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Audre and Africa: Reconsidering Lorde's Rites/Rights

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In this paper, I construct a Neo-African religious history of activist, essayist, poet, and writer Audre Lorde from her essays, poetry, and memoirs. I trace Lorde's cosmology through her writings, locate her within two larger American religious cultures, and place her in posthumous conversation with two of her strong socio-religious critics. I advance biographical and creative writings as critical axes for a Neo-African spirituality that Lorde inherits outside of American religious history canons. My analysis ultimately becomes a platform to think through how a religious history emerges from Lorde's multiple genres. Considering more recent scholarship that sheds light on African gender and sexuality diversity within African religious cultures, this paper asks what, if any, literary license African descended persons have to claim and adapt African religion qua African religion in the diaspora.

Keywords: Audre Lorde, Africa, rites, African diaspora religion, Africana spirituality, art and religion

Born in 1934, Audre Lorde—essayist, poet, and writer—was arguably one of the most well-known lesbian activists of the twentieth century. As the Harlem-raised child of Grenadian immigrant parents, Lorde's self-understanding was multi-sited from a young age. While she wrote from the intersections of her "black, feminist, lesbian, mother, poet warrior"[1] identities, an overarching and undervalued theme throughout much of her writing was the interreligious ways that she understood historical and contemporary West African cultures and their relationship to her corners of the African diaspora. Lorde creatively employed her African descent to make sacred meaning and texture the multiple nodes of her spiritual existence.

During 1974, Audre Lorde traveled to Dahomey (now Benin), Ghana, and Togo, searching for "an ancestral female self"[2] and, upon return, developed a robust, West African-inspired spirituality. As a post-Catholic with Buddhist leanings, Lorde began to connect with "what she believed was the religion of her foremothers."[3] For Lorde, this included a pantheon of several West African divinities, including Dahomean Seboulisa and Ayida-Weddo; Yoruba Oshumare and Yemoja-Oboto; Ewe-Fon Avrekete; and Fon Mawu-Lisa. Biographer Alexis De Veaux affirms that Lorde constructed her own version of "Africa reblended" when she returned to North America and, indeed, became her own "new religion."[4] Lorde transformed a five-week journey through West Africa into a polyreligious synthesis of what spiritually characterized the remainder of her public literary life, fashioning an individualized, Africa-in-diaspora devotion that ran adjacent to an "African American religious nationalism."[5] While Lorde's first trip to

[1] Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 179.
[2] Ibid., 147.
[3] Ibid., 151.
[4] Ibid., 152.
[5] Advanced by religious historian Tracey Hucks, the designation "African American religious nationalism" has seven characteristics: 1. Black religious nationalism subverts the association of blackness with deified evil and makes a deliberate attempt to theologically realign blackness with divine essence. 2. A primary motivation is the need to *de-*

West Africa would not be her last, it gave her basic religious idioms through which to articulate her own emerging Africa-inspired belief and practice.

Parsing the Africentric spiritualities that Lorde's writings evoked, this reflection expands upon the work of several Audre Lorde scholars including Gloria Joseph, Sharon Barnes, Katie Cannon, Donna Aza Weir-Soley, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Layli Maparyan, Joan Martin, Heather Russell, and Pamela Ayo Yetunde, who have articulated the spiritual and religious imperatives of Lorde's oratorical and literary activism. However, the contribution of my approach is its appreciation of Dahomean, Fon, and Yoruba religious vocabularies as Lorde's artistic medium and worldsense.[6] Inspired by Alexis DeVeaux's illustration of a self-fashioned, Africanized Lorde in *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*, I demonstrate how Audre Lorde carves out an African Atlantic spiritual orientation. Tracing Lorde's spiritual practice through her poetry and prose writing, I locate her along two African American religious continuums in the late twentieth century. Also placing Lorde in posthumous conversation with two of her strongest West African scholarly critics, I advance her writings as one unlikely axis for the study of African diasporic religious traditions.

