

**“The Transformation of Silence into Language”:  
The Modes of Polyphony in Audre Lorde’s**

***The Black Unicorn***

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**Abstract**

Audre Lorde (1934-1992) stands out as a challengingly controversial Afro-American feminist lesbian poet and socio-political activist who has been for long credited and highlighted for the ideological aspect of her poetry rather than its artistic value. She obviously figures, however, as a good model for the post-structuralist Third Wave Feminism in its diversity and multivocality. Her literary approach as informed by her socio-political and cultural contexts is mainly anchored in the polemics of race, class, and the various sex relations and the different, and sometimes opposed, value judgments attached to them. The objective of the current study is mainly to cast new lights on and assess a significant artistic aspect of her poetry in its operation within the context of recent developments in literary theory and cultural studies. Polyphony thrusts itself, in this connection, as an instrumental weapon for an artist engaged in an incessant presentation of the conflicting dialogue between a constellation of vulnerable minority voices and the Western phallo-centric heterosexual tradition. M. Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony projected itself as a theoretical framework within which Lorde’s polyphonic inclination works. The study focused on her oft-cited volume *The Black Unicorn* in which main voices are recurrently heard, or overheard. In a highly Bakhtinian sense, the black, the feminist, and the lesbian/erotic voices push forward in a variety of ways as discourses of secondary culture(s) worthy of scrutiny concerning their struggle against, or contiguity with, the centrally hegemonic discourse. The study reaches a number of findings and observations concerning Lorde’s convergence on or divergence from the other practitioners of similar interests and sympathies. Her presentation of the erotic in her poetry as differently from the manner of representation in her prose writings is significantly alluded to. The study rounds up with the recommendation that the working of ideology into artistry in Lorde’s poetic world be deliberately considered for the attainment of a proper assessment of her as a poet.

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حديث الصمت:  
منظورات تعددية الأصوات في ديوان وحيد القرن الأسود لأودر لورد

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ملخص

أودر لورد (1934-1992) شاعرة زنجية أمريكية و ناشطة اجتماعية و سياسية تتكى شهرتها في مجال الأدب علي مواقفها الجريئة من القضايا العرقية و التسوية لاسيما ما يتصل مباشرة بخبراتها المثلية و هو ما جعلها دوماً كاتبة مثيرة للجدل. بيد انه من اللافت للانتباه أن مجمل الآراء النقدية المرتبطة بشعرها قد بنيت في المقام الأول علي القيمة الأيديولوجية و لم تلتفت كثيراً إلي الجانب الفني و الشكلي لذلك الشعر. و من ثم فقد تراءى للباحث محاولة تسليط الضوء علي الجانب الفني لشعر أودر لورد و علاقته الوثيقة بتعدد الانتماءات و الهويات للشاعرة نفسها كما يتجلي ذلك بوضوح في ديوانها المحوري وحيد القرن الأسود. و قد برز في هذا المقام اهتمام لورد بتعدد الأصوات الإنطولوجية في شعرها سواء كان ذلك عن قصد منها أو بشكل عفوي. و من هنا أصبحت الإشارة لميخائيل باختين ناقد البنيوية و ما بعد البنيوية الروسي واجبة باعتباره أهم المنظرين للمصطلح النقدي كما هو مستخدم في الدراسة الحالية. و قد أبرزت الدراسة تكرار تسليط الضوء علي مجموعه أساسية للأصوات العرقية و المجتمعية و التي قد تتجلي فرادي داخل الفقرات الشعرية (intra-/interlinearly & intrastrophically) أو تتألف و تتفاعل سوياً بين الفقرات بداخل القصيدة الواحدة (intratextually & interstrophically) أو فيما بين نصوص الديوان نفسه أو مع أصوات إنطولوجية خارج النص (intertextually). و أبرز الأصوات التي لا يخطئها القارئ في هذا السياق هي: الصوت المرتبط بالإنسان الأسود و الصوت النسائي و الصوت المتصل بالجماعات المثلية و تقف كلها في جانب لتكون ضرب من ضروب الثقافة الثانوية في تضادها مع صوت الثقافة المهيمنة ألا و هي الثقافة الأبوية الذكرية. و قد خلصت الدراسة إلي توصية أساسية مفادها الاهتمام بأسلوب أودر لورد بصياغة الأيديولوجية فنياً حتى يمكن الحكم عليها كشاعرة بصورة أدق و أشمل.

### “The Transformation of Silence into Language”

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“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 do what must be done” (Audre Lorde, “Above the Wind,” An Interview with Charles Rowell, 54-5).

“I felt as if I was [*Sic*] always listening to a context of voices from inside myself, all with something slightly different to say, all of which were quite insistent and none of which would let me rest” (Lorde, *The Cancer Journal*, 30; all subsequent reference to this book will be in the abbreviation *CJ*).

Audre Lorde stands out as an immeasurably controversial Afro-American feminist lesbian poet and socio-political activist whose convictions and ideological connections with race, sex, and gender informed the content and form of her prose and poetry. As a feminist thinker, she may not be claimed to have broken perfectly fresh grounds in the field of ideas. Nevertheless, she is highly impressive as a poet by virtue of her artistry. So, the current study represents essentially an endeavor to approach her in different perspectives. Expectedly, Lorde is strikingly challenging because she has the courage of conviction as a black lesbian feminist thinker/writer who poses, either deliberately or indeliberately, ontological and epistemological polemics for readers of different cultural orientations and, probably, for the single reader in different subject positions. Paradoxically, however, she proves to be constantly and excitingly rewarding; that is, her poetry, while anchored in the present world, anticipates the desires and needs of several vulnerable groups. For long, however, the reception of her as a “woman,” “mother,” “lesbian,” and “African American” eclipsed “the expectations of her as a ‘poet’ and high profile artist with post-modernist and post-structuralist sympathies and affinities, according to Zofia Burr (153), and Lori Walk (815).

Lorde’s poetry, in a sense, gains progressively in a wider readership in terms of her presentations of life and ideas, on the one hand, and the ways they are technically worked out, on the other. Anthony Lewelle, for instance, is aware of how Lorde’s work “served as a foundation and catalyst for theorizing by scholars and activists in relation to questions of identity, difference, power, social movements,

and social justice” (524). Her views, therefore, leave the readers and critics of her poetry with ambivalent attitudes in this connection. To do her justice as an artist, however, it is strongly recommended to make a divorce between her rabble-rousing perceptions and her technical mastery. That is, “poetry provokes us, as customary learning does not, to highlight the linguistic, sensory aspects of every part of our craft,” according to Alexandra Roberts (1532). So, whereas critics may assess the value and relevance of the content of her poetry variously, their orientations to the power of her artistry seem consonant to a large measure. As Lorde herself insists: “For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it” (*Sister Outsider*, 43; all subsequent references to this book will be in the abbreviations *SO*). Her writings are ideal materializations of all “multiethnic literature” of which the reader is aware that he is in the presence of a multiplicity and diversity of de-centered “selves” that are “unstable,” according to Carole Center (232), and Charles Altieri (157) respectively. Such a complexity of experience and sophistication of sensibility is to be reflected, expectedly, in a different form of art capable of highlighting the interplay of various ontological centers. This feature of Lorde as a woman and artist, in other words, called for an elaboration of “a critical idiom that allows us to shift the focus from the poet’s life to the relationship between the poem and the reader’s world,” voices Burr (154-5).

An ideally valid way of effectively engaging with Lorde’s poetry is in terms of its multivocality. The stature of her poetry, in this context, rests significantly on, and may be validly approached in relevance to, its polyphony (with all its Bakhtinian connotations). This polyphonic peculiarity emerges to a large measure from her tendency to make the different aspects of herself (as standing for the diversity of outlooks in her community) voiced, heard, and seriously considered as she alluded to in various places of her prose writings as observed in the epigraphs to this study. It seems at times that her poetry cannot be approached otherwise. This kind of approach helps “garrison feminism from a full epistemological reorganization that serious engagement with the intersection of gender and race would necessitate,” in Rebecca Mane’s words (72). This ideologically-based

### **“The Transformation of Silence into Language”**

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stylistic aspect contributes to the depth, diversity, complexity, and *jouissance* (in its Barthian diversity) of her art and vision collectively. Burr states, therefore, that: “By embracing division as the steady state, *Lorde’s poetry would become a vehicle to address multiplicity and division, to engage her audiences in the hard work of coalition building across differences.* (Emphasis added, 153). Burr’s argument is, in effect, informing of the problematically complex nature of Lorde’s poetry in terms of what she labels “multiple identity” (161).

