

INTERVIEW

# Audre Lorde on the Sacred Scale of Livability: Alexis Pauline Gumbs in Conversation with Caleb Ward

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## Abstract

Caleb Ward interviews Black feminist writer, poet, educator, organizer, and scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs about Audre Lorde's spirituality, her ecological political praxis, her pedagogy, and the cross-generational scale of social change.

**Ward:** Alexis, your prose poetry and other writing has gotten a lot of acclaim over the past several years, especially for how you draw on Black feminist archives to project visions for the future.<sup>1</sup> But going all the way back to 2010, your dissertation has been an urtext for Black feminist scholars and activists grappling with the inheritance left behind particularly by June Jordan and Audre Lorde.<sup>2</sup> You are a bottomless repository of stories from Lorde's life. And you especially have this relationship with the material artifacts of her life that enables a holistic view of how her ideas developed. I've seen you speak about the stones that she used to make necklaces, the notes that she jotted on the back of napkins and fliers, and her physical collection of her own water-damaged books that went through Hurricane Hugo in her home in St Croix. I feel like through this intimate relationship with the immediate, bodily life that she had, you've become probably the primary thinker of Lorde's spirituality, and a person who's bringing Lorde's spirituality to the forefront of our engagement with her thought. So, I'd be interested to hear a little bit about how you see Lorde's spirituality connecting with her politics, whether as a motivator or as something that actually shaped her practice.

**Gumbs:** Oh, that's a great question. Well, I don't know. I don't know if I'm an expert on Lorde's spirituality. I know that my relationship to Audre Lorde is a spiritual relationship, for me. But if I were to describe Audre Lorde's spiritual approach, I definitely think it's an Earth-based approach, or it became an

Earth-based approach. We know that Audre Lorde grew up in Catholic educational contexts and a religious Afro-Caribbean family. But in her life, she really developed this reverence for Earth itself. So, she would collect stones, she would find out what they were used for in different traditions. She would really study and think about animals, the stars, and meteor showers, what was going on in the sky. All of these were topics that she gave a lot of space for in her journals: the solstice, the equinox, the cycles of the moon. She was encountering these things in a number of different ways. Something like a feminist goddess practice also intersected with the research she did on West African cosmologies. She was bringing all those things together, in terms of how she actually led her spiritual life, made her decisions, was able to think of her life beyond the narrowness of one lifetime or of a “human society” context.

But Audre Lorde was also very spiritually eclectic. We know she was working with I Ching oracle, and she was ultimately really fascinated by a number of practices that inspired her. And I heard from one of her students that, towards the end of her life, this student asked her if she believed in an afterlife, what were her thoughts about that, and Lorde said—maybe jokingly, but you don’t always know, because just because she’s laughing doesn’t mean she’s joking—“You know, I was raised a Catholic, and I’m going to heaven.” So there’s all of this range and space . . . maybe that’s a different form of Catholicism. She had a very, very inclusive spiritual approach.

Politically, I think she was driven by an ethic that was ecological. A very important aspect of her work that I don’t think is discussed as much as we really need to discuss it—especially considering our own situation in relationship with this planet—is that Audre Lorde had a reverence for the Earth and understood these concepts, like the creative power of difference and the possibility of ethical relationship across difference, to be inclusive of all species, but also the planet itself.

So, Audre Lorde was practicing an ethics. When she talked about the creative power of difference, when she talked about the dynamism of a simultaneous interpersonal experience, the way that she theorized that in her writing and in her life, it really was inclusive of difference across species. It was inclusive of geological time. It was an expansive understanding of participation in creation and accountability for destructive actions—not only on the scale of interpersonal relationships but with the entire ecology. There are a number of places in interviews where Audre Lorde emphasizes that, of course, she wants these technologies of relationship that she’s theorizing in her work to make conversations possible between different groups of people. But if we don’t actually activate that in relationship to the planet itself, there will be no place to have those conversations. That’s something she emphasizes to multiple interviewers, especially when she’s in her fifties [in the late 1980s and early 1990s]. So yeah, if I had to make it very concise, I would say Audre Lorde practiced an eclectic, Earth-based spirituality that impacted her politics such that her politics resonated at the scale of the planet.

