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Audre Lorde's Expansive Influence on Black Lesbians: Jewelle Gomez, Cheryl Clarke, and Kate Rushin

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Audre Lorde's Expansive Influence on Black Lesbians:

Jewelle Gomez, Cheryl Clarke, and Kate Rushin
(TITLE)

BY

Denise L. Fitzer

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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Abstract

Audre Lorde, who named herself black, feminist, lesbian, mother, poet, and activist, was a pioneer for black lesbians everywhere. In her poetry and prose, Lorde challenged the myths and taboos associated with black women, lesbians, and feminists. Although her work focused on a broad range of topics that illuminated her many identities, she concentrated most heavily on issues of multiple oppression and its resulting fear and silence. In naming herself, Lorde urged others to do the same – to fight the self-imposed and socially-imposed silence surrounding triple oppression.

Countless women from the black community of writers have paid tribute to Lorde, both before and after her death, for aiding them in breaking the internal and external silences that stem from multiple oppression. Lorde has spoken to and incited many women from various backgrounds; however, her influence has extended most readily to the black lesbian community. Lorde's far-reaching impact is illustrated in the works of black lesbians Jewelle Gomez, Cheryl Clarke, and Kate Rushin. Inspired by Lorde's life and work, these women challenge through their poetry and prose the conflicts associated with triple oppression.

Although the style of writing that Gomez, Clarke, and Rushin employ is quite different from both that of Lorde's and each other's, the images and issues that they present are very similar. In her work, Jewelle Gomez tackles issues of multiple identities and both the threat and liberation of self-exposure. Cheryl Clarke, who echoes Lorde's message that speech is a powerful tool for liberation, follows Lorde in speaking about

and reclaiming the lesbian erotic as a positive, life-giving force. And finally, Kate Rushin, while focusing on the conflicts of triple oppression, writes of the importance of community as a necessary means of support and validation.

In “Clearing a space for us,” Rushin acknowledges the black lesbian community that Lorde has established for all black lesbians: “Audre made a space, cleared a space for us that has never existed before...especially, she made a space for Black lesbians, a space that has never existed in the history of the world...We’ve been blessed to have her imprint on our lives” (88). As evidenced by both their personal and political writing, Gomez, Clarke, and Rushin pay homage to Lorde for breaking ground for them, and thereby allowing them to embrace visibility and resist silence. In Gomez’s, Clarke’s, and Rushin’s poetry and essays, the effects of Lorde’s words and teaching can be seen and heard through their personal, emotional, and political exhalations. Even though Lorde has died, her words continue to live in these women’s voices.

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Introduction

I was first introduced to the works of Audre Lorde in an African-American literature class during my sophomore year of college. My professor referred to Lorde as a “black lesbian, feminist poet and activist” – names I later learned Lorde embraced and encompassed. It was through Lorde’s work that I became exposed to writing of a lesbian nature. At this time, while I was coming to terms with my own sexuality, her words gave me the necessary strength to gain a sense of identity and pride. In reading works such as Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, “Poetry is not a luxury,” and numerous poems from Lorde’s collection, I realized that I must be visible emotionally and politically in order to be free. Since Audre Lorde inspired me, a *white* lesbian, to embrace my differences and break my silences, it made sense to me that she would leave an even deeper imprint on black lesbians like herself. I soon found validation for my assumptions.

As I began to read poetry by other African-American lesbians, I noticed that Audre Lorde was named in their poetry, included in their dedications, and even present in the similar images they used in their poems. I am not alone, however, in citing Lorde’s effect on these women; several literary critics and scholars have also marked Lorde’s impact on black lesbian writers. Lorde has influenced black lesbians’ works personally and politically. Perhaps this is because she directly addressed the issues that affect their lives.

In her poetry and prose, Lorde details and defines the triple oppression of being black, female, and lesbian that African-American lesbians confront in society. Although

the voice of difference is often silenced by the crushing hand of fear and oppression, Audre Lorde resists silence, and instead, chooses to proclaim her multiple identities. In declaring her identities and embracing them equally, Lorde fights the triple oppression of African-American lesbians. And by rebelling against the system that tries to bury her, she legitimizes her existence, and consequently, the existence of other black lesbians who live in the closet of fear. Audre Lorde provides for women a language and voice with which to talk about oppression.

Through her work, Lorde has directly challenged the system of oppression that has actively worked against her. She does this by first confronting the patriarchal myths surrounding black women, as rooted in the brutal history of slavery and racism. In a poem entitled “Dear Toni...,” Lorde writes:

As she moves through taboos
whirling myths like gay hoops over her head
I know beyond fear and history
that our teaching means keeping trust
with less and less correctness
only with ourselves –
History may alter
old pretenses and victories
but not the pain my sister never the pain. (Collected 64-72)

This passage indicates that, although black women may try to escape the mythology that encompasses their existence, the remaining wounds will leave their scars. Myths and

stereotypes that the white media has created to characterize African-American women, such as that they are evil, poor, promiscuous, or ugly, like those of “Jezebel” and “Aunt Jemima,” hinder black women in their struggle to exist as individuals. Lorde has challenged these myths, consequently exposing them for their inaccuracy and maliciousness.

Not only does Lorde fight myths that exist in white culture, but she also fights the myths that exist in the African-American community. In a speech geared at black women entitled “I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities,” Lorde shatters the negative stereotypes surrounding black lesbianism. She states: “We are not white, and we are not a disease. We are women who love women...I am a Black lesbian and I am your sister” (25). By first exposing the myths that surround African-American women and lesbianism, Lorde can then focus on the three forms of oppression that black lesbians confront in society: sexism, racism, and homophobia. In her poetry and prose, she exposes this triple oppression.

Lorde rarely speaks about racism, sexism, or homophobia separately; they are an omnipresent part of her *self*, and therefore, she is unable to rank oppressions. Society, however, urges people in many ways to prioritize identities. Lorde states: “I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am” (“Age” 447). By fighting the tendency to closet parts of her identity, Lorde encourages others to embrace their full

identities as well.

Lorde understands how important it is to embrace multiple identities. When black lesbians choose to hide aspects of their identity out of the fear of not being accepted, the horrifying result is silence. Furthermore, when African-American lesbians silence themselves, they are rendered powerless. Lorde writes: “Your silence will not protect you... 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” (“Transformation” 629-30). In this passage, Lorde is revealing that many black lesbians use silence as a shield against self-revelation. Instead of defining who they are and accepting themselves in light of that definition, they choose to remain undefined and consequently non-existent. Their self-imposed silence will “choke” them, or in other words, invalidate them, while it simultaneously reinforces the heterosexist perception that there is something wrong in being a lesbian. Lorde continues to challenge silence in a poem entitled “A Litany for Survival”:

...when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
or welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid.
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive. (Collected 37-44)

Here, Lorde advocates that speech is the most effective way to combat fear and powerlessness. The last three lines of this passage are crucial to understanding Lorde's stance on the oppression of silence. In saying "we were never meant to survive," Lorde reminds her readers of their own inevitable mortality. She imparts with them that they must break their silences, as black women and lesbians, not only to call themselves into existence, as society impedes their survival, but also to gain a sense of self. In naming themselves, and in speaking the truth, they can gain power over their silence, therefore alleviating the added oppression that silence creates. Lorde's words reinforce who she is; by professing her beliefs both in writing and speech, Lorde showed that announcing the self serves to empower it. In the act of speaking out, Lorde is an example of how breaking the silence is a setting-free. Because she succeeded in living what she preached, she has had a profound influence on other African-American lesbians.

In my research, I have discovered that countless women from the black community of writers have paid tribute to Lorde, even after her death, for aiding them in breaking the internal and external silences that stem from triple oppression. In writings about black women, black feminism, and black lesbianism, Audre Lorde is mentioned in nearly every work; she is essential to a discussion of triple oppression and African-American lesbians. Several critics have pointed to Audre Lorde's influence on black lesbian writers. Elaine Maria Upton, in Contemporary Lesbian Writers of the United States, writes,

The most important reception of Lorde's writing and her life of social activism is that manifest by the number of readers and admirers whom she

has inspired – women struggling against sexism, lesbians struggling against homophobia, and blacks seeking to create a meaningful existence beyond the many injustices suffered across the globe. (322)

In a similar vein, Brenda Carr acknowledges Lorde: “At the intersection of multiple oppressions, Audre Lorde risks essentialism to affirm her own speaking and call other black lesbian women’s voices from silence” (“Woman” 138). General assertions such as these are made quite frequently in reference to Audre Lorde and her work.

AnnLouise Keating, in The Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage, goes even further in marking Lorde’s influence on the African-American lesbian community, by naming some of the women Lorde has incited. However, although Keating names black lesbian writers who have been inspired by Lorde, such as June Jordan and Becky Birtha (13-15), she fails to investigate how the specific works of these African-American lesbians reflect the direct effects of Lorde’s influence. The literary critics and writers who have named Lorde as a vehicle for visibility and a destructor of oppression have only described her influence in a general way, without specifically marking how her impact is present in black lesbians’ poetry and prose.

Consequently, in order to illuminate Lorde’s far-reaching impact, I will focus on the complex and varied extent to which Lorde has influenced three black lesbian writers: Jewelle Gomez, Cheryl Clarke, and Kate Rushin. The critical perspective from which I explore this topic is that of a white lesbian feminist. Although many white readers of minority writers may indirectly impose their own ideologies and experiences on the individuals they are studying, Elizabeth Abel, in “Black writing, white reading: Race and

the politics of feminist interpretation,” offers an approach that helps to avoid such unintentional misreadings:

If we produce our readings cautiously and locate them in a self-conscious and self-critical relation to black feminist criticism, these risks [of intervention] would be counterbalanced by the benefits of broadening the spectrum of interpretation...and deepening our recognition of our racial selves and the ‘others’ we fantasmatically construct – and thereby expanding the possibilities of dialogue across as well as about racial boundaries. (498)

In other words, Abel is saying that in studying those who are racially different from us, we not only learn about other races, but also about the race we individually belong to. When I first began studying African-American lesbian poetry, I discovered, not only that there were differences beyond skin-color between Caucasian and African-American people, but also that denying these differences was a step towards complete ignorance and an intentional lack of acknowledgment of race. Black lesbian poet Pat Parker reveals this truth in her poem “For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend.” She writes: “The first thing you do is to forget that i’m Black. / Second, you must never forget that i’m Black” (Movement 1-2). In these lines, Parker reveals genuine suggestions as to how white people should relate to black people. She asserts that white people should not ignore racial differences, because they construct people in various ways. However, white people should also work to avoid making racial differences a focal point for separation.

