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Audre Lorde – "The Woman Thing"

Most literary criticism on Audre Lorde (1934-1992) uses Lorde's self-identification as a "black, lesbian, feminist, warrior, poet, mother" as a starting point. Lorde not only repeatedly claimed these multiple identities in her prose, but also constructed in her poetry an embodied self in whom these elements of identity are in constant play. In constructing this diverse self, Lorde locates her lived experience of the body as the source of her texts. This is true also of her poetry dealing with pregnancy and childbirth. My discussion of Lorde will focus on two poems—"Now that I Am Forever with Child" and "Bloodbirth"—dealing with childbirth in most disparate ways. Interestingly, reading "Now that I Am Forever with Child" in isolation yields an experience of pregnancy and birth that is disconnected from race, sexuality, or feminism. If, however, we read "Now that I Am Forever with Child" together with "Bloodbirth" a far more complicated reading of Lorde's experience of motherhood emerges.

For Lorde, an account of becoming a mother that is not gendered, raced or sexed, that does not call for political change, needs to be re-imagined in a social and symbolic context. At the same time, however, the angry, chaotic, social and symbolic construction of "Bloodbirth" needs to be tempered by the personal, loving intimacy of "Now that I Am Forever with Child." My paper will suggest that although these two poems in a sense undo each other, they also have at their root the same vision of the possibility of becoming a self through a recognition of the other.

> … I was changed forever. From a woman whose "womb" had been, in a sense, her head—that is to say, certain small seeds had gone in, and rather different if not larger or better "creations" had come out—to a woman who … had two wombs!
>
> —Alice Walker, "*One* Child of One's Own."

The above epigraph, excerpted from Alice Walker's startling essay "*One* Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s)" (1983), imparts the impression that the issues facing African-American poets in respect to pregnancy and childbirth are similar to the issues facing the white poets. Indeed the sense of being able to create from both body and mind seems to unite women poets; the fears, the ambivalence, and the juggling of writing and mothering that Walker describes at the outset of her essay have been described by numerous white women. Yet as Walker's essay develops, it becomes apparent that while certain issues are held in common by black and white women poets writing about maternity, the differences are vast.

Walker highlights the stark divisions between white and black women, and even black and white feminists, going so far as to claim that "perhaps white women feminists, no less than white women generally, can not imagine black women have vaginas" (Walker, 1983: 373). Being black and female, or as Walker (1983) sardonically says, "in the condition of twin 'afflictions'" (377), places the African-American woman poet in a particularly precarious position. While the Black power movement of the '60s and the feminist movement of the '70s improved the conditions for the acceptance of African-American women's poetry, these poets have neither been subsumed into either of these movements, nor has their work received adequate critical attention. African-American women poets continue to define themselves in opposition to white men, white women and African-American men.

The broad question that arises, and that African-American literary theorists have debated mainly in relation to fiction, is whether this sense of identity fuses itself into an African-American woman's literary aesthetic that has discernable features. The two poems by Audre Lorde (1997) analyzed in this paper seem paradoxically both to affirm and negate the existence of such an aesthetic. The poems "Now that I Am Forever with Child" (1997c) and "Bloodbirth" (1997a) deal with childbirth in most disparate ways. Interestingly, reading "Now that I Am Forever with Child" in isolation yields an experience of pregnancy and birth that is disconnected from race, sexuality, or feminism. As a white, Jewish, heterosexual reader I identify with the poem's rendering of the experience of becoming a mother and cannot locate differences between the speaker and myself. However, if we read "Now that I Am Forever with Child" together with "Bloodbirth," a new and far more complicated reading of Lorde's experience of motherhood emerges. Each of these two poems can be seen as a re-imagining of the other, and together make up a complex re-imagination of the pregnant, birthing and writing self.

The apparent colour-blindness of "Now that I Am Forever with Child," then, seems to appeal to a shared sex, but it is undeniable that motherhood, including pregnancy and childbirth, resonates differently for African-American women, who have to contend with a unique history that represents womanhood and motherhood in ways foreign to white women. Audre Lorde (1984) was insistent on her self-identification as "black, lesbian, feminist, warrior,

poet, mother" (99). She not only repeatedly claimed these multiple identities in her prose, but also constructed in her poetry an embodied self in whom these elements of identity are in constant play or interaction. "My poetry," claimed Lorde, "comes from the intersection of me and my worlds" (99). In constructing this diverse self, Lorde locates her lived experience of the body as the source of her texts.

"Now that I Am Forever with Child" (Lorde, 1997c), addressed to the child, opens with a peaceful recollection of pregnancy:

> How the days went
> While you were blooming within me
> I remember each upon each—
> The swelling changed planes of my body—
> And how you first fluttered, then jumped
> And I thought it was my heart.