**CW:** That’s beautiful. So, do you see the kind of action she’s taking in the name of survival in the face of anti-Black violence—both in her own life and beyond, as in her support for the anti-apartheid movement—do you feel like that activism is continuous, in a way, with this project of the health of the planet,

and the project of creating a home that will last on planetary time for human community?

**APG:** Absolutely. I don't think there is a distinction between the sacrifice of Black life that she saw in terms of the apartheid movement and in terms of racism in Germany and resurgence of Nazism that she spoke about at the end of her life, and what she was doing in St Croix, being a fierce advocate against offshore oil drilling and understanding that there are structures that she called "cancerous." And obviously, there's a weight to somebody who is living with cancer, using the metaphor of "cancer" to describe the society that she lives in. So, what she saw, especially in the leadership of women like Ellen Kuzwayo in Soweto and the sisters of the Maggie Magaba Trust,<sup>3</sup> was this sacred scale of livability. She saw that in the practice of different Black feminisms across the planet. I wouldn't say that she was always thinking about this in the terms that I would articulate it in, but I do think that when you see the way she writes about it in her poetry, she's always bringing those things together.

**CW:** Thank you. This question about the scale of survival and ecological time comes up in a few places in her writing. In the context of nuclear energy, she talks in several places about putting things in the Earth that will never break down—things that, in planetary time, are like a tumor that can never be reintegrated into the Earth. So, thinking about those images, I have two "M-words" to ponder—appropriately enough, given your book *M archive* (Gumbs 2018). They're actually words that appear in the early pages of *M archive*, and I think they are really central in Audre Lorde's thought. Those two words are *metastasize*, which we've already talked about a little bit, and *metabolize*. I'd love to hear you think about those words aloud in the context of Lorde's thought.

**APG:** It's so interesting because Audre Lorde was protesting around issues of nuclear policy from when she was a college student, and she continued to think about that, write about that, organize around that, and mentor others to organize around that, throughout her life. She thinks of human action out of alignment with the environment as something that is cancerous, that spreads and drains and kills. And, at the same time, it's reciprocal: she thinks about her work of actually fighting cancer in her body as anti-apartheid work. That's one of the ways that she talked about it to her doctor in Berlin. And so, out of tune with the rest of the environment, capitalism creates structures that the Earth can't actually sustain and hold. They're not porous enough for life to move through, and they cause these huge problems, like offshore oil drilling does. And then there's how she sees her life force and her energy as something that is, in fact, being metabolized by the universe. When she talks about "a burst of light" (Lorde 1988), she's talking about life in this way, where it is something that's renewable—not in the form of an individual life, but in the form of the energy that she's moving. And she sees her work with her poetry as energy work that she's doing. She often talks about a concept in her mind of this "fount of life" that we pour back into after we die. She sees her own life

as just a vessel that energy moves through, and that energy being renewable and something that is—like everything else in the planet—cyclical and not ownable by an individual. She contrasts that with how capitalism functions and what it means for multinational corporations to inject structures that only extract and don't offer something back that can actually become part of this whole. I would say that *metastasization* as opposed to *metabolism* might be a way to think about that conflict that Audre Lorde saw. She began to believe that, on the level of her body [going through cancer], she was experiencing the conflict between the imposed system and the will for life to be able to move through.

**CW:** Thank you. That's wonderful. And in a way, this is not a metaphor, right?

**APG:** Quite literally!

**CW:** In some sense it's a metaphor, but in another it is quite literally her body living out the impact of what capitalism has done to the world and to the food chain and the environment. There are so many directions we could go with this. First, let's talk about this idea of her knowledge practices participating in this wider recycling and regenerating of the Earth. I feel like that's really visible in her narrative of her first experience of menstruation, when she talks about the appearance of this blood that is going to be a source of knowledge that will be available to her—I think she says knowledge *and* power, as she often does. I'm thinking in particular of her account in *Zami*, and of course that piece also appeared elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> I think when people today read the feminists of the 1970s, there are some anxieties about this sort of spiritual feminine that Lorde and others seem to draw out. And the fear that some form of gender essentialism might be underlying some of these views.<sup>5</sup> So, I'd be interested if you have advice for people who are reading Lorde and feeling this kind of anxiety or caution around that. Are there places where we have to recognize limitations of her thought because of this kind of view, or are those places where we have to actually look closer and more deeply to see what she's actually trying to get at?

