

From “We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism” a dissertation by Alexis Pauline Gumbs

Infinite or Past the Human: “The Brown Menace or Poem to the Survival of Roaches”

In *New York City Head Shop and Museum* Audre Lorde wrote “The Brown Menace Or poem To the Survival of Roaches,” a harder to stomach, harder to quote poem about survival when compared to the later “Litany.”¹ Lorde makes the brave move of literalizing the underlying metaphor of the dominant narrative of racism, underneath the dismantling of welfare and the coerced sterilization of Black women and women of color in the global south. Using the figure of the roach, Lorde brings the rarely admitted narrative of public policy into view: the description of the persistence of Black life, unbound by the limits of the patriarchal family or the internalized values of capitalism is what everyone fears it actually is... invincible vermin, roaches running all over, dirtying everything.

Lorde published “The Brown Menace” in her 1974 collection of poems *New York Head Shop and Museum* during a time when police murders of young Black men were highly visible and the New York City and State were engaged in a widescale response to the evacuation of white ethnics from New York City and the increased population of Black and Latino migrants from the Caribbean and the US South. In the eyes of the police department and the city government, New York was infested. Police violence and the cuts in city services in Black and Latino neighborhoods were justified based on this logic.² Seeking to bring this latent justification for the economic and police enforced extermination that people of color were facing in New York City in the 1970’s into view,

¹ Although recently Cherrie Moraga has publicly quoted this poem, transforming it into its own litany in honor of Audre Lorde and other poisoned feminists of color. The refrain of her talk at Sister Comrade, an evening in celebration of Pat Parker and Audre Lorde at the First Congregational Church in Oakland, CA on November 3rd 2007 was “Go ahead. Call me roach.”

² More on the details of city services and police violence in Chapter 2: Teaching Us Questions.

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Lorde creates a speaker in the position of the most despised creature, the brown cockroach, daring the reader to

*Call me
your deepest urge
toward survival.*³

The roach/speaker in this poem redefines survival, building on scientific predictions that roaches would survive nuclear holocaust, outliving humans for at least as long as they predated homo sapiens. The roach, the speaker of this poem reminds us, will survive the social world that we seek to exclude them from in the present. The intersubjectivity suggested by the constant reflection in this poem means that it cannot only be addressed to the obvious villains, white police officers who kill Black children, or even liberal organizers who fund birth control clinics in Black neighborhoods.

*I am you
in your most deeply cherished nightmare.*

There is another extermination here...that comes from inside. Naming

*your itch to destroy
the indestructible
part of yourself*

Lorde’s roach speaker could just as well be talking to Black men who enact or condone violence against Black women, characterizing this violence against women within the Black community as an attack against the survival of Blackness, the attempt to destroy the Black mother, the survivor of the repeated violence against and within the Black community. That “itch” to destroy is the false “need” that Lorde mentions in her work *Need: A Chorale for Black Women’s Voices*.⁴

She goes on to accuse

³ Audre Lorde. “Brown Menace of Poem to the Survival of Roaches,” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. 149-150. (Originally published in *New York Head Shop and Museum*. Chicago: Broadside Press, 1974.

⁴ extended reading of *Need* in Chapter 3: Difficult Miracle

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*with hate
you learn to honor me
by imitation
as I alter—
through your greedy preoccupations
through your kitchen wars
and your poisonous refusal—
to survive.*

*To survive.
Survive.*

Survive, in the infinitive and then the command form echoes here, describing an oppositional futurity in which oppression itself, the dependence of a society on a hated other even within the self, the death threat itself, is an indelible impact, an unavoidable reminder of the need for transformation. In a later revision of the poem for Lorde’s *Undersong* a collection of her revisions of her published poems that Lorde herself compiled, the last “Survive” in the poem is actually “To survive” keeping the infinitive and eschewing the command. The poem itself survives in both forms: initially as imperative and finally as potential.

Lorde’s characterization of survival in this poem moves beyond the context of biological life into an analysis of impact. Lorde’s move in this poem to align with the cockroach, the absolute other⁵ questions the category of the human, arguing that survival in general and human survival are not the same project and highlighting the way in which the discourse of humanity is particularized, operating through a dependence on a dehumanized other. The poem provokes a question about form, both biologically and poetically.

If the poetry of Audre Lorde survives in this dissertation, it is not merely as evidence. In fact, it may be necessary to the survival of this poetry that it not fully offer itself up to my reading. The poem, an experiment in form, is not equivalent to its

⁵ So much so that in the Rwandan genocide the Tutsi ideologues consistently referred to the Hutu’s they would attempt to exterminate as “cockroaches.”