The quiet, slow tone of these lines conveys the feeling of the speaker during her pregnancy. The speaker recalls each day of her gestation, and each change in her body; she recalls the first quickening of the fetus within, confusing the fluttering feeling with the beating of her heart. At this point she starts separating herself from the fetus: she *thought* it was her heart, but realized that it was a being separate from herself. With the baby "growing heavy/ Against the wind" the speaker envisions the progressive development inside her:

> … I thought
> Now her hands
> Are formed, and her hair
> Has started to curl
> Now her teeth are done
> Now she sneezes

What she in fact envisions is the future growth of the baby outside the womb—curling hair and teeth are not elements of *in vitro* growth. The speaker has a clear vision of the material "otherness" of her child, referring to her as a real person rather than a symbiotically connected and dependent fetus. Her vision of being a mother to a child connects to the title of the poem: although the baby is not yet born, the poet knows that pregnancy is only the first part of motherhood and that a process has begun in which she is "Forever with Child."

The tranquil tone surprisingly extends to the initial description of the birth: 'Then the seed opened./ I bore you one morning just before spring—." The speaker is in tune with nature; just as the kernel splits towards spring to bear fruit, her womb releases her child "just before spring." But the birth is not as serene as the opening of a seed. Rather, the speaker describes how "My

head rang like a fiery piston," locating the tremendous pain and pressure in her head. But this is not a disembodied mental experience of pain; rather the head and the body together birth the baby. The body is at once a part of nature ("the seed") and a part of history and culture:

> My legs were towers between which
> A new world was passing.

She equates the act of giving birth to the historical image of a new reign passing through city walls or towers in conquest or discovery, and in this way both elevates her private act and insists on the cultural functions of the body.

The description of birth in the last stanza seems to transcend the descriptions offered up until this point:

> From then
> I can only distinguish
> One thread within running hours
> You … flowing through selves
> Toward you.

The anguish of childbirth "from then" blocks out any comprehensible thought or imagery. The only "one thread" pulling her through is the child—"you"—becoming a separate human being, becoming herself: "flowing through selves/Toward you." No metaphor is adequate to describe the uniqueness of the baby; she is just "you." In this way Lorde once again expresses an appreciation of the "you-ness" of her child, a distinctive, rare "new world" separate from any other self.

This tranquil, rather uncomplicated, tender poem renders a positive, loving experience of pregnancy and childbirth that emphasizes the bond between mother and child, who are removed in their own world of growth and birth. In opposition "Bloodbirth" (Lorde, 1997a), is a rather violent and far more ambivalent poem, describing both the act of giving birth and the writing of poetry. The entire first stanza (20 lines) is a frenzied outflow of words and associations punctuated by a full stop only at its end. As in "Now that I Am Forever with Child," the form and tone of the poem conveys the experience, which, in this case, is the chaotic, inexorable event of childbirth. In contrast to the "blooming," fluttering child in "Now that I Am Forever with Child," "that which is inside of me" in "Bloodbirth" is "screaming/ beating about for exit or entry." The poet does not name "that which is inside of me," but we realize almost immediately that she is discussing both poetry and baby. Indeed this presence inside of her "names the wind, wanting winds' voice/ wanting winds' power." The acts of naming, finding voice and thereby finding power are acts of poetic creation.

The poet is conscious of the difficulty of giving form and expression to her experience, describing her attempts to authentically relate what is happening to her: "and I am trying to tell/ this without art or embellishment/ with bits of me flying out in all directions." She is striving to let those screaming, beating words inside of her exit her brain, body and heart and enter the world, as a baby, naked, undisguised, unembellished. The hectic flow of the poem is evidence that her words, are indeed "flying out in all directions" but we remember that she is simultaneously relating the pain and loss of control during childbirth. The metaphor of childbirth as creativity and the actual experience of childbirth are so merged in this poem, that we have constantly to remind ourselves that Lorde is describing both processes. This fusion acts in the same way as deconstruction in that it breaks down the binary separation between literal and metaphorical, real and symbolic, experience and representation, natural and constructed.

Further descriptions flow forth, with the speaker seemingly returning to the referent of "that which is inside me" who:

> screams memories old pieces of flesh
> struck off like dry bark
> from a felled tree, bearing
> up or out
> holding or bringing forth
> child or demon

She is at once describing her bodily feeling of giving birth and her narration of the pain of the event; her flesh seems to be "struck off" her body like dead bark and in its stead a child (or demon) is brought forth. At the same time the memories are unpeeled until the dead, meaningless parts are "struck off" and the poem is written. As to the result, the speaker is unsure whether she has birthed a "child or demon," or whether this is "birth or exorcism." On one level the agony of giving birth is compared to the travails of exorcising an evil spirit, but on the symbolic level, to release that "which is inside of me" is to release the devil, the darkness, the rage within.