Other critics are highly illuminating, moreover, in giving insights into the workings of ideas into art throughout Lorde’s poetry. Sharon Barnes, in this connection, identifies it as an “emotional mathematic” emerging from Lorde’s “marvelous arithmetics of distance” (777, 778). Megan Obourn, recommends considering her poetry consistently with her “multiculturalism” (232; this approach is sustained by other recent views about the nature of “black women’s texts” as sharing in a postcolonial diversity of discourse that leaves room for different aesthetics. This is expressed outspokenly, for instance, by Namita Goswami, 76, 82, 85; Carole Center, 232, 235; Lisa Collins, 737, 739; Rebecca Mane, 79; and Alan Palmer, 219. Robin Hawley, nevertheless, poses a discordant perception of the term and depicts “multiculturalism”, and the closely associated term of “polyphony,” as “challenging the authority of the white West, but it may also simultaneously function as a side-show for white people who look on with delight at all the differences that surround them,” 66). This perspective, no doubt, overlooks the overwhelming presence of “polyphony” throughout Lorde’s poetic world. Lorde’s reader, therefore, is insistently called upon to consider the presence of an orchestra of resonating, and at the same time conflicting, voices in her poetic world.

Actually, Lorde’s committed belief in the significance of straddling the fences of gender, race, and sex in her life and art pilots the polyphony of her poetry. Brenda Carr observes in this respect that “when a black lesbian woman like Lorde writes from her complex subject positioning, she cannot separate the strands of gender, race, and sexual orientation” (137). However, these subject positions are neither reduced nor subordinated to a single voice. They turn out to be

triggering off various ones that engage dialogically with the master's hegemonic discourse. A constellation of voices conspire together throughout her poetic world and project strikingly as operating dialogically with a dominant ideological discourse: the womanist (as the black feminist term coined by Alice Walker), the black, and the lesbian voices become central to the assessment of her artistry as compatibly integrating to form a second culture balancing the main Western pallo-centric heterosexual culture. Her polyphony, in a sense, turns into "unacknowledged challenges to the heterosexual Mainstream"—just to make use of Lies Xhonneux's title related to Queer Literary Theory. The evocation of one of the three voices, in the process, necessarily conjures up per force an odd voice of the dominant white ideology that is rejecting and negating them. As she voices it outspokenly in one of her poems: "I am blessed within my selves/who are come to make our shattered faces/ whole" (Audre Lorde, "Outside," from *The Black Unicorn* volume as figuring in *The Collected Poems*, 280; all subsequent references to Lorde's poems are related to this edition).

M. Bakhtin, conceivably, is to be conjured up with in this respect (considering that Bakhtin himself is reckoned upon as far as African American literary theory is concerned, according to Dorothy Hale who renders the "Du Boisian 'double consciousness' synonymous with Bakhtinian 'double voice'", 446, 453, 456, 464). This renders Lorde's approach, however, problematic owing to the general tendency to restrict, or misconceive, Bakhtin's conception of "polyphony" as exclusively connected with the art of fiction. A bird's eye view of the term, as chiseled and elaborated by Bakhtin himself, may be forthcoming, in this context, for getting insights into Lorde's endeavor to orchestrate her fragmented selves together either intertextually, or intra-linearly.

Bakhtin's revolutionary ideas about "polyphony," "heteroglossia," "dialogism," and carnival" (all are frequently used interchangeably in a sense as connoting multi-layered consciousness, multi-vocal

### “The Transformation of Silence into Language”

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language, and multiplicity of ideological discourses) may prove relevant for handling Lorde’s poetry and poetics. This approach, however, evades perceptively any misconception of Bakhtin’s views of the above mentioned terms whose metamorphosis through his writings signals a movement from an exclusion of genres in favor of fiction towards a progressive inclusiveness of poetry. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin develops his conception of polyphony to depart from the stylistic/formalistic levels and converge on ideological ones as a sign of an endeavor to embrace “the plurality of consciousness-centers not reduced to a single ideological common denominator”(17). Early in life, nevertheless, he limits his view of the conception of polyphony to the art of fiction, notably to Dostoevsky’s novels where the “image of polyphony” that emerges when new problems “arise when a novel is constructed beyond the boundaries of ordinary monologic unity, just as in music new problems arose when the boundaries of a single voice were exceeded” (*Problems*, 22). Here, Bakhtin is anticipating the post-structuralist notions of non-commitment on the author’s part as well as a non-closure on the side of the text. Thus, his criterion of the polyphonic text is the power to evoke an “artistically organized coexistence and interaction of spiritual diversity, not stages in the evolution of a unified spirit” (*Problems*, 31). Bakhtin is, in a way, forwarding forcefully modernist and postmodernist orientations in his tendency to discard the traditional views of organic unity for a more artistic inclusiveness of “the most varied and incompatible elements in the unity of novelistic construction” and the “deconstruction of the unified and integral fabric of narration” (*Problems*, 14). Polyphony, accordingly, is to be ideally obtained in terms of a “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (*Problems*, 6). In the light of Bakhtin’s conception of polyphony and the strong tendency of the majority of critics to correlate the term with the art of fiction as part of its “social formalism” that connotes “social positioning,” according to Hale (447).

Bakhtin, however, widens the scope of the term to the inclusiveness of the poetic forms distinctly with what a large group of critics do to the extent of being ambivalent about the term sometimes, or limiting it to the art of fiction most often (see for instance: Sonya

Petkova, 2, 8; Che Mahzan Ahmad, "Authoring a Dialogical Working Knowledge," 40; and Farah Gobrej, 111). In many places of his writings, in this connection, he loosens the dictates of polyphony to embrace non-fictional literary genres (and more specifically poetry). He stretches his conception without oversimplification to render it applicable to, and embedded in, poetry due to the exigency that "all the voices playing a truly essential role in the novel [or text] are actually 'convictions' or 'points of view on the world'" (brackets added; *Problems*, 133). This notion should, in effect, be bracketed with the temporal value of the text itself. Thus, the present-oriented lyric poetry that manages to be inclusive of diverse perspectives and ideologies gains in polyphony in a manner of speaking as it will be discussed later in connection with Lorde's. The polyphonic dialogism, thereupon, "focuses on the ways language is constituted through changing and variously positioned social subjects, which contrasts with unified and static tendencies within monologic discourses," in Susan Driver's words, and becomes, accordingly, valid for approaches to "unfold multiple and conflictual meanings within and between generations," or between a dominant and subaltern discourses (348). This very notion is enhanced by Bakhtin's recognition that the modern world, and implicitly modern literature, is "polyglot" as distinctly from the ancient world (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 12). Julia Krestiva, greatly aware of Bakhtin's eminence as a thinker and linguist, severely castigates those thinkers of language that are starved of post-structuralist sympathies. Krestiva considers all language, especially the poetic, to be unfixed, incessantly metamorphosing, and essentially polyphonic (*Revolution*, 13).

