

**ESSAYS &
SPEECHES BY
AUDRE
LORDE**

New Foreword by
CHERYL CLARKE



**SISTER
OUTSIDER**

Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge the invaluable help of each one of the women who supported me through these writings, with particular note of appreciation for the patience and insight of my editor, Nancy K. Boreano, who has helped to make the whole process real again.

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Foreword

WITH ITS PARADOXICAL TITLE, *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde's most influential book of prose, is ever more trenchant twenty-three years after its first printing—surpassing even the reputation of her poetry, which is no minor feat. Were she here among us in the funky U.S. instead of floating somewhere over the Guinea Coast, Lorde would still want and have to claim that “outsider” stance. These prose works, much like her poetry, position her (and us), as Akasha Gloria Hull said many years ago, “on the line,” refusing the safety of that inside perimeter. I return to these texts again and always—in these times of imperial and unnatural acts, like the war in Iraq and the federal abandonment of the Gulf Coast survivors in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. *Sister* is my sister no matter how I may reject her counsel: “As Black people . . . we must move against not only those forces which dehumanize us from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves.”¹ No matter how angry *Sister* makes me with her seemingly easy aphorisms: “*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.*”² No matter how much *Sister* still asks the hard questions: “Why do Black women reserve a particular voice of fury and disappointment for each other? Who is it we must destroy when we attack each other with that tone of predetermined and correct annihilation?”³

On the shelf with or at the bottom of that stack of other well-mined tomes—*The Black Woman: An Anthology*; *Conditions: Five*, *The Black Women's Issue*; *Lesbian Fiction*; *Top Ranking*—*Sister* is never far from me. I retain several dog-eared, underlined, coffee-splotched copies of her—at home, at work, on my nightstand—as necessary as my eyeglasses, my second sight.

A fall semester of teaching my women's studies seminar never passes without deploying one of the following texts in theorizing feminist activism: “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” or “The Uses of Anger: Women

Responding to Racism.” In one paragraph, Lorde can simultaneously blow away the entire Enlightenment project and use its tools, too.

In 1990 I quoted myself in “Knowing the Danger and Going There Anyway,” an article I wrote on Lorde for the Boston feminist newspaper, *Sojourner*; I’ll change the sister trope and quote myself again: “I said that Audre Lorde’s work is ‘a neighbor I’ve grown up with, who can always be counted on for honest talk, to rescue me when I’ve forgotten the key to my own house, to go with me to a tenants’ or town meeting, a community festival.’”⁴ In 1990, Lorde was still walking among us. *Sister Outsider* has taken its creator’s place as that good neighbor. And with this new edition, we will have our good neighbor and sister for another generation. May those of us who are *Sister Outsider*’s old neighbors continue to be inspired by her luminous writing and may those new neighbors be newly inspired.

—CHERYL CLARKE
2007

Notes

1. “Learning from the 60s,” p. 135.
2. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” p. 112.
3. “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” p. 159.
4. Cheryl Clarke, *The Days of Good Looks: Prose and Poetry, 1980–2005* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006).

Introduction

WHEN WE BEGAN EDITING *Sister Outsider*—long after the book had been conceptualized, a contract signed, and new material written—Audre Lorde informed me, as we were working one afternoon, that she doesn't write theory. "I am a poet," she said.

Lorde's stature as a poet is undeniable. And yet there can be no doubt that *Sister Outsider*, a collection of essays and speeches drawn from the past eight years of this Black lesbian feminist's nonfiction prose, makes absolutely clear to many what some already knew: Audre Lorde's voice is central to the development of contemporary feminist theory. She is at the cutting edge of consciousness.

The fifteen selections included here, several of them published for the first time, are essential reading. Whether it is the by now familiar "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," opening us up to the potential power in all aspects of our lives implicit in the erotic,

When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.¹

or the recently authored "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," probing the white racist roots of hostility between Black women,

We are Black women born into a society of entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female. We are strong and enduring. We are also deeply scarred.²

Lorde's work expands, deepens, and enriches all of our understandings of what feminism can be.

But what about the "conflict" between poetry and theory, between their separate and seemingly incompatible spheres? We have been told that poetry expresses what we feel, and theory states what we know; that the poet creates out of the heat of the moment, while the theorist's mode is, of necessity, cool and reasoned; that one is art and

therefore experienced “subjectively,” and the other is scholarship, held accountable in the “objective” world of ideas. We have been told that poetry has a soul and theory has a mind and that we have to choose between them.

The white western patriarchal ordering of things requires that we believe there is an inherent conflict between what we feel and what we think—between poetry and theory. We are easier to control when one part of our selves is split from another, fragmented, off balance. There are other configurations, however, other ways of experiencing the world, though they are often difficult to name. We can sense them and seek their articulation. Because it is the work of feminism to make connections, to heal unnecessary divisions, *Sister Outsider* is a reason for hope.

Audre Lorde’s writing is an impulse toward wholeness. What she says and how she says it engages us both emotionally and intellectually. She writes from the particulars of who she is: Black woman, lesbian, feminist, mother of two children, daughter of Grenadian immigrants, educator, cancer survivor, activist. She creates material from the dailiness of her life that we can use to help shape ours. Out of her desire for wholeness, her need to encompass and address all the parts of herself, she teaches us about the significance of *difference*—“that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.”³

A white Jewish lesbian mother, I first read “Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist’s Response” several years ago as I was struggling to accept the inevitability of my prepubescent son’s eventual manhood. Not only would this boy of mine become a man physically, but he might act like one. This awareness turned into a major crisis for me at a time and place when virtually all the lesbian mothers I knew (who I realized, with hindsight, were also white) either insisted that their “androgynous” male children would stay that way, would not grow up to be sexist/misogynist men, or were pressured to choose between a separatist vision of community and their sons. I felt trapped by a narrow range of options.

Lorde, however, had wider vision. She started with the reality of her child’s approaching manhood (“Our sons will not grown into women”⁴) and then asked what kind of man he would become. She

saw clearly that she could both love her son fiercely *and* let him go. In fact, for their mutual survival, she had no choice but to let him go, to teach him that she “did not exist to do his feeling for him.”⁵

Lorde and I are both lesbian mothers who have had to teach our boys to do their own emotional work. But her son Jonathan is Black and my son Joshua is white and that is not a trivial difference in a racist society, despite their common manhood. As Lorde has written elsewhere:

Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you; we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying.⁶

I read “Man Child,” and it was one of those occasions when I can remember something major shifting inside me.