**APG:** I think that's a good question. My deepest wish is just that she were here, right? That's the thing. When our great thinkers have passed away, we can't ask them to then speak in the language that has developed since they were gone—in this case, with language that maybe would not even have developed without her contribution to our discourse. So, I think there's a lot there. When I think about it, I don't think Audre Lorde would be a gender essentialist today. I can't know. But the reasons I think that she would not be, from what she did in her lifetime, have to do with the fact that she did all this research to unpack the gender essentialism of Black cultural nationalism in the United States.

She would bring back all of these examples of different ways that people practice gender, different forms of body modification that had to do with people's roles they took on in society. She strongly identified with the idea of Amazon warriors cutting off their breasts and being warriors in a certain kind of way.<sup>6</sup> She was really interested in bringing this idea of the "boy wives"

and the “female husbands” to her political community.<sup>7</sup> All of these things were really important as she resisted a form of gender essentialism that she was trying to disrupt and get free from, even in her own participation in the Black Arts Movement.<sup>8</sup> To me, that suggests that gender essentialism isn’t something that she would want to hold onto. Also, of course, she aligns herself with the women of the Combahee River Collective, who specifically say that they don’t believe in biological determinism and don’t practice separatism for those reasons. And she has her own dialogs around lesbian feminist separatism that are really core to how she moved in the world.<sup>9</sup> And so those things suggest to me that, if we were to talk to Audre Lorde today, she would not be claiming a gender essentialism that would harm the people whose freedom she has fought for and made possible. I think what [the concept of] a divine feminine is doing in her work is really seeking another way to be. It’s seeking to unseat patriarchy, to acknowledge that there have been other ways that energy has moved.

I think she also sees herself, the energies moving through her, as identified with her mother and identified with her father. In *Zami* and everywhere else, she talks about the masculine and feminine energy that moves through her, and that is so important to her.<sup>10</sup> What she’s doing with the blood in the menstruation scene in *Zami*, it really is connected to what she’s doing in that entire book, which is, I would say, a transubstantiation of her maternal legacy and her relationship to her mother. She’s asking, what could this relationship mean? She reaches a point in her life where she realizes she’s been pushing against her mother’s own internalized racism, her mother’s strict discipline, and other things that she railed against growing up in her mother’s home. And then she’s realizing what she got. She’s realizing that, oh, her relationship to language is completely influenced by her mother. She’s realizing how—I’m going to use the word queer, which is not the word that she used—but how queerly her mother moved in the world, as a powerful woman who was breaking all these different norms. Audre Lorde didn’t even know they were norms, because her mother was the first person that she saw! And she is thinking about the lesbianism of her mother—using “lesbian” not to mean specifically an identity where a woman partners with other people who identify as women, but as a way to describe how she saw her mother’s reality, as something that pushed against heteronormativity in a way that Audre Lorde benefitted from, her mother’s legacy.

So, then to turn to the blood and this menstrual moment, which is based in Audre Lorde’s life, but we know it’s a “biomythography,” which she sometimes refers to as a novel with “Audre” as the character. So, there’s room for her to go back to that scene and create this lineage and inheritance and energy transfer between her mother and herself that I don’t think she was able to recognize was happening until she also had her own children, until she had other life experiences and even other experiences with her mother, that allowed her to see that. What we witness in that scene is Audre returning to that moment in her puberty and to her relationship with her mother to honor a connection that she didn’t know how to honor when she really was that age. And I think that’s very powerful.

We also see her do that work in terms of her relationship with her father, who she looks just like and who at the end of her life she realizes had a secret

family that she never knew about, before she was born. She starts to link it to how she has been in her relationships—what has been her relationship to her sexuality, or her relationship to other women? So, she’s doing that work, and it is gendered because she’s aligning it with her mother and her father. But I don’t think she’s trying to reproduce a gendered essentialism. I think she’s finding something very sacred in her own femininity that she’s making space for. I think that’s what’s so useful and exciting about this work. Of course, we’ll never find out. I mean, we know that the people that Audre Lorde mentored, who I interview and who I am in relationship with, they themselves are not gender essentialists. And they’re not practicing the harmfulness of trans exclusion. That’s something that we know, which also suggests that that’s where she would be if she were here. But I think the more important thing is to really look at Audre Lorde as a theorist of energy, a person who was theorizing energy in a way that is even more expansive than what we have terminology for now, let alone what she had terminology for then. That to me is really exciting. It’s also a challenge, you know, as somebody writing about her. But I’m also a poet, so I have to imagine that there’s energy we can move, beyond the terminology we have.