Bakhtin's critics have formed a guiding paradigm derived from his various statements about polyphony and heteroglossia: a framework that functions as a firm foundation for examining genres that feature those elements definitely. Hence, tracing the presence of a diversity of social voices woven into, and highlighted by, the different formal aspects of the text becomes the criterion of examining a polyphonic genre. Jennifer Pfenniger reaches the extreme that every text is essentially polyphonic due to the "multiple features of any 'text' or linguistic production" (4; it is worth mentioning here that Julia Krestiva predated Pfenniger in her understanding of Bakhtin's thought



### “The Transformation of Silence into Language”

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as far as polyphony, intertextuality, and the carnivalization of the “literary word” that is “an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning),” *Semiotics*, 64-5). Heather Dubrow glimpses an ideal resolution to the clash between the “lyric” and the “narrative” in what she conceives of as the “metalyric” and “metanarrative” that emerge when the author “defamiliarizes putative generic norms and thus invites us to rethink the relationship between lyric and narrative” (254, 255; Vered Shematov labels the form a “metrical hybridization,” 65). In the process, when “lyric and narrative interrelate, the ontological status of the latter may vary considerably, ranging from storytelling clearly represented within the text to its analogues in paratextual materials to its versions in the non-diegetic world,” voices Dubrow 256).

This sketchy presentation of Bakhtin’s views as spotlighted in various places of his writings, and as analyzed by a myriad of critics and researchers, may facilitate approaching Lorde as a polyphonic poet. This renders essential an attempt to get insight into the essence, foundation, and working out of polyphony in her poetic world. The term’s strategy remains, nevertheless, problematic in the case of lyric poetry in a way or another. For instance, how the poetic “I” turns into an inclusive voice has been the subject of exhaustive discussions by critics of “multicultural” literature in general and as modeled in Lorde’s poetry in particular. Eric Stanley points out, for instance, that “[t]here has been...an important and understandable drive in critical and artistic production to articulate the various forms of artistry that congeal below the surface or outside the orbit of the fully realized promise of personhood” as demonstrated in “a wish for a way of understanding what Lorde has called...’the deaths we are forced to live’” (13). The way critics have come to grapple with the poetic “I” in Lorde’s poetry renders it substantially and inherently polyphonic. Christor Giroux reveals, for example, that: “Beyond just spelling her name differently, she is breaking down the status quo, to create a new world, where she belongs, and to which all readers—male, female, black, white, straight, gay—are invited” 288). It is presumed, therefore, that in Lorde’s poetry the “I” is more inclusive than the subjective, confessional “I.” This view, while solving the ambivalence that crops up sometimes in terms of the correlation between

polyphony and particular literary genres, becomes a fitting framework for engaging with Lorde's poetry.

Lorde's dual ethnic/gender ontological/epistemological contexts, predictably, have invited a specific mode of representation that is materialized in polyphony. So, her position is one of a writer with multiple subject positions making connections with unprivileged minority groups "in a 'multicultural' society—each with a different discourse of representation, none directly corresponds to but all of which must speak to the hegemonic centers of culture in which ideologies of US liberal individualism produce discourses of self-identity and self-expression," in Obourn's words (227-8). The scope of this approach is further widened by what Carmen Williams and Marsh Wiggins label the "Womanist traditions as a means for addressing multiple cultural stigmas," (177). This view conjures up Bakhtin's visualization of the operation of a multi-voiced text properly and effectively. In the process, Lorde's poetry is recommended to be illuminated in connection with various contexts: "in relation to her multiple identity positions"(220) and its "irreconcilable multiplicity," according to Obourn(231); to be assessed in terms of what Carr labels Lorde's "dialogic of difference" and "dialectic of identity" (138); and to be contextualized within critics' inclination to "read against and with a continuum of antiqueer violence in the United States," as Stanley views (2).

Very early in life, Lorde identified herself as a multi-faceted personality (or a "many-shaped character," as she informs in her poem "The Winds of Orisha," from her 1973 volume *From A Land Where Other People Live*, 60). In an interview with Rowell, Lorde emphasizes the same notion in terms of making connections between poetry, the poet, and her location in the world which gave bearings to the emergence of diversified voices throughout her poetic world (54-5) since her life is a sort of "consciousness that continues" (56). She felt that she is the living incarnation of a plethora of epistemological and ontological hands-on experiences. Throughout her poetic world, Lorde demonstrates, accordingly, a strong tendency to incarnate the struggle of voices as inspired by the "poet, activist, mother and lover to find the words that gave meaning to her existence and to the many lives that resided within her," states Jewelle Gomez (in Audre Lorde,

### “The Transformation of Silence into Language”

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*Zami*, vi). Lorde’s multi-layered discourse, in addition, is not restricted to her prose writings but is most significantly textured into her poetry as well. The multiplicity of voices textured into her poetry informed by her life experiences that are not necessarily consonant or uniform (see Lorde, *Zami*, 223). This polyphonic framework within which her artistry operates is having, equally connotative, folkloric origins. She stresses, in this connection, that: “Everybody in Grenada [her mother’s Caribbean region] had a song for everything” (*Zami*, 3).

The act of writing, for Lorde, becomes one of reducing tension by means of understanding the world and making herself recognizable to it in its complexity and diversity. It stands out, moreover, to be an existential option. As she announces in *CJ*: “In order to keep me available to myself, and able to concentrate my energies upon the challenges of these worlds through which I move,...I must...separate these external demands about how I look and feel to others, from what I really want for my own body, and how I feel to my *selves* (emphasis added; 66). This attitude is, in effect, sustained by a general feminist interest in the woman writer’s place in the world, the close affinity between location, body, and the relations amongst them. (For an elaborate reference to this systematic understanding of women’s writings Mary Eagleton, 299-300, and Kathleen Kurby, 174, 175, 181 may be cited). In Lorde’s poetic world polyphony turns, in the process, into a “carnival” of voices (with all its Bakhtinian connotations) representing warring attitudes and fragments of the self that emanate from different subject positions. It is in tune with the “development of cultural studies from the mid-1980s onwards” that “served as a theoretical framework to develop alternative discourses with which to pathologize black homosexual subjects and communities,” according to M. Escudero-Alias (393).

As it has been discussed above, polyphony is valuable, in this context, for approaching “multiethnic literature” that places a high premium on a variety of identity positions that renders the writer’s self a disunified and highly versatile entity. Polyphony, in a way, intersects, as encountered in Lorde’s writings, with what she herself views as the expression of the “house of difference” (*Zami*, 226) as well as what Aimee Rowe terms “differential belonging” and “differential consciousness” (33), and that Maria Lugones labels

“polycentric multiculturalism.” All are brought into tension within the single poem and over the collection of poems collectively in terms of binary oppositions conflicting together and exchanging positions in an unending process of zooming in and out. The underprivileged minority voices, meanwhile, conspire together to undermine and replace a primary hegemonic center (just to evoke Derrida’s established deconstructionist paradigm). Lorde’s polyphony, particularly, is rendered in her life and aesthetics a fitting mode of engaging with her different worlds, cultural/ideological positions, and layers of consciousness. It turns out to be her solution to the multicultural counseling approaches that “have tended to analyze cultural variables such as race and gender in isolation from one another rather than as overlapping,” according to Williams and Wiggins (175). Her polyphony, as it goes, gains greater significance from the end of millennium’s turn of thought that rests on a steady serious quest of fresh movements/voices to the dominant tunes so that no single movement/voice can perform the act of dialogism effectively as divorced from the others. Meanwhile, a central, subordinating movement/voice remains a common determinant in the process of gaining in a provocative multivocality. It turns into a “fixed, absent centre” (in a highly Derridian sense) that proves in the end capable of endowing a form of integration and cohesiveness upon the minor/subaltern ones. It is worth mentioning, in this respect, that the constellation of voices that make for the semantic and syntactic implications are mainly and essentially shaped by Lorde’s dialogue with the victimizer(s)’ discourse. This is associated with what Carr identifies as the feminist critics explicit inclination to equate “coming to voice with cultural visibility” (141), “naming” (143), and “presence” (134).

