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Challenging White Fragility through Black Feminist Political Poetry

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled
**“Challenging White Fragility through
Black Feminist Political Poetry”**

written by
Langley Leverett

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Professor Jennifer Pittman, thesis director

Dr. Amy Sonheim, second reader

Dr. Kevin Motl, third reader

Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

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“And now I hope that this will be the last battle that will be in the world. Let us finish up so that there will be no more fighting. I have faith in God and there is truth in humanity. Be strong women! Blush not! Tremble not! I want you to keep a good faith and good courage.”
— Sojourner Truth, “When Woman Gets Her Rights Man Will Be Right” (1867)

I have a voice
Started out a whisper, turned into a scream
Made a beautiful noise
Shoulder to shoulder, marching in the street
When you're all alone, it's a quiet breeze
But when you band together, it's a choir
Of thunder and rain
Now we have a choice
'Cause I have a voice
— Alicia Keys and Brandi Carlisle, “A Beautiful Noise” (2020)

INTRODUCTION

In the vein of Audre Lorde, poetry is the only flexible mode of providing tangibility to the nameless. Poetry crashes through boundaries of numbness and pain to unearth the yearning within to find something worthwhile. For many women writers, poetry acts as an intersectional blend of experience and opinion. Their words not only aim to move through the dominant consciousness, but they also aim to strike, to jolt the reader out of submission. For many Black women feminist writers, moving readers from a state of indifference is their sole intention. These writers labor to force the reader into action, to shake up their notions of what they believe is true, and to show a perspective not yet acknowledged. This purpose is the reality of a Black woman's poetical pressure; for the Black woman, poetry is not just an art form to be enjoyed with leisure. It is a burning burden of eagerness to achieve, to make someone listen and understand the plight of both racial and gender oppression. From this uneven weight, feminist theory has struggled to prevail over class, race, age, and gender expression. Due to overwhelming patriarchal hegemonies that women – white women, rich women, young women, and cis¹ women – continue to uphold, feminism struggles to serve all women justly. To combat this negligence in feminism's fourth wave movement, I will use this thesis to highlight ways that Black² feminist poets have not only shaped feminist theory through their own contributions, but also have prolonged and saved the livelihood of both gender and racial equality. With a strong emphasis on

¹ Stemming from the term “cisgender,” cis describes a person whose gender identity is the same as their assigned sex at birth.

² In accordance with the Associated Press, when referring to the community of Black people or Black women in particular, “Black” is capitalized. This capitalization change occurred following the murder of George Floyd in 2020: “AP’s style is now to capitalize Black in a racial, ethnic or cultural sense, conveying an essential and shared sense of history, identity and community among people who identify as Black, including those in the African diaspora and within Africa. The lowercase black is a color, not a person. AP style will continue to lowercase the term white in racial, ethnic and cultural senses” (“Explaining Ap Style”).

Intersectional Feminism,³ I will explore the ways in which women can be united against tokenistic power, beginning with the inspiration from three voices: Gwendolyn Brooks (1917 – 2000), Maya Angelou (1928 – 2014), and Audre Lorde (1934 – 1992). These poets’ canons span the duration of a century and trace the highs and lows of the Women’s Liberation movement, Gay Rights movement, and the Civil Rights movement. While mainly utilizing two theories — Robin DiAngelo’s idea of white fragility and Patricia Hill Collins’ focused thoughts surrounding articulation — I will analyze a portion of each author’s poetry, identifying key rhetorical devices and central themes that underscore the power of Black Feminist Thought and the progression of clarity. Reviewing select poems, I will demonstrate how each author responded to and articulated her era’s societal oppression through (but not limited to) poetic diction, various modes of imagery, and metaphor to create momentous change within her community and the communities that followed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although the term *White Fragility* is recently coined, the idea comes with a very long history. Antiracist educator and author Robin DiAngelo wrote *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (2018) to examine the patterns of behavior white people use to continue racial inequality. In her author’s note, she firmly states that her book is intended primarily for a white audience so that the white collective “can practice building ... stamina for the critical examination of white identity — a necessary antidote to white fragility” (DiAngelo xiv). DiAngelo, while far from the first person to claim that racism is an institution, spends the entirety of the book explaining ways that white people can take responsibility for their whiteness

³ Intersectional Feminism focuses on those who experience various and overlapping forms of oppression and works to understand how those forms relate to one another.

and begin to work toward racial equilibrium. She explains how Western society has conditioned white people to uphold racial superiority (regardless of moral positioning), analyzes the emotions behind the white collective's response to racism, and ultimately outlines how white fragility continues to perpetuate harmful social conditions despite legislation and centuries of activism. Basing her conclusions on anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which refers to the specific repetitive actions, norms, values, and attitudes of a specific social group, DiAngelo ultimately argues that white fragility is not a conscious state white people choose to enter, but rather an unavoidable experience, or state of being that white people must accept as reality and then choose to dismantle. Her findings and descriptions of white fragility behaviors are not new to people of color but certainly have, and continue, to shock and render white readers uncomfortable. Her book records many people of color describing instances in which white people can and will do anything to avoid conversations about race, including crying, deflecting, gas-lighting, becoming defensive, shutting down the topic, denying an experience, or physically leaving. She explores the emotions white people tend to feel when the topic of race is brought up, which often range from anger, guilt, fear, or even feelings of being called out, attacked, insulted, or shamed. DiAngelo breaks down the characteristics of white fragility in order to show how this pattern of behavior from white people is ultimately a form of bullying and an active way "to protect, maintain, and reproduce white supremacy" (DiAngelo 113). DiAngelo writes to persuade white readers to start building their racial stamina – their ability to make space for uncomfortable conversations and to recognize that there is an interlocking system of oppression (which has existed for centuries) that has socialized white people into believing they are meant to be superior over other cultures and groups of people. She makes it clear that this goal is not an individual attack on personal identity, but rather an attack on a particular social system, which is

racism: “When a racial group’s collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism, a far-reaching system that functions independently from the intentions or self-images of individual actors” (DiAngelo 20). DiAngelo also acknowledges that while, yes, *racism* and being a *racist* certainly have a negative connotation and direction, she clarifies the differences between *prejudice*⁴, *discrimination*⁵, and *racism*, outlining the exact definitions of each, showing that a conversation about racism does not mean that one person is *bad* and the other *good*. By relieving readers of such binaries, DiAngelo coaxes white readers to see themselves and others truthfully, encouraging them to develop deeper cross-racial connections by learning how to tune into racial sensitivities.

As Black women who experienced the full brute force of racism and sexism, Brooks, Angelou, and Lorde share many perspectives on the topic of their oppression. These varying perspectives appear as main themes throughout their poetry, which holds a special intersectional space that Patricia Hill Collins, a groundbreaking sociologist and Black Feminist, explains in her essay “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought.”⁶ In this essay, she affirms the idea that subordinate groups of people have valid interpretations and opinions of their oppression and that they are capable of articulating their own perspective on the conditions in which they reside. Collins is one of the first theorists to specialize in Black Feminist Thought and to research in an academic setting how Black women have used their status as *outsiders* to create forms of

⁴ DiAngelo defines prejudice as having pre-judgements about another person or body of people without any firsthand experience.

⁵ Discrimination is the action someone takes against the person to whom they have assigned pre-judgements or opinions.

⁶ Collins’ essay appeared in the 1989 edition of *Signs*, a major publication of Black Feminist writing in the 1970s and 1980’s and is considered one of the first pieces of writing that specifically outlines Black Feminist Thought, helping give voice to the meaning of intersectionality and the unique viewpoint and history Black women carry.

resistance. Collins clarifies that an oppressed group's position in society not often, if ever, allows them to voice their opinions freely, that the dominant ideological hegemony of the time "makes the articulation of their self-defined standpoint difficult" (340). She also states that the main reason voices from oppressed groups are discredited is because reception can often "can stimulate oppressed groups to resist their domination" (Collins 340). Essentially, the subordinate group's voice is silenced because the oppressor does not want to give power, mobility, or the freedom to the subordinate group so that they may resist their status as inferior. This thought alone highlights the power of the poetry that Black women produced in the decades prior to the Civil Rights Movement; poetry, for Black women writers, has acted as a form of "rearticulated consciousness [that] gives African American women another tool of resistance to all forms of their subordination" (Collins 341). By writing about the collective Black women's lived experience, the poets I discuss have succeeded in using new techniques — differentiated poetic form — in order to reach a different audience reaction, one of understanding and receptivity, even if that desired reaction was not provoked immediately.