**CW:** Thank you, that is a wonderful answer. I love that challenge of reading Lorde as a theorist of energy. And, of course, in a very specific context, she prickles at being labeled as a theorist.<sup>11</sup> I think she responds that way because of this mistaken view that you can strip out the energy of actually living and still be left behind with ideas, with a theory. Of course, in Lorde’s words, “there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us”; the usefulness and resonance of those ideas has to come from feeling and rise up with the sources of energy we have.<sup>12</sup>

I’d love to talk a little bit more about this, building on the really rich discussion of her inheritance from her parents you just gave us. I think you’re right that she begins to circle back to these battles as she’s going through life as a mother and experiencing her relationships with her children. I feel like in her poetry, on the one hand there’s a renegotiation of her relationship with her mother—we talked about “metabolism” and “metastasis”—and in that relationship she has to figure out how to metabolize her mother’s colorism that she inherited, or her father silences, not let them metastasize.<sup>13</sup> But simultaneously, she is looking ahead toward the perspective of her daughter and her son—especially her daughter—at how the next generation will or will not be able to take up whatever she, her generation, has given to them. She talks often in her poetry about how one generation has developed tools and sources of energy for survival in a particular season, but the season will change, and the challenges of survival will take different shapes in the future. In a new season, it could be that all those inherited tools just need to be rejected, or at least transformed. I wonder if you could say a little bit about this cross-generational structure. Not so much her personal relationship with her children, but what she sees as this transmission that’s supposed to happen from her generation of Black feminists onward. And maybe there are lessons there—I really deeply believe there are—for all social movements, all attempts to transform the status quo. But I’d love to hear your thoughts on this futural direction of inheritance in her thought.

**APG:** Definitely, I think she was always working on an intergenerational scale. And this is why you see quotes from her children as the epigraphs to her poetry books. This idea of “the children” as something expansive, that she really felt as a teacher but also as a person situated in time and believing in energy beyond time. She was working to imagine those possibilities. That’s what I was thinking, when you were phrasing that question: I was thinking about “Prologue” and the way that through that poem she moves from this idea of the undead and the old voices—How are we honoring our ancestors? Can my brothers and sisters hear me?—to the fact that it’s actually good news that her legacy is something that she won’t have control over. And that the grass that grows in that poem, the children of the future, are going to have this other context, and she doesn’t have to control the outcome.<sup>14</sup> I see it also connected to the poem “Blackstudies,” where she is thinking through, “What is it to teach?” And, obviously, as we know, she was involved in the creation of Black Studies in the United States and was constantly in meetings with other colleagues in the City University of New York, around what that would be, what that would mean, in solidarity with the students who had demanded Black and Puerto Rican studies. She is doing this work to figure out what *she* learned? What is the English language doing inside of her? Is it a demonic force? The lines on her hands, where her relationship to language becomes something that’s haunted?<sup>15</sup> Both of those are definitely poems of haunting. Then she gets to this place where, “mother soon we will not need you/only your memory/teaching us questions.” She has questions—“what shall they grow for food?” “What shall they carve for weapons?”—but, she can never answer those questions. She just has to be an expansive enough memory to teach the questions that they will be able to then work with on their own, in the conditions that they face.

We see different versions of that. You see it in her poetry after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>16</sup> You see what I would call a generational generosity, a real insistence and rigor around the open-endedness of the future for the next generation. This is not to say she wasn’t invested in what people younger than her did. She loved to give advice, and she totally told younger people what to do—she would say, “You need to write your book!”, or “You need to go to grad school!” It’s just that she was also really curious. And she also did not think that she would be able to understand all of it, what was going to be generated in the future. She knew she shouldn’t be able to understand it. That would be a sign that they weren’t just reproducing the same harmful cycles that she herself was trying to find a way, a portal, out of.

The reality is, Audre Lorde, or anybody living with cancer for more than a decade, obviously thinks about their legacy. And they have all these encounters and these moments where they understand that they are participating in things that are hopefully going to outlive them, and they’re not going to necessarily see the end of them. But I will say, having read the middle school notebooks of Audre Lorde, she was thinking about legacy from when she was a kid. She was somebody who thought on that intergenerational scale from very early in her life. That was part of her relationship to language and to poetry. She wondered about that in this sci-fi piece that she wrote when she was about 14. She was asking, “What happens

with the light if there are people who don't know how to receive it?"<sup>17</sup> That was something she was already thinking about, using language that would be the same language that she'd use in *A burst of light* (1988), her very last work of autobiographical prose.