Indeed, Lorde's poetry and prose are filled with anger, both as emotional expression and as theoretical stance. In her essay "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" (1984), Lorde discusses the importance of channeling and expressing anger:

> Women of Color in America have grown up with a symphony of anger … And I say *symphony* rather than *cacophony* because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart. We had to learn to move through them and use them for strength and force and insight within our daily lives. Those of us who did not learn this lesson did not survive. (129)

But the demon within is also what Lorde calls the "Black Mother," an image for the "terror, the chaos which is Black which is creative which is female which is dark which is rejected which is messy…" (Lorde, 1984: 101). Margaret Kissam Morris (2002) points out that although it seems as if the use of "Black Mothers" and "White Fathers" is an essentialist and stereotypical depiction of the instinctive, dark female and the rational white male, Lorde (1984) herself argues against this interpretation (177). Indeed Lorde suggests that the "black mother who is the poet exists in every one of us" (100) regardless of sex or race. Moreover, she claims that she does not "see feel/think as a dichotomy" rather as "a choice of ways and combinations" (101). Thus Lorde is birthing her child, her poem *and* her self. She is birthing or exorcising the "Black Mother" or the poet within. Yet this exorcism does not function to rid the self of the "sinister, smelly, erotic, confused, upsetting" (Lorde, 1984: 101) but to liberate these elements.

Both sides of her parentage, mother and father, are implicated in the birth of her self:

> is this birth or exorcism or
> the beginning machinery of myself
> outlining recalling
> my father's business—what I must be
> about—my own business
> minding.

The poet mother she is birthing, or the "beginning machinery of myself" is constructed through her confrontation with patriarchal (black and white) expectation—"my father's business"—of her silence and marginalization—"My own business minding." These lines provide an excellent illustration of Lorde's use of *apo koinu* as described by Amitai Aviram (1986):

> Almost every line seems to have a sense of its own which is then somehow altered—sometimes drastically—by the following line. Each line is thus held in common between itself and the sentence of which the next line unexpectedly makes it a part. The technique at its most surprising forces us to become estranged from, and to reinterpret, an overfamiliar term. (193)

In the last three lines of the above section of "Bloodbirth," we constantly revise our reading of meanings. At first we read that she must imitate her father's business: "my father's business—what I must be" only to realize that "what I must be/about" is "my own business." This is once again transformed when the next line tells us that, rather than establishing her own sphere, she must really be "minding" her business. Through her freeing up of syntax by suspending sentence-closure in order to allow the deepest and most chaotic

thoughts and emotions to surface, Aviram (1986) continues, Lorde reveals "the hidden possibilities of meaning in words, especially in their ideological dimensions" (206). I would add that she does not only explore and criticize patriarchal reality in these lines, but by literally giving birth, by writing poetry, by centering her self and by *fusing* these acts as opposed to separating them, she defies patriarchy.

The second and final stanza shows poetry as emerging from the body, or more specifically the birthing body. The speaker asks:

> Shall I split
> or be cut down
> by a word's complexion or the lack of it

Lorde (1997a) tackles the question of writing poetry not only from her body, but also from her blackness, exploring the possibility that the complexion of her words "or the lack of it" will have real consequences. I want to use Lorde's question, which remains unanswered, to refer back to "Now that I Am Forever with Child," a poem that does not posit race as a category of difference, rather celebrates the very personal experience of becoming a mother. But for Lorde poetry *does* have color, as it has sexuality and gender consciousness. In the poem "Coal" (1997b), Lorde explicitly argues for a poetry growing out of blackness, linking her identity to her blackness: "I is the total black/being spoken/from the earth's inside"and her blackness to her poetry: "I am Black/ because I come from the earth's inside/take my word for jewel/ in the open light." I want to argue that Lorde re-writes in "Bloodbirth" the almost ideal experience of giving birth constructed in "Now that I Am Forever with Child" because of her sharp awareness of her multiple identities. For Lorde, an account of becoming a mother, or the construction of a birthing self, that is not gendered, raced or sexed, that does not call for political change, needs to be re-imagined in a social and symbolic context. At the same time however, the angry, chaotic, social and symbolic construction of "Bloodbirth" needs to be tempered by the personal, loving intimacy of "Now that I Am Forever with Child."

The last lines of "Bloodbirth" return to the births of self—"the true face of me"—babies—"my children your children their children"—and poetry—"our conjugating business:"

> and from what direction
> will the opening be made
> to show the true face of me
> lying exposed and together
> my children your children their children
> bent on our conjugating business.