I came to understand it was not merely that Lorde knew more about raising sons than I did, although I had been given expert advice. I realized how directly Lorde’s knowledge was tied to her difference—those realities of Blackness and lesbianism that placed her outside the dominant society. She had information that I, a white woman who had lived most of my life in a middle-class heterosexual world, did not have, information I could use, information I needed.

For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as american as apple pie have always had to be watchers . . . ⁷

I was ashamed by my arrogance, frightened that my ignorance would be exposed, and ultimately excited by the possibilities becoming available to me. I made a promise to my future to try and listen to those voices, in others and in myself, that knew what they knew precisely because they were different. I wanted to hear what they had to tell me.

Of course, the reverberations continue.

When I read “Man Child” again several years later, having done a lot of work reclaiming my Jewish identity in the interim, I thought about the complexities of my son being a white Jewish man in a white Christian society. I had not seen this as an issue the first time around; it is hard now to reconstruct my shortsightedness.

When we define ourselves, when I define myself, the place in which I am like you and the place in which I am not like you, I'm not excluding you from the joining—I'm broadening the joining.⁸

There is a further reduction of the distance between feeling and thinking as we become aware of Lorde's internal process. We watch her move from "the chaos of knowledge . . . that dark and true depth within each of us that nurtures vision"⁹ to "the heretical actions that our dreams imply."¹⁰ Understanding—the figuring out and piecing together, the moving from one place to the next, provides the connections.

What understanding begins to do is to make knowledge available for use, and that's the urgency, that's the push, that's the drive.¹¹

Movement is intentional and life-sustaining.

Nowhere is this intentionality more evident than in "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." Here Lorde grapples with a possible diagnosis of cancer. "I had the feeling, probably a body sense, that life was never going to be the same. . . ."¹² She deals in public, at an academic gathering, in front of 700 women. She tells us that she is afraid but that silence is not a protection.

And it [speaking] is never without fear; of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, in silence, except death. And I remind myself all the time now, that if I were to have been born mute, and had maintained an oath of silence my whole life for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die. It is very good for establishing perspective.¹³

Lorde's commitment to confront the worst so that she is freed to experience the best is unshakeable. Although *Sister Outsider* spans almost a decade of her work, nine of the fifteen pieces in this book were written in the two years following Lorde's discovery that she might have/did have cancer. In the process of her growth, her coming to terms and using what she has learned, she shows us things we can take with us in our struggles for survival, no matter what our particular "worst" may be.

What is there possibly left for us to be afraid of, after we have dealt face to face with death and not embraced it? Once I accept the existence of dying as a life process, who can ever have power over me again?¹⁴

Audre Lorde asks no more of us than she does of herself: that we pay attention to those voices we have been taught to distrust, that we articulate what they teach us, that we act upon what we know. Just as she develops themes, reworking and building on them over time to create theory, so, too, can we integrate the material of our lives.

Black woman, lesbian, feminist, mother of two children, daughter of Grenadian immigrants, educator, cancer survivor, activist. The essays and speeches in *Sister Outsider* give new resonance to that fundamental but much abused feminist revelation that the personal is political. We are all amplified by Audre Lorde's work.

I am who I am, doing what I came to do, acting upon you like a drug or a chisel to remind you of your me-ness, as I discover you in myself.¹⁵

—NANCY K. BEREANO
December 1983

Notes

1. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," p. 55.
2. "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," p. 151.
3. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," p. 112.
4. "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response," p. 73.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
6. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," p. 119.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 114.
8. From an interview in *The Feminist Renaissance*.
9. "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich," p. 100, and "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," p. 68.
10. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," p. 38.
11. "An Interview," p. 109.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 108–109.
13. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," p. 43.
14. *The Cancer Journals* (Aunt Lute Books, 1980), p. 25.
15. "Eye to Eye," p. 147.

Notes from a Trip to Russia*

SINCE I'VE RETURNED from Russia a few weeks ago, I've been dreaming a lot. At first I dreamt about Moscow every night. Sometimes my lover and I had returned there; sometimes I would be in warmer, familiar places I had visited; sometimes in different, unfamiliar cities, cold, white, strange. In one dream, I was making love to a woman behind a stack of clothing in Gumm's Department Store in Moscow. She was ill, and we went upstairs, where I said to a matron, "We have to get her to the hospital." The matron said, "All right, you take her over there and tell them that she needs a kidney scan and a brain scan . . ." And I said, "No, they're not going to do that for me." And she looked at me very strangely and she said, "Of course they will." And I realized I was in Russia, and medicine and doctor bills and all the rest of that are free.

My dreams don't come every night anymore, but it seems as if they've gotten deeper and deeper so that I awake not really knowing any of the content of them but only knowing that I've just dreamt about Russia again. For a while, in my dreams, Russia became a mythic representation of that socialism which does not yet exist anywhere I have been. The possibilities of liv-

* These are edited journal entries from a two-week trip to Russia that I made in 1976 as the invited American observer to the African-Asian Writers Conference sponsored by the Union of Soviet Writers.

ing in Russia seem very different in some respects, yet the people feel so Western European (so American, really) outside of Tashkent. And the afternoons in Moscow are so dark and gloomy.

I

The flight to Moscow was nine hours long, and from my observations on the plane, Russians are generally as unfriendly to each other as Americans are and just about as unhelpful.

There was a marvelously craggy-faced old blue-eyed woman in her seventies wearing a babushka, with a huge coat roll. On the plane everyone had one kind of huge coat roll or another except me. When I stepped out into the Moscow weather I realized why. But this woman was sitting in the seat right in front of me. She was traveling alone and was too short to wield her roll easily. She tried once, and she tried twice, and finally I got up and helped her. The plane was packed: I'd never seen a plane quite so crowded before. The old woman turned around and looked at me. It was obvious she did not speak English because I had muttered something to her with no reply. There was in her eyes a look of absolutely no rancor. I thought with a quick shock how a certain tension in glances between American Black and white people is taken for granted. There was no thank you either, but there was a kind of simple human response to who I was. And then as she turned to sit back down, under her very dowdy cardigan I saw on her undersweater at least three military-type medals, complete with chevrons. Hero of the Republic medals, I learned later. Earned for hard work.

This is something that I noticed all over: the very old people in Russia have a stamp upon them that I hope I can learn and never lose, a matter-of-fact resilience and sense of their place upon the earth that is very sturdy and reassuring.