These writers were all too well acquainted with the reality of white fragility. However, despite powerful white backlash in the forms of economical, physical, emotional, and mental abuse, these women succeeded in giving a voice to the masses who needed it the most – those within their community and outside their community. While these writers spoke specifically for the Black community, they also carried the torch so that future groups of people would have a chance to exist in a space freely.

Gwendolyn Brooks: Articulating Oppression through Community-Minded Lines

Gwendolyn Brooks is considered by many critics and readers to be one of the chief poets of her time, not only due to her extensive literary accomplishment, but also because her poetry captured the essence of a far-reaching, international community. While she was born in Topeka, Kansas in 1917, she was raised on the South side of Chicago and lived there for the majority of her life. Her canon covers the realities of the Black urban poor, the harsh demands of womanhood, and the brutalities of the American South, while also reflecting a deep active and sub-conscious understanding of what it means to be Black in an environment that has been and continues to be unforgiving. Her poetry is multidimensional in that it works to express individual emotion and grit and to also elevate the raw power of the collective's resilience. She is the first Black author to win a Pulitzer Prize, for any category, in 1950, the first Black woman to stand as the poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, the first Black poet laureate for the state of Illinois, and she was also a receiver of the 1995 National Medal of Arts. Brooks is something of a watershed poet: she carries the academic Black writing of her predecessors Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes into the militancy of the social activists of the sixties. Her metamorphosis from a writer to a poet activist is not a sudden shift, but rather a slow flood; she helps sets the stage so that activists like Angela Davis, Alice Walker, and bell hooks could thrive and bloom in Black Feminist Thought.

For her entire life, Brooks had a love of writing; she had her first nationally published poem at thirteen in 1930 and was a ground-breaking success by the age of twenty-five. She was "ever observant," and quickly "settled in to learn the ways of her people, the geography and genius of Afro-America" (Jackson 2). Her observations of her family and surroundings led to a deep appreciation of her culture and roots, as she had "early on fallen in love with her own color

because her parents, by their love of her and her brother, had taught her to love the totality of herself' (Jackson 4). Brooks respected herself and where she came from, which enabled her to write clearly about the circumstances she witnessed, without shame or reserve. Although Brooks' poetry does experience a radical shift in the sixties due to the Civil Rights movement, her early work is equally important as it paved the way for her later works to be recognized as moving political pieces rather than mere recollection.

While her life consistently reflects a concern and passion for her surroundings and the Black community as a whole, it isn't until her later years that critics and admirers alike begin to see her power as an activist emerge. Throughout the 1960s, organized protests such as the March on Washington (1963) and the sit-in movements began to overwhelm the public's idea of what society should look like. During this time, Brooks created many relationships within the Black Arts movement, the Black Power movement, and with many Black publishers.⁷ In these defining moments of the Civil Rights movement, Brooks finally began to see herself as a voice for a cultural entity — an entity not only worthy of recognition, but one that does not have to assimilate any longer. Researchers like to note that this change is marked officially with her transferring her work from the major publisher Harper & Row to a Black-owned and operated publisher, Broadside Press, with Dudley Randall at the helm.⁸ For Brooks, this shift is especially noticeable in her poetry collections *In the Mecca* (1968) and *Riot* (1969), but in order to show that Brooks' articulation of her community's oppression was a long-enduring endeavor, I will

⁷ Brooks had literary connections and friendships with Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Etheridge Knight, among others.

⁸ Brooks would become lifelong friends with Dudley Randall, who was deeply committed to publishing Black poets and carving out a space where Black poets could thrive.

discuss a range of poems such as “kitchenette building” (1945), “We Real Cool” (1963), and “RIOT” (1970).

Writing frankly about her surroundings, Brooks was a voice for an entire community, for both women and men, the elderly, and children. She was able to reveal several challenges the Black communities in the 1940s and 1950s faced simply because she was at once a wife, a sister, a daughter, and a mother, and while she doesn’t fit the so-called *angry-outspoken feminist* stereotype of today, she most certainly was a feminist in that she fought for the equality for both women and men. She saw the iniquity of the day and used the material to propel a national fight

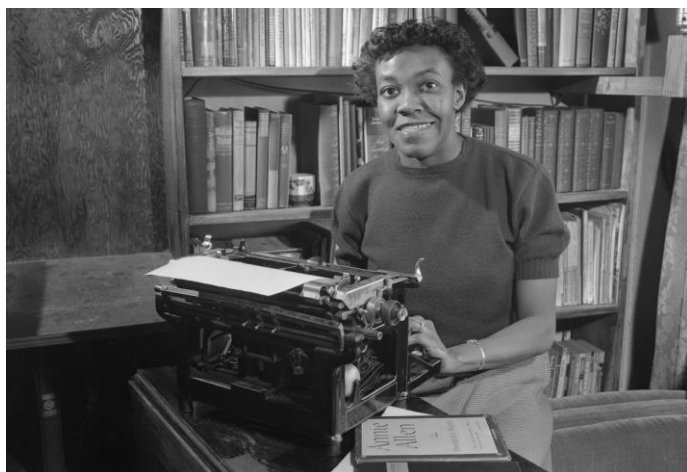


Photo: Gwendolyn Brooks sitting at her typewriter, with a copy of *Annie Allen* (1949) on the table (Bettman).

for equality. She once wrote: “If you wanted a poem, you had only to look out of a window. There was material always, walking or running, fighting or screaming or singing” (qtd. in Jackson 25). Her poetry, from the collections first written in *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) to *Annie Allen* (1949), to *Bean Eaters* (1960), articulates an acute level

of observation of lived Black experience that carries a higher level of storytelling and wisdom not easily found. According to Collins:

This distinction between knowledge and wisdom, and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to black women’s survival. In the context of race, gender, and class oppression, the distinction is essential since

knowledge without wisdom is adequate for the powerful, but wisdom is essential to the survival of the subordinate. (346)

In other words, Black women have historically had to rely on their own wisdom, on the grounds of un-stated rules and perceptions, in order to survive both private and public spaces without being ridiculed or shamed. Black women have had to try harder, be smarter, and move quicker, so that their basic emotional and physical needs are met, and sometimes, even that is not enough. This phenomenon is affirmed by Black women across the board; whether it's through poetry, music, or art, this theme crops up repeatedly.

A chief example of this wisdom appears in one of Brooks' earlier poems, "kitchenette building."⁹ This poem reflects her difficult experience of living in run-down urban kitchenettes, which were often mice-ridden and lacking private bath facilities. Brooks contrasts ideas of work and fantasy, arguing that those who are burdened with every-day chores, like cooking, cleaning, or paying bills, cannot afford to dream. The poet describes this experience as being colorless and trapping. She writes, "We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan, / Grayed in, and gray" (1-2) not only to demonstrate that her community is suffering and losing vitality, but also to show the people's lack of autonomy. In the middle of line two, Brooks gives agency to the word "dream," which acts as the subject: "'Dream,' makes a giddy sound, not strong / Like 'rent,' 'feeding a wife,' 'satisfying a man'" (2-3). Although the poet focuses brief attention on the subject, the audience and the speaker both know the real energy belongs to the everyday responsibilities: paying bills, providing provision for one's family, and taking care of loved-ones. In the first stanza of this poem Brooks draws the picture clearly: the people in this poem are not able to dream wildly about maintaining social status or networking their way through careers,

⁹ For full poem, see Appendix A.

and not because they do not desire to, but because they are not given the option. This poem is one of the first examples of Brooks' activism, as she isn't only concerned with aesthetic qualities of her community, she's concerned with their literal livelihoods. She begins the poem with the collective pronoun "we," to both show solidarity with her community while also demonstrating a lack of autonomy. She avoids the personal pronoun "I" to show that the descriptions she is about to share is and has been endured by many. Due to the devastation of the Great Depression, the economic pressure of World War II, and the booming population growth of the 1950's, many in Black communities struggled to find jobs and adequate housing, and consequentially faced exploitation.