In "The Winds of Orisha," published in 1973, Lorde articulates an emergent interpretation of a Yoruba cosmology:

> *Impatient legends speak through my flesh*
> *changing this earths formation*
> *spreading*
> *I will become myself*
> *an incantation*
> *dark raucous many-shaped characters*
> *leaping back and forth across bland pages*
> *and Mother Yemonja raises her breasts to begin my labour*
> *near water*
> *the beautiful Oshun and I lie down together*
> *in the heat of her body truth my voice comes stronger*
> *Shango will be my brother roaring out of the sea*

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slave or deobjectify (thus rehumanize) the *historical corporality* of black Atlantic people in the aftermath of traumatic enslavement, with the goal of redesignating as sacrosanct the spiritual body and essence of postslavery African people. 3. Race becomes a central hermeneutical prism for conceptualizing sacred community and determining religious membership. In this collective community, individual differences are transcended, and direct continuities and links to ancient black communities are envisaged. 4. Religious practices reflect strict moral and ethical codes of behavior and religious expression is often patterned on ancient or traditional interpretations of culture. 5. New modes of creation and primordialism are mythologized and often textualized. History is also used as a "system of narration" in the quest "not only for identification and inspiration" but also for collective "legitimacy." 6. Iconic renderings of the sacred and the divine are racially recast and rearticulated as affirming of black physicality while subverting the supremacy of an Anglo *imago dei*. New theologies are espoused that emphasize the inherent divinity or primordial universality of blackness. 7. Africa is often revalued and historically honored as a sacred source of ancient philosophies and traditions. The image of Africa and African humanity are deprimitivized and rescued from pejorative European typologies. Tracey Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), 44–45.

[6] On the importance of the term "worldsense" to understandings of African cultures, see Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 3.

> *earth shakes out darkness swelling into each other*
> *warning winds will announce us living*
> *as Oya, Oya my sister my daughter*
> *destroys the crust of the tidy beaches*
> *and Eshu's black laughter turns up the neat sleeping sand.*[7]

While "The Winds of Orisha" serves as an index of Yoruba energies for Lorde, later Africentric poetry would interpret Lorde's own past and present through Yoruba cosmological archetypes. Take, for example, her poem entitled simply, "Oya":

> *God of my father discovered at midnight*
> *my mother asleep on her thunders*
> *my father*
> *returning at midnight*
> *out of tightening circles of anger*
> *out of days' punishment*
> *the inelegant safety of power*
> *Now midnight empties your house of bravado*
> *and passion sleeps like a mist*
> *outside desire*
> *your strength splits like a melon*
> *dropped on our prisoners floor*
> *midnight glows*
> *like a jeweled love*
> *at the core of the broken fruit.*
>
> *My mother is sleeping.*
> *Hymns of dream lie like bullets*
> *in her night weapons*
> *the sacred steeples*
> *of nightmare are secret and hidden*
> *in the disguise of fallen altars*
> *I too shall learn how to conquer yes.*
> *Yes yes god*
> *damned*
> *I love you*
> *now free me*
> *quickly*
> *before I destroy us.*[8]

Here, Lorde employs prominent features of Oya—storm, cataclysm, and change—in order to express her own familial and relational turmoil. Seemingly, Lorde expresses her evolving belief and practice through her poetry: "Between Ourselves" (in *Between Ourselves*); "From the House of Yemanja," "Dahomey," "125th Street and Abomey," and "Timepiece" (in *The Black Unicorn*—where she also listed a glossary of "African" names used in her poems); "Mawu" and "Call" (in

[7] Audre Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 90–91.
[8] Ibid., 140.

Our Dead Behind Us)—and others. Ewe-Fon Avrekete became inspiration for Lorde's newfound valediction: "In the hands of Afrekete."[9] (She also re-named a love interest in her bio-mythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Afrekete.) However, Lorde's Africa-inspired belief is most evident in her later literary corpus, after her breast cancer diagnosis in 1978.

The personal, indeed, became political as she waged battle with healthcare establishments that sought to make her personhood synonymous with her prosthesis. English scholar Sharon L. Barnes notes, "Lorde's late poetry offers . . . a unique window on Lorde's spiritual vision, particularly how [she] focused on . . . Seboulisa as the muse of her death journey."[10] This particular devotion collapsed a contextually wrought Dahomean cosmology and placed Seboulisa and other West African divinities Lorde encountered along a divine continuum of power — Seboulisa, biological and spiritual ancestors, co-journeying activist sisters, and Lorde herself. Lorde and later Barnes named this her "mathematics" of spirituality.[11] Lorde calculated the features of the energies most likely to be of assistance in an urgent time of health need. Lorde took this devotion to her writing—making desk, pen, and paper an altar upon and through which lexical devotions could emerge. Writing itself became a spiritual rite.