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content. Which means a responsible intergenerative reading must understand this poem as more than an example of what one Black feminist would say about roaches and extermination in the early 1970’s. This poem, as an intervention in form, precedes Lorde’s later evocation of the litany, but instead of a call and response, here there is only a call that brings the muted structure of dialectical humanism into view. The command “call me” repeated three times in the opening stanza and introducing the second stanza is an echo and a reproduction, mimicking the way a humanism defined and haunted by its other is reproduced through a repeated, even rhythmic naming of that other.

*Call me
your deepest urge
toward survival
call me
and my brothers and sisters
in the sharp smell of your refusal
call me
roach and presumptuous
nightmare on your white pillow
your itch to destroy
the indestructible
part of yourself.*

*Call me
your own determination
in the most detestable shape
you can be become
friend of your image within me
I am you*

The structure of repetition Lorde employs here is instructive. Besides the repeated “Call me,” and the key word “survive,” Lorde repeats only the words “nightmare,” “refusal” and derivations of “you,” especially the possessive “your.” In fact, in the revised version in *Undersong* Lorde takes out the first possessive “your.” Maybe she thought it was too much. But then again maybe not, in the revised version she takes out the “into” that precedes three of the “your” statements, which seems to highlight the possessive even more. If we take the description of the “nightmare” other out and look at

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the skeleton created by the repeated words that Lorde uses to frame and punctuate the originally published version of the poem we have

*Call me
your
survival
call me
your refusal
call me
nightmare your
your
yourself*

*Call me
your
you
your
me
you
your
nightmare
you
me
your
your
your
your
you
me
your
your refusal
to survive.*

*To survive.
Survive.*

If we do the violence of taking out the details and look simply at the framework offered here through repetition, a few things stand out. First the second stanza become a queer echo of the first stanza, but haunting, in the stutter of “your/you/your/you,” and the eventual repetition of the possessive “your/your/your/your,” becomes possession two senses. First, the presence of the other that threatens humanism operates through property, the invading other is all over the rightful property of the human, disrupting its

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propriety “presumptuous/ nightmare on your white pillow.” The roach troubles the property owner’s desire and ability to secure her property “scuttling through the painted cracks/you create to admit me.” Property is the *form* through which the “human” is haunted by its contingency, represented by the radical other. Property is a form of life. “Property” describes a manifestation of life, as in the properties or characteristics possessed by a particular species. And property is a pedagogical form, through which we learn to value life differentially.

But another form of possession, in the spiritual sense emerges as the form and the result of Lorde’s incantation (“call me”). Through the spell worked in the poem, the radical other inhabits not only the privately owned spaces of the human audience, but the contingent subject itself. The structure of possession appears in the passages describing the intimate learning enacted through repression, “The most destestable shape/ you can become/ friend of your image/within me/I am you” and “you learn to honor me by imitation as I alter.” Like the Orishas that Lorde will explicitly reference in her later poetry, the non-human speaker of the poem compels the “human” reader to embody her difference. As within the context of spirit possession, the human form becomes just one of the shapes that another energy can inhabit, a medium through which to alter a trajectory of survival that does not start or end with the human. Therefore the form of this poem critiques and transforms the form of the human, pointing out that the definition of the human within the specific form of capitalism, i.e. the human as a form of property instead of a form of life or spirit, is incompatible with survival, and that repeating “possession” a central term of capitalism, offers another meaning, another form in which life can persist.

Haunted Audience: “A Litany for Survival”

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Therefore, when Lorde publishes “A Litany Survival” she does not mean survival as merely the persistence of animated life in one body. Survival is a collective, trans-species phenomenon that challenges individual embodiment. The poetic possibility created in “The Brown Menace” is what has made “A Litany for Survival” so attractive to embattled collectives who repeat the “for those of us” the “for all of us” and the perpetual “we” addressed in “A Litany for Survival,” creating collectivity where there was only exclusion.⁶ The poem begins

*For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone...⁷*

Already those who understand themselves as “alone” are hailed as multiple parts of a larger collective “those of us.” Even those lines of the poem, while not connected by end-rhyme or rhythmic repetition, are connected by alliteration that brings the lines together. “shoreline” meets “standing.” And the alliterative threading continues, “constant/crucial/cannot” “dreams/doorways/dawns” “before breed bread, and so on. The way that we were “imprinted with fear” has everything to do with a narrative of isolation, individual failure and expendability. Fear is a pedagogy deployed to reproduce abjection. “Learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk” once again reminds us that the condition of the mother is present in the narrative of naturalized oppression. M. Jacqui Alexander follows Lorde with her own observation that women workers organizing in sweatshops in the global south have reimagined “survival” as “collective self-consciousness.”⁸ Furthermore the collective “those of us” of this poem is diasporic