Brooks' poetry not only reflects wisdom gained from lived experience, but it also reflects wisdom that is supported and affirmed by other writers. In many ways, this poem acts as the preface to Langston Hughes' popular poem "Harlem," more commonly recognized as "A Dream Deferred," which was published in 1951. Both writers fixate on the idea of a dream,¹⁰ using visual and olfactory imagery to stimulate the reader's nose and eyes to situate the audience in a position of understanding on why realities of achieving a dream outside of the household are near impossible. Many Black communities' primary concerns were feeding children, making sure the electricity was on, and staying warm in the winter months. Brooks describes "dream" using the adjective "giddy," which means to have a sensation of whirling or falling, to feel dizzy with overpowering emotion. She chooses this word to show how precarious it is for Black women and men to be focused on an uncertain dream instead of the fixed realities that she later

¹⁰ The idea of an *American Dream* extends far back into American history and appears in numerous literary works like *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck; however, the term holds different connotations for different groups of people. Many Black writers, like Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and Martin Luther King, Jr., discuss the *American Dream* in terms of longing for racial equality, justice under the law, and the abolishment of police brutality, rather than economic riches or social mobility. These themes are clear through works such as Hughes' "I, too," King's "I Have A Dream" speech, and Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

describes like wafting the “onion fumes” out of the apartment, or “yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall” (lines 4, 6). While her pessimistic longing is evident as she pens “even if we were willing to let it in, / Had time to warm it, keep it very clean, / Anticipate a message, let it begin?” (8-10) hearing or thinking of a dream would not last “for a minute!” (11). With these concluding lines, Brooks makes it clear that the overwhelming message of this poem is communal endurance; Black women and men could not afford to think of dreams because their survival depended on it.

After more than a decade passed in Brooks’ career, the poet maintained concern for community, reflecting her own observations through one of her most recognized poems: “We Real Cool.”¹¹ Published in her collection *The Bean Eaters* (1960), this poem is to the point and startlingly clear, representing a “model of compression, economy, and rhythm” while poignantly illustrating an “unforgettable portrait of lost young men of color whose lives are over far too soon” (Jackson 84). As a mother herself that wanted a better life for her son, Brooks wrote these lines with a personal motivation, for she was determined to protect her children. Using a simple rhyme scheme and a structured meter, Brooks formulates this poem in the style of the blues, a music genre created by Black people during the 1800s in the midst of slavery and persecution. The blues is rooted in historical and cultural meaning and often appeared in every layer of African American society. Black people would sing and repeat spirituals, prayers, chants, and work songs, to express their hardship and to find companionship in others who sang along. With this tradition in mind, Brooks intentionally models this poem after the blues because she knows the piece will reverberate as a “protest poem, as powerful as [Richard] Wright’s *Native Son* or an

¹¹ For full poem, see Appendix B.

essay by James Baldwin” (Jackson 84). Brooks wants her audience to see that her work is not just a personal statement but a cultural and collective declaration.

Furthermore, Brooks continues to unionize her people by beginning the poem and each new sentence with the collective pronoun “we.” As in “kitchenette building,” by avoiding the personal pronoun “I,” she conveys the idea that there is a lack of personal identity or independence. At the time she was gaining popularity and recognition, it was not commonly accepted for a woman, especially a Black woman, to voice her own opinions freely without judgement or retribution. Women were viewed as being subordinate to the man within a familial unit – not capable of standing alone. Brooks, of course, is aware of this limitation and uses it to her advantage. Although she doesn’t claim personal autonomy within her poetry in the way that Angelou and Lorde does, she does bolster and support collective autonomy, which is what her people needed at that time. In using collective pronouns, she speaks on behalf of the entire Black and African American community, validating their oppression and outlining the unique hardships that they have faced in unison. In “We Real Cool,” Brooks ultimately suggests that because of their race and economic position, the subject, Black men, and Black people, are sequestered on one set path, with little chance to change course for improvement. Utilizing a mix of alliteration, parataxis, enjambment, and hazy imagery, Brooks invokes the blues to draw her people together in solidarity and to reflect on rebellion against authority.

Using strong alliteration and parataxis (placing clauses or phrases together without connecting words) to both release the rampant energy that is building within the described content that she witnesses and to tell the audience that every word on the page is equally important as the other. She keeps a rigid form with three syllables per line as well as consistent alliteration of consonant sounds:

“Left School. We
 Lurk Late. We
 Strike straight. We
 Sing sin.” (2-5)

Brooks expresses the profundity of the patterns and behaviors these young men are routinely following — staying out late, participating in petty crime, getting lost in the sprawls of the urban landscape. Her alliteration contributes to the overall rhythm of the poem, which is steady, yet soft and understated. Further, they “Jazz June,” meaning they chase the spontaneity and lightheartedness of freedom, but the sobering reality arrives soon in the last lines. The poet and the subject both know they will “die soon” either in spirit or in literal terms (7-8).

Brooks also relays this same message through enjambment to demonstrate the continuity of these behaviors. Although she writes complete sentences in an active voice, with the subject preceding the verb, ironically, Brooks places the subject at the end of every line (except for line 8), giving an illusion of passivity, suggesting that the men who are following the behaviors have no choice but to keep repeating patterns. By placing the verb at the beginning of the line and the subject/pronoun “we” at the end, Brooks demonstrates the idea, that collectively, the men will face sorrow, but only after they enjoy the revelries first. These notions, coupled with the dark imagery of shadows, booze, death and midnight hours, transforms “We Real Cool” into an entire anthem for a generation of people struggling to rise above their subordination.

Although neither of “We Real Cool” nor “kitchenette building” is about Black women specifically, Brooks continues to act as a primary voice for her people, whom she feels responsible for. Rather than try to form a competing worldview that describes her community differently, she “points out common themes and concerns” (Collins 351) that every one, within

and outside her community, is beginning to notice and feel. She begins the unique process of rearticulating oppression into poetry and song so that other bodies of people (men, white people, and other groups of color) will understand or at the very least, acknowledge. By choosing her own poetic mode that keeps a rigid form, she balances her work between her lived experience as a Black individual and a woman, giving her the necessary tools to become a mediator between many groups of people (Collins 351). She chooses her own poetic form, diction, reflections of lived-experience and uses her culture's customs as a basis for her art; at once, she differentiates herself as the activist for Black mothers and their sons and daughters. This poem ultimately protests the breakdown of the familial unit, the rise of violent crime, and the painful realization that her community is being pulled into further disarray due to the lack of change within the racial atmosphere of the 1960s.

Reaching a crescendo of pain and indignation, Brooks' poem "RIOT"¹² serves as a powerful response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 and the riots in Chicago that followed. At the top of the poem she quotes King, "a riot is the language of the unheard," illustrating both her anger and her sorrow. This work is written in three parts, sectioning off contemplative storylines that ponder Black experience and an alternate society in which things could be different. The poet contrasts religious tones with mythological images, music with clanging guns, and peace with death, in order to reframe ideas that surround rioting and to provide a fresher perspective.

¹² For full poem, see Appendix C.

In the first portion, Brooks ironically blasts anti-black¹³ sentiments through a fictional character who, in her eyes, justifiably dies in the middle of a riot. She sets the scene with a white fictional character named “John Cabot,” who is characterized by his English heritage and resounding prejudicial thoughts and feelings. She references his “Wycliffe” lineage and “golden hair,” describing how he almost forgets his identity because he realizes that Black people are protesting nearby and are moving closer to him (1-2). At once, the character is overcome with anti-black sentiments:

because the Poor were sweaty and unpretty...
 and they were coming toward him in rough ranks.
 In seas. In windsweep. They were black and loud.
 And not detainable. And not discreet. (11, 13 - 15)

The poet includes these specific descriptions to show what kind of behaviors the white collective would prefer from Black people: meek, docile, and quiet. In *White Fragility*, DiAngelo argues that “anti-blackness is foundational to our very identities as white people” and that “whiteness has always predicated itself on blackness” (91). This same idea appears in John Cabot’s reaction to the protest in the poem; the Black people in John Cabot’s world are behaving outside of what he expects, therefore, his identity as a white person is being threatened and challenged. This change in behavior causes the man unadulterated fear because he has lost pseudo control over his surroundings. As the group moves closer to him, John Cabot cries, “Gross. Gross,” and begs, “Don’t let It touch me! / the blackness! / Lord!” (16, 19). Nonetheless, Brooks is resolved toward poetic justice; she allows the man to be swallowed by the riot, and he dies “down in the smoke

¹³ The term *anti-blackness* describes the attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions that denounce and degrade Black people. It refers to the societal, legal, and personal attacks toward people who are specifically Black, rather than just toward people of color. Using the term *anti-blackness* can be a more specific way to help identify racist actions and attitudes taken toward the Black community.

and fire” (28). Although this first segment of the poem is angry, Brooks wants white readers to finally listen to people of color and face the dangerous fear that anti-blackness creates and perpetuates, which is fundamentally “rooted in misinformation, fables, perversions, projections, and lies” (DiAngelo 94). Brooks wants the white collective to reconcile and put away their false ideas of blackness, and although she creates a violent scene that depicts a bystander’s death, she does so in order to show that as long as harmful, prejudicial ideas continue to materialize, there will be no justice or peace for either group of people.