So, I don't necessarily think there is a settling over the course of her life. We can see things that are consistent across the way that Audre Lorde thought about intergenerational impact. But the most important thing is, that's really where the juice and energy was for her. That's why it was so exciting for her to meet the young women in Berlin who were creating the Afro-German movement and the Afro-German feminist movement. It was so exciting because their existence actually hadn't even occurred to her, before she started this correspondence where she began to ask, "Oh, I really want to know, what are they like? What are they doing?" And she had this intense focus. She was studying pictures from the conference in Zurich before she got there, so she could embrace Ika [Hügel-Marshall] as soon as she first met her. She was studying the future and so curious about it and so honored to play any part in what future generations will create. But in this sense that, yes, she's drawing on her experience. She's drawing on her connections. She's trying to support people. She's believing in them more than they believe in themselves—the number of Black women in Europe who tell stories like, "And then Audre Lorde had me translate [her speech]—and I'm not even a translator!" But she said, "You can do it!" And then she would just start, you know, without, well, full consent. But also because of this deep belief that everybody is going to grow and that she wants to contribute to that.

I think this also speaks to what it means to have an Earth-based ethic. Some practitioners of an Earth-based spirituality or indigenous forms of ethics are thinking seven generations back and seven generations into the future. That also describes the way Audre Lorde was thinking—not necessarily only identifying with an indigenous framework, but absolutely being taught by solidarity with different folks who were living in that framework. And there's a lot of reach to that. I feel included in that. And I also feel accountable to an intergenerational, yes, metabolization. And offering this energy that we can say Audre Lorde is continuing to generate beyond what she could imagine, beyond what I will be able to imagine, and beyond.

**CW:** Wonderful. Thank you so much for bringing everything together in such a beautiful way. I want to ask one last question, about how this long-scale cross-generational inheritance can be shepherded along on the face-to-face level in the classroom. Especially when she's working with other Black women, other Black lesbians, other poets, especially women of color poets, but also just in the classroom in general, with its particular challenges. She talks about this drain of trying to teach white students in the City University of New York—the Teacher's College—where she's supposed to teach these white teachers-in-training how to interact with Black and Puerto Rican and Dominican students, and it's just a total drain. So, do you have a sense that she has a pedagogy that she develops through her life, beyond her demand for self-scrutiny, which I would identify as the starting point she asks of all people—to scrutinize what is of meaning for your life and how it is connected to others. I'd love to hear your thoughts about her pedagogy,



especially as all these lecture notes are being published and archival work is pulling together material that gives us insight into that.

**APG:** Yeah, I think it's so great to have the transcripts of the classes in Germany, and the CUNY archival work is awesome.<sup>18</sup> And talking to Audre Lorde's students has been one of the great, great joys of writing this biography. Some of these students have been my direct mentors since long before this project. So, Audre Lorde's pedagogy. There's no origin point, right? We're always learning. We're always thinking about learning. We're actually always teaching. And, as Audre Lorde also writes, there's not a separation between these. When Audre Lorde was a kid, she met that first Black librarian, Augusta Baker. The great librarian Augusta Baker, who was the children's librarian at the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library when Audre Lorde's mother used to take her and her sisters there.<sup>19</sup> That encounter was so important and so formative. Augusta Baker was the granddaughter of a storyteller; she believed in storytelling. She believed in reciting poetry. Then we learn that this is how Audre Lorde says she learned to talk, by reciting poetry—directly because of the influence of Augusta Baker.<sup>20</sup> Then we track that all the way to Audre Lorde later becoming a librarian and secretly stashing publications relevant to the Black young people in Mount Vernon, publications that were not part of the library's collection, to give to them when they came in the room and were being policed by the other librarians for being too loud, too Black, too young.<sup>21</sup> And how can they not be young Black people? She has this gratitude for Augusta Baker that moves through what she decides to do. And then, as she describes it, when she goes as a poet-in-residence to Tougaloo,<sup>22</sup> and she works with those students to create their poetry publication, *Pound* (Lorde 1969)—that is also when she realizes, 'Oh, I really am a teacher. I really am a poet. . . . I was identifying as a librarian.' She loved that classroom.