> *November 6, 1986*
> *New York City*
>
> *Black mother goddess, salt dragon of chaos, Seboulisa, Mau.*
> *Attend me, hold me in your muscular flowering arms, protect me from throwing any part of myself away.*
>
> *Women who have asked me to set these stories down are asking me for my air to breathe, to use in their future, are courting me back to my life as a warrior. Some offer me their bodies, some their enduring patience, some a separate fire, and still others, only a naked need whose face is all too familiar. It is the need to give voice to the complexities of living with cancer, outside of the tissue-thin assurance that they "got it all," or that the changes we have wrought in our lives will insure that cancer never reoccurs. And it is a need to give voice to living with cancer outside of that numbing acceptance of death as a resignation waiting after fury and before despair.*[12]

These musings are one of many requests that Lorde pens, pleading to members of her own selected pantheon for courage and determination—a sharing in what was proving a personal, painful journey with cancer. Lorde had a sense that the in-between space for which she sought divine meaning was nuanced with no easy answers. The spiritual systems to which she had been briefly exposed in her West African sojourns would have untried, unfamiliar antidotes.

Lorde's West African spiritual inclinations resonate with the African American religious nationalism of her era. En masse, African American activists of the 1960s and 1970s were "reverting" back to West African religions and developing what theologian Dianne Stewart names "black religions of protest." Stewart observes that, though these religious cultures are

[9] De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 151.
[10] Sharon L. Barnes, "Audre Lorde's Seboulisa: Muse for the Death Journey," in *Goddesses in World Culture, Vol. 3*, ed. Patricia Monaghan (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 241.
[11] Ibid., 242.
[12] Ibid. 244–245.

typically referenced as cults and sects in most social science literature, the category "black religions of protest" re-frames new religious movements that responded to the self-empowering calls of Black Nationalism and created durable religious cultures in the United States. "Black religions of protest" include movements such as the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem, the Nation of Islam, the Pan African Orthodox Church (Shrines of the Black Madonna), and Yoruba-Ifa religious cultures.[13] Ostensibly, Lorde would not have been attracted to these communities of like-minded religio-cultural devotees because of the patriarchy and homophobia some of them held as "African-centered."[14] What distinguished Lorde from this larger African American communal leaning was her insistence on a personal encounter and relationship with African divinities outside of an institutionally endorsed structure; Lorde worked within transnational communities of socio-political advocacy and held like-minded allies as a spiritual accountability network. Lorde's patronage was more in line with what black feminist scholar-activist Akasha Gloria Hull identifies as a "new spirituality of African American women" that, between the 1970s and 1990s, thrived on non-Christian supernatural encounters, incorporated ancestral reverence, and encouraged enhanced creativity.[15] Hull identifies prominent African American contemporaries of Audre Lorde—Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Lucille Clifton, Octavia Butler, Ntozake Shange, Pauli Marshall, Sonia Sanchez, and others—whose literary works echoed similar spiritual systems. Hull's tethering of creative genres and spiritual formation is significant for my argument; we know of these women's unorthodox spirituality because of their extant literature. Of these writers, however, Audre Lorde was one of the few to insist upon a firm West African cosmological cornerstone and its contemporary relevance for African diasporic lives.

Lorde's spiritual encounter did not end with poetic prayers. Lorde's socio-religious writings attest to a robust sense of her lesbian identity in conversation with historic West African social structures. Responding to Lorde's assertion of culturally sanctioned "woman-to-woman" marriages (that, for Lorde, made lesbian identities an "ancient African reality"), two Nigerian scholars—anthropologist Ife Amadiume and sociologist Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí—challenged and critiqued Lorde's "appropriation," particularly her "misreading" of West African socio-spiritual structures. Oyěwùmí explains the complicated structure of "woman marriage" and "*ahonsi*"—that which Lorde referenced to make her case —in Dahomean society. "Wives" enter a particular lineage through marriage; husbands enter by birth. For Oyěwùmí, these realities—social, nonsexual relationships—have "no indication that they are associated with homosexuality in theory or in fact."[16] Oyěwùmí indicates that these practices are living traditions and that Lorde—along with other black feminists—have not taken seriously contemporary, well-documented articulations of this phenomenon. "Unfortunately," says Oyěwùmí, "the issue is not the reality of African social institutions and cultural practices but the various agendas of 'blackness' and 'womanism' that Africa is called upon to serve in the United States and other parts of the African Diaspora. Such concerns cannot define African institutions; they must be

[13] Dianne Stewart Diakité, "Spiritual Dynamics of Afro-America: Black Religions of Protest" Course Syllabus, 2013, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

[14] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "But We Are Not the Same: Generating a Critical Poetics of Diaspora," in Audre Lorde's *Transnational Legacies*, Eds. Stella Bolaki and Sabine Broeck (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 163.