*For those of us who live at the shoreline
on the constant edges of decision*

⁶ Audre Lorde. “A Litany for Survival,” in *The Collected Poetry of Audre Lorde*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, 255. Originally published in *The Black Unicorn*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1978, 31.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Alexander, 12

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and homeless

who love in doorways coming and going

and untimely

at once before and after

and utopist

*seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children’s mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours*

But survival is not victory in this poem. The description of survival in the refrain fills every “when” with “we are afraid.” Survival becomes not only the persistence of life, but life as the persistence of fear. But the “triumph of the poem” is not deferred, it is “this instant.” Lorde completes the collectivization moving from “for those of us” to

*For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.*

This poem does not predict survival or celebrate victory. It marks the unlikely persistence of that which was never meant to continue, opening a need for active language and untimeliness. “We were never meant to survive” could refer to the enslavement of Africans in the Caribbean, forced to work themselves to death such that their labor was replaced by new imported shipments, not reproduced. It could refer to the bankruptcy of mere survival, insisting, “all of us” were meant for more than this. It could, referring back to “The Brown Menace” disrupt the fantasy of human immortality, restating the inevitability of death. It could offer an intervention into meaning itself such that “meant to survive” offers a failed description, characterized by fear, inadequate to the “crucial” “edges of decision” that those of us “who stand on the shoreline” “in

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doorways” or at other marginalized crisis positions inhabit. Survival, something that was never meant to happen, can describe the deviant persistence of Blackness past its usefulness as a category through which to stabilize slavery. It can describe the position of feminized warriors forgotten because their battles were not valorized in a history of masculinist race struggles. Lorde closes the poem with the injunction

*So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.*

Speaking is privileged over what was “meant,” a lesson we learn through the process of remembering. “Better to speak” insists that something else can be produced and must be produced if we remember what has come before. And indeed the survivors of the Black power and Black arts movement need this language of survival. Survivor’s guilt burdens the tongues of elders who seem almost ashamed that they did not die for their people. Young activists who still invoke and praise the memories of Malcolm, X, Huey Newton and Fred Hampton have no idea that leaders like Mae Mallory and Janet Cyril (who started and ran the Black Panther Party Free Breakfast Program in New York City) and other women who literally formed the backbone of the aptly named Black Panther Survival Programs and other Black power activities slowly die in poverty with poor healthcare every single year. *We were never meant to survive*, which is another way of saying the *meaning* of survival does not signify in the context of Black life. *Meaning*, we literally have no way to understand, or even to see this survival. The survival of Black people, even Black visionaries, is not something that has a language. How is it that Rosa Parks lived in poverty all those years while we were building museums for Martin Luther King Jr.? Black death signifies. Black survival is another thing.

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In order to continue the work of creating a definition of survival that can do the work of describing life, under the pressure of Black death, Lorde is again working on the level of form. Using a litany, a form of prayer consisting of a series of petitions, Lorde addresses her supplication not to a god, but rather to an audience of her own making. The structure of the poem is an argument, so distinct that I was able to use this poem to teach undergraduates how to write an argumentative essay. Oversimplified for my pedagogical purposes, one description of the function of each stanza could read:

1. Who we are and what brings us together “for those us”
2. The problem we face “for by this weapon”
3. How we feel about it “we are afraid”
4. The conclusion “so it is better to speak”

The penultimate stanza of the poem describes the subjective situation of the audience that the first stanza convened.

*And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid*

The refrain “we are afraid,” the consistent ontology of every situation for oppressed people, provides a punctuation across the different times referenced in the stanza, starting with the structure of the day, sunrise and sunset. The repetition of “we

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are afraid” at the end of every other line creates a rhyme structure and performs the reproduction of abjection over time through oppression. The repetition of “we are afraid” is more apparent, especially in the many spoken performances of the poem, but it is haunting repetition of the word “when” every other line, that provides the key to Lorde’s intervention into the meaning of survival. The first line begins with “And” connecting to the assertion that “We were never meant to survive,” but through the center of the stanza the word “when” starts every other line. “When” is a marker of repetitive time, time that is repetitive because of the social reproduction of the situation of oppression. But if we understood that repeating “when” to be a question, challenging the inevitability of it’s own repetition (when?/when?/when?) we might understand the role that a poetic intervention into time plays in the generation of a definition of survival that does not consent to traditions of violence and oppression. If we were to consider the end of that structure of repetition to be a stopping point we can see a 14 line non-sonnet

*and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard*

The last set of lines marks the movement of the “when” from the beginning of the line to the inside, preceded by the breath “and” again here, and then in the set of lines, that actually does end the stanza, which offer a counter-argument after a break in the repeating structure

*nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid*

the “but” places the “when” under the pressure of a critical relationship. And the true refrain of the poem “we were never meant to survive” is a critical relationship to time.