As pertaining to academia, white readers should be aware of how racism or racial ignorance can blind us, but we should also be aware of the differences between black and white people because those differences contribute to how we perceive the world, and how society perceives us. In this study, I am attempting to explore black lesbianism in depth by reading works by Lorde, Gomez, Clarke, and Rushin. As a white lesbian feminist, I have certain similarities with black lesbian women, but in terms of race, our experiences have been vastly different. Because of my “privilege” of being born into a dominant race, I have not suffered from triple oppression. However, I directly relate to the consequences of being female and lesbian in American society. Furthermore, Audre Lorde’s work has made me acknowledge the position of privilege I am in as a member of the white race; consequently, it also provided me with insight on the *lack* of privilege experienced by African-American lesbians.

Lorde has spoken to and influenced many women from various backgrounds; however, her influence has extended most readily to the black lesbian community. Inspired by Lorde’s life and work, Gomez, Clarke, and Rushin challenge through their poetry and prose the conflicts associated with triple oppression. As evidenced by both their personal and political writing, they pay homage to Lorde for breaking ground for them, and thereby allowing them to embrace visibility and resist silence. In Gomez’s, Clarke’s, and Rushin’s poetry and essays, the effects of Lorde’s words and teaching can be seen and heard through their personal, emotional, and political exhalations.

Although the style of writing that these women employ is quite different from both that of Lorde’s and each other’s, the images and issues that they present are very

similar. Of the three authors I examine, Jewelle Gomez has had the most prolific career. She has published a novel, a collection of essays, a volume of poetry, and an extensive number of articles. Audre Lorde's influence is most present in Gomez's works that focus on triple oppression and the resulting fear and silence. As Audre Lorde fought to make visible the multiple identities and consequent triple oppression that black lesbians confront, Jewelle Gomez continues the same fight. Much of her poetry and prose highlight issues of difference, multiple oppression, and the concluding fear and silence that stem from these conflicts.

In her poetry and prose, Jewelle Gomez fights to combat fear and silence. Gomez's essay "Because silence is costly" (Forty-Three Septembers 167-194) is in many ways a continuation of Lorde's "The transformation of silence into language and action." In her essay, Lorde questions the causes and motivations for silence, illuminating for her readers how to fight this self-imposed silence. Gomez's essay furthers Lorde's arguments by revealing just how damaging silence can be. Throughout "Because silence is costly," Gomez intersperses passages from Lorde's essay, using her words for validation and emphasis. Lorde's influence on Gomez's prose work is clearly visible in both her subject and language.

The images of fear and silence that permeate Gomez's poetry are also similar to those of Audre Lorde. In a poem entitled, "Gilda Sings: Dreaming Awake," Gomez writes,

My lips are parched and split
not from being black, being colored, being Negro

being nigger, being old, or loving women.

But from the lies I've had to tell.

From the bile I've swallowed. (Oral 16-20)

This poem accentuates the conflict between internal and external silence that is crucial to understanding the struggles of African-American lesbians. Audre Lorde was one of the first activists to expose this self-imposed silence induced by triple oppression. As she has now died, others such as Gomez are carrying on her words and ideas.

Poet and essayist Cheryl Clarke has also been heavily influenced by Audre Lorde's work. Although Clarke's radical poetry is vastly different from Lorde's in style, the themes that drive it remain quite similar; this is especially apparent in poems that focus on sexuality. Because society often concentrates on the "sex" component of homosexual individuals, lesbian sex was for a long time never discussed or mentioned. Lesbian writers felt that if the topic of lesbian sex was opened for discussion, it would only add fuel to the fire of homophobia. Audre Lorde, however, opened this discussion through her erotic lesbian-identified poetry in the early seventies, and later in her 1978 essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (Sister Outsider 53-59). In this essay, Lorde provides a new definition of the "erotic." Lorde writes, "When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce 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"(55). In other words, for Lorde, the erotic identifies the power and sensuality of women in their creative explorations. The erotic extends to everything from creating poetry to loving women. Lorde furthers her

definition of the erotic by examining how it has been misnamed and wrongly mistaken for the pornographic. She writes:

We have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. (54)

By this, Lorde means that pornography is a false representation of sexuality.

Pornography, a vehicle usually employed by men, uses women only for their bodies, suppressing any real feelings and expressions. The erotic, however, promotes the “true feelings” of women. Therefore, pornography is male-centered, whereas the erotic is female-centered.

By portraying unions between women as positive experiences, Lorde helps to break some of the taboos associated with sex between women. This results in writers feeling less inhibited about expressing their sexual desires. In response to Lorde’s discussions of the erotic, Clarke’s poetry shifts to themes that reclaim lesbian erotica. Her poetry conveys a celebration of women and lesbian sexual intimacy. In a poem entitled “Marimba” Clarke writes:

I am told...
of how she smelled you
and came for you there
black camisole
fingers flexed...

stooped and spread your legs

for her mouth

lips dripping for it. (Living 12, 14-7, 20-22)

In creating a sexual moment between two women through poetry, Clarke is using the erotic to illustrate the sexual intensity of women. The line “lips dripping for it” shows how eager both women are to come together sexually. Through Lorde’s example, Clarke feels validated in sharing lesbian sex with her readers. Clarke’s poetry radically reclaims lesbian sex and overrides the taboos associated with it.

In an essay entitled “She still wrote the word Kotex on a torn piece of paper wrapped up in a dollar bill,” Clarke writes about the eroticism captured in other women’s work, using Lorde’s definition of the “erotic” as a guide and the means for formulating a better understanding of lesbian eroticism. Of Lorde, Clarke writes, “Who else, before or since, has taught us that sex energy is life energy?” (“Knowing” 14). Although Lorde has influenced Clarke in several ways, the most visible and revealing effect has been in her speaking about the erotic. Speaking, whether in regard to the erotic or other issues, such as racism, is as important to Clarke as it is to Lorde. A prominent theme in Clarke’s poetry is speech: voicing and communicating the conflicts that complicate everyday life. In a poem about trying to talk with a lover, Clarke writes, “Telephones cannot be left off the hook / or lines too long engaged / or conversations censored any longer” (Living 2-4). This poem conveys a sense of urgency in opening up lines of communication. In her poetry, Clarke follows Lorde in opening new doors and creating new voices through the power of speech.

Of the three women I will discuss, Kate Rushin has been published the least. In many ways, she can be seen as a part of the third generation of poets who have been affected by Audre Lorde, as she began reading Lorde's work later in life. However, she is well known for her acclaimed and often-anthologized work, "The Bridge Poem," which was first published in This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (Moraga & Anzaldua). Rushin's work shows both the political and personal influence that Lorde has had on her life.

In her collection of poetry, The Black Back-Ups, Rushin explores issues and subject matters that have been guided by Lorde's work. As Jewelle Gomez discussed the conflicts associated with triple oppression in response to Lorde's work, so does Kate Rushin. Many of Rushin's poems deal with the simultaneous reality of being black, female, and lesbian. In "Invisible Woman," Rushin expounds on the invisibility that accompanies triple oppression:

I am The Invisible Woman

Super Woman

Wonder Woman

Afro Woman

The Woman with Triple Vision. (1-5)

Here, Rushin names her identities, and reflects on the perspective that these identities give her: a "Triple Vision." She looks at the world through black, female, and lesbian lenses. The invisible state she is in comes from those in society who do not want to see her, those who blindfold themselves to difference. In her collection of poetry, Rushin

explores all of her identities, and avoids excluding parts of herself that make her whole. As Lorde spoke about the importance of validating one's self through speech and self-acceptance, Rushin writes herself into existence through her work. Lorde's work has inspired Rushin to write about and reclaim triple oppression.

In both her essays and poetry, Lorde focused readily on the importance of community; she continually wrote about the different people that had come in and out of her life. Lorde worked to bring together her different communities, and in that union, created a *black lesbian* community for countless women who were in need of coalition. In reaction to Lorde's work, Rushin uses her own work to bring together her different communities. In particular, Rushin shows her readers how black lesbians are a part of every community; she promotes a normalcy for black lesbians that is often neglected and denied by society. Lorde's poetry about community and the people in it has given way to Rushin's poetry, work that she refers to as "people poetry" (Contemporary 477). Rushin's first volume of poetry, The Black Back-Ups, details this importance of community. She includes excerpts of people from her neighborhood, including her family, as well as people she has never met, who regardless, have still touched her. The ways in which people interact with one another is a theme that Rushin incorporates into a large part of her poetry. Audre Lorde has clearly inspired Rushin to adopt this theme. Of Lorde, Rushin writes: "very important to me is the writing she did about how we treat each other, on a day-to-day basis—as friends, lovers, political people, comrades, allies. She wrote about how important that is, how it's something that needs attention and thinking about" ("Calling" 5). Rushin follows Lorde's lead in writing about community,

more specifically about the African-American women's community, which is typically the group of people that Lorde and Rushin write to and about. The powerful effects of Lorde's work are illustrated through Rushin's poetry and her personal exhalations.

What has been important to Lorde, has now become important to Rushin, Gomez, and Clarke. From Lorde's lead, these women have continued the fight against oppression. Gomez, Clarke, and Rushin belong to a tight-knit community of black lesbian writers who all acknowledge each other and Lorde. In many of their essays and poetry collections, they name one another as sisters and friends in their struggle with being black lesbians. Audre Lorde has influenced these women in different ways; yet, the most unifying way in which she has left her legacy is by giving them a forum for speech and self-liberation. Rushin chooses to speak for all African-American lesbians when she writes: "Audre made a space, cleared a space for us that has never existed before...especially, she made a space for Black lesbians, a space that has never existed in the history of the world... We've been blessed to have her imprint on our lives. And best of all, because of her, we have each other" ("Clearing" 88). Audre Lorde's influence on these women's lives is quite clear through both their personal and political works. And although Lorde is no longer alive, her words continue to live in these women's voices.