Polyphony, most eminently, has always been for Lorde a means of “the transformation of silence into language and action” so much that language itself in its polyphonic nature gains its truth from its power to materialize such truths of life (*CJ*, 19). This process signifies a willingly persistent effort to spotlight the various divisions of the self that remained for long overlooked by, and unknown for, the Other(s)—such divisions are not necessarily those of the poet herself but expressions of her affiliations to many vulnerable groups. They are

**“The Transformation of Silence into Language”**

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motivated by her staunch belief that in the modern age “there are so many silences to be broken” (*CJ*, 22). Polyphony, accordingly, is both ethically and psychologically oriented together. It is a fitting means of breaking silences, of giving voices to the multiplicity of suppressed fears associated with the different subject positions in order to triumph over them. Lorde, thereupon, “uses language as a crucial means of intervention in a socio-cultural field structured by systematic inequities—sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism,” states Carr (133). Lorde, in this connection, tells Adrienne Rich in an interview that “we cannot fight old power in old power terms. The only way we can do it is by creating another whole structure that touches every aspect of our existence” (731). Polyphony, in effect, is masterfully achieved within the context of giving voices to all these fears and premonitions from the perspective that they are incarnations of conflicting impulses and drives of a speaker caught into the gamut of cross-purposes and torn among conflicting orientations.

*The Black Unicorn* stands out, in this connection, as one of Lorde’s most revealing collection of poems. Lorde’s Critics, almost unanimously, cite it as a striking evidence that mirrors her vision and artistry together. It gains in relevance to the current study in terms of its polyphonic essence. All the diversified aspects of Lorde’s self as well as her solidarity with various subaltern communities as informed by conflicting, or opposed, attitudes find echoes in this volume. The multicultural feminist lesbian voices are clearly heard, or even deliberately overheard. In her poem “A Litany for Survival,” Lorde heralds, thereupon, that her poetry is directed:

...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 dream of choice  
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For those of us  
Who were imprinted with fear  
Like a faint line in the center of our foreheads. (255)

In these lines, Lorde states her polyphonic pronouncements according to which her poetic maneuverings should be generally

assessed.

The volume's magic has been captured and highlighted by the majority of Lorde's critics. Lisa MacGill, for instance, assesses it by stating that "[a]ppearing at the highest of Lorde's conversations with white feminists and Black Arts intellectuals, the poetry of *The Black Unicorn* explores Lorde's particular feminist concerns with the discourses of U.S. liberation struggles" (138). The volume's thrill cannot be lost sight of by those who find favor with multiethnic literature, nor its polyphony be overlooked by those who aspire to be in the presence of majestically sophisticated literature. Daryl Dance, in this connection, stresses its power that makes it Lorde's "most complex book of poetry" in which she "views Africa as the source of racial identity and awareness" and "enacts Africa as the site that validates her ties to multiple racial, cultural, and sexual communities'...thus making it possible for Lorde to reconcile all of those parts of herself that she frequently was asked to justify: a woman, a feminist, a lesbian, a Caribbean, and African American, a poet" (813; for a consonant argument, Giroux, 285-6, and Angela Bowen, 117-18 may be cited).

The book can be subject to a variety of readings thematically and technically. The latter is of prime importance for readers of structuralist and poststructuralist sympathies. It merits attention for its particularity as an experimental work that raises evidence for the validity of polyphony for poetry. Lugones elaborates, in this context, on a collection of discursive maneuverings that functions as a paraphernalia for a poetic text as related particularly to multicultural literature as exemplified in Lorde's *The Black Unicorn*. Those strategies embrace the "public" and the "hidden transcripts" as well as "a politics of 'disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors'" (177). This helps Lorde, according to Lugones, "to use a discourse that is not just outside 'the master's tools,' but also outside the master's perceptual field and master's perceptual possibilities" (179). (This view, however, seems self-contradictory considering that Bakhtin's conception of polyphony is part of the master's tools. Lorde's recourse to such tools, nevertheless, is exercised from the perspective of the Black aesthetics' Signifying Monkey— just to

engage intertextually with Henry Louis Gates’ title).

*The Black Unicorn*, in this context, remains Lorde’s lucid and ardent presentation of her belongings to diverse minority groups that prove interdependent and interconnected to each others as well as to the multi-layered consciousness of the poet herself. It stands out as a good model for a Third-Wave feminist text. Kara Provost demonstrates, thereupon, that in “*The Black Unicorn*, Lorde...attempts to participate in and communicate with a number of communities which often do not speak each other’s languages: Blacks, whites, gays, straights, men, women, academics, working class people, the ‘squares’ and the ‘hip’” (49). Throughout the book, presumably, she places a high premium on such bonds that Obourn terms “identity categories” that gain in ontological and epistemological significance for Lorde (221). This, persistently, called for particular modes of representation to cope with such intricacy of vision and sensibility. Obourn observes, in addition, that in the representations of the complexities of identity, “Lorde manipulates form to capture the complexities of these representations, not through a ‘plain language’ but through a highly constructed, difficult aesthetics” (225). In terms of Bakhtin’s criterion of polyphony, in *The Black Unicorn*, and even in so many other places of her poetic world, the various, and mostly opposite, voices are given utterance and stand out as unmistakable all the time. The voices, equally significant, concurrently jostle and couple together dialogically (in a Bakhtinian sense) as well as in binary, or poly, oppositions (in a highly Derridan mode) to sustain their individual presence as well as their (de)constructionist dynamic. Any single voice foregrounded, moreover, does not overshadow the others; rather, they become conspicuous by absence and turn into a presence in absentia. In this manner, “Lorde speaks in ‘diverse known tongues’..., negotiates multiple axes of community affiliation, in a manner suggests the possibility of a provisionalized universal around which coalitions of ‘corresponding differences’ may be formed,” voices Carr (142).

According to what has been mentioned as far as the significance of technique to the assessment and interpretation of *The Black Unicorn*, a “carnival” of voices is waiting to be, heard—or overheard—prior to being engaged with while reading it. Throughout

the whole volume, Lorde seems to be at her best when she permits various voices to infiltrate into the single text. The heterogeneous voices, in the process, conspire together in a highly dialogic interplay with a dominant discourse to produce a highly multivocal text. Lorde, accordingly, flirts via her poetic world the American collective imagination and urges the American community with its multiculturalist peculiarity to get involved in it. The various voices dominating her world are artistic expressions related to her ever present subject positions. Barnes holds this carnival of voices to be: “Celebrating life through her relationships, her spiritual connections to ancient goddesses and women warriors, thinking about love, difference, and survival, positing a future that extends beyond her life...Lorde is at peace with her life and her work” (786).

Four main voices and layers of consciousness prominently figure in Lorde’s poetic world as informed by her intricate experiences and belongings and function as ontological and epistemological patterns that give shape to the texture of her poetry in general and *The Black Unicorn* in particular. Firstly, the Black voice as deeply ingrained in Lorde’s Afro-Caribbean affinities is, naturally, striking as demonstrated in the employment of Afro-Caribbean cultural elements, notably the Folkloric and mythical patterns in addition to the symbols of being and survival in Lorde’s life such as her family members and Harlem. Afro-Caribbean culture, understandably, projects as a formative aspect of Lorde’s being that stands out in her poetry as balancing the elitist culture that represents Western oppression and colonialism in its broadest sense. Secondly, the voice of white America as countering her Afro-American cultural consciousness should be considered while engaging with her poetry. Thirdly, The voice of the double-oppressed black women in a white culture and a Black phallo-centric community. Fourthly, the erotic voice of a lesbian struggling against a multitude of adverse powers is allowed a free space in Lorde’s world and she makes a point of highlighting its prime importance for her as a black woman. The voice of Western heterogeneous tradition, in the process, represents the fixed, or imaginary center (in a highly Derridian sense) with which all the other minor voices representing second cultures come into dialogic interplay. In effect, none of these voices is to be taken for granted as



### “The Transformation of Silence into Language”

---

typically representative of the poet herself. Rather, each one is presumed to stand for an ontological perspective and prospect that may converge on or diverge from Lorde’s personal vision in degrees. The various voices designated function as “concepts that can also be understood as texts or discourses,” in Escudero-Alias words (393). It remains, after all, that none of these voices operates individually as she symbolically alluded to in one of her *Black Unicorn* poems: “and we need them all/for the combined use of all...” (“Dream/Songs from the Moon of Beulah Land I-V,” 294).