I landed on September 10th about 3:30 P.M. Moscow time and stepped out into a very raw, familiar greyness. There was a winter smell to the air; almost nostalgic. The trees were

Thanksgiving-turned and the sky had that turkey-laden grey-pumpkin color. I saw three large, square-faced women arm-in-arm, marching across the airfield laughing and joking as they came. They were evidently workers just going off shift – they had grey coveralls and jackets with engineer caps and carried lunch buckets. They stopped beside a truck that had paused and started beating against the closed window, drawing the attention of the other woman inside with some half-hello/half-joke at the driver, who was obviously their buddy, because they all pointed fingers at each other laughing uproariously together there on the Moscow airstrip in the grim light, swinging their lunch pails and cutting up.

My Intourist guide's name was Helen, a very pleasant and attractive large-boned young woman in her thirties. She was born in the East, near Japan, and her father, who'd been a military man, was dead. She lived with her mother now, and she said that she and her mother had to learn to do a lot of things for themselves since there are so few men around these days and service is so hard to get.

In Russia you carry your own bags in airports and hotels. This, at first, struck me as oppressive because, of course, carrying a laden bag up seven flights of stairs when the elevator isn't working is not fun. But the longer I stayed there the fairer it seemed, because in this country it appears that everything is seen in terms of food. That is, the labor of one's hands is measured by how much food you can produce, and then you take that and compare its importance to the worth of the other work that you do. Some men and women spend their whole lives, for instance, learning and doing the infinitely slow and patient handwork of retouching Persian Blue tiles down in Samarkand to restore the ancient mausoleums. It is considered very precious work. But antiquities have a particular value, whereas carrying someone else's bag does not have a very high priority because it is not very productive either of beauty or worth. If you can't manage it, then that's another story. I find it a very interesting concept.

It's about thirty miles from the airport to the city of Moscow, and the road and the trees and the drivers could have been peo-

ple from Northern Westchester in late winter, except I couldn't read any of the signs. We would pass from time to time incredibly beautiful, old, uncared for Russian-Orthodox-style houses, with gorgeous painted wooden colors and outlined ornate windows. Some of them were almost falling down. But there was a large ornate richness about the landscape and architecture on the outskirts of Moscow, even in its grey winter, that seemed to tell me immediately that I was not at home.

I stayed at the Hotel Yunnost, which is one of the international hotels in Moscow. The room was a square studio affair with Hollywood bed couches, and a huge picture window looking towards the National Stadium, over a railroad bridge, with a very imposing view of the University buildings against the skyline. But everything was so reminiscent of New York in winter that even as I sat at 9:30 P.M. after dinner, writing, looking through the blinds, there was the sound of a train and light on the skyline, and every now and then the tail lights of an auto curving around between the railroad bridge and the hotel. And it felt like a hundred nights that I remembered along Riverside Drive, except that just on the edge of the picture was the golden onion-shaped dome of a Russian Orthodox church.

Before dinner I took a short walk. It was already growing dark, but down the street from the hotel was the Stadium stop on the Metro, which is a subway. I walked down there and into the Metro station and I stood in front of the escalators for awhile just watching the faces of the people coming and going. It felt like instant 14th Street of my childhood, before Blacks and Latins colored New York, except everyone was much more orderly and the whole place seemed much less crowded. The thing that was really strangest of all for the ten minutes that I stood there was that there were no Black people. And the token collector and the station manager were women. The station was very large and very beautiful and very clean – shockingly, strikingly, enjoyably clean. The whole station looked like a theater lobby – bright brass and mosaics and shining chandeliers. Even when they were rushing, and in Moscow there's always a kind of rush, people lack the desperation of New York. One thing that characterized all of these people was a pleasantness in their

faces, a willingness to smile, at least at me, a stranger. It was a strange contrast to the grimness of the weather.

There are some Black people around the hotel and I inquired of Helen about the Patrice Lumumba University. This is a university located in Moscow for students from African countries. There were many Africans in and around the hotel when I got back from the Metro station and I think many of them were here for the Conference. Interestingly enough, most of them speak Russian and I don't. When I went downstairs to dinner, I almost quailed in front of the linguistic task because I could not even find out where I was supposed to sit, or whether I should wait to be seated. Whenever the alphabet is unfamiliar, there are absolutely no cues to a foreign language. A young Black man swaggered across my eyesight with that particular swagger of fine, young Black men wanting to be noticed and I said, "Do you speak English?" "Yes," he said and started walking very rapidly away from me. So I walked back to him and when I tried to ask him whether I should sit down or wait to be seated, I realized the poor boy did not understand a word that I said. At that point I pulled out my two trusty phrase books and proceeded to order myself a very delicious dinner of white wine, boiled fish soup that was lemon piquant, olive rich, and fresh mackerel, delicate, grilled sturgeon with pickled sauce, bread, and even a glass of tea. All of this was made possible by great tenacity and daring on my part, and the smiling forbearance of a very helpful waiter who brought out one of the cooks from the kitchen to help with the task of deciphering my desires.

II

It's very cold in Moscow. The day I arrived it snowed in the morning and it snowed again today, and this is September 16th. My guide, Helen, put her finger on it very accurately. She said that life in Moscow is a constant fight against the cold weather, and that living is only a triumph against death by freezing. Maybe because of the cold, or maybe because of the shortage of

not know where he was, and I really wondered what his mother would do if she knew.

The woman from the Writers' Union who was doing her book on Negro policy was, I'd say, a little older than I was, probably in her early fifties, and her husband had been killed in the war. She had no children. She offered these facts about herself as soon as we sat down, talking openly about her life, as everybody seemingly does here. I say *seemingly* because it only goes so far. And she, like my guide and most women here, both young and old, seem to mourn the lack of men. At the same time they appear to have shaken off many of the traditional role-playing devices vis-a-vis men. Almost everyone I've met has lost someone in what they call the "Great Patriotic War," which is our Second World War.

I was interviewed by Oleg this evening, one of the officials of the Union of Soviet Writers, the people who had invited me to Russia and who were footing the bill. In my interview with him I learned the hotel that we're staying in was originally a youth hostel and Oleg apologized because it was not as "civilized," so he said, as other Moscow hotels. I came across this term *civilized* before, and I wondered whether it was a term used around Americans or whether it meant up to American standards. Increasingly I get a feeling that American standards are sort of an unspoken norm, and that whether one resists them, or whether one adopts them, they are there to be reckoned with. This is rather disappointing. But coming back to the hotel, I notice that the fixtures here *are* a little shabby, but they *do* work, and the studio beds are a bit adolescent in size, but they are comfortable. For a youth hostel it's better than I would ever hope for. Of course, I can't help but wonder why the African-Asian Conference people should be housed in a youth hostel, particularly an "uncivilized" one, but I don't imagine that I'll ever get an answer to that. All hotel rooms cost the same in the Soviet Union. Utilities, from my conversation with Helen while we were riding the Metro down to send a cable, utilities are very inexpensive. The gas to cook with costs sixteen kopecs a month which is less than one ruble (about \$3.00) and the most electricity Helen says that she uses, when she's translating all day long

in winter, costs three rubles a month. That is very expensive, she says. The two-room apartment which she and her mother share costs eight rubles a month.