Chapter 1: Jewelle Gomez

Jewelle Gomez first connected with Audre Lorde at a Lesbian and Gay Pride March in the 1970s. She recalls:

...I spotted Audre Lorde. She was standing several yards away from me, tall above those seated on the ground. I'd been reading her work since the 1960s but had only seen her from a distance at readings...I started to wave, as if I really knew her...she looked over and caught my gaze. She winked conspiratorially, as if she knew I needed to make that connection with another Black lesbian. The wink was both flirtatious and sisterly. It opened up a dialogue between us that lasted for more than a decade...When I received the news of Audre's death in November 1992 the image that came to me was her in that crowd...It had helped me define what it meant to be a lesbian. (Forty-Three Septembers 95-6).

Jewelle Gomez describes the effect of meeting Audre Lorde in a very personal way. However, this connection as a sister and friend opened for Gomez the world of Lorde's words and politics, which she then embraced for herself.

In her poetry and prose, Jewelle Gomez highlights a variety of issues that are crucial to the African-American lesbian community. She has broached topics concerning homophobia, the racism present in the gay community, and even black feminism. However, the issues surrounding triple oppression and the consequent fear and silence that are its result are specifically the topics Gomez focuses on. Her concern with these

subjects has been fueled in several ways by Audre Lorde's work. Although it may be argued that triple oppression and silence are issues that many African-American lesbians address, Audre Lorde was a pioneer in breaking the silence surrounding this triple oppression. Before Lorde, many black lesbians felt compelled to privilege one identity at the expense of the others. Lorde, however, created a new option: embracing her multiple identities simultaneously and therefore eliminating the need for silence. Inspired by Lorde's voice, Gomez continued the fight against triple oppression that Lorde initiated. In "Audre Lorde: Passing of a Sister Warrior," Gomez writes,

Audre...was the vision of our new beginning...There was an undeniable link between all parts of her self – feminist, Black woman, lesbian, activist, artist, friend, teacher and mother. Her insistence on being seen for her whole self and refusal to let one aspect of her being dominate or obscure the other made Audre Lorde's work and life an invaluable gift and a persistent necessity. (89)

In this passage, Gomez clearly identifies Lorde as the pioneering voice that led other black lesbians towards self-acceptance. In Lorde's refusal to compartmentalize her *self*, she taught other African-American lesbians that they too can identify themselves in multiple ways. By naming the different parts of herself, Lorde fought the self-imposed silence that stems from fear. African-American lesbians have gained needed validation from Lorde's self-acceptance. As Gomez states, Lorde demonstrated and presented a "persistent necessity," which in turn compelled Gomez to incorporate into her writing the issues of triple oppression and elements of difference and how to combat the resulting

fear and silence.

Many African-American lesbians are confronted with multiple identities, such as being black, female, and lesbian, which are often in conflict with one another because of various pressures to fit into specific roles as African-American women. However, like Lorde, who felt she could never hide parts of her identity, Gomez also feels that this is an impossibility; her identities make her whole. In an essay entitled “I lost it at the movies,” Gomez states, “Being a black woman and a lesbian blended unexpectedly for me... The different faces came together as one, and my desire became part of my heritage, my skin, my perspective, my politics, my future” (Forty-Three Septembers 12). From this passage, it is clear that Gomez cannot exclude parts of her identity, because they are so intrinsically linked. For instance, she cannot separate being *black* from being a *lesbian* because she has found a solid union in identifying as a *black lesbian*. Gomez’s acceptance of her identity has become a part of her “politics” and “perspective.” If her identities were separated, she would not be the same person. However, although Gomez has accepted her whole self, she understands how difficult it is to balance multiple identities.

In a poem entitled “Gilda Sings: Desire,” Gomez writes: “It’s not difficult being black, being Negro, / being colored, being woman, being nigger. / It is difficult being and being and being” (Oral 21-23). In stressing the word “being,” Gomez is reflecting on the situation of *existing* with multiple identities. She must continually integrate all of these identities at the same time. Gomez is also stressing her difference from the majority, by citing words typically used by white people against black people, such as “colored” and

“Nigger.” As an African-American lesbian, Gomez is continually defined in opposition to the dominant majority. White heterosexual individuals often refer to members of minority groups by adjectival names and labels, for instance using phrases such as “my *black* friend” or “my *gay* friend.” On the other hand, these majority individuals often neglect to use labels in speaking about those of the same race and sexuality. As a white woman, I have had to combat the socially ingrained need to define those different from me with adjectives that lead to marginalization. In discussing the issue of difference, Gomez follows Lorde in lessening ignorance by creating an acknowledgment of the differences in people.

Politically, Audre Lorde worked to view differences as strengths, rather than causes for separation. In her essay “There is no hierarchies of oppression,” Lorde writes, “I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sizes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression” (51). In this statement, Lorde reveals that people from all social and cultural groups are intolerant to difference. Lorde is alluding to how many people become divided on account of issues of difference; this is particularly true in the Black, Gay, and Woman’s movements. For instance, the feminist movement, which predominantly includes white women, often excludes black women when it decides that race issues are not as important as gender issues. For Gomez, the problem is more specifically about the marginalization of lesbians, and more directly of black lesbians. She writes, “Blacks don’t want lesbians to exist publicly. Gays don’t want lesbians to exist publicly.

Many white lesbians don't know what to do with Black lesbians either publicly or privately. I'm left to wrestle with who I'm writing for and speaking to ("Transubstantiation" Forty-Three Septembers 73). In this statement, Gomez is echoing Lorde's message that movements for liberation are often dominated by the majority. In the Black Movement, racist issues are more important than gay issues, in the Gay Movement, men's issues are more important than women's, and in the feminist movement, white women's concerns hold precedence over black women's. Gomez is left to consider who, in the cause of liberation, is actually listening to her as a black lesbian. She feels hindered from gaining validation for her work. Like Lorde, however, Gomez continues to insist that we cannot prioritize issues or oppressions: "there can be no hierarchies of oppression."

Lorde writes of the difficulty of balancing oppressions and liberation movements in "Who Said it Was Simple":

...I who am bound by my mirror
as well as my bed
see causes in colour
as well as sex
and sit here wondering
which me will survive
all these liberations. (Collected 12-18)

In this poem, Lorde identifies herself as a member of different liberation movements; she is "bound" to both her race and her sexual orientation. In using the word "*bound*," Lorde

evokes a strong connection to her being both black and lesbian. Because of her multiple identities, her triple oppression, Lorde must fight in both these liberation movements. She is left to wonder “which *me* will survive”. In this line, Lorde shows the tension of being pulled in different directions. However, although she is struggling, she still embraces her multiple identities. In the cause for liberation, Gomez also embraces her full identity. And like Lorde, she urges others to accept differences and share liberation movements, as Lorde argued in “There is no hierarchies of oppression.” Gomez asserts:

Just as I cannot leave part of myself – Black, female, raised-poor, or lesbian – at home on any march, no one of us should feel we can leave someone behind in the struggle for liberation. Audre brought her full self to the public eye; our marches bring together the full range of what our movement really is. And it is never just the interests of one segment of the group. (“The Marches” Forty-Three Septembers 97-98)

In the name of difference, Gomez promotes unity.

From Lorde’s inspiration, Gomez tackles the problems of difference not only in her prose, but also in her poetry. In an allegorical poem entitled “Flamingoes and Bears,” Gomez broaches topics of racism, homophobia, and intolerance as she describes societal reactions to an interracial lesbian relationship. She begins, “Flamingoes and Bears / meet secretly / on odd street corners” (Oral 1-3). From the first lines of this poem, the reader is aware of the situation these characters must confront in having to live a secret, silent life. This is mainly because they are different, not only from those who might observe them, but also from each other. Gomez stresses their differences by using animals that are very

much in opposition to one another: one lives on land, one in water; one has legs, one has wings. After introducing the issue of difference through these animals, Gomez then sets up society's reactions to them. She continues:

Horses and chickens
elephants and geese
look shocked and appalled.

Ostriches don't look at all. (4-7)

Here, Gomez shows that many animals (people) are disgusted by their relationship, while others choose to ignore it. Essentially, the relationship between flamingos and bears receives no validation from society. Gomez, however, emphasizes that although they feel they must hide, they refuse to accept society's wishes that they remain apart. She writes:

Bear and flamingo
ignore greedy gazes
from disgruntled parents
and frightened sly weasels
who hiss

as the couple strolls by. (8-13)

Gomez voices her politics through the guise of allegory. This poem clearly shows how society views elements of difference.

Gomez more directly furthers her assertions about difference and black lesbianism in lines from a poem entitled "Beneath the Williamsburg Bridge," where she states:

"You are not a man / and I am not white" (Oral 24-25). These lines are reminiscent of

those from “A Woman Speaks” by Audre Lorde: “I am / woman / and not white” (Collected 32-34). In both poems, the writers are making the same point, even though they are highlighting different issues. They are marking themselves and their lovers as different from the majority or “dominant” members of society. In doing this, they are powerfully declaring their identities at the risk of being unaccepted because of their differences. Lorde’s influence on Gomez is seen in many of her poems, as her images and words echo Lorde’s. After Lorde’s death, Gomez writes,

I still need Audre...I look for her in the way I put words together and how I explain my ideas. I feel deeply sad that she will give us no more of her own words, but those messages she has left with us are explicit and empowering. We need only open one of her books for that light to shine.
(“Audre” 91)

Gomez has relied on Lorde’s words for power and a sense of direction. In “Audre Lorde: Passing of a sister warrior,” Gomez even states that she modeled her first collection of poetry, Oral Tradition, after Lorde’s From a Land Where Other People Live, learning “how a book is supposed to look...[and] how poetry is supposed to sound on the page” (“Audre” 90). Lorde’s teachings live through Gomez as Gomez voices them in her personal and political life. In dealing with the subject of black lesbianism, Gomez has looked to Lorde for inspiration. She follows Lorde’s lead in discussing the resulting fear and silence that stem from the conflict of triple oppression.