Equally significant, the employment of polyphony throughout the book is both inter- and intra-strophic. Sometimes, one of the variety of secondary/subaltern voices is highlighted in contrast with the centrally dominant white phallo-centric heterosexual one. At other times, more secondary voices are deliberately foregrounded. Lorde seems to be at her best, in this connection, when the various voices jostle with one another in one and the same poem. The critical context to be informed with in this case is an eclectic one; yet, the structuralist-poststructuralist paradigm is a reliable touchstone in this connection.

The volume’s title poem that initiates it manipulates two voices that operate either dialogically or in a “deconstructionist” mode: the black voice versus the white. The central topic about which conflict revolves is “Black Beauty.” The poem, in a sense, is informed by Lorde’s associations with The Black Arts Movement and its slogans of “Black Power” and “Black Beauty.” (Collins establishes, in this connection, parallels between The Black Arts Movement and the women’s liberation activists as both seek to defeat white supremacy and patriarchy, or male supremacy as forms of oppression, 718.) Irrespective of this historical and cultural background, the presence of the two voices is sustained by the clash between two opposite attitudes towards blackness as the essence of beauty and power of a whole race. It is observed, therefore, that though the black voice is allowed greater space, the centrality of the white one persists and is conspicuous by absence. So, while the black voice is telling its own tale of oppression, the opposite voice seems to be inspiring, or provocative to a large measure.

The poem opens with the black voice sounding, or resounding,

the common misconception and stereotyping of “blackness” that stands for man and culture together:

The black unicorn is greedy.  
The black unicorn is impatient.  
The black unicorn was mistaken  
for a shadow  
or symbol  
and taken  
through a cold country  
where mist painted mockeries  
of my fury.  
It is not on her lap where the horn rests  
but deep in her moonpit  
growing.

The black unicorn is restless  
the black unicorn is unrelenting  
the black unicorn is not  
free. ( 233)

The black voice’s high pitch in this poem is misleading considering that the white voice (representing the Western tradition and its orientation towards blacks and their culture) is both heard and overheard in degrees. So, in the opening two lines, it is the black voice strongly heard, yet, the white one is strikingly overheard. The two lines prove to be more reiterations of Western culture’s judgments of blackness rather than explicit statements of the latter. Thus, examining “the invocations of race in third-wave feminism through the discursive lens of deconstructing whiteness,” in this connection according to Mane, “serves to untangle what Sandoval...calls a ‘presence-absence’...of diversity in third-wave feminism” (72). In the succeeding lines, the black voice is substituted by the white one (though it is not an exclusive kind of act). The black voice, accordingly, sums up the long history of Western prejudice against the peoples and cultures of African descent. Here, it seems impractical to mistake the overlapping of the two voices at this midpoint, the matter that renders the white voice central to the speaker’s consciousness and unconscious simultaneously. There seems to be some sort of an impossibility of the perfection of the black experience without the full

### “The Transformation of Silence into Language”

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presence of the white (mis)conception. Thus, the “mist painted mockeries of my furies” is a case in point of such an impracticality of divorcing one voice from the other, or even overlooking one while highlighting the other at any place of the poem. The poem’s concluding lines undertake a similar task in its mingling of pride and complaint. So, while the lines pronounce the black culture’s rejection of subordination, the white history of prejudice and oppression is strongly evoked. The entwining of the two voices into the main fabric of the poem’s structure is, therefore, essential for interpreting and assessing it properly as foregrounding the conflict between two main attitudes towards co-existence and tolerance, if the point is to be overstretched.

In “Dahomy,” the four voices of her carnivalisue poetic world are forcibly and skillfully ushered into the structure of volume: the black/white and feminine/ masculine dichotomies are deliberately projected. They are not to be taken as entirely different voices of the black and white structures of consciousness of two cultures; rather, they are having close affinities with them respectively to a large measure. As typical of Lorde, those voices are to be recognized in terms of hearing and overhearing: what is heard, in the process, is audibly impressing; yet, what is overheard is more audible—just to signify on one of John Keats’s favorite and oft-quoted paradoxes in “Ode on A Grecian Urn”.

The poem revolves around memories in Abomey, the ancient capital of the African kingdom of Benin. The experience foregrounds the two voices with which the speaker is fully associated: Blackness and Femininity. Both voices similarly incarnate suffering and victimization. However, they are evocative of, and set in a state of equilibrium with, their opposite voices: Whiteness and Masculinity. The poem opens with the speaker (a black woman) standing in the presence Abomey’s goddess *Seboulisa* whose figure, while giving the speaker a spiritual support as a black feminist activist, reflects all forms of oppression and victimization from which Africa and its people suffered for long:

It was in Abomey that I felt  
the full blood of my fathers’ wars  
and where I found my mother

Seboulisa  
standing with outstretched palms hip high  
one breasted eaten away by worms of sorrow  
magic stones resting upon her fingers  
dry as a cough. (239)

As the lines reveal, the speaker connects herself, and her creator, with what McGill conceives of as “an ancient source of power” (136). In this part of the poem, expectedly, the African feminine past and present conspire together to create a perfect bulwark against phallogocentric white Westernism. As McGill observes, Africa in the poem is both “the present-day Africa of Dahomey...and the ancestral Africa of Abomey, the ancient African kingdom where arts and culture flourished. The juxtaposition of Dahomey and Abomey creates a continuum between past and present in the poem that later serves Lorde’s desire to discover a new voice by recuperating an ancestral black lineage” (136-7). *Seboulisa*, the African goddess of power and mysticism plays a central role in the unity of thought throughout the whole poem. Lorde identifies herself with this goddess and goes further to impersonate herself as a modern *Seboulisa* (*Zami*, 45). However, this source of power (the black goddess) never plays down the full presence of the other’s voice working as a source of hegemony. McGill views rather that “the black mother poet appears as both the African god(dess) and the autobiographical first person...[p]roviding alternatives to Western, heterosexual, and patriarchal social formations” (136; this notion is further sustained by Christel Temple, 29, and Nira Yuval-Davis, 262, 266).

In the second stanza, a chorus of female voices figure as in a state of revolt against the phallic authority. As McGill understands it, “Lorde employs these and other warrior figures to situate alternative means of viewing the world within a non-European and non-patriarchal framework” (139):

In the dooryard of the brass workers  
four women joined together dying cloth  
mock Eshu’s iron quiver  
standing erect and flamingly familiar  
in their dooryard

**“The Transformation of Silence into Language”**

---

mute as a porcupine in a forest of lead  
In the courtyard of the cloth workers  
other brothers and nephews  
are stitching bright tapestries  
into tales of blood. (239)

As the lines indicate, the feminine/masculine voices are systematized in terms of binary oppositions. They are, apparently, black voices after all. Yet, they conjure up the various voices of white oppression. Yakini Kemp highlights, in this respect, the significance of “the African diasporic mythology and imagery” as an assertion of Lorde’s black identity and as a glorification and retrieval of the marginalized black underprivileged voice (21).

In the third part of the poem, bearing herself as a staunch feminist advocate of women of color as double-oppressed creatures, the black female turns to bitter satire in the face of the phallic oppression exercised against her by white and black males:

Bearing two drums on my head I speak  
Whatever language is needed  
To sharpen the knives of my tongue  
The snake is aware although sleeping  
Under my blood  
Since I am a woman whether or not  
You are against me  
I will braid my hair  
Even  
In the seasons of rain. (239-40)

As obviously suggest in these lines, implicature is a prerequisite of the accomplishment of polyphony in the dialogue and deconstruction of voices that work either implicitly or explicitly. The speaker, therefore, is a professed socio-political activist whose dogmas about lesbian feminism are unshakable. By pronouncing her unappeasable zest for revolt and criticism, she deliberately calls forth a negative image of a male-oppressor on the one hand, and a stifling anti-homosexual traditions on the other. McGill assesses these lines by stating that “the black mother poet is no longer an observer of the strength of *Seboulisha* and the other African women; instead, she, too, takes on their power”

137). The speaker, therefore, protests her freedom as a black woman and lesbian collectively. In the process, by expressing her readiness to “sharpen the knives of” her “tongue,” an implicit listener and covert interlocutor is alluded to. Then, a more prompt and explicit dialogue takes place to foreground the idea of uncompromising ideological clash between two orientations: “Since I am a woman whether or not/You are against me/I will braid my hair.” Here, the male voice is more clearly heard with a deep storehouse of phallo-centric and conservative cultural traditions. So, the speaker ardently tries to rationalize her argument in terms of this dialogic form that conjures up the Bakhtinian conception of polyphony. (The same mood and mode persistently inform the structure and texture of the sequel poem “15<sup>th</sup> street and Abomey”).