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What if we were to understand survival, not as mere persistence, but as a critical relationship to time in which in which forms of life, practiced by oppressed people, challenge the structure of time itself by defying the social reproduction of their own fear?

If that is the case, then I offer one example of the survival of the poem “A Litany for Survival” in the life of a Black feminist community building project, queerly and intergenerationally related to Lorde’s project, and the definition of survival, published by Lorde in 1978, necessary for the lessons of 1979 mentioned in the introduction and present in the work I am doing now. Within UBUNTU, a women of color and survivor-led coalition to end gendered violence, located in Durham, North Carolina, the poem “Litany for Survival” has a palpable life.⁹ The line “it is better to speak” was the motto of the group, which was convened as a space of healing and empowerment, aligned on the belief that speaking out against sexual violence is a key element of creating a just society. The Artistic Response committee of the group, of which I was the first co-chair with scholar and performance artist Ebony Noelle Golden, engaged in a full performative and pedagogical relationship to the poem. Using an emergent technology of interactive poetry, the collective performed poems by radical Black feminists at the public library, on college campuses, in community centers at conferences and in chapels. The performative style emphasized echo and collaboration, so that even if the poem had been written as a statement from one speaker (which it was not), the voice of the poem was multiplied among the performers and scattered across the rooms. The performers never stayed on stage, most times they ignored stages if they were available; the idea was for the words of each poem to come from inside the audience, providing a transition between the normative silence about sexual violence and framing the audience members as the speakers to come. Then the poems were transformed into call and response

⁹ See Alexis Pauline Gumbs. “The Life of a Poem: Audre Lorde’s ‘A Litany for Survival’ in Post-Lacrosse Durham” in *Reflections: A Journal of Writing, Service-Learning and Community Literacy*. Vol. 7 no. 3, 2008.

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exercises, through which each audience revised and rewrote and inhabited the poems in order to describe their own experiences and visions. Our performances of “A Litany for Survival” drew on Audre Lorde’s choice to convene an eclectic audience connected through shared experiences of marginalization and oppression in order to create poetic montages. We added poems that we ourselves had written, dedicated to political prisoners and people living in exile, dedicated to elders in our own families, dedicated to our little sisters. *For all of us.* As a key component of the performances, we printed the poem on worksheets that prompted participants to write their own invocations and definitions of survival and to make their own conclusions. Our understanding of Lorde’s intervention into the language of survival is dynamic, meaning that the continued life of her poem requires critical engagement and continued reinvention of the terms of that survival, because the term, and the poem are not products owned by Lorde; they are technologies of sharing.

In 2007 in response to the publicized sexual violence against Black women in the Dunbar Village gang rape and the rape and torture of Meagan Williams, a group of young Black feminists created a youtube video and blog instigating viral campaign to raise awareness about violence against women of color called Be Bold Be Red, encouraging all people who agreed to stand against gendered and racialized violence to wear red on October 31st. Rallies of women of color and allies wearing red emerged in Detroit, Atlanta, Chicago, Kansas City and many other places. Women of color around the world posted pictures of themselves wearing red on their blogs and posted essays about “Why I am Wearing Red?”¹⁰ At the different rallies on in many online locations people shared Lorde’s Litany and a revised version specific to the campaign called “Out of the Silence We Come: A Litany.” Like UBUNTU’s work, the Be Bold Be Red Campaign identified

¹⁰ See www.documentthesilence.wordpress.com.

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itself as a movement hailed by the call of Lorde’s “Litany” insisting that “it is better to speak” and using poetry, connection, analysis, disclosure and visibility to transform the discourse about racial and sexual violence across space.

The example of the use of “A Litany for Survival” to instigate healing and conversation about sexual violence in oppressed communities, along with the many earlier examples of the use of the poem in a number of contemporary contexts, teaches a lesson about what an anti-capitalist poetics might be. The interactivity of the poem in its UBUNTU and Be Bold Be Red incarnations is part of the social life of the poem, and sees itself as linked to the alternative sociality that survival requires. In this sense the use of “A Litany for Survival” and the demands of responding to gendered and racialized violence required a socialist intellectual process, a poetics of production in which the relationship between the producers, consumers and administrators of knowledge is disrupted and conflated towards the development of a social relation that does not objectify people and their bodies. The “when” that repeats in the penultimate stanza of Lorde’s poem then, is alive in the instances of the poem’s social engagement across time. *When* the UBUNTU collective invokes and transforms “A Litany for Survival” towards a world free from sexual violence or *when* anti-police brutality organizers in New York City invoke the poem, *when* the poem gains new life from a specific context in which a group of people actually produces its own survival, when survival is an alternative meaning of life that contradicts the murder and violence of the state and the ruling class. Survival is a queer, non-linear link between moments of collectivized response to oppression across time. And space.