In the Acknowledgments of her Collection of Poetry Oral Tradition, Gomez writes: “Grateful acknowledgment goes to the those who have helped me speak out

loud...” The first of the names she lists is Audre Lorde. To speak out is what Lorde wanted black lesbians to do in order to solidify their existence, not only for others, but specifically for themselves. However, because of the conflict of being black, female, and lesbian, accepting one’s self is often riddled with difficulty. Many African-American lesbians remain silent about their sexuality because they already have the burden of dealing with sexism and racism in this society; adding homophobia as something more to contend with is an even greater challenge. Furthermore, because race and sex are almost always visible, while sexuality is visible only when one wants to be open about it, it is easier to be silent. Most black lesbians remain silent about their sexuality due to fear; they fear being rejected by the black community. As a *white* lesbian, I have been able to come out more easily because I do not feel the threat of being rejected from white society because I belong to the dominant culture. White people in general have a greater degree of freedom because of their position of privilege. African-American lesbians, though, who have counted on the men and women from their black communities for support, are afraid of losing that support once they declare their sexual orientation. Therefore, both Lorde and Gomez, as her successor, ask African-American lesbians to break a silence that more than likely allows them to feel like an integral part of a community. Needless to say, this silence provides them with what is actually a false sense of security, since being themselves would no longer give them the safety of acceptance as part of a family.

Many of Gomez’s poems capture images of fear and silence. In “Beneath the Williamsburg Bridge,” Gomez writes:

On our second walk together

I'm wary but not of you.

Boys behind a chain-link fence – it's almost dusk

and they are so many in cleated shoes

full of cockish noises...

They poke at us with curious, weighing eyes...

A ball hurtles through the air uncaught

as they swallow all they might know about us. (Oral 1-5, 8, 22-3)

This poem accentuates the fear of being openly gay in public. Although the boys seem to pose no immediate threat to the women in the poem, the speaker is nevertheless afraid of how they might view their relationship, of how she and her partner might be judged. The speaker claims she is comfortable with her lover, "I'm wary but not of you"; her fears are focused completely on society's judgments. Therefore, the poem calls attention to an external fear of society's reactions to homosexual relationships. The speaker is not concerned with her own self-acceptance, but how others may interpret her. However, a lack of external validation can often lead to difficulty with self-acceptance, or anxiety about sexuality. In "On Lake Ontario" Gomez combats her internal fears of being rejected by society. She writes:

You grip my arm. Woman fingers

pressing my flesh hard

so it bulges between like brown, kneaded dough...

When two mothers pass we lean closer together

pushing away their stares...

They wonder. (25-7, 30-1, 35)

As with the boys in “Beneath the Williamsburg Bridge,” the mothers in this poem also pose no threat; however, the women feel as if they might be rejected: one woman grips her lover in anticipation of being scorned. The women combat their internal fears, though, as they “push” away the mothers’ stares and “lean closer together.” In these actions they are gaining self-validation for their relationship and their sexuality. In conquering fear, black lesbians are more able to gain a sense of identity. However, because of fear, many black lesbians are forced into silence.

Silence is the most paralyzing ramification of fear. When black lesbians are silent they are in many ways impeding their own existence, at least in the realms of greater society. Gomez, however, validates the existence of African-American lesbians, as Audre Lorde did. In her essay “Representations of Black Lesbians,” Gomez writes of the impact Lorde has had in breaking the silence surrounding black lesbianism. She states,

Lorde’s books smashed that enforced black silence in ways that no other works have done before and few books have done since...And just as with the recovery of black history in the 1960’s, it was no longer easy to dismiss black lesbians once we were identified as part of black history.

(35)

In communicating about silence issues, Lorde influenced Gomez most readily through her celebrated paper, “The transformation of silence into language and action” (1977). Voicing the fear and silence manifest by triple oppression, this essay helped to crumble the existing walls society had placed to imprison those of difference. Lorde writes:

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... In the cause of silence, each one of us draws the face of her own fear – fear of contempt, of censure, of some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live. (42)

In this powerful assertion, Lorde states that black lesbians must be visible, regardless of the consequences. The consequences, however, are many. Rejection and emotional scarring are just some of the ramifications of being a visible black lesbian. Because of these and other consequences, many black lesbians choose to be silent. Lorde, however, asserts that in choosing silence, one is, in a sense, choosing death. If African-American lesbians remain silent, suppressing the part of themselves that yearns to be with women, they are not truly alive, they are not whole. In breaking the fear and silence, Lorde shows that African-American lesbians can be validated in their existence. And the risks of being visible are necessary; for if they are living in fear and denial, they are not really living.

Gomez continues Lorde's argument from her "Transformation" essay in her own essay "Because silence is costly" (Forty-Three Septembers 167-194). But rather than speaking about silence in general terms, Gomez uses the vehicle of the coming-out story as a method of breaking the silence. Gomez's essay furthers Lorde's arguments by revealing how damaging both internal (self) and external (societal) silence can be to existence. Gomez believes that breaking this silence is important in accepting one's self.

In the traditional coming-out story, one can reaffirm her identity and gain a sense of visibility. Gomez writes: “Coming out is not merely announcing a personal choice to the world; it is a step in accepting your identity. For Black lesbians/gays it means saying both *I am gay* and also declaring *I am still Black*” (169). This quote reaffirms the difficulty of triple oppression by revealing the black community’s misconception that being gay is a white issue. Gomez is alluding to the phenomena that people believe they can not be black and gay simultaneously. Many African-Americans, both gay and straight, believe that they lose some of their “blackness” in being gay. This can be attributed to the strong family connections black women and men share. Homosexuality is threatening to the black community because its outcome is sterile: no children are derived from the union. Consequently, homosexuals, especially lesbians, threaten the idea of family. Gomez, however, affirms that not being heterosexual doesn’t mean that black gay individuals can’t be an integral part of the community. Furthermore, she asserts that being gay does not mean rejecting one’s blackness. In order to deconstruct this false belief she elevates the coming-out story as a tool for visibility. Gomez asserts, “The coming-out story reaffirms the legitimacy of the role Black gays and lesbians continue to play in the Black community...In spite of fear, Black lesbians and gay men continue to write and speak their coming out stories... Why[?]...Because silence is costly” (194).

Throughout her essay Gomez intersperses passages from Lorde’s “The transformation of silence into language and action” for validation and emphasis; this action serves to reiterate Lorde’s influence on Gomez. Indeed, the opening passage of

the essay is a quote from Audre Lorde. The combination of Gomez and Lorde's words together create a strong, solidifying argument. Gomez even uses Lorde's biomythography Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982) as an example of a coming out story that breaks the silence. Of Audre Lorde, Gomez writes,

She refuses to equivocate in her coming out story, never attempting to either ignore her Blackness or to indicate that she is a lesbian in spite of it. She also is able to acknowledge and describe her political perspective on race, gender, and sexuality as a Black woman and as a lesbian...Zami offers one of the first honest glimpses of Black lesbian sexuality in American literature. (191)

Gomez's decision to include Lorde in her essay, both in language and theme, signifies the strong effect Lorde has had on her life. Over and over again, Gomez pays homage to Lorde for her inspiration and direction.

After Lorde's death, her friends convened for an article in the publication New Directions for Women; the article was called "A Special Celebration of Audre Lorde." In remembrance of Lorde, Gomez wrote,

In a poem 'Now that I am forever With Child' (1963) Audre writes about the birth of her daughter...In those words she claimed me, too, as her child and insisted at the same time that I make my own way. She embraced and pushed me out of the nest. And it was a pushing I needed; one we all need...To be Black, Mother, Lesbian, Poet, Warrior was her art. In doing so she gave me history for my nourishment and the thrill of many new

ways I might choose. Her writing will keep winking at me, pointing me towards new paths. (31)

Gomez sees Audre Lorde as her mother, her sister, and her friend. But she also sees her as her teacher and mentor. Through Lorde's instruction, influence, and inspiration Gomez found her way and gained the courage to speak out on behalf of herself.

Chapter 2: Cheryl Clarke

In an article Cheryl Clarke wrote in Sojourner (1990), “Knowing the danger and going there anyway,” she discusses the impact Audre Lorde has had on her life and work:

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. I still feel this way and that she has more work to do. And so do we... We can enter the house she leaves open for us, ‘head for the source’ of our own pain, and work with her to discover. (15)

With these words, Clarke illustrates that Lorde’s work is something that she carries with her every day. And because of Lorde, many doors have been left open for her to explore her daily conflicts. Essentially, Lorde’s work has enabled Clarke to do her own work.

The direction in which Cheryl Clarke’s work has gone has, in many ways, been guided by Audre Lorde. Of Lorde, Clarke writes, “Her essays have transformed the way we live our lives and do our work as feminists and lesbians” (“Knowing” 14). This passage refers to the way in which Clarke and other black lesbians have reexamined their own lives and writing in response to Lorde’s work. For instance, Lorde’s poetry and prose has inspired Cheryl Clarke to address political issues that are crucial to the black lesbian community. Although Audre Lorde has had a very personal effect on Clarke, Lorde’s influence is most present in Clarke’s political work. This is seen most vividly in Clarke’s poetry and prose about black lesbianism and the erotic. In her 1990 essay

“...She still wrote the word Kotex on a torn piece of paper wrapped in a dollar bill,” Clarke continues Lorde’s groundbreaking arguments she made for reclaiming the lesbian erotic in “Uses of the erotic: the erotic as power” (1978). She does this by discussing several poets and how they use and reclaim the erotic as a source of positive power. And in speaking against the taboo of lesbian sex, Clarke promotes Lorde’s fight to ease oppression through the power of speech. This is evident in Clarke’s poems that speak out on and consequently validate lesbian sex. Like Jewelle Gomez, who furthered Lorde’s “The transformation of silence into language and action” by exploring silence issues, Clarke furthers Lorde’s arguments in her poetry, by exploring elements of speech and the act of speaking to affirm black lesbian visibility. The ways in which Lorde has reshaped Cheryl Clarke’s life and work are quite clear through her activist work.

Cheryl Clarke explains that when a black woman acknowledges herself as a lesbian, she is making more than a personal choice. She is making a political statement. In her essay “Lesbianism: an act of resistance,” Clarke writes, “For a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic, imperialist culture, such as that of North America, is an act of resistance” (128). In this statement, Clarke emphasizes that America, as it stands, does not allow for the existence of African-American lesbians. She further affirms that she resists the intolerance of American society that promotes invisibility in people who do not fit “the norm”. For her then, being a lesbian becomes a political action against the small-mindedness of exclusion. In an untitled poem, Clarke explores the oppression of being a black lesbian in America by drawing a parallel between racism and homophobia. She writes:

We are everywhere and white people *still* do not see us.