Oleg does not speak English, or does not converse in English. Like many other people I was to meet during my stay in Russia, he understands English although he does not let on. Oleg said through Helen that he wants me to know it was very important for us to meet other writers and that the point of the Conference was for us to get together. I thanked him for the twenty-five rubles I had been given as soon as I arrived here in Moscow, which I have been told was a gift from the Union of Soviet Writers for pocket money. I spoke of the oppressed people all over the world, meeting to touch and to share, I spoke of South Africa and their struggle. Oleg said something very curious. "Yes, South Africa is really very bad. It is like a sore upon the body that will not heal." This sounded to me both removed and proprietary. Unclear. Willy, my South African poet friend, lives in Tanzania now and he may be here, which I am very excited about.

III

We traveled south to Uzbekistan for the Conference, a five-hour journey that became seven because of delays. We arrived in Tashkent after dark following a long, exhausting plane ride. As I have said, Russian planes are incredibly packed, every single inch being taken up in seats. They absolutely utilize their air space. Even coming from New York to Moscow it was like air mass transit. Certainly from Moscow to Tashkent this was true since there were 150 delegates to the African-Asian Writers Conference, myself, one observer, interpreters, and press personnel. All together, a traveling group of about 250 people, which is a large group to move around a country at least four or five times the size of the United States (and in a standard, not wide-bodied, plane).

As we descended the plane in Tashkent, it was deliciously hot and smelled like Accra, Ghana. At least it seemed to me that it

did, from the short ride from the airport to the hotel. The road to the city had lots of wood and white marble all around broad avenues, and bright street lights. The whole town of Tashkent had been rebuilt after the 1966 earthquake. We arrived tired and hot, to a welcome that would make your heart grow still, then sing. Can you imagine 250 of us, weary, cramped, hungry, disoriented, overtalked, underfed? It is after dark. We step out of the plane and there before us are over a hundred people and TV cameras, and lights, and two or three hundred little children dressed in costumes with bunches of flowers that they thrust upon each of us as we walked down the ramp from the plane. "Surprise!" Well, you know, it was a surprise. Pure and simple, and I was pretty damn well surprised. I was surprised at the gesture, hokey or not, at the mass participation in it. Most of all, I was surprised at my response to it; I felt genuinely welcomed.

So off to the hotel we went and I had the distinct feeling here, for the first time in Russia, that I was meeting warm-blooded people; in the sense of contact unavoided, desires and emotions possible, the sense that there was something hauntingly, personally familiar – not in the way the town looks because it looked like nothing I'd ever seen before, night and the minarets – but the tempo of life felt hotter, quicker than in Moscow; and in place of Moscow's determined pleasantness, the people displayed a kind of warmth that was very engaging. They are an Asian people in Tashkent. Uzbeki. They look like the descendants of Ghengis Khan, some of whom I'm sure they are. They are Asian and they are Russian. They think and speak and consider themselves Russian, for all intents and purposes so far as I can see, and I really wonder how they manage that. On the other hand, the longer I stayed the more I realized some of the personal tensions between North Russian and Uzbek are national and some racial.

There are only four sisters in this whole conference. In the plane coming to Tashkent, I sat with the three other African women and we exchanged chitchat for 5½ hours about our respective children, about our ex-old men, all very, very heterocetera.

IV

Tashkent is divided into two parts. There's the old part that survived the huge earthquake of 1966, and there's the newer part which is on the outskirts of old Tashkent. It's very new and very modern, rebuilt in a very short time after the earthquake that practically totaled the area. It was rebuilt by labor from all over the Soviet Union. People came from the Ukraine, from Byelo-Russia, from all over, and they rebuilt the city. And there are many different styles of architecture in the new part of town because every group who came built their own type of building. It's almost a memorial to what can be done when a large group of people work together. It was one of the things that impressed me greatly during my stay in Tashkent. The old part, which is really the center of Tashkent, looks very, very much like a town in Ghana or Dahomey, say Kumasi or Cotonou. In the daylight it looks so much like some parts of West Africa that I could scarcely believe it. In fact, if Moscow is New York in another space, in another color – because both New York and Moscow have a little over eight million population and should apparently have many of the same problems, but Moscow seems to have handled them very differently – if Moscow is New York, Tashkent is Accra. It is African in so many ways – the stalls, the mix of the old and the new, the corrugated tin roofs on top of adobe houses. The corn smell in the plaza, although the plazas were more modern than in West Africa. Even some flowers and trees, Calla lilies. But the red laterite smell of the earth was different.

The people here in Tashkent, which is quite close to the Iranian border, are very diverse, and I am impressed by their apparent unity, by the ways in which the Russian and the Asian people seem to be able to function in a multinational atmosphere that requires of them that they get along, whether or not they are each other's favorite people. And it's not that there are no individuals who are nationalists, or racists, but that the taking of a state position against nationalism, against racism is what makes it possible for a society like this to function. And of course the next step in that process must be the personal ele-

ment. I don't see anyone attempting or even suggesting this phase, however, and that is troublesome, for without this step socialism remains at the mercy of an incomplete vision, imposed from the outside. We have internal desires but outside controls. But at least there is a climate here that seems to encourage those questions. I asked Helen about the Jews, and she was rather evasive, I think, saying only that there were Jews in government. The basic position seems to be one of a presumption of equality, even though there is sometimes a large gap between the expectation and the reality.

We visited a film studio and saw several children's cartoons which handled their themes beautifully, deeply, with great humor, and most notably, without the kind of violence that we have come to associate with cartoons. They were truly delightful.

After two very busy days of meetings in Tashkent, we started out at about 7:30 one morning by bus for Samarkand, the fabulous city of Tamerlane the Great. After a short snooze on the bus I began to feel a little more human, to look about me and the countryside. We're heading southeast from Tashkent, and Tashkent was southeast of Moscow. The countryside is very beautiful. It feels strange and familiar at the same time. This is cotton country. Miles and miles of it, and trainloads of students were coming south from Moscow on a two-week vacation to party and pick cotton. There was a holiday atmosphere all around. We passed through small villages where I could see little markets with women sitting cross-ankled on the bare earth selling a few cabbages or a small tray of fruit. And walls, behind which you could see adobe houses. Even the walls themselves reminded me very much of West Africa, made of a clay mud that cracks in the same old familiar patterns that we saw over and over again in Kumasi and south of Accra. Only here the clay is not red, but a light beige, and that is to remind me that this is the USSR and not Ghana or Dahomey. Of course, the faces are white. There are other differences that creep through also. The towns and the villages are really in very good repair and there is a powerful railroad running parallel to our road. Long, efficient looking trains and tanker cars and ten-car

and that she so much liked the way I looked that she just wanted to bring her little boy and find out if I had a little boy, too. Then we blessed each other and spoke good words and then she passed on.