The second section of the poem describes the height and arc of the infamous riots in Chicago,¹⁴ in which there were casualties, ruined infrastructure, and lost children. To cast a hopeful light on the wreckage, she begins the section with an image of a mythological Phoenix, rising from the ashes of ruin. Here, Brooks compares the Black community to a Phoenix, while the riot acts as the necessary purification process in which Black people, and Chicago as a whole, return rebirthed with stronger wings. To put the situation in a realistic focus, Brooks adds snippets that resemble journalistic headlines:

GUARD HERE. GUNS LOADED”

Nine die, Sun-Times will tell

will tell too

in small, black-bordered oblongs “Rumor?

check it at 744-411. (78, 103-106)

¹⁴ According to a blog post from *Black Past*, an online reference center, following Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination on April 4, 1968, riots and protests erupted nationwide. In Chicago, these riots often turned deadly and were “characterized with looting, arson, and violence” (Brammah).

These lines show the level of social frenzy occurring. As the riot continues and eventually fizzles to silence, she imagines reconciliation and understanding from the oppressor, even if the oppressor chooses to feign ignorance,

“But WHY do These People offend themselves?” say they

who say also “It’s time.

It’s time to help

These People. (122-125)

Here, I believe Brooks acknowledges white fragility at its most basic core; as DiAngelo argues, white people will do anything to avoid a conversation on race or take responsibility for their actions that have caused such fervent displays of grief and anger. In line 122, the white collective feigns ignorance instead of owning or acknowledging their cruelty, enforcing a common “pillar of white fragility: the refusal to know” (DiAngelo 50). The poet shows in one line how white people typically refuse to understand why the Black community protests or riots. Instead of making amends, many white people will deflect accusation and comfortably argue that Black people create their own problems and choose their own peril. This experience is incredibly familiar to people of color, and many would argue, nothing but expected behavior. Likewise, Brooks chooses to conclude this section with “the dust, as they say, settled” (132). As a Black woman, she is not writing to convey that the events are forgiven or justified, she is sardonically commenting on the realities that people of color endure. Although she chooses to drop the subject, Brooks does not choose silence to appease or sooth white people. In this instance, the poet is relying on her lived-experience and wisdom as a Black woman who has repeatedly witnessed the danger of white people’s avoidance. In order to limit any further provocations from the white collective and protect her own people, she chooses this response so that her

community within the poem will have the slightest chance to move forward and begin again. This response is not only poetic, it is symbolic of a lived-reality that continues today.

Brooks continued to write prolifically for the rest of her life. Surrounded by her friends and family, she passed away in her home in 2000 at the age of 83. Her words reflect a lifetime of political activism, and her poetry continues to inspire generations. Although she is angry, her canon isn't characterized with overzealous anger. Her cannon flows over the rocky horror of centuries-long hatred and horror. With twists of mythology, urban realities, and evolving prosody, her work uplifts and changes the stereotypes of the day and continues to challenge the twenty-first century. She is not a poet against anyone, but rather for everyone, especially those who have been marginalized. She is a figure that has sparked Black Feminist Thought to life, enabling intersectional feminism to come alive. For Black individuals, Black women, and Black children, she writes to expand the narrative so that their futures can expand, too.

Maya Angelou: Articulating Oppression through Memory and Grit

Maya Angelou, throughout the course of her life, became an acclaimed writer, poet, and social activist, and worked extensively to undercut injustice through the power of language. Angelou is a highly decorated individual, but the most prestigious awards include appearing as the first Black woman on a U.S. quarter; receiving the Medal of Freedom (the highest civilian honor), bestowed upon her by then President Barack Obama in 2010; and the National Medal of Arts, awarded by then President Bill Clinton in 2000. Angelou worked alongside Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, entered the Harlem Writers Guild, and claimed expatriate status for her time spent in Cairo and Ghana working as a freelance writer for the *African Review*. She also served as the Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University and earned

over fifty honorary degrees throughout her time as an educator (“Maya Angelou”). She was a woman who was a jack of many trades and eventually a master in her own profession. She worked as a waitress, a dancer, an actress, a mechanic, a cook, a singer, wearing many more hats before her reputation as a renowned writer was established.

However, before her life had truly begun, and before she experienced the rewarding fruit of her labor, Angelou was stamped with hardship at an incredibly young age. Born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1928, as Marguerite Annie Johnson, she and her older brother would eventually be placed to live with their grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, following their parent’s divorce. There, her life would be impacted forever. At the age of seven years old, Angelou was sexually abused and raped by her mother’s boyfriend. While he was charged for the offense, he was jailed for only one day and let go (“Maya Angelou”). After his release, Angelou’s uncles found and murdered him. As a child, she felt responsible for his death and became mute for five years. She did not want to be the center of any more violence and tried to make herself become invisible. It was only with the help of her eighth grade teacher that she spoke again, truly discovering her passion for literature and her love of storytelling. This experience, among others, influenced and solidified her reputation as a writer who persevered under extreme duress. From these moments on, she would read widely to be influenced by many writers, from Langston Hughes to W.E.B. Du Bois, and other traditional English writers like Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. She graduated from high school in California, gave birth to her son soon after, and spent many years working to heal both her mental and emotional states through language, becoming an outspoken advocate for Black women and Black people as a whole.

Over the course of Angelou's lifetime, she wrote six autobiographies, several children's books, two cookbooks, four works describing her travels abroad, and published eleven poetry collections with major publisher Random House, under the guidance of Robert Loomis ("Caged

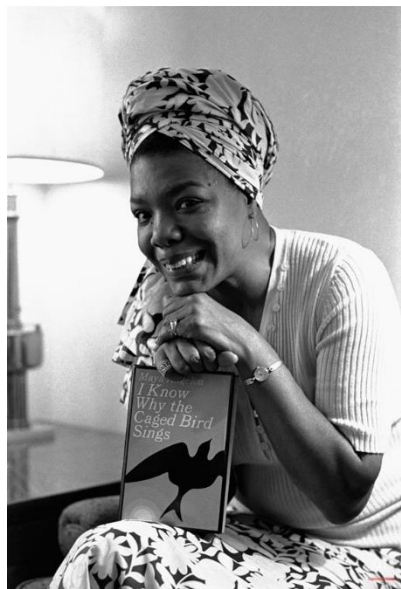


Photo: Maya Angelou poses with her autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* ("Maya Angelou").

Bird Legacy").¹⁵ Not only did she write about what she saw, but

she also wrote about how she, as an individual person and a

Black woman, felt during a time of overwhelming strife. She

worked largely as a memoirist, as most of her works reflected

her thoughts, experiences, and personal revelations, inspiring

many feminists to do the same within their writings and

artwork. Leaning into intersectional feminism, Angelou worked

to bring the reader and the work together so that they might

share the same sphere of understanding. She broke down

several barriers in order to bring the work at hand and the

reader closer, to create companionship between the two, so that

the reader will empathize with both the written subject and the

real-life subject. This connection is evident throughout Angelou's most famous work, her

autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), which informs several of her

later poems such as "Still I Rise" (1978), "Phenomenal Woman" (1978), and "Caged Bird"

(1983). I will focus on these later three selections to exhibit how the writer, through the use of

repetition, a defiant tone, pastoral imagery, and free verse, speaks for Black women in a new way

that embraces individual ownership, sensuality, power, and possibility. From Brooks'

community-based poetry, Angelou articulates Black women's oppression specifically using clear

¹⁵ Robert Loomis published all of Maya Angelou's works. The pair were lifelong friends.

and defined language. She moves away from decorated poetic form and style, and away from collectivist poetry, in order to shine a clear spotlight on Black women and the struggles they uniquely face.

In both poems, “Still I Rise”¹⁶ and “Phenomenal Woman,”¹⁷ Angelou uses repetition to boldly put forth her sense of self-identity and volition. The speaker is done hiding her strength and beauty and chooses to push back against those who would silence her voice. In line with Black Feminist Thought, Angelou’s poetry “goes far beyond demonstrating that black women can produce independent, specialized knowledge” and encourages a “collective identity by offering black women a different view of themselves and their world than that offered by the established social order” (Collins 341). Throughout “Still I Rise,” the poet maintains a confident attitude of determination, repeating the phrase “I’ll rise” ten times:

You may shoot me with your words,
 You may cut me with your eyes,
 You may kill me with your hatefulness,
 But still, like air, I’ll rise. (21-24)

Angelou states bluntly that no matter what comes her way, she will continue to hold onto her true self, not letting any obstacle stand in the way. This same sentiment is reflected in “Phenomenal Woman,” with an added flair of sensuality and passion. The poet acknowledges that her appearance is different, not “cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size” (2). Instead, her differences are reflected as exceptional and extraordinary, not only through her listed features,

¹⁶ For full poem, see Appendix D.