They force us from sidewalks.

Mistake us for men.

Expect us to give up our seats to them on the bus.

Challenge us with their faces.

Are afraid of us in groups. (Living 1-6, emphasis added)

Clarke's linking of the historical racial reference to Rosa Parks with the stereotypical portrayal of lesbians that are mistaken for men signifies that America is not changing. By connecting past racial conflict to current homophobia, Clarke shows a repetitious cycle of oppression that manifests itself in different forms of intolerance. In this poem, Clarke reiterates the invisibility that she and others must contend with as African-American lesbians. Nevertheless, she remains strong and visible in the face of aversion, as Lorde urges her to. Of Lorde, Clarke writes, "Determined not to be silenced or made invisible, she carried her lonely courage to another part of earth, where she found and liberated us" ("Knowing" 14).

Cheryl Clarke continues to fight against invisibility through the liberation she has found in Lorde's words. She furthers her argument in "Lesbianism: an act of resistance" when she writes,

As political lesbians, i.e. lesbians who are resisting the prevailing culture's attempts to keep us invisible and powerless, we must become more visible (particularly black and other lesbians of color) to our sisters hidden in their various closets...afraid to take the ancient act of woman-bonding beyond

the sexual, the private, the personal. (134)

Clarke calls others to resist socially imposed silence and join her in being visible. When she talks about taking “woman-bonding beyond the sexual, the private, the personal,” she is making a strong political statement about visibility. She is saying that lesbians, and in particular black lesbians, should resist the pressures to remain invisible, by being visible in all aspects of their lives; therefore, by being open about their sexuality in both a private and public way. Black lesbians can gain validation from speaking about their private lives: their partners, relationships, and families. While Clarke shows that lesbian sex is not dirty, but beautiful, she affirms that being a lesbian is a positive experience. Clarke stands by her words through her resistance to being silent and invisible in speaking about her sexuality. This is most evident in the works that focus on the lesbian erotic.

The lesbian erotic was for a long time restricted to the private realm of lesbians’ lives. Lesbian writers believed that if the topic of lesbian sex was opened for discussion, it would instill homophobic attitudes in those in society. Because many heterosexuals focus on the “sex” component of homosexuals, lesbians, in general, have had to be particularly careful about perpetuating stereotypes by calling attention to sex as an aspect of their lives. Speaking about sex, however, is even more dangerous for black lesbians because of the sexual stereotypes that encompass black women’s lives. Throughout history, black women have been portrayed as being over-sexed prostitutes and sexual temptresses. In reading Lorde’s work, though, Clarke and other black lesbians have found that in suppressing the erotic, lesbians are suppressing a part of who they are. Audre Lorde opened doors for a discussion of the erotic and lesbian sex through her

poetry in the early seventies. In “On a Night of the Full Moon” Lorde writes:

The curve of your waiting body
fits my waiting hand
your breasts warm as sunlight
your lips quick as young birds
between your thighs the sweet
sharp taste of limes. (Collected 5-10)

In this poem, Lorde explores her sexual love for women. In clearly identifying that she is making love to a woman, by calling attention to specific body parts and images, Lorde reaffirms her own identity. She also challenges the taboos associated with lesbian sex (that it is dirty and wrong) by creating a beautiful picture. Her use of phrases such as “warm as sunlight,” “quick as young birds,” and “the *sweet* sharp taste” evoke soft, loving images. Lorde’s lesbian erotic poetry had a profound effect on Clarke, whose own poetry shifted to reclaim the lesbian erotic. Referring to Lorde and her work, Clarke writes “ Who else, before or since, has taught us that sex energy is life energy?” (“Knowing” 14). By this, Clarke means that by validating her sexual relationships with women, she is able to live fully. She views sex between women as a positive and fulfilling part of life, something that contributes to one’s overall well-being. She is no longer suppressing her sexual needs, and therefore, no longer stifling her life. Clarke explores this sex/life energy in her poetry. In “Dear One,” Clarke writes:

Your lovely breasts want
to linger over me.

It's pouring out of you...

You bragged that you'd risk the taste

of a stranger's juices,

so committed to desire's destination...(Experimental 6-8, 11-13)

This poem vividly captures erotic yearning through the speaker's attempt to persuade a woman to make love to her. By offering suggestions, "your lovely breasts want / to linger over me" the speaker passionately evokes her own desire for the woman; the voice is vulnerable, yet strong. The last line is crucial to understanding how sex energy can become life energy. Clarke writes: "your mouth, the flow of menses" (14). By referring to menstrual blood, Clarke captures the natural essence of woman; in making love to her, she is absorbing her blood, blood that pumps the heart for existence. And in return, she is gaining life. The erotic connection that these women have moves back and forth between sex and life.

In "great expectations" Clarke becomes more explicit in her desires for women when she writes,

Questing a lesbian adventure one splendid night

of furtive, fixed stars and fully intend-

ing to have you suck my breasts and fuck me

til dawn...

dreaming the encounter intense as engines

first me then you oh what a night...

to find my lesbian sources in the window

of longing wide open in me. (Living 1-4, 7-8, 11-12)

As in “Dear One,” this poem also accentuates Clarke’s desire for sexual intimacy with women. She is less inhibited in this poem, however: her “lesbian sources” of “longing” are “wide open.” She avoids other poets’ needs to speak about sex in an evasive way, instead choosing strong words like “fuck” and “suck” to illustrate for her readers her resistance to silence and her willingness to open doors for language that is often devalued. Clarke reclaims lesbian sex in her poetry and insists on its visibility.

Not only did Audre Lorde’s poetry have an effect on Clarke, but her prose spoke to her as well. In Lorde’s 1978 essay, “Uses of the erotic: the erotic as power” (Sister Outsider 53-59), Lorde verbalizes women’s need for the erotic. She describes the erotic as “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” (56). Lorde shows the strong connection between the erotic and love. In speaking about the lesbian erotic, she means the love of women, by women, and for women often expressed in a sexual way. In Lorde’s reclamation of the erotic, Clarke redefines her own definitions of black lesbianism and sexuality. Lorde’s essay inspired Clarke in a lasting way. In “Living the texts out” Clarke writes of Lorde’s influence on her work and what reaction it instilled in her:

In the early 1980s, I used poetry to reclaim lesbian sexuality and desire – in its diverse poetic and real forms...Audre Lorde gave us the first and most searing in *The Black Unicorn*...I plainly wanted to advance Audre Lorde’s thesis in her 1978 piece ‘Uses of the Erotic,’ by promoting the

concept of lesbian sexuality, a poetry of itself in all its irony and paradox.
(223)

Clarke clearly states how Lorde's erotic work led to her own. Because of the effect Lorde's erotic poetry and prose had on her, Clarke wanted to explore themes of lesbian erotica in her own work. In response to Lorde's essay "Uses of the erotic," Clarke wrote an essay entitled "...She still wrote the word Kotex on a torn piece of paper wrapped up in a dollar bill." Here, Clarke explores the eroticism captured in Lorde's and other women's works, using Lorde's definition of the "erotic" as a guide for creating a clear understanding of lesbian sexuality. Clarke discusses in detail lesbian eroticism and Lorde's part in creating a broader definition and a more well-rounded view of the erotic. She also writes of the courage it requires to openly discuss lesbian eroticism:

Black lesbian poet, Audre Lorde, whose work is always at the edge of pain and alienation and at the center of anger and hope, evokes the danger implicit in sex, especially for lesbians. Lorde has spoken often of her ostracism by the black literary community because of her explicit lesbianism. In her love poetry, Lorde is in the here-and-now...Lorde is more than anything sensual and explicit. ("She" 452)

In this passage Clarke expounds on Lorde's strength to resist and surpass the efforts to silence her own efforts to create a lesbian consciousness. Speaking of the erotic is dangerous because it is continually misconstrued. Yet Lorde speaks of it, regardless of the pain and rejection she may suffer as a consequence. As a result, Lorde's discussion of the erotic in both her poetry and prose inspired Clarke to express her sexuality.

In speaking about the erotic, Lorde and Clarke have both opened doors that had remained closed for many years. Lorde's courage empowered Clarke to explore openly lesbian erotic issues, to encourage open communication about it. In an interview with Charles H. Rowell, Lorde stated: "I want my poems – I want all of my work – to engage, and to empower people to speak, to strengthen themselves into who they most want and need to be and then to act, to do what needs being done" ("Above" 94). Lorde incites others to speak about themselves and the conflicts they confront, no matter how threatening this verbalization may be. She infers that the value in speaking lies in shaping one's self into who she is and wants to be. In speaking about issues pertinent to them, African-American lesbians can validate their own existence, reshape themselves, and consequently conquer silence and oppression. Clarke has been fortified by Lorde's work to give voice to her own internal yearnings and struggles. In a poem entitled "Living as a Lesbian Underground" Clarke combines the erotic with the power of speech. She writes:

The pages of my journal were all written up
with words censored years before...
a tasty little piece
of interracial erotica...
I wrote it with my left hand
as well as my right. (Experimental 58-9, 67-8, 74-5)

In reclaiming censored erotic words through the act of writing, Clarke announces her refusal to adopt society's belief that the erotic is dangerous and dirty. She writes these

words in every way possible, with her right hand and her left, gaining control over the words; essentially, she becomes empowered by her resistance. In writing and rewriting these words, she makes the erotic visible and real, if only to herself. Clarke continues:

I recited it every time I wrote it.

Played with my sex

as I wrote it

over and over.

And said it as I came

over and over. (76-81)

In this passage, Clarke links the act of writing to the attainment of pleasure. As she writes and speaks forbidden words, she releases sexual tension; the act of writing itself creates a sexual reaction in her. As she releases ink from the pen, she releases orgasmic fluids from her body, both able to spill out freely on the paper. In combining the erotic with the power of speech, Clarke reveals an important political message about resistance and freedom: in speech, one can gain liberation.

Lorde's speech, "The transformation of silence into language and action," strongly influenced Clarke, as it did other black lesbian writers. From this work, Clarke takes with her Lorde's message about the necessity of speech. In her speech, Lorde stated, "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised and misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect" (40). As I stated earlier, there are many consequences to speaking out, such as being rejected or being

vulnerable to physical and emotional pain. Furthermore, people both within and outside of the gay community misinterpret or even deny the existence of black lesbians.