There was the accomplished and very eloquent young Asian woman, an anthropology student, she said, who acted as our museum guide in Samarkand and shared her great store of historical knowledge with us. The night that we arrived in Samarkand and again the next day in looking through the museums, I felt that there were many things we were not seeing. For instance, we passed a case where there are a number of coins which I recognized as ancient Chinese coins because I'd used them for casting the I Ching. I asked our guide if these were from China. She acted as if I'd said a dirty word. And she said, "No, these were from right here in Samarkand." Now obviously they had been traded, and that was the whole point, but of course I couldn't read the Russian explanation under it, and she evidently took great offense at my use of the word *China*. In all of the women I've met here I feel an air of security and awareness of their own powers as women, as producers, and as human beings that is very affirming. But I also feel a stony rigidity, a resistance to questioning that frightens me, saddens me, because it feels destructive of progress as process.

We arrived in Samarkand about 9:30 P.M., quite wearied by a very full day. We got into the main square just in time to catch the last light-show at Tamerlane's tomb. The less said about that the better. But the following day, Helen, Fikre, and I played hooky from one mausoleum and ran across the street and went to a market. It is very reassuring and good as always. People in markets find a way of getting down to the essentials of I have, you want; you have, I want.

The tile tombs and the midrasas (ancient schools) of Samarkand are truly beautiful, intricate, and still. Incredibly painstaking work is being done to restore them. I could feel stillness in my bones, walking through these places, knowing that so much history had been buried there. I found two feathers in the Tomb of Bebe, Timor's favorite wife, and I felt almost as if I had come there to find them. The Tomb of Bebe

has beautiful minarets, but the Tomb itself was never used. The mosque was never used. There is a story that Bebe was Tamerlane's favorite wife and he "loved her with all of his heart." However, he had many, many journeys to go upon and he left her so often that he broke her heart and she died. When he returned and found she was dead, he was very upset because he had loved her so much, and he vowed that he would build the biggest mausoleum in the world, the most ornate mosque for her, and that is what he did. But then, just before it was completed, it collapsed. They say it was due to an error of the architect, but it was never used. One up for the lady shades.

The tile tombs and the midrasas are engrossing, but it's the market that caught my heart. We went later in that afternoon to another meeting of solidarity for the oppressed people of Somewhere. The only thing that I was quite sure of was that it was not for the oppressed Black people of America, which point, of course, I had questioned a number of days before and was still awaiting a reply. So we stood in the hot sun at the porcelain factory and it almost baked my brains, and I thought about a lot of things. The peoples of the Soviet Union, in many respects, impress me as people who can not yet afford to be honest. When they can be they will either blossom into a marvel or sink into decay. What gets me about the United States is that it pretends to be honest and therefore has so little room to move toward hope. I think that in America there are certain kinds of problems and in Russia there are certain kinds of problems, but basically, when you find people who start from a position where human beings are at the core, as opposed to a position where profit is at the core, the solutions can be very different. I wonder how similar human problems will be solved. But I am not always convinced that human beings are at the core here, either, although there is more lip service done to that idea than in the U.S.

I had a meeting the following day with a Madam Izbalkhan, who was the head of the Uzbekistan Society of Friendship. This meeting came about as a result of my request for clarification of my status here at the Conference. When all was said and done, why was there no meeting for oppressed peoples of Black

America? Enough said. Madam Izbalkhan talked two hours and she essentially said, well, here's what our revolution has done for us. And I felt she was implying that any time you want to get yours going, you know, be our guest, just don't expect us to be involved.

But she talked most movingly of the history of the women of Uzbekistan, a history which deserves more writing about than I can give it here. The ways in which the women of this area, from 1924 on, fought to come out from behind complete veiling, from Moslem cloister to the twentieth century. How they gave their lives to go bare-faced, to be able to read. Many of them fought and many of them died very terrible deaths in this battle, killed by their own fathers and brothers. It is a story of genuine female heroism and persistence. I thought of the South African women in 1956 who demonstrated and died rather than carry passbooks. For the Uzbeki women, revolution meant being able to show their faces and go to school, and they died for it. A bronze statue stands in a square of Samarkand, monument to the fallen women and their bravery. Madam went on to discuss the women of modern Uzbekistan and how there was now full equality between the sexes. How many women now headed collective farms, how many women Ministers. She said there were a great many ways in which women governed; there was no difference between men and women now in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. I was touched by these statistics, of course, but I also felt that there was a little more to it than met the eye. It sounded too easy, too pat. Madam spoke of the daycare centers, of kindergartens where children could be cared for on collective farms. The kindergartens are free in large cities like Moscow and Tashkent. But in Samarkand, there's a nominal fee of about two rubles a month, which is very little, she said. I asked her one question, whether "men are encouraged to work in the kindergartens to give the children a gentle male figure at an early age." Madam Izbalkhan hesitated for a moment. "No," she said. "We like to believe that when the children come to the kindergarten they acquire a second mother."

Madam Izbalkhan was a very strong and beautiful and forthright woman, excellently in charge of her facts, with a great deal

of presence, and I returned from my meeting with her almost overwhelmed and over-graped.

The grapes in Uzbekistan are incredible fruit. They seem to have a life of their own. They're called "the bridesmaid's little finger," and that's about the size of them. They're very long, and green, and they're absolutely the most delicious.

I came away with revolutionary women in my head. But I feel very much now still that we, Black Americans, exist alone in the mouth of the dragon. As I've always suspected, outside of rhetoric and proclamations of solidarity, there is no help, except ourselves. When I asked directly about the USSR's *attitude* toward American racism, Madam said reproachfully that of course the USSR cannot interfere in the internal affairs of any other nation. I wish now I had asked her about Russian Jews.