¹⁷ For full poem, see Appendix E.

but through the way the poet uses the personal possessive pronoun “my” to show complete ownership. The poet tells that her secret – the answer to her beauty – lies

in the reach of my arms,
The span of my hips,
The stride of my step,
The curl of my lips. (6-9)

Using “my” to own her body’s features demonstrates that Angelou is not afraid to take up space in a world that is dominated by white people, men, or other dominant hegemonies of power. She is learning to enjoy her own femininity, starting with her unique body:

It’s in the arch of my back,
The sun of my smile,
The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style. (38-41)

Angelou uses “Phenomenal Woman” to encourage other Black women to take up space too. Instead of hiding her mind and body, she shares her beauty with the world, even if it is not what society’s standards dictate. Similarly to Brooks and Lorde, Angelou boldly owns her identity. Each poet uses their unique identity as a Black women to show different aspects of attraction and intelligence to show the limitless power of Black joy. Their emotionally honest poems encourage other Black women to embrace their differences, rather than hide away or wish that they were created differently. Throughout the course of this poem, Angelou repeats the refrain “I’m a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That’s me” four times (10-13). This technique ultimately aids Angelou in insisting that her form, her ideas, and her essence as an individual, are worthy of praise, recognition, and understanding.

Furthermore, to enforce the message that Black women should embrace their differences and be unapologetically bold, both poems call attention to the speaker's body language. Both poems state clearly that the individual will no longer bow her head, nor will she be found cowering, avoiding eye-contact, or keeping quiet. This repetition surrounding body language not only works to defy society's expectations of Black women, but to redefine and reshape those expectations so that these women can protect their own agency. Toward the end of "Phenomenal Woman," Angelou concludes with "now you understand / Just why my head's not bowed" (45-46) to indicate that the shift in behavior from subservience to assertion is felt by both onlookers and the individual. Given Angelou's personal experience of having her bodily autonomy violated at an early age, Angelou's inclusion of these descriptions are powerful, not only because they show a deep, personal well of strength and confidence, but because historically, Black women have had their bodily autonomy repeatedly stripped from them in the forms of rape, unwanted pregnancies,¹⁸ low access to healthcare, and the lack of safe contraceptives.

Another example of assertion found within Angelou's poetry is the use of the rhetorical question as a poetic device within "Still I Rise." She uses several rhetorical questions to reinforce her position as an independent woman, capable of not only rising above her struggles but exceeding beyond society's, specifically, the white collective's expectations. She poses several questions to the reader in a scathing tone: "Did you want to see me broken? / Bowed head and lowered eyes? (13-14) and "Does my haughtiness offend you?" (17). Asking rhetorically, the speaker does not need nor want the reader to respond or try to answer. Angelou's questions are meant to state the obvious and meant to draw new boundaries in the sand; these boundaries

¹⁸ According to the 2022 United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) report, half of all women and girls report that their pregnancies are not deliberately chosen, which reflects a huge disparity within the progression of gender rights and gender equality.

protect the speaker in ways that are necessary to the poet's survival as an individual being.

Angelou is no longer letting others define who she is, who she loves, how she looks, or how she acts – she is rising above every infringement to claim that she is now and forevermore her own entity. Angelou, in this poem, is “leaving behind nights of terror and fear,” rising “into a daybreak that's wondrously clear” (35, 37). This poem is a subtle invocation of Brooks' “kitchenette building.” Angelou writes:

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise. (40-43)

In this beautiful metaphorical moment, Angelou announces that she is the embodiment of generational dreams. As a Black woman in the 1970s, she had just gained the ability to vote¹⁹ and to take legal action against discrimination. Although she had experienced a wealth of trauma and pain, she still somehow managed to find grace and wonder within these last lines.

Abandoning the collective pronoun “we” that Brooks used, she takes full ownership of the individual dream, affirming the notions that yes, Black people can dream beyond the realities of immediate needs, and now, significantly, so can Black women. With the new advances in legislation, Angelou and many other Black women were ready to be identified as their own, not just as a Black person or as a woman, but as powerful individuals who had intellect, prowess, and wisdom.

¹⁹ While white women were granted their right to vote in 1920 with the 19th Amendment, Black women gained the right to vote in 1965 through the Voting Rights Act.

In a change of tone, but not theme, Angelou continues to use repetition and earthy imagery in “Caged Bird”²⁰ to convey that there is still work to be done in the trenches of racial equality. This poem reads like an old folk tale, presenting two contrasting images of a free bird and a caged bird, and unlike Brooks’ triumphant Phoenix that rises from the ashes of protests, Angelou sees her community with clipped wings and tied feet. Drawing upon the simplistic image of two birds in two different states, Angelou sends a clear message that despite the radical events of the 1960s, racism continues to harm people of color. Even though issues like segregation and discrimination were criminalized through legislation, Angelou reminds readers that “racism can still exist because it is highly adaptive” (DiAngelo 40). Through issues like mass incarceration, workplace discrimination, gerrymandering, and lack of representation in popular forms of media, the institution of racism continues to evolve, perpetuating white fragility “as the *sociology of dominance*: an outcome of white people’s socialization into white supremacy” (DiAngelo 113). In this poem, Angelou envisions the white collective as the free bird who “dips his wing / in the orange sun rays / and dares to claim the sky” depicting the lack of racial boundaries white people face in their everyday lives (5-7). Conversely, the caged bird

stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage. (8-11)

These two images repeat throughout the poem, one wrapped up in the dreams of possibility, and the other lamenting over the lack of possibility. From Angelou’s perspective, white people have the ability to think of future endeavors, to have wild ambitions. This poem reflects the dream

²⁰ For full poem, see Appendix F.

dilemma that Brooks and Hughes mention; the writer is troubled because her people still cannot afford to truly dream. Whereas white people are free from racial anxiety and robustly conquer the “trade winds” (24), the caged bird, Angelou’s people, “sings / with a fearful trill / of things unknown” (15 – 17). Her people long to feel and experience what other people do, they long to be rid of their chains and move away from “the grave of dreams” (27). The writer repeats these lines several times throughout the poem, leaning into a musical quality of rhythm that ultimately helps transform this poem into a song of freedom, rather than just a statement. The “Caged Bird” is a passionate cry for liberty that gives voice to an authentic Black woman’s perspective, one that is not only mutually shared by other women and men, but one that is affirmed by many other writers, poets, musicians, and artists.

Angelou’s poetry speaks volumes to many readers for the sheer genuineness it presents. As a writer and artist, she is not concerned with fitting into a certain stereotype or covering up her true emotions. She shows all of herself, body, mind, and soul, unlatching and setting free a plethora of unique experiences that Black women have historically and metaphorically shared together. From this succinct articulation of her personal oppression, her standpoint is validated by others and consequently lifted up into recognition, as evident from her many awards and honors. Moreover, her work has not only influenced other writers like Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and Jesmyn Ward, but it has also contributed greatly to the modern #MeToo movement in more ways than one.²¹ Through speaking on her memories of abuse and trauma, but also of success and triumph, her work, like Brooks’, goes beyond simple recollection and presses into

²¹ The #MeToo movement originated in the fourth wave feminist movement. It is a social movement that has empowered survivors of sexual abuse and harassment to talk about their experiences publicly, giving many victims closure, healing, and justice.

readers a deep impression of personal and public history, emotion, grit, and ultimately the wisdom of many generations who have persisted.