However, Lorde continues to insist that it is better to speak than to be silent, as does Clarke. Joining Lorde, Clarke uses her own work to discuss controversial issues at the risk of mutilation, and continues the act of liberation. In "Living the texts out" Clarke writes about the impression Lorde's "Transformation" speech made on her and other women. She asserts: "Lorde's piercing words were/are especially empowering to disempowered women who were/are afraid to speak, and especially to Black women artists who are prominent among disempowered women...for they underscore the severity of our silence" (243). In using the words "*our* silence," Clarke includes herself in the group of disempowered women who have stood up against oppression. This revelation shows how important Lorde's words have been to her, as well as to other silent women. She has gained power through Lorde's emphasis on the harsh reality of silence and her insistence on speech.

A prominent theme throughout Lorde's poetry is the power of speech and the act of communicating. In "Dahomey" Lorde writes,

Bearing two drums on my head I speak
whatever language is needed
to sharpen the knives of my tongue...
since I am woman whether or not
you are against me. (Collected 27-9, 32-3)

This poem illustrates how Lorde challenges oppressors who prefer that she remain silent.

Lorde's imagery of drums and knives evokes a sense of battle, a war against silence. With Lorde's battle gear, drums sounding a steady beat and knives issuing piercing words, she speaks in "whatever language" necessary. She speaks because she is a woman who has been threatened to not speak. Lorde realizes that she may be alone in her battle, yet she still fights against oppression and impels others to do the same. Clarke uses similar language in her poetry to discuss and consequently fight oppression. In a poem entitled "storyteller," Clarke writes about the reclamation of language:

At dawn we'll make a closed circle
and say every word
stolen from us
and still forbidden
very loud. (Living 12-16)

This poem emphasizes Clarke's desire to speak. In making a "closed circle" she is forming a powerful wall against her oppressors; she is actively fighting those who have suppressed her speech. In voicing what has been taken from her, she is gaining power.

In many of Clarke's poems, she equates loss of speech with death. In a poem called "Choking" Clarke envisions how she will die: "Last night / I saw how I would die / by choking" (Experimental 1-3). She continues to describe her death with loss of breath and consciousness:

...coughing
coughing
not able to get my breath

unable to scream for help...
and I'd die like that
sort of frozen in the horror of it
my mouth and eyes open. (9-12, 14-16)

This poem vividly captures the fear Clarke has of losing her ability to speak. Using images of coughing and choking, she illustrates her need for words, but also her difficulty in speaking them. Her mouth remains open even after death, hoping that words will find their way out. In losing speech, Clarke would lose herself; she would lose the part of her that needs to be spoken and validated. It is evident that Clarke values her ability to speak, particularly about personal and political issues that concern her.

Audre Lorde has shown Clarke the value of speaking freely in the face of adversity. Through Lorde, Clarke has gained a voice of her own. In a poem Clarke wrote after Lorde's death entitled "A Poet's Death," Clarke writes about the absence she feels now that Lorde is gone: "Audre, my good neighbor, / I miss your elegy, / your so-long song" (Experimental 28-30). Clarke then continues to describe her loss of speech now that Lorde's life has ended: "I miss my voice, my tongue, my most voluptuous lips" (37). This line indicates that Clarke has lost a part of her ability to speak because the woman who provided her with a voice has died. In this powerful poem, Clarke depicts the influence Lorde has had on her life. Lorde's life and work have spoken to Clarke, and from Lorde's words, Clarke has gained her own voice, and made her own way. Even after Lorde's death, Clarke continues to draw inspiration from Lorde's words and her presence as a leader in the fight against the triple oppression of black lesbians.

Chapter 3: Kate Rushin

Although Kate Rushin belongs to the same generation of poets as Gomez and Clarke, Rushin began reading Lorde's work later in her life. When she was asked in a 1993 interview: "Who in your adult life has inspired you?," she replied, "In the last ten years, it would be Audre. Audre Lorde" ("Calling" 5). Rushin has published less poetry and prose than her black lesbian sisters; however, even in the small volume of writing attributed to Rushin, Lorde's influence on her work is quite evident. In an article Rushin wrote for Radical America entitled "Clearing a space for us: A tribute to Audre Lorde," she expounds on the impression Lorde has made on her and other African-American lesbians. Rushin writes:

There are many of us here who work hard and have many special skills and talents. We write, we speak, we go to countless meetings; we work hard to be educated and take care of our families; we give our time and labor for things we believe in, we contribute. I think you'd agree, there are few people who do all these things and who are also able to speak to and to move so many different kinds of people as Audre...She brought us together, women and men, Black and White, Asian and Latina and indigenous, all sexualities and class backgrounds. Audre brought us together when we weren't so sure that's where we wanted to be. (85-86)

In this statement, Rushin captures the power of Audre Lorde. Although she acknowledges herself and other writers who work towards creating change, she clearly

sets Lorde apart as a “visionary,” a woman who not only worked towards creating change, but who was victorious in creating a political consciousness that was crucial to leading a fulfilling life; she brought people together in the name of liberation, even when they were afraid of coming together, and she gave them the tools with which to unite. Lorde’s message eventually reached Rushin, as it reached many others before her who were in need of finding a voice.

In her collection of poetry The Black Back-Ups (1993), several themes Rushin explores come together as a result of the impact of Lorde’s work. As Jewelle Gomez discussed the effects of triple oppression in response to Lorde’s work, so does Kate Rushin. In much of her work, Rushin reflects on the reality of being female, black, and lesbian. The difficulty of this triple oppression is expressed in several poems, including her groundbreaking piece “The Bridge Poem,” which has been anthologized in many collections and became the inspiration and title for This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (Moraga & Anzaldua).

In her poetry, Rushin explores and names all of her identities; she never excludes a part of her *self* that makes her whole. In an interview with Rebecca Johnson, Rushin speaks about her efforts and intentions to name all her identities, especially her lesbian identity. She writes: “The publication *The Black Back-Ups* makes me more out to more people than I have been out to in my life. It’s not *easy* for me, but I needed to move forward. This book includes at least one poem about every aspect of my life – there was no way I could leave out my lesbian identity” (“Calling” 5). Rushin’s “I Just Don’t Know” is an example of a lesbian-identified poem which confronts the worry involved

with being “out.” She writes:

I worry about all the Fantastic People

Who might not want to talk to me

Or publish me

Or be my friend

Those people who might disown me

Or be disgusted...

After I start reading these poems aloud

These women poems. (“Calling” 1-7, 10-11)

Although identifying herself as a lesbian was a difficult step for Rushin, her existence depended on making that part of herself visible. And it was Lorde’s work that inspired Rushin to write about and thereby reclaim all aspects of herself.

Another important theme in Rushin’s work influenced by Lorde is that of community. Audre Lorde focused on the significance of community in both her poetry and prose; she often captured images of the different people who have shaped her life. Lorde’s writings on community became a stepping stone for Rushin, as she adopted this focus in her own poetry, which she refers to as “people poetry.” In the Black Back-Ups, Rushin includes excerpts and short prose poems that detail the lives of people in her neighborhood, including her family, as well as people she has never met; she credits Lorde for awakening her to this theme. Of Lorde, Rushin writes: “very important to me is the writing she did about how we treat each other, on a day-to-day basis—as friends, lovers, political people, comrades, allies. She wrote about how important that is, how it’s

something that needs attention and thinking about” (“Calling” 5). Rushin has taken from Lorde the necessity of being aware of how we treat individuals, that we approach people with respect and understanding. By referring to people she is aligned with, Rushin speaks specifically about community. In her “people poetry”, Rushin follows Lorde by speaking about the centrality of community to not only her life, but also to the lives of other black lesbians. In Rushin’s poetry, which highlights both the triple oppression she must confront and the community relations that help her combat it, the powerful effects of Lorde’s work become evident.

In order to combat triple oppression, Lorde continually names herself in her work, recognizing the power and visibility she can gain in the naming process. She asserts that there is no fulfillment to be gained from denying parts of her *self*, and continues to define herself even at the threat of alienation because of her different identities. In a poem entitled “To the Poet Who Happens to Be Black and the Black Poet Who Happens to Be a Woman,” Lorde writes about the conflicts of triple oppression:

...I can recall without counting
eyes
cancelling me out
like an unpleasant appointment
postage due
stamped in yellow red purple
any color
except Black and choice

and woman. (Collected 24-32)

In this poem, Lorde discusses the invisibility that she often experiences. People “cancel” her out – pretend not to see her because she is a black lesbian. As a black woman who chooses to be a visible lesbian, she encounters the oppression of rejection and denial. Here, Lorde clearly delineates the triple oppression she experiences for being who she is. She is stamped out because of her differences, yet those differences define her and, therefore, she must draw attention to them. Because of Lorde’s extensive work on triple oppression, many black lesbian writers have followed her in creating a consciousness about multiple identities. Accompanying Lorde in exposing the multiple identities in common to African-American lesbians, Kate Rushin uses her poetry to work through self-imposed and socially imposed oppression.

In “The Bridge Poem,” Rushin conveys the compromising position she occupies as a member of several different groups. She writes:

I’ve had enough

I’m sick of seeing and touching

Both sides of things

Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody. (Black 1-4)

Rushin cries out against the various ways she has to represent herself. She recognizes that she extends herself to various sides of issues and movements because of her multiple identities. However, because of this, people use her as a mediator, their only source of connection. This position is tiring for Rushin. She continues:

I explain my mother to my father my father to my little sister my

little sister to my brother my brother to the White Feminists the
White Feminists to the Black Church Folks the Black Church Folks
to the ex-Hippies the ex-Hippies to the Black Separatists the Black
Separatists to the Artists and the Artists to the parents of my
friends... (6-11).

As a triply oppressed black lesbian, Rushin belongs to several communities and is therefore obligated to different causes that often conflict. As a member of these groups, she fights to find unity among their disparities, but becomes frustrated in always having to explain herself and those she is aligned with. Still, Rushin feels that because she has a broader perspective than others in more privileged positions, she is relegated to the role of translator. However, the oppression that Rushin must deal with because of her conflicting identities is only amplified by her continual need to defend and explain her varying positions. In Contemporary Lesbian Writers of the United States, Sandra Pollack and Denise D. Knight offer an analysis of “The Bridge Poem” that points to the conflict of multiple identities: “In the poem...the speaker’s perception that the ‘self’ is multiple gives emphasis to the relationality between one’s selves and those of others as an ongoing process of struggle, effort, and tension” (478). In other words, Rushin must contend with seeing the components of herself in relation to others in order to “bridge” differences as a means of establishing tolerance, if not acceptance.