In Samarkand, Helen and I went looking for a fruit market. She inquired directions from a man who had passed by with either his little girl or his granddaughter, but I tend to think his little girl because so many of the adults here in Uzbekistan look much older than they are. It must be a quality of the dry air. Anyway, Helen stopped to inquire directions to the market and this gave him an opening, as frequently happens in Russia, to discuss anything. He wanted to know from Helen whether I was from Africa, and when he heard I was from America, then he really wanted to discuss American Black people. There seems to be quite an interest in Black Americans among the peoples of Russia, but it's an interest that is played down somewhat. Fikre, my Ethiopian companion who studied at the university, was often questioned about me in Russian. I had developed enough of an ear for the language to be able to notice that. Fikre frequently did not say I was from America. Most people in Tashkent and Samarkand who I met thought I was African or from Cuba, and everyone is also very interested in Cuba. This fascination with all things American is something that keeps coming up over and over again.

This man wanted to know from me whether American Black people were allowed to go to school. I said yes, and Helen said yes to him, and then he wanted to know if we were allowed to teach, and I said yes, I was a professor at the University of the

City of New York. And he was surprised at that. He said that he had seen a television program one time about the Black people of America. That we had no jobs. So Helen started to answer him and he stopped her. Then she angrily said he wanted me to speak because he wanted to look at my face so he could see how I answered. I told Helen to tell him that the question was not that we could never go to college, but that frequently even when Black people went to college, we had no jobs when we came out. That it was more difficult for Black people to find work and make any kind of living, and that the percentage of unemployment among American Black people was far higher than that of American white people.

He pondered that a little while and then he asked, do Black people have to pay for their doctors, too? Because that's what TV programs had said. I smiled a little at this and told him it's not only Black people who have to pay for doctors and medical care; all people in America have to. Ah, he said. And suppose you don't have the money to pay? Well, I said, if you don't have the money to pay, sometimes you died. And there was no mistaking my gesture, even though he had to wait for the translator to translate it. We left him looking absolutely nonplussed, standing in the middle of the square with his mouth open and his hand under his chin staring after me, as in utter amazement that human beings could die from lack of medical care. It's things like that that keep me dreaming about Russia long after I've returned.

There's much that I think that Russian people now take for granted. I think they take for granted free hospitalization and medical care. They take for granted free universities and free schooling as well as the presumption of universal bread, even with a rose or two, although no meat. We are all more blind to what we have than to what we have not.

One night after midnight, Fikre and I were walking through a park in Tashkent and we were approached by a Russian man with whom Fikre had a short, sharp conversation, after which the man bowed and walked away. Fikre would not tell me what they'd said, but I had the strong feeling he had tried to pick one of us up, either Fikre or me. Tashkent is, in some respects, a

to be a traffic jam or great delay although this was the time when most people were coming home from work. It seemed quite an achievement in a city of eight million people, and I thought Moscow must be handling her problems of urban transportation in a new and creative way. Of course, when I saw the Metro, I realized why. Not only are the stations spotlessly clean, but the trains are quick and comfortable, and I'd never really thought that it could be an actual joy to ride on the subways.

VII

It will take a while and a lot of dreams to metabolize all I've seen and felt in these hectic two weeks. I haven't even discussed the close bonding I felt with some of the African writers and how difficult it was to get to know others. I have no reason to believe Russia is a free society. I have no reason to believe Russia is a classless society. Russia does not even appear to be a strictly egalitarian society. But bread does cost a few kopecs a loaf and everybody I saw seemed to have enough of it. Of course, I did not see Siberia, nor a prison camp, nor a mental hospital. But that fact, in a world where most people — certainly most Black people — are on a breadconcern level, seems to me to be quite a lot. If you conquer the bread problem, that gives you at least a chance to look around at the others.

So, for all of the double messages I received (and there were many — because of the places in which I stayed, because of a kind of both deference and unpleasantness that I received as an American, and because no matter how much is said and done, America still appears to have some kind of magic over many countries), no matter what the shortcomings were, there is enthusiasm about the people that I met in Russia, particularly the people I met in Uzbekistan. And I recognize some of the contradictions and problems that they have. I am deeply suspicious of the double messages that kept coming and of the fact that when they are finished with you (and by *they*, I mean the government), when they are finished with you, they drop you

and you can fall very far. So what's new? I also am intrigued by the idea that there are writers who are paid to be writers and that they survive and they wield considerable power. I am also very well aware that if what they write is not acceptable, then it never gets read or it never gets printed. So what's new?

But you do have a country there that has the largest reading population in the world, that prints books of poetry in editions of 250,000 copies and those copies sell out in three months. Everywhere you go, even among those miles of cotton being harvested in the Uzbekhi sun, people are reading, and no matter what you may say about censorship, they are still reading, and they're reading an awful lot. Some books are pirated from the West because Russia does not observe International Copyright. In Samarkhand, Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* was the latest best seller. Now, how many Russian novels in translation have you read this past year?

Poetry Is Not a Luxury*

THE QUALITY OF LIGHT by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.

As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us.

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, “beautiful/and tough as chestnut/stanchions against (y)our nightmare of weakness/”** and of impotence.

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each

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** From “Black Mother Woman,” first published in *From A Land Where Other People Live* (Broadside Press, Detroit, 1973), and collected in *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1982) p. 53.

one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.

When we view living in the european mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious.

But as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-european consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes.

At this point in time, I believe that women carry within ourselves the possibility for fusion of these two approaches so necessary for survival, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry. I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean – in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight.

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of "it feels right to me." We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that

language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.

Possibility is neither forever nor instant. It is not easy to sustain belief in its efficacy. We can sometimes work long and hard to establish one beachhead of real resistance to the deaths we are expected to live, only to have that beachhead assaulted or threatened by those canards we have been socialized to fear, or by the withdrawal of those approvals that we have been warned to seek for safety. Women see ourselves diminished or softened by the falsely benign accusations of childishness, of nonuniversality, of changeability, of sensuality. And who asks the question: Am I altering your aura, your ideas, your dreams, or am I merely moving you to temporary and reactive action? And even though the latter is no mean task, it is one that must be seen within the context of a need for true alteration of the very foundations of our lives.

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.

However, experience has taught us that action in the now is also necessary, always. Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours? "If you want us to change the world someday, we at least have to live long enough to grow up!" shouts the child.

Sometimes we drug ourselves with dreams of new ideas. The head will save us. The brain alone will set us free. But there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves – along with the renewed courage to try them out. And we must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions that our dreams imply, and so many of our old

In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences. Of what had I *ever* been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end. Death, on the other hand, is the final silence. And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else's words. And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gave me great strength.

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living.

The women who sustained me through that period were Black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual, and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence. They all gave me a strength and concern without which I could not have survived intact. Within those weeks of acute fear came the knowledge – within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not – I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior.

What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself – a Black woman

warrior poet doing my work — come to ask you, are you doing yours?

And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger. But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, “Tell them about how you’re never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there’s always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don’t speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside.”