She kept those student evaluations, so they're part of her archive now. And . . . Oh my gosh. If you could get your students to say things like that, they just had so much love, so much gratitude. They wrote, "Can she come back?," "Can she stay longer?" "She opened us up to things we couldn't even imagine. She supported us so deeply." And then when you see the publication they created: how did she create a space where these students at a historically Black college in the mid-1960s would write about mental illness, about deep poverty, about controversial, gritty, dirty things—not anonymously, but put their names on it and publish them? That itself speaks to the space of truth-telling and bravery that she held for them.

And she was really activated by their truth-telling and by their bravery in a huge way. So her teaching career, I would say, comes out of the way that those students impacted her and showed her that something was possible. And then she's in the SEEK program, and she's working with the students who've been underserved by the New York City public school system.<sup>23</sup> She's working at Lehman College with the white teachers-in-training who are not trying to hear it, you know. She talks about feeling like these white students at Lehman—who were becoming teachers, as you mentioned, for majority Black and Puerto Rican schools—they saw her as their enemy. Yet it's interesting to see how she doesn't give up on those tools.<sup>24</sup> She adapts her

syllabi about systemic racism and then continues to teach them at John Jay [College of Criminal Justice], where she's working with this mix of students that includes police cadets as well as newly included students of color interested in criminal justice and legal justice—in transforming it or participating in it, as the case may be.

She's adapting the same work, and she doesn't actually give up her pedagogy even though she feels like it was such a fight and such a drain, and she doesn't necessarily feel like it succeeded with those teachers-in-training at Lehman. To think it's more successful when your students are police officers is *deep*, first of all! But I think she really did feel that way. And, at a certain point, she really wanted to focus on teaching poetry. It kind of comes full circle, back to a space where poetry is the center of what they're doing, as opposed to composition, which had been the center of what she was doing in her role at John Jay.<sup>25</sup> All that is to say, self-scrutiny is definitely a key part of her pedagogy, but also institutional analysis and understanding of systemic oppression—these are also very core parts of her pedagogy that she brought with her. I think this is an important part of understanding the consistency of Audre Lorde's socialism. You know, she has the students reading James Boggs at John Jay. That's the one core required text, someone who is retheorizing what it means to be a Black worker coming out of Detroit. There are other things, but that's the consistent text that she brings over and over again.<sup>26</sup> I think that's very important because there are times when—and I don't think this is a coincidence—people remove Audre Lorde from a systems analysis by focusing on her interpersonal relationships, on only some of her ideas, or on her identity itself. And, like the authors of the Combahee River Collective statement, she really did think of identity as something that was never removed from these structures, that was actually produced within a systemic frame—identity has everything to do with capitalism and how racism is useful for capitalism. I think that's really important to say.

She was responsive and adaptable as an educator, and she was practicing a pedagogy of presence. She would change what they were talking about on a particular day based on what was going on. When Thomas Shea killed Clifford Glover, that was a moment where she said, "We have to talk about this differently, because this is what police do."<sup>27</sup> It was so profoundly relevant for the setting that she was teaching in. Or, when Eleanor Bumpurs was killed.<sup>28</sup> Her students talk about her coming in and framing what she would do that day based on what was actually happening in the world, and what she felt her students needed to be aware of. And at the same time, her teaching was grounded in this deep relationship to systems and wanting her students to have an analysis of systems—to understand that the individual experiences that they're having are in relationship with these systems. This also keeps everybody in the room connected to each other, despite different backgrounds, through the possibility of reproducing or transforming those systems. That's something really important about her pedagogy.

I also think there's something like an intimacy and a mothering that her students talk about, which had a huge impact. Well, there's mother figure, there's older sister figure, there are different ways that people talk about Audre Lorde's example. But she was profoundly interested in her students

and curious about them. I think that kind of attention is an important part of her pedagogy: her honest curiosity about people. Yes, she insisted that people scrutinize themselves, but also her curiosity about people made them more curious about themselves, too, about their relationship with the world around them. Her students talk about her putting them in a circle—she wanted everybody to face each other—she was really thinking about how they related to each other in that room. That relating was so important, as they learned about how they were related to each other through these larger systems.

