with the vaginas. As Irigary (1980, p. 100) argues in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, a woman has sexual organs everywhere. A woman is also capable of auto-eroticism; that is, the female is always touching herself: "A woman 'touches herself' constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually" (Irigary, 1980, p. 100). Imagine the absence of a lover is an act of sexual pleasure since the female is sexually autonomous. Parts of the body, like the fingers, the tongue, and the labia, become sexual zones of equal importance. Among these poems are: "Sowing", "On a Night of the Full Moon", "Love Poem", "The Winds of Orisha", "Meet", "Walking Our Boundaries", "Woman", "Recreation", and "Fog Reports". Putting women at the centre of the erotic charge frees them entirely from patriarchal bias.

The last schema of Lorde's lesbian poems captures mythical deities who sanction lesbian love. As influential and spiritual figures, these deities must be queer in a society that denies women attributes of power, creativity, and eminence. Lesbians, radical feminists, and feminist myth critics take recourse to a pantheon of female deities or witches that have shown their independent spirit in history. As powerful and self-reliant women, lesbians are extraordinary because they are ready to suffer to assert themselves. Although patriarchy is adamant, lesbians dare to challenge and deconstruct its hegemonic structures of propaganda and manipulation. Their power springs from

other female goddesses, legends, and even victimised women who dared and challenged heterosexuality. The poems “The Winds of Orisha”, “Meet”, “Letter for Jan”, “Sowing”, and “On a Night of the Full Moon” capture this link between lesbian love and the feminine pantheon of goddesses and legends.

From the explication of her four lesbian schemas, we realise what stands out as the lesbian conundrum. The paper, therefore, captures Lorde’s desire to free the erotic and creative power of women by making them less dependent on men.

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