In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear — fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live. Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. Even within the women’s movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness. For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson — that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today, Black or not. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid.

In my house this year we are celebrating the feast of Kwanza, the African-american festival of harvest which begins the day after Christmas and lasts for seven days. There are seven principles of Kwanza, one for each day. The first principle is Umoja,

which means unity, the decision to strive for and maintain unity in self and community. The principle for yesterday, the second day, was Kujichagulia – self-determination – the decision to define ourselves, name ourselves, and speak for ourselves, instead of being defined and spoken for by others. Today is the third day of Kwanza, and the principle for today is Ujima – collective work and responsibility – the decision to build and maintain ourselves and our communities together and to recognize and solve our problems together.

Each of us is here now because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation.

For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it. For others, it is to share and spread also those words that are meaningful to us. But primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth.

And it is never without fear – of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of those already, in silence, except death. And I remind myself all the time now that if I were to have been born mute, or had maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die. It is very good for establishing perspective.

And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives. That we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own. For instance, “I can’t possibly teach Black women’s writing – their experience is so different from

mine." Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust? Or another, "She's a white woman and what could she possibly have to say to me?" Or, "She's a lesbian, what would my husband say, or my chairman?" Or again, "This woman writes of her sons and I have no children." And all the other endless ways in which we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other.

We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.

The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.

Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving*

Racism: The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance.

Sexism: The belief in the inherent superiority of one sex and thereby the right to dominance.

Heterosexism: The belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance.

Homophobia: The fear of feelings of love for members of one's own sex and therefore the hatred of those feelings in others.

THE ABOVE FORMS of human blindness stem from the same root – an inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self, when there are shared goals.

To a large degree, at least verbally, the Black community has moved beyond the “two steps behind her man” concept of sexual relations sometimes mouthed as desirable during the sixties. This was a time when the myth of the Black matriarchy as a social disease was being presented by racist forces to redirect our attentions away from the real sources of Black oppression.

For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others – for their use and to our detriment. The development

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can never result in true progress on the issue because it does not question the vertical lines of power or authority, nor the sexist assumptions which dictate the terms of that competition. And the racism of white women might be better addressed where it is less complicated by their own sexual oppression. In this situation it is not the non-Black woman who calls the tune, but rather the Black man who turns away from himself in his sisters or who, through a fear borrowed from white men, reads her strength not as a resource but as a challenge.

All too often the message comes loud and clear to Black women from Black men: "I am the only prize worth having and there are not too many of me, and remember, I can always go elsewhere. So if you want me, you'd better stay in your place which is away from one another, or I will call you 'lesbian' and wipe you out." Black women are programmed to define ourselves within this male attention and to compete with each other for it rather than to recognize and move upon our common interests.

The tactic of encouraging horizontal hostility to becloud more pressing issues of oppression is by no means new, nor limited to relations between women. The same tactic is used to encourage separation between Black women and Black men. In discussions around the hiring and firing of Black faculty at universities, the charge is frequently heard that Black women are more easily hired than are Black men. For this reason, Black women's problems of promotion and tenure are not to be considered important since they are only "taking jobs away from Black men." Here again, energy is being wasted on fighting each other over the pitifully few crumbs allowed us rather than being used, in a joining of forces, to fight for a more realistic ratio of Black faculty. The latter would be a vertical battle against racist policies of the academic structure itself, one which could result in real power and change. It is the structure at the top which desires changelessness and which profits from these apparently endless kitchen wars.

Instead of keeping our attentions focused upon our real needs, enormous energy is being wasted in the Black community today

in antilesbian hysteria. Yet women-identified women – those who sought their own destinies and attempted to execute them in the absence of male support – have been around in all of our communities for a long time. As Yvonne Flowers of York College pointed out in a recent discussion, the unmarried aunt, childless or otherwise, whose home and resources were often a welcome haven for different members of the family, was a familiar figure in many of our childhoods. And within the homes of our Black communities today, it is not the Black lesbian who is battering and raping our underage girl-children out of displaced and sickening frustration.

The Black lesbian has come under increasing attack from both Black men and heterosexual Black women. In the same way that the existence of the self-defined Black woman is no threat to the self-defined Black man, the Black lesbian is an emotional threat only to those Black women whose feelings of kinship and love for other Black women are problematic in some way. For so long, we have been encouraged to view each other with suspicion, as eternal competitors, or as the visible face of our own self-rejection.

Yet traditionally, Black women have always bonded together in support of each other, however uneasily and in the face of whatever other allegiances which militated against that bonding. We have banded together with each other for wisdom and strength and support, even when it was only in relationship to one man. We need only look at the close, although highly complex and involved, relationships between African co-wives, or at the Amazon warriors of ancient Dahomey who fought together as the King's main and most ferocious bodyguard. We need only look at the more promising power wielded by the West African Market Women Associations of today, and those governments which have risen and fallen at their pleasure.

In a retelling of her life, a ninety-two-year-old Efik-Ibibio woman of Nigeria recalls her love for another woman:

I had a woman friend to whom I revealed my secrets. She was very fond of keeping secrets to herself. We acted as husband and wife. We always moved hand in glove and my husband and hers knew about our relationship. The villagers nicknamed us twin

sisters. When I was out of gear with my husband, she would be the one to restore peace. I often sent my children to go and work for her in return for her kindnesses to me. My husband being more fortunate to get more pieces of land than her husband, allowed some to her, even though she was not my co-wife.*

On the West Coast of Africa, the Fon of Dahomey still have twelve different kinds of marriage. One of them is known as "giving the goat to the buck," where a woman of independent means marries another woman who then may or may not bear children, all of whom will belong to the blood line of the first woman. Some marriages of this kind are arranged to provide heirs for women of means who wish to remain "free," and some are lesbian relationships. Marriages like these occur throughout Africa, in several different places among different peoples.** Routinely, the women involved are accepted members of their communities, evaluated not by their sexuality but by their respective places within the community.

While a piece of each Black woman remembers the old ways of another place — when we enjoyed each other in a sisterhood of work and play and power — other pieces of us, less functional, eye one another with suspicion. In the interests of separation, Black women have been taught to view each other as always suspect, heartless competitors for the scarce male, the all-important prize that could legitimize our existence. This dehumanizing denial of self is no less lethal than the dehumanization of racism to which it is so closely allied.