Throughout Lorde’s poetic world, however, the erotic voice (as more or less associated in her consciousness and vision with the lesbian experience) holds a high profile as that of a vulnerable group that endeavors to evade the victimization of the “master’s tools”—as she highlights it in one of her most resounding titles of *SO*. In “The Erotic as Power,” Lorde hails the erotic as “a considered source of power and information in our lives” that “rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge” and that reveals and rests on “the open and fearless underlining of [the] capacity for joy” (*SO*, 56). Lorde views further that the erotic has always been mistaken for pornography and misused by men against women and turned into a tool of humiliation and subjection (*Sister Outsider*, 54). In all her meditations on the relationship between the erotic and the self, Lorde holds it to be a manifestation of an existential stance for the black women in their revolt against the double oppression of black males and Euro-centric white feminists (*SO*, 38, 49). So, this very voice is to be essentially assessed in correlation with the black and feminist ones as indulged in a state of solidarity discordantly with the Euro-centric heterosexual voice, as revealed by Temple (29; a similar interpretation of the erotic as power in Lorde’s life and work is presented by Barnes, 777, and Walk, 816). In “The women of Dan Dance with Swords in Their Hands to Mark the Time When They were Warriors,” a chorus of subaltern voices playing consonantly is markedly heard. Over the poem’s three strophes, the three voices infiltrate into the poem in

**“The Transformation of Silence into Language”**

---

proper order and dialogically with a fixed tradition that functions as an “absent center” (in a highly deconstructionist sense). In this manner, the voices of blackness and womanism are attended by images deliberately drawn from militarism, which is quite connotative. The complexity of the poem has to do, however, with the erotic voice of the third strophe; a voice that is challengingly disruptive of a long history of traditions:

I come like a woman  
Who I am  
Spreading out through nights  
Laughter and promise  
And dark heat  
Warming whatever I touch  
That is living  
Consuming  
Only  
What is already dead. (242)

As connotatively indicated, what is projected in those lines is an erotic/lesbian voice that promises to be accepted, and even more legalized, as a crystallization of unity being and a demonstration of a positive Life Force. According to Temple, this erotic power gains value and appeal for Afro centric womanism from being an “energy for change,” and its emergence from “intuition, or ‘that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge’ that Audre Lorde describes as the ‘erotic as power’” (28-9; see also Walk, 816). So, the New Woman is armed with “laughter and promise” as instrumental tools for gaining recognition and continuity in contradistinction with the “white heterosexual continuum” referred to by Adrienne Rich in her authoritative lesbian article. Driver maintains, in this connection, the significance of “sexuality as a productive and dialogical set of relations” for lesbian feminist writers in general (348). The fact that the lesbian body is one teeming with “dark heat/warming [or rather energizing] whatever” it touches aggrandizes the significance of the other minor voices implicitly given utterance. Then, eroticism is forcibly glorified in terms of being both “living” and “consuming,” which foregrounds the presence of the binary opposition between two

orientations and conceptions of existence, truth and eternity. (The lines, in a sense, may gain weight and depth when contextualized with Yeats' lines in "Sailing to Byzantium": "O sages standing in God's holy fire.../...be the singing masters of my soul./consume my heart away" (217). In Yeats' context, the consummation implies the superiority of the spiritual over all that is material. In Lorde's case, in contrast, the erotic reigns supreme as the main source of continuity and revitalization. Her tactic, accordingly, is informed by the tendency to "dismantle the master's"/patriarch's house).

In "Chain," the double oppression of women (their suffering from the patriarchal sense of supremacy on the one hand, and being abused by heterosexuality on the other hand) evokes the feminist and lesbian voices as opposing and counterbalancing a dominant tradition that is always experienced in Lorde's poetic world as a presence in absentia. Throughout the poem, the two voices are to be compared and contrasted with the voices in the poems within which it is contextualized. In the latter, in this connection, the erotic voice is an expression of regeneration, vitality, and eternity. In "Chains," in contrast, where eroticism is the patriarchal abuse of sexuality, it turns out to be a state of death-in-life. Equally significant, the feminist voice is an expression of defeat and the sense of casualty, compared with the sense of power and empowerment reverberating within the context of the other polyphonic poems.

The poem opens with a journalistic traumatic report of the rape of two teenage girls by their "natural father." Then the poet, as typically of her, turns the accident into a polyphonic poem made up of the tension between subaltern voices and a voice of fixed tradition made into an "absent center" in a highly deconstructionist manner. In the opening stanza, the poetic persona is scared, and provokes the reader to recognize that both girls are clear incarnations of women suffering in the patriarchal community:

but look at the skeleton children  
advancing against us  
beneath their faces there is no sunlight  
no darkness  
no heart remains  
no legends



**“The Transformation of Silence into Language”**

---

to bring them back as omen  
into their bodies at dawn. (246)

As the lines point out, the true dilemma of the victimized girls lies in the fact that they became in a borderline between innocence and experience failing to join neither of them—just to make use of William Blake’s title “Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience.” In the next stanza, the speaker skillfully foregrounds one of her central voices related to this very experience: the feminist/womanist one:

look at the skeleton children  
advancing against us  
we will find womanhood  
in their eyes  
as they cry  
which of you bore me  
will live me  
will claim my blindness as yours  
and which of you marches to battle  
from between my legs? (246)

The lines, undoubtedly, represent a cry for salvation and a struggle for survival in a highly Darwinian sense. The voice echoing in the lines is one summing up the various feminist waves beginning from the quest for recognition, liberty, and equality towards the Third Wave of trying to present a feminist hermeneutics of being and the world. The concluding rhetorical question of the stanza is highly connotative and thought provoking in this context. The stanza’s effect is enhanced, understandably, in terms of its dialogic structure that imposes some sort of an ethical exigency on the reader who is invited in a manner to think out a solution to the problem.

In the fourth stanza, the poet perfectly and deliberately reconciles the feminist voice to the sexual one as differently from her previous maneuverings in this respect. The erotic, accordingly, is neither a source of pleasure nor a kind of free act. It is rather both a source of suffering and a demonstration of “compulsory heterosexuality” as Adrienne Rich phrases it in the title of her informative article. So, the experience is ultimately horrible and revolting as well:

Two girls repeat themselves in my doorway  
their eyes are not stone.  
Their flesh is not wood nor steel  
but I not touch them.  
Shall I warn them of night  
Or offer them bread  
Or a song?  
They are sisters. Their father has known  
Them over and over. The tins they carry  
Are his. Whose death shall we mourn  
In the forest  
Unburied?  
Winter has come and the children are dying. (247)

As strongly hinted at, the speaker determines to be an advocate of the victimized sibling and the singer of their sad story. She will give free space to their feminist voice. The stanza gains in power as it becomes multi-layered in terms of evoking the erotic voice. Still, it is not the lesbian voice of the poet but that abusive and suppressive patriarchal one instead. It turns out after all to be destructively disruptive. The whole scene contextualizes with T. S. Eliot's in *The Waste Land* in which the three girls sing their own sad story of rape and deflowering. In both contexts, the tension between the male/female orientations and feelings is essential for a perfect assessment of the paradoxical state of death-in-life prevailing. The poem, accordingly, closes with a more excessive sense of loss. The speaker/victim is obsessed with mixed feelings owing to her epistemological and ontological dilemmas consequent on her failure to reconcile the daughter/mistress crisis conflicting her at the moment of speaking:

Am I his daughter or girlfriend  
am I your child or your rival  
you wish to be gone from his bed?  
Here is your granddaughter mother  
give us your blessing before I sleep  
what other secrets  
do you have to tell me  
how do I learn to love her

**“The Transformation of Silence into Language”**

---

as you have loved me? (248)

Actually, the speaker’s sense of loss is better revealed in terms of two levels of victimization that give bearings to the emergence of the orchestra of voices forming the general fabric of the whole poem. The poem gains in effectiveness in terms of its artistic sophistication by means of juxtaposing “in unsettling ways multiple temporalities while interweaving characteristics of the two modes:” the lyric and the narrative in the process of achieving polyvocality, just to apply Dunbrow’s anatomy of a Thomas Wyatt’s lyric poem to Lorde’s poem itself (267).