Audre Lorde: Articulating Oppression through Honest Free Verse

Audre Lorde, a native New Yorker, was born in 1934 and grew up in Harlem. She was a child of Caribbean immigrants, and she, like many other famed writers, loved poetry and literature at an early age. As a child, she would recite poems constantly, memorizing rhyme schemes, rhythms, and refrains. When others would speak to her, she would respond in poetry. Soon, she found that her voice needed its own poetry, and so she began to write prolifically. Her first poem was published in an edition of *Seventeen*, after her catholic high school deemed it to be inappropriate for the school journal. As a teenager, she attended multiple writing workshops hosted by the Harlem Writers Guild, but later reported that she felt like an outsider at those meetings because of her sexual orientation (“Audre Lorde”). Nevertheless, she continued to write. After she graduated high school, she studied abroad as an undergrad student at the National University of Mexico, where she experienced an intense revitalization and realization that she was a poet, a queer woman, and

ultimately, a political artist. After this time spent away from her home, she returned to New York City and earned her master’s degree in library sciences from Columbia University. She began to split her time between campus and Greenwich Village, a

historical neighborhood that is known for its positivist gay culture. During these early years in the 1960’s she found her place within several social movements: Women’s Liberation, Gay

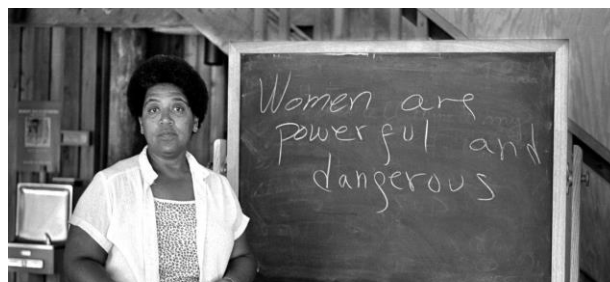


Photo: Audre Lorde stands in front of a white-board that reads “Women are powerful and dangerous (Alexander).

Liberation, and the Civil Rights Movement. From then on, she committed to a life of intellect (“Audre Lorde”). She worked as a librarian in Mount Vernon, New York and as a professor at multiple colleges, and stood as an educator bound on giving Black people, specifically Black feminists, a space to speak, mobilize, and to be heard. By 1968, she penned her first poetry collection *The First Cities* (1968), with others soon following: *Cables to Rage* (1970), *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973), *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974), *Between Our Selves* (1976), *The Black Unicorn* (1978) and several more. In conjunction with other feminists, such as Barbara Smith and Cherríe Moraga, Lorde co-founded the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press in 1981. This press worked to advance Black and queer writings and to create a literary space for writers who found themselves lodged in the same intersectional spaces as Lorde. This grassroots organization also worked closely with other feminist groups such as the National Black Feminist Organization²² and the Combahee River Collective (Wada).²³ Notably, Lorde was not only concerned with American women. Growing up with Caribbean parents, she knew first hand that women around the world needed assistance. In 1984, Lorde traveled to Berlin, working as a professor at the Free University of Berlin, where she helped build and mobilize the Afro-German movement, a social liberation group that elevated the status of Black German women and men. Through Lorde’s contributions to these organizations and groups, she furthered the reach of intersectional feminism, demonstrating fiercely through her writing that there was evidence of interlocking systems of oppression fighting against many individuals. She used language to show ways that people can grow together, connect, and recognize that

²² The National Black Feminist Organization was found in 1973 and included prominent Black feminist like Michele Wallace, Faith Ringgold, Doris Wright and others. The organization focused on specific barriers Black women faced within the Civil Rights and Women’s Liberation movement. The organization disbanded in 1976 (Wada).

²³ The Combahee River Collective was a socialist organization in Boston that mobilized from 1974-1980 in an effort to bring specific attention to Black lesbians and feminists (Wada).

humanity's cultural, ethnic, and racial differences can be jointly used to create meaningful life for more than just one dominant group of people.

During the most active and brilliant time of her career, Lorde was diagnosed with breast cancer. Even then, Lorde, determined and fiery hearted, used this calamity in her life to advocate for women. She wrote *The Cancer Journals* (1980), a prose piece that documented her experience undergoing surgery, living with a mastectomy, and the pain she endured daily. Her recount of illness is striking, not only because she was forced to face death at too early an age, but because she used this work to both call and divert attention. On one hand, she calls attention to herself as a woman suffering and in need of relief, and on the other hand, she diverts the attention away from her and onto other women who have needlessly suffered the same experience in silence. Lorde's poetry, at its best, is a cry for herself and the outsiders. Her writing is intended for the ones who do not fit stereotypes, who find themselves living in constant fear, and for those who must carve out their own space instead of finding it within pre-established community. Unlike Brooks, Lorde does not concentrate her poetry on the themes of community, but rather focuses on the individual's inner world to reveal disparities. She uses her work as an emotional catharsis and documents how many social groups have isolated, overlooked, or ignored individual differences. While her work is similar to Angelou's in that they both prioritize the individual, Lorde's work is characterized with zealousness. Lorde's poetry is blunt, angry, and abandons grace in true revolutionary style. Through her poems "Who Said It Was Simple" (1973), "Power" (1976), and "A Litany for Survival" (1978), Lorde exemplifies what it means to be an outsider, and shows the audience that labels will not deter her from speaking out and delivering her truth. She was an angry feminist who grew tired of articulating and rearticulating oppression because she experienced oppression on multiple fronts.

Lorde quit pandering to modes of social control, etiquette, and diplomacy, and threw all of her might into the lines she wrote. This sentiment can be felt through all three poems, and although they are incredibly gritty and raw, they still tenderly uplift many groups of marginalized people through packed lines of emotional expression, the use stream of consciousness, and the free verse form.

Lorde's "Who Said It Was Simple,"²⁴ is a free verse poem that utilizes a stream of consciousness style to convey the sense of dread that the speaker feels when observing two different groups of people protesting for the same liberties. By breaking from conventional form, Lorde suggests that the old forms and old ways of thinking about oppression are no longer reliable. Immediately, readers know the speaker is angry and close to the verge of crumbling, as Lorde writes: "There are so many roots to the tree of anger / ... sometimes the branches shatter / before they bear" (1-3). This depiction of a living thing fracturing under the weight of intangible indignation and rage sets the tone for the rest of the poem and also acts as a metaphor for Lorde's inner emotional state. Simultaneously, Lorde's poem contains two spaces, one being her own mind and thoughts, and the other being the public restaurant. The speaker, presumably Lorde herself, is sitting in the restaurant and witnesses two microaggressions in a matter of seconds.²⁵ While listening to white people complain and criticize their household maids (women from a different background than they) as they prepare to march in protest for women's rights, Lorde observes an "almost white counterman" ignore the Black man waiting to be served, so that he can serve the white women first (8-9). This doesn't sit well with Lorde, because she understands the power of division, prejudice, and resentment, and the ways that these emotions work against

²⁴ For full poem, see Appendix G.

²⁵ Microaggressions are any act, statement, or incident that indirectly or subtly translates as an act of discrimination against individuals in a marginalized or minority group.

a collective, corporeal movement. In her essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” she states that “it is not those differences between us that are separating us... but rather our refusal to recognize those differences” (Lorde 285). Lorde wishes that the white women at the counter would stop and realize three facts: one, they are all women who want the same result (to be treated equally and fairly), secondly, these differences in cultural or ethnic backgrounds can be used to strengthen the Women’s Liberation movement as a whole, and lastly, an individual’s mental perceptions on groups of people have real life consequences. Another way this written observation reflects a stream of conscious style is the use of little punctuation, “the ladies neither notice nor reject / the slighter pleasures of their slavery.” (10 – 11). The period at the end of slavery is meant to illustrate where Lorde herself pauses in real life and turns inward, away from the bustling restaurant. As she soaks in the observations and mentally reflects on what this moment in time means for her future, she is overcome with depressive feelings. She is not only a child of immigrant parents, she is also a Black, lesbian, artist, poet, out-spoken single-mother. Lorde feels fragmented, as she is not permitted by her society to be wholly herself in one identity, at all times. Rather, she must pick and choose which identity to present, depending on what setting she’s in and what people are present in that environment. Ultimately, Lorde struggles to see where she will fit in a Women’s Liberation movement that cannot find comradery through differences such as race or class:

But 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. (12-18)

Lorde does not wish for white people, or anybody, to be color-blind or simply see past other's differences, but it does cause her to ponder the timing of her own liberation and which part of herself will be celebrated the most, if at all. The writer also implores women to "root out internalized patterns of oppression within [themselves] ... to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change" (Lorde, "Age, Race" 290). This is no easy feat, for any person.

However, Lorde uses her personal experience as an outsider to show that, while eliminating personal bias and taking accountability for one's own prejudicial actions is not easy or simple, it can and must be done, so that people like her can live without constant fear of abandonment or exile.