In “Calling my poems home,” Rushin shares her feelings about “The Bridge Poem”:

I have some poems that are, in a sense, geared towards a white audience.

In many ways the “Bridge” poem is. It’s an explaining poem. Although many Black people and other people of color relate to the poem, the stance of the poem is actually doing the explaining that the poem is protesting. I think it could be dangerous for a writer of color to be in that stance for too long. (5)

This statement reiterates how Rushin always has to clarify and define herself, and the multiple identities that comprise her, to other people; it is another example of her trying to find connections with those different from her. Although the poem objects to the role of translator she occupies, Rushin is forced to continue assuming the explaining stance, even while protesting her disapproval of it. Rushin argues that the explaining stance is often a hazardous position to remain in, because it keeps writers of color in a defensive mode, as if they truly had to apologize for who they are. In this stance of divided understanding, there is no hope for growth.

Rushin continues to voice her conflicts with triple oppression in other poems from The Black Back-Ups. In “The Invisible Woman,” she illustrates her difficulty with being an object of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Because these injustices are tolerated in society, Rushin feels invisible. She begins, “I am The Invisible Woman / ... The Woman with Triple Vision” (1,5). Her “Triple Vision” illustrates her three perspectives that come from being black, female, and lesbian. Because she has these “unfavorable” identities, she is often unacknowledged by society. Rushin continues:

I listen to men talk about
Schemes for picking up young girls

And broads who only rate C-minus
I listen to white people in white rooms
Sipping white wine...
I listen to my relatives talk about
Homos, fags, fairies
And that girl who walks like a man...
Something tells me
You do not see me. (6-10, 14-16, 23-4)

Rushin clearly conveys her invisibility in the lines of this poem. From her hidden position, she “listens” to people stereotype women, exclude blacks, and discriminate against homosexuals, and is confronted with the reality of existing in a male-dominated, homophobic, white world. Since she does not fit into this world, she feels invisible to society. In this poem, Rushin alludes to the actions of powerful groups of ignorant people who either ignore those who are different from them, or treat them with contempt. In dealing with multiple oppression, African-American lesbians are often faced with being canceled out of existence. In the act of writing herself into existence, Rushin challenges those who would rather ignore her. She joins Lorde in naming and reclaiming herself.

Rushin expounds on her admiration for Audre Lorde’s act of reclamation in “Clearing a space for us.” She writes,

This straightforward, seemingly simple, act of naming herself requires great will, focus and courage. Audre was able to claim each part of her

identity with such authority because she had paid the price. She paid the price by walking into the fire of self-examination and self-disclosure. She looked at herself and she showed herself, however painful those acts. (86)

Rushin admires Audre Lorde because Lorde faced her fears. She examined herself and her oppressions, her identities, and she accepted them, and then derived power from them. By examining herself, Lorde was able to name herself. And the process of naming is very powerful. Being accepted in society is often a complex problem; however, accepting and naming *one's self* is even more complicated, especially in light of society's rejections. Black lesbians, as opposed to white lesbians, have more difficulty accepting themselves because by declaring themselves lesbians, they risk rejection from both the black and white community. Therefore, the process of naming themselves as lesbians becomes more threatening. This is illustrated in "A Pacifist Becomes Militant and Declares War," in which the threat of alienation is in conflict with the desire for self-examination and acceptance. Rushin, like Lorde, looks at herself through her lesbian partner and is forced to confront self-acceptance. She writes,

Your sudden
Street corner kiss
Accentuates my hesitation
And I realize that in order to care about you
I have to be everything that is in me...
I know once and for all
If I walk away

Hide from you

I keep on running from myself. (Black 10-14, 17-20)

This poem emphasizes Rushin's battle with accepting herself as a lesbian. In the face of her lover, she sees the face of herself. Therefore, in order to give herself to another, she must acknowledge who she is. She cannot love another woman if she hides the fact that she is a lesbian. She continues:

And if I love you

Even just a little bit

I have to love the woman that I am

I have to reach down deep inside

I have to stand and show myself

I have to walk in the world. (42-7)

Rushin's reflection on Audre Lorde's courage is reiterated here. In order to love another woman, Rushin must first come to terms with accepting herself. In this poem, Rushin goes through the struggle of searching inside herself for definition and validation. She decides not only to show herself who she is, but also the world. This poem epitomizes Rushin's statement made in "Calling my poems home," where she writes of The Black Back-Ups, "there was no way I could leave out my lesbian identity" (5). Rushin chooses to validate herself through poetry by combating the oppression that accompanies her identities; consequently, she gains power and visibility because she allows herself to be who she is, both publicly and privately.

For African-American lesbians, community is particularly important because they

are the ultimate minority within the dominant culture. Kate Rushin writes about the connections and power she derives from her various communities in much of her poetry. In The Black Back-Ups, Rushin uses her “people poetry” to discuss the people that represent community for her. Rushin names and describes the people of her community similarly to Audre Lorde. Her focus on community is, in many ways, directly attributed to Lorde. Rushin asserts,

We talk a lot about community, what it is and what it isn't. We talk about how it is not what it used to be, we worry about it, we wonder where it is and we mourn it. The day I found out Audre died I knew instantly what community was to me and why I needed it and what I needed to do to ensure that it existed and that I was a part of it...The day Audre died I was homesick for the first time and knew I had to come back to Boston and sit and talk with other Black lesbians. (“Clearing” 88)

In her constant visibility and demand for coalition, Lorde created a black lesbian community for many women to share in. Lorde called this community into existence, not only for herself, but for countless women who had no means of support or validation; she believed that community was essential to survival. Therefore, Audre Lorde defined community for Rushin. As Lorde joined black lesbians together, she became an ever-present symbol of community. The loneliness Rushin feels when Lorde dies makes sense then, because an important “family member” had left her to fend for herself. In response, Rushin seeks the aid of other black lesbians with whom she can identify. She now realizes that it is her and other women’s obligations to continue developing and nurturing

the community that Lorde established. Lorde wrote, “Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression” (“Master’s” 112). In other words, the peace one can make between herself and her oppression can only be minimal without the support from other voices seeking the same aim. Lorde urged people to unite in their common oppressions, even in spite of their differences, because only in numbers could they truly make themselves visible enough to initiate change.

In her poetry, Lorde frequently depicts women who have come to represent what community means to her. This is evident in “Journestones I-XI,” where Lorde names and describes eleven women who have accompanied her journey through life. For instance, Lorde writes,

Elaine
my sister outsider
I still salute
the power of learning
loss...
Flora my sister
what I know
I no longer need
to understand... (Collected 11-15, 64-7)

From these lines, readers can derive a strong sense of community. Although Lorde is vague in the meaning of her discourse with Elaine and Flora, we nevertheless feel she is

sharing an inside joke or coded message with them. This is reminiscent of the special languages and secrets particular to specific communities. Lorde refers to these women as her sisters, and in that, makes them members of her family. In naming these women whom she has met along the way, Lorde calls them into existence, and furthermore, into her community.

Inspired by Lorde's continual stress on the importance of coalition, Rushin explores the connections she develops from the black, women's, and gay communities in The Black Back-Ups. Very similar to Lorde's poem "Journeystones" is Rushin's title poem "The Black Back-Ups," which depicts various black women who have been a source of strength in her life and the lives of people within her community. The title refers to the countless black women who have been back-up singers for both white and black men – black women who have been stuck in the background and often forgotten. Rushin writes:

This is for my Great-Grandmother Esther, my Grandmother

Addie, my grandmother called Sister, my Great-Aunt

Rachel, my Aunt Hilda, my Aunt Tine, my Aunt Breda...

This is dedicated to all the Black women riding on buses

and subways back and forth to the Main Line...

This is for the Black Back-Ups

This is for my mama and your mama

My grandma and your grandma

This is for the thousand thousand Black Back-Ups. (15-17, 21-2, 98-101)

As Lorde named women into existence, so does Rushin. Rushin reminds her readers, both white and black, not to forget the important contributions black women have made to this world. In aligning herself with black women everywhere, she draws a strong connection between herself and others in the community. She also reclaims the “back-up” position black women have been resigned to and reverses it. Rushin’s focus on resurrecting community is evident in much of her work.

In “Calling my poems home,” Rushin talks about who her audience is. She asserts,

Certainly my family, people from my town and the Black community in general, is my audience. And certainly the women’s community. It’s very important to me to be communicating with other Black women, whoever they are...there’s a certain kind of power you get from talking to people in your community, who are more likely to understand you, who share your experience. (5)

Rushin uses her poetry to connect with women from her community. The power Rushin alludes to comes from her ability to openly share her entire self with others who will understand her. In speaking directly to her community, Rushin lessens the possibility of being misconstrued and stereotyped for her differences. Rushin’s audience is clearly in mind in her poetry which speaks to the black community. In one of her “people poems,” Rushin details a woman from her neighborhood who is believed to be a witch. Rushin writes:

Everybody says Miss Lindy Brown is a witch. On the 4th

of July, she steps out with the Junior Marchers, Boy Scouts, and fire trucks. She wears scarves, bracelets, long swirling skirts and carries a ruffled white parasol. She prances. She curtsies. She throws kisses to us as we line the dusty streets. Everybody says Miss Lindy Brown is a witch. I don't doubt it for a moment. And always, she says to me, *Remember, Darling, Aunt Linda loves you.* (Black 1-8)

In this poem, Rushin captures a piece of her childhood. As the tone and style are both simplistic and conversational, the piece is reminiscent of childish prattle. However, in describing Miss Lindy, Rushin evokes both her speculations about the woman, as well as her affection for her. Miss Lindy, in Rushin's depiction of her, becomes one of her black back-ups. Although Rushin's style is vastly different from Lorde's, the similarity in the people in which they describe and the ties they have with their community is quite evident. Both Lorde and Rushin use their poetry to restore a deep sense of community.