If the recent attack upon lesbians in the Black community is based solely upon an aversion to the idea of sexual contact between members of the same sex (a contact which has existed for ages in most of the female compounds across the African continent), why then is the idea of sexual contact between Black men so much more easily accepted, or unremarked? Is the imagined threat simply the existence of a self-motivated, self-defined Black woman who will not fear nor suffer terrible retribution from the

* Iris Andreski, *Old Wives Tales: Life-Stories of African Women* (Schocken Books, New York, 1970), p. 131.

** Melville Herskovits, *Dahomey*, 2 vols. (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1967), 1:320-322.

gods because she does not necessarily seek her face in a man's eyes, even if he has fathered her children? Female-headed households in the Black community are not always situations by default.

The distortion of relationship which says "I disagree with you, so I must destroy you" leaves us as Black people with basically uncreative victories, defeated in any common struggle. This jugular vein psychology is based on the fallacy that your assertion or affirmation of self is an attack upon my self — or that my defining myself will somehow prevent or retard your self-definition. The supposition that one sex needs the other's acquiescence in order to exist prevents both from moving together as self-defined persons toward a common goal.

This kind of action is a prevalent error among oppressed peoples. It is based upon the false notion that there is only a limited and particular amount of freedom that must be divided up between us, with the largest and juiciest pieces of liberty going as spoils to the victor or the stronger. So instead of joining together to fight for more, we quarrel between ourselves for a larger slice of the one pie. Black women fight between ourselves over men, instead of pursuing and using who we are and our strengths for lasting change; Black women and men fight between ourselves over who has more of a right to freedom, instead of seeing each other's struggles as part of our own and vital to our common goals; Black and white women fight between ourselves over who is the more oppressed, instead of seeing those areas in which our causes are the same. (Of course, this last separation is worsened by the intransigent racism that white women too often fail to, or cannot, address in themselves.)

At a recent Black literary conference, a heterosexual Black woman stated that to endorse lesbianism was to endorse the death of our race. This position reflects acute fright or a faulty reasoning, for once again it ascribes false power to difference. To the racist, Black people are so powerful that the presence of one can contaminate a whole lineage; to the heterosexist, lesbians are so powerful that the presence of one can contaminate the whole sex. This position supposes that if we do not eradicate les-

bianism in the Black community, all Black women will become lesbians. It also supposes that lesbians do not have children. Both suppositions are patently false.

As Black women, we must deal with all the realities of our lives which place us at risk as Black women – homosexual or heterosexual. In 1977 in Detroit, a young Black actress, Patricia Cowan, was invited to audition for a play called *Hammer* and was then hammered to death by the young Black male playwright. Patricia Cowan was not killed because she was Black. She was killed because she was a Black woman, and her cause belongs to us all. History does not record whether or not she was a lesbian, but only that she had a four-year-old child.

Of the four groups, Black and white women, Black and white men, Black women have the lowest average wage. This is a vital concern for us all, no matter with whom we sleep.

As Black women we have the right and responsibility to define ourselves and to seek our allies in common cause: with Black men against racism, and with each other and white women against sexism. But most of all, as Black women we have the right and responsibility to recognize each other without fear and to love where we choose. Both lesbian and heterosexual Black women today share a history of bonding and strength to which our sexual identities and our other differences must not blind us.

we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness.

The aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible. Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision – a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered.

Of course, women so empowered are dangerous. So we are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex. And the lack of concern for the erotic root and satisfactions of our work is felt in our disaffection from so much of what we do. For instance, how often do we truly love our work even at its most difficult?

The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need – the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment. Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or oblivion for ourselves and those we love. But this is tantamount to blinding a painter and then telling her to improve her work, and to enjoy the act of painting. It is not only next to impossible, it is also profoundly cruel.

As women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and through them.

The very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.

There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Because

of these attempts, it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical. "What do you mean, a poetic revolutionary, a meditating gunrunner?" In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. For the ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is one not of self-discipline but of self-abnegation.

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic – the sensual – those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.

Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, "It feels right to me," acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. And understanding is a handmaiden which can only wait upon, or clarify, that knowledge, deeply born. The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.

Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether

it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.

That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called *marriage*, nor *god*, nor *an afterlife*.

This is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all. For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.

During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it.

I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.

We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to

suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women.

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.

And yes, there is a hierarchy. There is a difference between painting a back fence and writing a poem, but only one of quantity. And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love.

This brings me to the last consideration of the erotic. To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse.

In order to be utilized, our erotic feelings must be recognized. The need for sharing deep feeling is a human need. But within

the european-american tradition, this need is satisfied by certain proscribed erotic comings-together. These occasions are almost always characterized by a simultaneous looking away, a pretense of calling them something else, whether a religion, a fit, mob violence, or even playing doctor. And this misnaming of the need and the deed give rise to that distortion which results in pornography and obscenity – the abuse of feeling.

When we look away from the importance of the erotic in the development and sustenance of our power, or when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences. To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd.

The erotic cannot be felt secondhand. As a Black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. This deep participation has often been the forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before.

But this erotic charge is not easily shared by women who continue to operate under an exclusively european-american male tradition. I know it was not available to me when I was trying to adapt my consciousness to this mode of living and sensation.

Only now, I find more and more women-identified women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic's electrical charge without having to look away, and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange. Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama.

For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.

"Audre Lorde is a passionate sage. I say 'is' and not 'was' because her keen insights continue to provoke and sustain us and give us courage. The reissue of this book is a gift to longtime admirers and to new readers who have yet to discover the power and grace and splendid audacity of Audre Lorde."

—VALERIE MINER, author of *After Eden* and professor of feminist studies at Stanford University

"[Lorde's] works will be important to those truly interested in growing up sensitive, intelligent, and aware."

—*New York Times*

Presenting the essential writings of black lesbian poet and feminist writer Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* celebrates an influential voice in twentieth-century literature. In this charged collection of fifteen essays and speeches, Lorde takes on sexism, racism, ageism, homophobia, and class, and propounds social difference as a vehicle for action and change. Her prose is incisive, unflinching, and lyrical, reflecting struggle but ultimately offering messages of hope.

This commemorative edition includes a new foreword by Lorde scholar and poet Cheryl Clarke, who celebrates the ways in which Lorde's philosophies resonate more than twenty years after they were first published. These landmark writings are, in Lorde's own words, a call to "never close our eyes to the terror, to the chaos which is Black which is creative which is female which is dark which is rejected which is messy which is . . ."

A writer, activist, and mother of two, **AUDRE LORDE** grew up in 1930s Harlem. She earned a master's degree in library science from Columbia University, received a National Endowment for the Arts grant for poetry, and was New York State's Poet Laureate from 1991 to 1993. She is the author of twelve books, including *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and *The Black Unicorn*. Lorde died of cancer at the age of fifty-eight in 1992.

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