Many activists are characterized by their zeal, and Lorde is no different. Her poem "Power,"²⁶ is an emotional response to an on-duty, undercover police officer murdering a ten-year-old Black boy, Clifford Grover, on a spring day in Queens, New York. Her scornful free verse poem unpacks the intensely traumatic emotions of sorrow and pain that Black people feel when police brutality is rampant and justice is scarce. "Power" unleashes a sense of catharsis for Lorde and many readers, and truly symbolizes the meaning of Lorde's statement "poetry is not a luxury" (Lorde, "Poetry" 4). In the first four lines, Lorde claims there's a difference between rhetoric and poetry, the separation is between "being ready to kill / yourself / instead of your children," insisting that writing poetry is a self-sacrificial act, not something of ease or peace (2-4). As the poet tries to make sense of this horrifying act, she is haunted by dreams of "a dead child dragging his shattered black / face off the edge of my sleep" (6-7). Like Brooks and

²⁶ For full poem, see Appendix H.

Angelou, Lorde struggles to dream, and not just of future liberty, but of present survival, especially for her child. As she tries to make sense of this evil, she continues to imagine that the child's blood and bones can still be used for power, but the "whiteness" she is surrounded by swallows up his body, leaving her in a homogenous desert. This poem is deeply characterized with the overwhelming emotions of desperation and anguish. Lorde, along with the rest of the Black community both in America and abroad, mourn for the loss of an innocent child. As they witness another instance of institutional racism, Lorde voices what many cannot: "I am lost / without imagery or magic / trying to make power out of hatred and destruction" (16-18). This event sparked protests in Jamaica, a neighborhood in Queens, which lasted for days, resulting in many arrests and injuries. At the trial of the officer, tapes prove that he murdered the child simply because he was Black. Lorde includes this, too:

This policeman said in his own defense
 'I didn't notice the size nor nothing else
 only the color'. And
 there are tapes to prove that, too. (25-28)

These lines recount plain injustice and evil. Both the reader and the poet are aware that this is an insidious example of pure hatred because the murder was intentional, not accidental. One year after this incident, after the officer went on trial, he was acquitted by a jury of eleven white men and one Black woman. Lorde describes the Black woman's compliance bluntly,

they had dragged her 4'10 Black Woman's frame
 over the hot coals
 of four centuries of white male approval
 until she let go. (35-39)

Lorde continues, explaining that her grief is untouchable and can hardly be reconciled. She tries in earnest to think of the differences between poetry and rhetoric, and she fears that even her poetry, the tools that have been most useful in articulating and defining her oppression, is useless. Lorde is hopeless in this moment of time, and in her hopelessness, she envisions vengeance in a reverse situation, where an elderly white woman is raped out of hatred, and no justice happens, just a “greek chorus... singing in $\frac{3}{4}$ time / ‘Poor thing’” (54-55). The poet holds no more reservations about trying to articulate the misery that the white collective has caused the Black community. She is finished trying to teach her oppressors the nature of her oppression. Her writing breaks with Collins’ statement that “academicians who persist in trying to rearticulate a black woman’s standpoint also face potential rejection of their knowledge claims” (Collins 342). Lorde is not concerned with satisfying white male-dominated knowledge claims. She is fiercely using her poetry to catch the reader’s attention, both white and Black, even if she risks rejection by either communities. Lorde has already experienced personal rejection due to the nature of her identity. She knows that her full acceptance in any one community is unlikely, so she uses that to her advantage as she writes lines that scandalize and shock her readers. In this sense, Lorde feels as if she has nothing to lose, and her writing reflects that radical, urgent mood.

Today, this poem is important for white readers in two ways: first, it helps white readers understand the pain Black people feel when an innocent dies or is needlessly harassed, for white readers experience a deep shock when the white woman in the poem is abused for no plausible reason, too. Secondly, this poem motivates white readers to do their own research into the history of racism. DiAngelo argues that knowing this research and background is central to combating white fragility: “not knowing or being sensitive to this history is another example of white centrality, individualism, and lack of racial humility” (133). “Power” is one of Lorde’s most

controversial poems, but it has plenty reason to motivate readers and enlighten them on the depth of pain and emotion that is at stake if the state of racial equality does not change.

Lorde continues her discussion of emotional damage through her poem “A Litany for Survival.”²⁷ In this piece, she explores the way fear impacts the individual and the collective, and how that fear limits the ability to dream, change, and prosper. The first section is a picture of isolation for those who identify with multiple groups “crucial and alone / for those of us who cannot indulge / the passing dreams of choice” (3-5). These lines reflect Lorde herself, as a lesbian woman, who has not gained all of her rights, despite decades of protest and mobilization. Lorde, like many others, are frustrated that each identity an individual has must undergo some type of liberation. She wants this experience to pass so that she can finally rest without the weight of fear on her shoulders. Like Brooks and Angelou, and many others, she understands that dwelling in fear and letting it takeover one’s senses is dangerous, so she uses fear as a platform to speak instead. Like Brooks and Angelou, she has to put down her longing of a dream, not so that she will survive, but so her children have a chance to survive. Lorde boldly writes on the importance of speaking up against dominant thought as “it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive” (42-44). This sentiment is different from Brooks’ in that Lorde’s poem takes on an existential theme. Lorde does not place all of her faith in social movements to deliver her from oppression because she has witnessed a particular sense of exclusion from every social movement. This does not mean that she does not believe in the activism she performs, however it does mean that she knows her activism alone is not enough to fulfill her dreams of an inclusive society. This powerful realization resonates with many, and

²⁷ For full poem, see Appendix I.

ironically, this sense of futile thought continues to inspire others to keep trying today, in the feminist fourth wave movement.

Lorde's poetry has inspired many across the globe to march in protest for a better world, in which women, the disabled, the ill, other groups of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ community have equal access to the media, to equal employment opportunities, quality healthcare, and overall, fruitful lives. Through her intensely honest prose and poetry, the endeavor toward diversity and inclusion has taken giant leaps and bounds forward. Lorde died in 1992 from metastasized breast cancer. Her story is both beautiful and saddening because in her fifty-eight years, her work never ceased to inspire change and to motivate others to accept someone's difference. However, the mantle she carried and the legacy she created is carried by many others, and lives on, despite backlash.

CONCLUSION

Through mediums of organizing, speaking, protesting, and writing, change has come slowly, yet has clothed itself differently, depending on which group of women that is in question. Like Lorde writes "change means growth, and growth can be painful" but in struggling "together with those whom we define as different from ourselves," we can move forward to new modes of existence where patterns and behaviors change for the better (Lorde, "Age, Race" 291). Like many before, I argue confidently that the most powerful medium for change, no matter what change it is, is poetry. Feminist poets, not men in suits or policy-makers, are the political artists responsible for mass change. Specifically, Black Feminists worldwide have immortalized their stories through poetry because poetry is political by nature; through Black Feminist poetry, writers have gone beyond societal limitations to provide the necessary sinews to secure and bind lived experience to future freedom. Their poetry and art has carried revolutions and has inspired

continual metamorphoses, despite public pressure or status. These women, Brooks, Angelou, and Lorde, although incredibly different, actively sought change in their everyday lives through poetry and education. Through their continual and persistent articulation of varying forms of oppression, they have permanently prescribed future generations renewable resources that can be used to break and mend societal systems. These women – these political artists – remained truthfully and wonderfully themselves, despite pressures from a white-washed world.

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Appendices

Appendix A

“kitchenette building” (1945) by Gwendolyn Brooks

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong
Like “rent,” “feeding a wife,” “satisfying a man.”

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

Appendix B

“We Real Cool” (1963) by Gwendolyn Brooks

The Pool Players.

Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Appendix C

“RIOT” (1970) by Gwendolyn Brooks

A Poem in Three Parts

A riot is the language of the unheard.
—Martin Luther King, Jr.

John Cabot, out of Wilma, once a Wycliffe,
all whitebluerose below his golden hair,
wrapped richly in right linen and right wool,
almost forgot his Jaguar and Lake Bluff;
almost forgot Grandtully (which is The
Best Thing That Ever Happened To Scotch); almost
forgot the sculpture at the Richard Gray
and Distelheim; the kidney pie at Maxim’s,
the Grenadine de Boeuf at Maison Henri.

Because the “Negroes” were coming down the street.

Because the Poor were sweaty and unpretty
(not like Two Dainty Negroes in Winnetka)
and they were coming toward him in rough ranks.
In seas. In windsweep. They were black and loud.
And not detainable. And not discreet.

Gross. Gross. “Que tu es grossier!” John Cabot
itched instantly beneath the nourished white
that told his story of glory to the World.
“Don’t let It touch me! the blackness! Lord!” he
whispered to any handy angel in the sky.

But, in a thrilling announcement, on It drove
and breathed on him: and touched him. In that breath
the fume of pig foot, chitterling and cheap chili,
malign, mocked John. And, in terrific touch, old
averted doubt jerked forward decently,
cried, “Cabot! John! You are a desperate man,
and the desperate die expensively today.”