In an interview with Charles H. Rowell, Lorde expounds on poetry and its connection with community. She affirms,

I am now a part of the U.S. colonial community, as well as part of the international community of people of color. I am also part of the Black women's community. I am part of many communities. Poetry is a way of articulating and bringing together the energies of difference within those communities, so those energies can be used by me and others to better do what must be done. ("Above" 86)

Lorde recognizes that because she is a member of different communities, it is her duty to bring those communities together through her poetry. And by joining her different communities and identities, she can claim her many selves. Lorde speaks of energy, that there is energy in bringing together differences. By this, she means that there is a certain force or power that comes from the tension of differences. Lorde wants her readers to use the powerful charge from these differences for a greater purpose.

Inspired by Lorde's vision of collective communities, Rushin forges bonds between her communities as well. She brings the black women's community and lesbian community together in a poem entitled "Camden, New Jersey." Rushin states:

Two backyards down
Our neighbor is yelling: ...
Got eight, Wanita!
Has seven tomatoes,
Now I got eight!
Wanita is her girlfriend.
Then it hits me
Our neighbor is a lesbian, a mother
And just as colored as
Everybody else. (Black 1-2, 5-12)

In this poem, Rushin illustrates for her readers a "normal" black lesbian couple. The reader joins Rushin in her discovery of her neighbors' relationship and the realization that such a relationship can exist among people just like her. In placing her characters in a

comfortable family neighborhood setting, Rushin breaks stereotypes about black lesbians as being either strange or non-existent; she depicts them as a part of her own community, and consequently, everyone's community. Rushin gives visibility to black lesbians and their community by asserting that one can be both black and a lesbian simultaneously. With her poetry, Rushin creates a visibility for black lesbians that is often lacking by creating a community that is usually unseen or ignored.

Audre Lorde's influence on Kate Rushin is manifest in both Rushin's works and her own accounts of Lorde's inspiration in her life. Lorde has fueled Rushin's poetry and given meaning to her existence. Perhaps the most important way in which Lorde has had an impact on Rushin's life is in creating a black lesbian community for her and other women. Rushin writes, "Audre, in her complete generosity of spirit, made a space for us. She accomplished this by clearing a space within herself...Now, we are called upon to think more deeply, speak louder, work harder, be more of ourselves to keep our claim on the space that Audre cleared" (87-88). Lorde provided a space for black lesbians that had never existed. In creating that space, Rushin was able to find herself and other women like her. The echo of Lorde's words resonates not only in Rushin, but also in women everywhere.

Conclusion

Audre Lorde made a lasting impression on Jewelle Gomez, Cheryl Clarke, and Kate Rushin. They reflect on Lorde's words and her message in both their poetry and prose. In response to Lorde's work, these women challenge the conflicts associated with triple oppression, and in turn, validate their own existences. Lorde has given Gomez, Clarke, and Rushin the gift of speech, and in that speech, they have found true liberation. Audre Lorde's inspiration is ever-present in these women's voices.

Jewelle Gomez has been influenced by Lorde most readily in her discussion of multiple identities and the resulting fear and silence. In "The Question," Gomez confronts the face of her own fear and oppression through her lover. She writes:

I was too afraid and curious. That became a bond –
fear and curiosity. Embattled, overcome, succumbed to,
reignited each day and still we glanced
in comfort and surprise, knowing we were never meant
to see each other at all. (Oral 14-18)

This poem retells the fear Gomez once had of loving women sexually. She was pulled in two different directions – attracted by curiosity, yet repelled by fear. Although she and her partner battled their fears and gave into their desires, Gomez is aware of the prohibition against their union, "knowing we we're never meant to see each other at all"; yet she is able to be "in comfort" with her relationship. She "knows" that she was never meant to look at another woman with desire, and furthermore act on that desire.

However, as this poem is written in the past tense, the reader understands that Gomez has triumphed over her fears and given credence to her sexuality.

As Lorde has affected Gomez's poetry, she has also affected her prose. In her essay "Because silence is costly," Gomez furthers Lorde's arguments in "The transformation of silence into language and action" which displayed how silence can reinforce the hidden and invisible lives of black lesbians. Gomez uses the vehicle of the coming-out story as a powerful means of writing one's self into existence. She asserts, "In spite of fear, Black lesbians and gay men continue to write and speak their coming-out stories...*Because silence is costly*" (194). This passage is in direct reference to many women and men who have overcome their silences and spoken, and especially to Audre Lorde who has provided the tools for this action to occur. As Gomez intersperses lines and phrases from Lorde's poetry and prose, she shows how instrumental Lorde's aid has been in breaking the silences of black lesbians.

Audre Lorde has also played a profound role in Cheryl Clarke's life and work. Lorde's influence on Clarke is especially apparent in her poetry and prose that focuses on lesbian sexuality. In a poem entitled "Cucumber," Clarke writes: "The room filled with her sex / as she knelt upright before me / ...to make certain of wetness" (Experimental 14-15, 24). This poem conveys the speaker's sensations of being engulfed with pleasure by her lover. Like this poem, much of Clarke's poetry explores the erotic nature of lesbian love.

Audre Lorde opened doors for a discussion of the erotic in her poetry and prose in the seventies. In her 1978 essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde

describes the erotic as “creative energy empowered” (55). In response to Lorde’s essay and exploration of the erotic, Clarke wrote the essay “She still wrote the word Kotex on a torn piece of paper wrapped in a dollar bill,” where she furthers Lorde’s arguments, and consequently validates sex between women as a positive and life-giving force. Clarke exclaims, “We have to work against the custom of silence as well as our own fear of power as sexual beings” (“She” 457). As Clarke follows Lorde in reclaiming the lesbian erotic, she argues that keeping silent about sexuality is dangerous, and giving in to an unfounded fear of sexuality is passive. In speaking about the erotic, Clarke internalizes Lorde’s sentiment that speech is the most effective way to combat oppression.

Clarke also focuses on Lorde’s argument about the power of speech and language. In “Living as a Lesbian Underground, ii,” Clarke writes:

A faggot historian friend – once noted
now hunted – smuggled me the latest
in dyke fiction from Fiji.
I had to eat the manuscript
before I could finish it. (Experimental 1-5)

Indicated by the title, this poem shows the societal danger of living and speaking of one’s lesbian identity. The “dyke fiction” is smuggled and the smuggler awaits the threat of detainment. However, Clarke shows the necessity of reading and writing about lesbians’ lives in her absorption of the text; she “had to eat the manuscript” before she could finish reading it. Although she understands that speaking is fraught with danger, she must put the pages – the words – in her mouth, making them her own. Audre Lorde has shown

Clarke the value of speaking and making one's self visible in the face of alienation.

Kate Rushin, who was influenced by Audre Lorde later in life, takes from Lorde similar issues and battles as Gomez and Clarke. As Gomez discusses the conflicts of triple oppression in response to Lorde's work, Rushin does as well. Rushin uses her poetry to work through self-imposed and socially-imposed oppression. She writes: "I am the Invisible Woman / The Woman with Triple Vision" (Black 1,5). Here Rushin describes her triple oppression as various lenses she must look out from. Her multiple identities shape the way in which she sees the world, and consequently define who she is.

Another prominent theme that Rushin incorporates in her poetry is the importance of community. Lorde often wrote about the different people in her community, and, in the act of writing, brought her communities together. The impact that Lorde's writing about community had on Rushin is evident in several poems from her first collection of poetry, The Black-Back Ups. In "Camden, New Jersey," Rushin writes black lesbians into existence, and makes them a part of her community: "Our neighbor is a lesbian, a mother, / And just as colored as / Everybody else" (10-12). In stating that her neighbor is "just as" colored as other people, Rushin breaks false stereotypes that black women can't be lesbians, and that lesbians don't raise children. Furthermore, Rushin shows her readers that black lesbians are a part of every community. Through Lorde's work, Rushin understands how powerful community can be. She writes: "The day I found out Audre died I knew instantly what community was to me and why I needed it and what I needed to do to ensure that it existed and that I was a part of it" ("Clearing" 88). Lorde helped Rushin define what community is and why it is necessary, and by doing that,

Lorde became a symbol of community to Rushin. When Lorde died, Rushin needed to find community beyond Lorde. She now accompanies Lorde's "daughters" in fostering the black lesbian community that Lorde had established. With Lorde's guidance, Rushin has been able to come into her own.

Although Gomez, Clarke, and Rushin tackle different issues in their poetry and prose, their concerns are connected in a solidifying way: through the power of language. Lorde's overall goal was to enable others to use language as a means of combating oppression. In an interview with Charles H. Rowell, she asserts, "I want my poems – I want all of my work – to engage, and to empower people to speak" ("Above" 94). With these words, Lorde calls others to voice their own injustices, to speak in the cause of breaking the perpetual silence that envelops oppression. Gomez, Clarke, and Rushin have succeeded in doing this. In writing about their lives and voicing their oppression, they are reclaiming themselves and their own inner strength. Lorde's influence has extended to many African-American lesbians and women. In "Knowing the danger and going there anyway," Clarke writes of Lorde, "She has entered many rooms and made it possible for others to enter those places and speak there also" (15). Clarke writes of Lorde's ability to open doors for communication and expression. Through Lorde, these women have validated their own existences. And through the black lesbian community that Lorde established, they have learned to validate each other.

In her life and work, Lorde created a black lesbian existence. She showed that being a lesbian, being black, and being a woman can be and is a positive experience. Furthermore, she illustrated that the joining of these identities is a powerful testimony to

strength and resistance. In her fostering of a black lesbian community, Lorde has created a supportive and nurturing environment for women to exist and grow in. This community has played an integral role for Gomez, Clarke and Rushin. As they have named Lorde in their dedications, poetry, and prose, they also name each other as sisters in their struggle. For instance, in “Calling my poems home,” Rushin writes: “There is more of a space for people of color to be out. *Audre Lorde* and Barbara Smith, Pat Parker and *Jewelle Gomez*, *Cherrie Moraga*, *Cheryl Clarke* – and all the rest of us who people haven’t necessarily heard of – made such a difference” (5). Rushin names Gomez, Clarke, and other women who have contributed to easing the effects of triple oppression. As Lorde paved the way, they now have all learned from each other. Rushin writes of Audre: “We’ve been blessed to have her imprint on our lives. And best of all, because of her, we have each other” (“Clearing” 88). Lorde has led the way for black lesbians to find one another.

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