In the succeeding poem, “Sequelae,” the challengingly euphoric attitude dilutes the bitter tone of the preceding one. Typically characteristic of Lorde as pressingly polyphonic throughout her book, the black-woman-lesbian voice is collectively and insistently heard in its collision both with the phallo-centric heterosexual white tradition and the black male chauvinism: two tyrannical forces victimizing the black lesbian feminist speaker:

While I battle the shape of you  
wearing old ghosts of me  
hating you for being  
black and not woman  
hating you for being white  
and not me  
in this carnival of memories  
I name you both the laying down of power  
the separation I cannot yet make  
after all these years of blood  
my eyes are glued  
like fury to the keyholes  
of yesterday  
rooms. (249)

The lines skillfully present two heterogeneous, yet intersecting, circles including entirely conflicting ontological and epistemological orientations: the Euro-centric white tradition and the black male vision in sharp contrast with the black lesbian feminist outlook. Both attitudes are founded on unreconciled approaches to man-woman

value judgments as far as essentialism and sexuality are concerned. Escudero-Alias, for instance, demonstrates in this connection that “the ‘homosexual,’ the ‘queer,’ were defined as the ‘Other’ of heterosexuality, and the creation of a binary acted as a catalyst to pigeonhole sexuality either as heterosexual or homosexual.” She adds, further, that “[l]ike the binary of gender and sex (i.e. male v. female), the heterosexual/homosexual one outlined the superiority and hegemony of the former, therefore relegating the latter to ‘notions of pity, cure and toleration, as well as resignation and defiance’” (390-1; for further notice, see also Erinn Gilson, 330). The conflict that is incarnated in the dialogue of various voices seems to be permanent since it is based on a past heritage of misconception and prejudice as well as a present tendency to keep intolerant.

The poem gains in weight and depth in terms of introducing the lesbian/erotic voice as perfectly representative of a sub-/lower-culture in a highly Bakhtinian connotation:

I battle old ghosts of you  
wearing the shapes of me  
surrounded by black  
and white faces  
saying no over and over  
becoming my mother draped in fathers  
bastard ambition  
growing dark secrets  
out from between her thighs  
and night comes into me like a fever  
my hands grip a flaming sword and screams  
while an arrogant woman masquerading as a fish  
plunges in deeper and deeper  
into the heart we both share. (250)

In these lines, the poem glides swiftly from the tension of voices based on racism and color prejudice to a clash founded on a form of Darwinian struggle for survival relying on two perfectly preferences for, and interpretations of, sexuality and sex relations. Temple views, in this connection, that “Lorde’s reconfiguration of the erotic demonstrates the link between the spiritual and the political, and the

### **“The Transformation of Silence into Language”**

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denial of this link has been a primary crisis of Africana life existing among forms of Western oppression” (29; this notion is reinforced by Michael Brubaker who identifies Lorde’s lesbian voice as representing parts of a public “coalition” and “community solidarities” and sustains the efforts to further the “learning of the intersections of heterosexism and transprejudice with other oppressions such as racism, classism, and ableism,”49). The speaker, thereupon, announces her rejection of the traditional sexuality as understood and preferred by her mother, though ironically it is her mother who fostered in her the early seeds of lesbianism as she recurrently states in her book *Zami* (256). So, the speaker challenges the backlash targeting the queers by giving a celebratory voice to “a visible gay or lesbian identity after a painful period of hiding in the closet,” in Xhonneux’s words (94; Reginald Harris’ views about same-sex poets, including Lorde, and presentations of themselves and their experiences are also to be considered in this context, 36, 37, 38.) Accordingly, the poem’s multivocality copes with the changes of outlook undergoing the relations of the dominant/hegemonic discourse of the privileged phallo-centric heterosexual value judgments and the underprivileged/stigmatized categories “that worked as a marker of individual differences from the norms that defined health and sexuality” and that “made possible the formation of a reverse discourse,” states Escudero-Alias in relevance to Foucault’s power/knowledge/discourse paradigm (391). The concluding lines teem with a lesbian eroticism informed by one of the speaker’s diverse experiences. The polyphony in these lines, accordingly, emerges from the unsettled discord of ontological voices.

In “Scar,” polyphony is Lorde’s instrumental device of spotlighting the kaleidoscopic pageantry of voices as collectively present in the speaker’s consciousness at a single moment. This is part of the dominant mode of the twentieth century itself as depicted by Ahmad in his Bakhtinian approach: “This century is often being equated with the age of globalization where compression of time and space, diversity of voices and conversations flourished” (“Living Organizational Communication,” 270). The hypothesis that in polyphony the various voices are spatially introduced throughout the poem proves to be fallacious in Lorde’s case. They are, more or less,

Adel M. Afifi

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incarnations of a highly sophisticated dialogic act between a constellation of minor voices representing a multivocal second culture jostling with an implicit hegemonic one. Equally significant, the voices might stand out as incompatible; still, they give insights into the psychic and ethical conflicts associated with the speaker's ontology.

The poem opens with an oppressed black woman voice that naturally conjures up all the subsequent related voices:

This is a simple poem.  
for the mothers sisters daughters  
girls I have never been  
for the women who clean the Staten Island ferry  
for the sleek witches who burn  
me at night  
in effigy  
because I eat at their tables  
and sleep with their ghosts. (270)

As the lines paradoxically suggest, the poem amalgamates both complex simplicity and austere opulence. The speaker is caught in the tension between her internalization of the outer reality and her externalization of the inner self; this accounts for the introspective attitude in the next stanza of the same poem:

those stones in my heart are you  
of my own flesh  
whittling me with your sharp false eyes  
laughing me out of your skin  
because you do not value your own life  
nor me. (70)

Here, the boundaries between the outer and inner aspects of self blur as the common and the personal are perfectly synthesized. This mingling of concerns is presumably motivated by akin feminist orientation:

This is a simple poem  
I will have no mother no sister no daughter  
when I am through

**“The Transformation of Silence into Language”**

---

and only the bones are left  
see how the bones are showing  
the shape of us at war  
clawing our own flesh out  
to feed the backside of our masklike faces  
that we have given the names of men. (270)

This feminist voice overlaps, and is entangled by, introducing the erotic/lesbian voice in the next lines:

Donald DeFreeze I never knew you so well  
as in the eyes of my own mirror  
did you hope  
for blessing or pardon  
lying  
in bed after bed  
or as your eye sharp and merciless enough  
to endure  
beyond the deaths of wanting?  
with your voice in my ears  
with my voice in your ears  
try to deny me  
I will hunt you down  
through the night veins of my own addiction  
through all my unsatisfied childhoods  
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I have no sister no mother no children  
left  
only a tideless ocean of moonlit women  
in all shades of loving. (270-1)

In this part of the poem, the feminist experience is fully complicated as it hurls the reader into an entirely different experience representing a different, yet closely related, voice throughout the feminist ontological evolution. As Lynda Hall observes, “specifically naming lesbian eroticism and embodied pleasurable acts, Audre rejects denial and silencing of women’s erotic bodily pleasures” (403). The dialogic aspect of the poem becomes multi-faceted. The first dialogic aspect is a feminist/patriarchal one. The second side of the dialogue is deeper and more complex; it is between the orthodox feminist/patriarchal

voices and the postmodern lesbian one. So, this part of the poem is a clear manifestation of the feminist evolution into a deconstructionist stage, an attitude that culminates in the volume's concluding poem "Solistice" (328.)