John Cabot went down in the smoke and fire
and broken glass and blood, and he cried “Lord!
Forgive these niggus that know not what they do.

THE THIRD SERMON ON THE WARPLAND

Phoenix

“In Egyptian mythology, a bird
which lived for five hundred
years and then consumed itself
in fire, rising renewed from the ashes.”
—webster

The earth is a beautiful place.
Watermirrors and things to be reflected.
Goldenrod across the little lagoon.

The Black Philosopher says
“Our chains are in the keep of the Keeper
in a labeled cabinet
on the second shelf by the cookies,
sonatas, the arabesques. . . .
There’s a rattle, sometimes.
You do not hear it who mind only
cookies and crunch them.
You do not hear the remarkable music—‘A
Death Song For You Before You Die.’
If you could hear it
you would make music too.
The blackblues.”

West Madison Street.
In “Jessie’s Kitchen”
nobody’s eating Jessie’s Perfect Food.
Crazy flowers
cry up across the sky, spreading
and hissing This is
it.

The young men run.

They will not steal Bing Crosby but will steal
Melvin Van Peebles who made Lillie
a thing of Zampoughi a thing of red wiggles and trebles
(and I know there are twenty wire stalks sticking out of her
head
as her underfed haunches jerk jazz.)

A clean riot is not one in which little rioters
 long-stomped, long-straddled, BEANLESS
 but knowing no Why
 go steal in hell
 a radio, sit to hear James Brown
 and Mingus, Young-Holt, Coleman, John on V.O.N.
 and sun themselves in Sin.

However, what
 is going on
 is going on.

Fire.
 That is their way of lighting candles in the darkness.
 A White Philosopher said
 ‘It is better to light one candle than curse the darkness.’
 These candles curse—
 inverting the deeps of the darkness.

GUARD HERE, GUNS LOADED.

The young men run.
 The children in ritual chatter
 scatter upon
 their Own and old geography.

The Law comes sirening across the town.

A woman is dead.
 Motherwoman.
 She lies among the boxes
 (that held the haughty hats, the Polish sausages)
 in newish, thorough, firm virginity
 as rich as fudge is if you’ve had five pieces.
 Not again shall she
 partake of steak
 on Christmas mornings, nor of nighttime
 chicken and wine at Val Gray Ward’s
 nor say
 of Mr. Beetley, Exit Jones, Junk Smith
 nor neat New-baby Williams (man-to-many)
 “He treat me right.”

That was a gut gal.

“We’ll do an us!” yells Yancey, a twittering twelve.
 “Instead of your deathintheafternoon,
 kill ’em, bull!
 kill ’em, bull!”

The Black Philosopher blears
 “I tell you, exhaustive black integrity
 would assure a blackless Amrica. . . .”

Nine die, Sun-Times will tell
 and will tell too
 in small black-bordered oblongs “Rumor? check it
 at 744-4111.”

A Poem to Peanut.
 “Cooooool!” purrs Peanut. Peanut is
 Richard—a Ranger and a gentleman.
 A Signature. A Herald. And a Span.
 This Peanut will not let his men explode.
 And Rico will not.
 Neither will Sengali.
 Nor Bop nor Jeff, Geronimo nor Lover.
 These merely peer and purr,
 and pass the Passion over.
 The Disciples stir
 and thousandfold confer
 with ranging Rangermen;
 mutual in their “Yeah!—
 this AIN’T all upinheah!”

“But WHY do These People offend themselves?” say they
 who say also “It’s time.
 It’s time to help
 These People.”

Lies are told and legends made.
 Phoenix rises unafraid.

The Black Philosopher will remember:
 “There they came to life and exulted,
 the hurt mute.

Then it was over.

The dust, as they say, settled.”

AN ASPECT OF LOVE, ALIVE IN THE ICE AND FIRE

LaBohem Brown

In a package of minutes there is this We.
 How beautiful.
 Merry foreigners in our morning,
 we laugh, we touch each other,
 are responsible props and posts.

A physical light is in the room.

Because the world is at the window
 we cannot wonder very long.

You rise. Although
 genial, you are in yourself again.
 I observe
 your direct and respectable stride.
 You are direct and self-accepting as a lion
 in Afrikan velvet. You are level, lean,
 remote.

There is a moment in Camaraderie
 when interruption is not to be understood.
 I cannot bear an interruption.
 This is the shining joy;
 the time of not-to-end.

On the street we smile.
 We go
 in different directions
 down the imperturbable street.

Appendix D

“Still I Rise” (1978) by Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history
 With your bitter, twisted lies,
 You may trod me in the very dirt
 But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
 Why are you beset with gloom?
 'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
 Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
 With the certainty of tides,
 Just like hopes springing high,
 Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
 Bowed head and lowered eyes?
 Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
 Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
 Don't you take it awful hard
 'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
 Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
 You may cut me with your eyes,
 You may kill me with your hatefulness,
 But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
 Does it come as a surprise
 That I dance like I've got diamonds
 At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
 I rise
 Up from a past that's rooted in pain
 I rise
 I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
 Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Appendix E

“Phenomenal Woman” (1978) by Maya Angelou

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
 I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
 But when I start to tell them,
 They think I'm telling lies.
 I say,
 It's in the reach of my arms,
 The span of my hips,
 The stride of my step,
 The curl of my lips.
 I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.
 Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

I walk into a room
 Just as cool as you please,
 And to a man,
 The fellows stand or
 Fall down on their knees.
 Then they swarm around me,
 A hive of honey bees.
 I say,
 It's the fire in my eyes,
 And the flash of my teeth,
 The swing in my waist,
 And the joy in my feet.
 I'm a woman
 Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,
 That's me.

Men themselves have wondered
 What they see in me.
 They try so much
 But they can't touch
 My inner mystery.
 When I try to show them,
 They say they still can't see.
 I say,
 It's in the arch of my back,
 The sun of my smile,

The ride of my breasts,
The grace of my style.
I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed.
I don't shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing,
It ought to make you proud.
I say,
It's in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,
the palm of my hand,
The need for my care.
'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me.

Appendix F

“Caged Bird” (1983) by Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird

sings of freedom.

Appendix G

“Who Said It Was Simple” (1973) by Audre Lorde

There are so many roots to the tree of anger
that sometimes the branches shatter
before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks
the women rally before they march
discussing the problematic girls
they hire to make them free.
An almost white counterman passes
a waiting brother to serve them first
and the ladies neither notice nor reject
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.
But 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.

Appendix H

“Power” (1976) by Audre Lorde

The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.

I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds
and a dead child dragging his shattered black
face off the edge of my sleep
blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders
is the only liquid for miles
and my stomach
churns at the imagined taste while
my mouth splits into dry lips
without loyalty or reason
thirsting for the wetness of his blood
as it sinks into the whiteness
of the desert where I am lost
without imagery or magic
trying to make power out of hatred and destruction
trying to heal my dying son with kisses
only the sun will bleach his bones quicker.

A policeman who shot down a ten year old in Queens
stood over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood
and a voice said “Die you little motherfucker” and
there are tapes to prove it. At his trial
this policeman said in his own defense
“I didn't notice the size nor nothing else
only the color”. And
there are tapes to prove that, too.

Today that 37 year old white man
with 13 years of police forcing
was set free
by eleven white men who said they were satisfied
justice had been done
and one Black Woman who said
“They convinced me” meaning
they had dragged her 4'10" black Woman's frame
over the hot coals
of four centuries of white male approval
until she let go

the first real power she ever had
and lined her own womb with cement
to make a graveyard for our children.

I have not been able to touch the destruction
within me.
But unless I learn to use
the difference between poetry and rhetoric
my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire
and one day I will take my teenaged plug
and connect it to the nearest socket
raping an 85 year old white woman
who is somebody's mother
and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed
a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time
“Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are.”

Appendix I

“A Litany for Survival” (1978) by Audre Lorde

For those of us who live at the shoreline
 standing upon the constant edges of decision
 crucial and alone
 for those of us who cannot indulge
 the passing dreams of choice
 who love in doorways coming and going
 in the hours between dawns
 looking inward and outward
 at once before and after
 seeking a now that can breed
 futures
 like bread in our children’s mouths
 so their dreams will not reflect
 the death of ours;

For those of us
 who were imprinted with fear
 like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
 learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk
 for by this weapon
 this illusion of some safety to be found
 the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
 For all of us
 this instant and this triumph
 We were never meant to survive.

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

we are still afraid

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