Obviously, Audre Lorde is teaching me after the fact, and I feel like she's a great teacher, from my own experience. But learning about her through the eyes of her students and her mentees is phenomenal. As far as we know, Audre Lorde was the first person teaching about systemic racism to police officers *ever*, which is revolutionary in terms of what that means, in terms of the content of what she was teaching. But when you understand who she was as an educator, the energy she brought to that part of her calling, you see how something like that becomes possible. You see it in the student essays she kept, where police officers were writing their critiques of the police system and writing about how they *feel*, how sad they feel as Black police officers, for example. I'm in awe of what kinds of spaces for inquiry she really made possible for the students who worked with her. And I don't think that can ever be removed from the fact that she modeled it. She didn't stop learning. You know, she didn't turn it off within herself, and I think that's what allowed her to make that level of inquiry available.

**CW:** Thank you. I love the way that, on the one hand, your answers are moving across these large-scale, structural relationships Lorde is thinking about: systemic, historical, intergenerational, the Earth, property relations, all of this. Yet, the scale of revolution is in the student, in the moment of feeling deeply. She's recognizing that the students are the source or the agent of imagination, which is needed to start to create something else once she's gone, moving forward. This love for the student, or love for the future, for the future possibility that the student can dream or imagine, can work toward. It motivates a kind of writing and a kind of teaching that creates a space in which that reflecting and imagining can happen.

What I appreciate from you is how your writing does this, how your work grappling with the archive and the inheritance from Black feminist foremothers like Lorde opens up a space for all different people to renegotiate their relationships with these systems. Or to redirect our attention toward something different, what we're not paying attention to—whether it's the environment and animal life or the dynamics that we are living out, day in and day out, of racist repetition of injustice. Thank you so much for having this conversation and for opening up more synapses for new ways of thinking about Audre Lorde's thought and work. And thank you also for doing your scholarship and writing *Survival is a promise*, which will continue creating new possible futures of her thought and new ways of engaging with this complex inheritance. I appreciate very much talking with you, and I can't wait to see where your work goes next.

**APG:** Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited about where your work goes next too. The attention you pay to Audre Lorde's thought is really important. I see it as mirroring that near-sighted Audre Lorde, bringing the stones so close to her face so she could really understand their complexity. That's how I think of what you are doing, and I know that it honors her, as it should.

**CW:** Thank you.

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## Notes

**1** Gumbs was awarded a Windham Campbell Prize in 2023 for her prose poetry, and her book *Undrowned: Black feminist lessons from marine mammals* won a Whiting Award for Nonfiction in 2022. She has also received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 2022 and a National Humanities Center Fellowship in 2020 to work on her book, *Survival is a promise: The eternal life of Audre Lorde*, which was published to acclaim in summer 2024. In 2024 Gumbs was awarded a Monument Lab Fellowship and a Ways of Repair commission to follow Audre Lorde's lead and theorize the shoreline insights of hurricane and flood survivors.

**2** Gumbs's dissertation (2010) was one of the first to draw extensively from the Audre Lorde Papers at Spelman College.

**3** Ellen Kuzwayo (1914–2006) was a South African community organizer, social worker, activist, educator, politician, writer, and filmmaker. Maggie Magaba Trust was an organization Kuzwayo helped lead in support of South African women's self-determination. See Kuzwayo (1985).

**4** The piece was originally published as "My mother's mortar" in the lesbian feminist journal *Sinister Wisdom* (Lorde 1979) and later appeared in *Zami* (Lorde 1982, 76–80). There and in the final version of *Zami*, she describes experiencing her first menstruation as sensing within herself "a tiding ocean of blood beginning to be made real and available to me for strength and information" (Lorde 1982, 78).

**5** For discussion of the problem of gender essentialism in Lorde's thought, and especially her concept of the erotic, see Ward (2023, 910–12).

**6** See, e.g., Lorde (1980, 35).

**7** See, e.g., Lorde's discussion of the Dahomeyan marriage structure of "giving the goat to the buck" (Lorde 1984, 50).

**8** Lorde published her third and fourth books of poetry with the Detroit-based Broadside Press, which was associated with the Black Arts Movement (Lorde 1973, 1974). She describes her relationship with the Harlem Writers' Guild as "underlining and rejection at the same time"—underlining her Blackness, while rejecting her lesbianism and other aspects of her identity ("An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich," in Lorde 1984, 91). On Lorde in the Black Arts Movement, see de Veaux (2004, 91–93, 129–42) and McGill (2005, 117–34).