The poem thus closes with a question that is enmeshed in identity, relational-

ity and poetry. Lorde is asking how, or "from what direction" the "true face of me," or her self, constituted of multiple selves, will emerge in her poetry and experience. What is sure is that this "true face of me" is not an isolated self, but a social self "lying exposed and *together.*" Moreover, it is a self that is responsible for a future generation, for the material result of giving birth. Her vision is almost utopian, with the progeny of self and other coming together. But this utopia is undermined by the double meaning of "lying;" by placing this word adjacent to and juxtaposed to the "true face of me" she suggests that there is no one essential "true" stable self, but continuously evolving multiple selves.

The union or "conjugation" of "my children your children their children," occurs through language, through writing poetry, through "*our* conjugating business." Indeed, the play on "conjugating," with its triple meaning of reproductive union, coming together and grammatical play of words or verbs, functions to promote a poetry that, rather than "my own business minding," focuses on the business of using words as a tool for social change. By "lying exposed and *together,*" by seeing ourselves in each other, the "true face of me," not essential and constant, but multiple and ever-changing, will emerge in poetry. Once again, we almost forget that Lorde is also depicting the experience of giving birth. In causing us forget this, Lorde breaks down the binaries of procreation and creation completely, rendering the body as source of both. Moreover Lorde subtly embeds the body in social, symbolic questions of identity, race, creativity and feminism.

Lorde's suggestive use of language in this poem illustrates Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's (1998) characterization of black women's writing as "speaking in tongues." Drawing on Bahktin's theories of discourse, Henderson locates in this writing both "glossolalia" and "heteroglossia." Glossolalia refers to the ability to "utter the mysteries of the spirit" (353) in an inspired mode of intimate communication, while heteroglossia refers to "polyphony, multivocality, and plurality of voices"(353). According to Henderson, since African-American women "speak from a multiple and complex social, historical and cultural positionality" (351), their speech takes on an "interlocutory, or dialogic character, reflecting not only a relationship with the "other(s)," but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity"(349).

Returning to "Now that I Am Forever with Child" I want to suggest that although these two poems in a sense undo each other, and thus paradoxically together offer us a more complex rendering of the experience of birth, they also have at their root the same vision of the possibility of becoming a self through a recognition of, or skewed identification with, the other. In "Now that I Am Forever with Child" the insistence on otherness is exceptional since Lorde's sources of otherness (black, woman, lesbian, feminist) are so numerous, one might not expect her respect for difference in her child, who is actually her same. Henderson's (1998) conscription of Hans-Georg Gadamer's "I-Thou" relationship to discuss black women writers is useful for conceptualizing this

vision of the "other." For Gadamer "the important thing is to experience the 'Thou' truly as a 'Thou,' that is, not to overlook (the other's) claim and to listen to what [s/he] has to say to us" (cited in Henderson, 1998: 345). In turn, the understanding of the "Thou" becomes "a form of self-relatedness" (Henderson, 1998: 346) Lorde's self in "Now that I Am Forever with Child," by separating from the other—"I *thought* it was my heart"—recognizes the baby's otherness, its "you-ness," as being the center or "one thread" of her birth experience. But this recognition valorizes her self, the "I," for she has brought the other into being. This identification is "skewed" or "a *form* of self-*relatedness*" in that, although she will see herself in her baby in the most material way—in her hands, her hair and her teeth—the emphasis on the otherness, the "you" flowing through or out of other selves, demands the recognition of difference.

As discussed, in "Bloodbirth" the "true face of me," the "I," emerges by a "conjugation" with and recognition of the other. The self may be social, bent on "*our* conjugating business," but it can become this way only by somehow seeing herself refracted in "my children your children their children." Henderson's (1998) theory seems almost exactly to describe the final stanza of Lorde's poem, and the dynamic specific to the black woman poet's recognition of the other:

> One discovers in these writers a kind of internal dialogue reflecting an *intrasubjective* engagement with the *intersubjective* aspects of self, a dialectic neither repressing difference nor, for that matter, privileging identity, but rather expressing engagement with the social aspects of self ("the other[s] in ourselves"). It is this subjective plurality … that, finally, allows the black woman to become an expressive site for a dialectics/ dialogics of identity and difference. (349)

Lorde's construction and re-imagination of the pregnant and birthing self, whether "private" as in 'Now that I Am Forever with Child" or "public" as in "Bloodbirth," is related to her construction of, and skewed identification with, an other.

> Sagri Dhairyam (1992) suggests that the earth's "total black … inside" is also "a feminized trope for the womb, both receptive and violated, that is at the center of the poetic act of extracting meaning" (233).

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