[15] Akasha Gloria Hull, *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women* (Rochester, NY: Inner Traditions, 2001), 1.

[16] Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, "Introduction: Feminism, Sisterhood, and Other Foreign Relations," in *African Women & Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, ed. Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2003), 15.

articulated on their own terms."[17] Here, Oyěwùmí insists that women in the African diaspora think carefully before naming diasporic ways of being "African" *sans* historical or ethnographic evidence.

Certainly, Oyěwùmí's critique of diasporic "appropriation" within Lorde's otherwise decentering approach is important. Both Amadiume and Oyěwùmí maintain that Lorde's African social invocations contribute to a persistent Western intellectual problem: the "invention of Africa" in lieu of rigorous historical scholarship.[18] Amadiume and Oyěwùmí accuse Lorde of white feminism's "sisterly" alliances with women worldwide who do not necessarily ask for that kinship. While Amadiume and Oyěwùmí never critique Lorde's claims to West African spiritual systems or energies, the implications of their critique are clear; if Lorde is to use what is "theirs," they insist that she uses "it" with precision. I argue that Amadiume and Oyěwùmí's sharp contention recognizes Lorde's posthumous power in the making of an inaccurate West African history, religious or otherwise.

Building on the insights of anthropologist Stephan Palmie, religious historian Tracey Hucks asks scholars of African Atlantic religions "the crucial question of whether 'New World conceptions of "Africanity" can—or even ought to—be subjected to anthropological or historiographical authentication.'"[19] As Ghanaian practical theologian Emmanuel Lartey suggests, African (qua African) experiences transgress the cultural, historical, and geographical confines of the continent. Hucks' and Palmie's observation cautiously affirms Lorde's usable African past as a helpful heuristic device. The category of African diasporic religious cultures can mine existing insights from the field of diaspora theory in order to make sense of Lorde's profound contribution. Lorde's poetry creates an *ideological* diaspora—that is, the movement and dispersal of belief divorced from West African migration or so-called "missionary" efforts of West African religious communities outside of the continent. Feminist scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs puts it this way: "[Lorde's] black transnational feminist praxis, especially as it concerns majority-black spaces . . . interrogate[s] and reconstruct[s] diaspora as a complex political category of solidarity."[20] Yet, as feminist scholar Abena Busia reminds us, "[i]t is one of the hardest things to accept that to work toward a common goal, we are not obliged to choose each other as dance partners, bedfellows, or any other kind of mate."[21] For purposes of this argument, I will add that "we" are not obliged to choose each other as spiritual co-journeyers. Yet, Audre Lorde offered one imperfect possibility for sacred camaraderie. Invoking multiple West African religious heritages, Lorde engineered a feminist, interreligious dialogue within her writing practice that still holds imaginative possibility for African Atlantic religious practitioners. Through creative arts, Lorde proffers the improvisational, dynamic possibility within spiritual traditions indigenous to West Africa and re-situated throughout the African diaspora; poetry composes her ritual life.[22]

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[17] Ibid., 16.

[18] Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, "Alice in Motherland: Reading Alice Walker on Africa and Screening the Color 'Black,'" in Oyěwùmí, *African Women & Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, 160.

[19] Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, 5–6.

[20] Gumbs, "But We Are Not the Same," 164.

[21] Abena Busia, "In Search of Chains Without Iron: On Sisterhood, History, and the Politics of Location," in Oyěwùmí , *African Women & Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, 258.

[22] A contemporary iteration of this Lorde's black feminist pursuit may be seen in the recent publication of Alexis Pauline Gumbs' volume, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*. Gumbs utilizes poetry to depict black women and girls seeking liberation from racist and sexist violence. The spiritual imperatives of the work may be understood as an

A first-generation child of Caribbean immigrants, Lorde traveled to West Africa several times, reversing Triangle Trade stops. Arguably her poetic archive maps one spiritual cartography and cosmology. Lorde's archives bow at the feet of black gods and offer scholars of African Atlantic religion a viable means to enter into New World Africas. Borrowing historian of religion Charles Long's language, Africa becomes an "orientational meditation"[23] for Lorde onto which she reads her transnational religious life. Poetry and prose become the primary vehicle through which Lorde's public comes to understand her unique practice.

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African-descended, interreligious extension of Lorde's model. See Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
[23] Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, *NEWS* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1993): 3–4. Cited by Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, 49.