**9** See "Man child: A Black lesbian feminist's response" in Lorde (1984), and "Turning the beat around: Lesbian parenting 1986" in Lorde (1988).

**10** Lorde opens the prologue of *Zami* with the words: "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 1982, 7).

**11** In the opening lines of the introduction to *Sister outsider*, editor Nancy Bereano quotes Lorde as claiming she "doesn't write theory" (Lorde 1984, 7).

**12** The quote is from "Poetry Is not a luxury" (Lorde 1984, 38).

13 Lorde addresses these themes often in her poems. Regarding colorism, Lorde writes in “Prologue”: “whatever my mother thought would mean survival/made her try to beat me whiter every day/and even now the colour of her bleached ambition/still forks throughout my words” (Lorde 1973, 97).

14 The poem runs: “The children remain/like blades of grass over the earth and/all the children are singing/louder than mourning” (Lorde 2000, 98).

15 Her hands and the “black marks running across them” are a theme across the long poem “Blackstudies.” Toward the end of the poem she writes, “Only the black marks on my hands itch and flutter/shredding my words and wherever they fall/the earth springs up denials” (Lorde 2000, 153–57).

16 In her interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde identifies “Equinox” as one poem she wrote during this time. See Lorde (1984, 93).

17 This piece is in the Audre Lorde Papers at the Spelman College Archives.

18 Two of Lorde’s seminars at the Free University of Berlin in 1984 have been edited and published by Kenning Editions in *Dream of Europe* (Lorde 2020), and notes from her teaching at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Hunter College have been published as “*I teach myself in outline*”, a volume in the CUNY Poetics Document Initiative’s *Lost and Found* series (Lorde 2017).

19 Lorde describes meeting Baker in *Zami* (Lorde 1982, 23–24).

20 See “An interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich” (Lorde 1984, 81–85). For discussion of the role of poetry in Lorde’s knowledge practices, see Ward (2020, 468–70).

21 Lorde was a librarian at Mount Vernon Public Library in Mount Vernon, New York, in 1960–63.

22 In 1968, Lorde won a National Endowment for the Arts residency grant to teach a six-week creative writing course at Tougaloo College, a historically Black college in Jackson, Mississippi (Hall 2004, xx). She often describes this as a pivotal moment in her consciousness. See Hall (2004, 52–57).

23 Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge (SEEK) is a program established in 1966 to encourage “matriculation of racially, economically and educationally marginalized high school graduates at CUNY colleges” (Lorde 2017, 1). Lorde taught in the SEEK program in 1968–69, before beginning to teach at Lehman College Education Department in 1969, where she trained new (predominantly white, female) public high school teachers (Lorde 2017, 2). For discussion of Lorde’s work and pedagogy during this period, see Savonick (2024).

24 At Lehman College, Lorde taught a course called “Race and Education.” Teaching notes from this period are collected in “*I teach myself in outline*” (Lorde 2017).

25 One of Lorde’s most famous poems, “Power,” begins with the lines: “The difference between poetry and rhetoric/is being ready to kill/yourself/instead of your children” (Lorde 1978, 108). See Lorde’s discussion of these lines in her interview with Adrienne Rich in *Sister outsider* (Lorde 1984, 106–8).

26 Lorde consistently taught Boggs’s “Uprooting racism and racists in the United States” (Boggs 1970b). She also assigned his essay “The myth and irrationality of Black capitalism” as suggested reading (Boggs 1970a). See Lorde (2017, 18–22).

27 Clifford Glover was a 10-year-old Black child shot to death by an undercover police officer on April 28, 1973 in Queens, New York. The murder of Glover and later acquittal of the officer, Thomas Shea, are the focal points of Lorde’s poems “Power” and “The same death over and over or lullabies are for children,” both published in *The Black Unicorn* (Lorde 1978).

28 Eleanor Bumpurs was a 66-year-old Black disabled woman killed on October 29, 1984, by NYPD officers enforcing her eviction from public housing in the Bronx, New York City. Lorde’s poem “Party time” draws connections between Bumpurs’s killing and rent protests in apartheid Soweto, South Africa (Lorde 1993).

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