The poem gains in complexity in terms of giving voice to a third subaltern voice; that is, it closes with the voice of blackness by means of celebrating Black Power and Black Beauty as the slogans of The Black Power and The Black Arts Movements of the 1960s:

This is a simple poem  
sharing my head with dreams  
of a big black woman with jewels in her eyes  
she dances  
her head in a golden helmet  
arrogant  
plumed  
her name is Colossa  
her thighs are like stanchions  
or flayed hickory trees  
embraced in armour  
she dances  
slow earth-shaking motions  
that suddenly alter  
and lighten  
as she whirls laughing  
the tooled metal over her hips  
comes to an end  
and at the shiny edge  
an astonishment  
of soft black curly hair. (271-2)

In addition to their imagistic power, the lines are fitting for closing the poem as the poet lets out the various voices consonantly backing up one another. All the voices (the black, feminist, lesbian together) are located at the cultural peripheries and impressively capable of producing a tonal equilibrium with the Euro-centric phallic heterosexual culture. This rates the poem among the most representative of Lorde's polyphonic aspect as featuring throughout the whole volume.



**“The Transformation of Silence into Language”**

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Polyphony remains, likewise, central for assessing “Pathways: From Mother to Mother.” The poem works out in a highly polyphonic tactic the heterosexual/lesbian conflicting orientations towards sex and sexuality. This dialogue is between a conventional conception of sexual relations and a post-modern revolt against and rejection of tradition. The poem’s first part is quite connotative in this context:

Tadpoles are legless and never learn to curtsy  
birds cannot pee  
in spring  
black snakes go crazy  
bowing out of the presence of kings.  
digging beneath a river bed  
whose heart is black and rosy  
I find the sticky ooze I learned  
rejecting all my angels.  
it puzzles my unborn children  
and they paused in my frightened womb  
a decade or two long  
breaking apart what was begun  
as marriage. [ Italics added; 289]

The lines, understandably, evoke the idea of the presence of a hegemonic discourse tensioned by the presumption of the inevitable existence of a galaxy of minority voices balancing, or even endeavoring to displace, it. Therefore, all the creatures, or voices, highlighted in the opening lines are devoted to be reminiscent of the significance of polyphony so that the center can hold— just to engage intertextually both with Yeats’ lines in “The Second Coming” (211), and Chinua Achebe’s fictional title. The lines, more properly speaking, are preliminary to the main polyphonic context within which the heterosexual/lesbian dialogue operates: “I find the sticky ooze I learned/rejecting all my angels.” It seems, more significantly, that the reconciliation between the center and the peripheries is destined to continue since none of the two parties/voices is prospected, nor at best desired, to undermine the other: “it puzzles my unborn children/and they paused in my frightened womb/a decade or two long.” This very orientation climaxes in the speaker’s emphasizing of the ever presence of the two heterogeneous conceptions of sex and sex

relations: “breaking apart what was begun/as marriage.” This endows ontological and epistemological dimensions upon polyphony. As Hall views it: “Tracing lesbian relationships through a lineage of women and mothers replaces traditional male-dominated scripts of the male hierarchy and the patriarchal structures of inheritance passed from fathers to sons, based on the exchange of women between women” (403).

The poem’s second part marvelously enhances the polyphonic effect by inserting other minority voices with the object of “dismantling the master’s house.” This part introduces the minority voices related to race, sex and gender in terms of a three-fold harassed black lesbian woman:

Imprisoned in the pews of memory  
beneath the scarlet velvet  
is a smile. My mother  
weeping  
gouts of bloody wisdom  
pewed oracular and seminal as rape  
pursues me through the nightmares  
of this wonderland of early learning  
where I wander cryptic as a saint  
tightmouthed as cuttlefish  
darting beneath and over  
vital flaws unstitched like crazy patchwork  
until analyzed and useless I  
crest in a shoal of missing mommies  
paid and made in beds of consecration  
worshiped by rituals in which  
I do not believe  
nor find a place to kneel and rest  
out of the storm of strangers and demands  
drowning in flooded churches  
thick with rot and swollen with confusion  
lashed to a raft of grins aligned in an enemy reason  
I refuse to learn again. [Emphasis added; 289-90]

The lines, unequivocally, represent a shrilling cry against a multifaceted oppression exercised by the Western phallo-centric heterosexual tradition that is projects as a presence in absentia. About

**“The Transformation of Silence into Language”**

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this hegemonic discourse that is hypothetically working as a fixed absent center revolves a group of secondary discourses, or voices (in a highly Bakhtinian paradigm keeping in mind the blurring of boundaries among the various literary genres). Hence, the poem’s operating system is entangled by the presence of Blackness, womanism, and lesbian eroticism vis-à-vis the White heterosexual axis. The voices running through the lines are connotative of rejecting the center evoked as “beds of consecration” in which such voices “do not believe.”

The poem “Power” is to be long remembered for its dramatic intensity as well as its polyphonic quality. Its effect and moral lesson rest on launching a variety of voices standing for the various forms of ethnic and sexist oppression that the poem’s speaker is mostly experiencing. The black/white and female/male conflicts are enacted in a highly breath-taking scene by means of portraying the killing of a black ten year old child by a white policeman who was disgracefully voiced not guilty and acquitted. The poem reaches a climax with the voice of a black woman jury member declaring that the white members convinced her. The whole situation resulted in an outburst of a complex of cross purposes. What is striking about this poem, however, is that the poet modifies her method of highlighting the different discursive powers. Unlike the strategy of ordering the voices as discussed in the afore mentioned poems, in “Power” the white-phallo-centric heterosexual culture is no longer functioning as a presence in absentia, or an absent center, but it is given an explicit utterance of ideology and orientation as far as the ethnic and sexist issues are concerned.

The poem opens with the poetic persona (a black woman) internalizing her feelings towards the white aggressive male-oriented culture:

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

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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. (319)

Adel M. Afifi

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In these lines the speaker's voice alludes to a long history of oppression and the quest for de-familiarization for blacks and women likewise in terms of a recent single incident.

In the succeeding part the victimizer's voice is allowed free space, still to draw the reader's indignation over vainglory and sadism:

the policeman who shot down a 10-year-old in Queens  
stood over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood  
and a voice said "Die you motherfucker" and  
there are tapes to prove that. At his trial  
this policeman said in his own defense  
"I didn't notice the size or nothing else  
only the color." and  
there are tapes to prove that, too. (319)

This voice is involved in a dialogic interplay with the previous one within the Foucauldian discourse/power/ideology paradigm. So, the white policeman is quite representative of the main white culture with its prerequisites of power. Yuval-Davis's words are highly forthcoming for the endeavor to understand Lorde's technical strategy in this poem: "The sociality of identity narratives is produced either within existing social narrative discourses and/or dialogically, combining individual and collective resources. These narratives are contingent and are being (re)constructed, reinterpreting the past while moving forward temporally" (279; a reference to Gomez is also due in this connection, 27, 28). The policeman's voice stands in sharp opposition with the black oppressed one. Expectedly, the Foucauldian paradigm is given clear evidence in the next stanza with the acquittal of the white policeman with a unanimous consent of the board of juries, including ironically a black woman member:

Today that 37-year-old white man with 13 years of police forcing  
has been set free  
by 11 white men who said they were satisfied  
justice has been done  
and one black woman who said  
"They convinced me" meaning  
they had dragged her 4'10" black woman's frame

**“The Transformation of Silence into Language”**

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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. (319-20)

The lines pose an angry tone against the inequity of powers and discourses that are expected to lead to new forms of victimization, and even worse to a full ethnic termination as the last two lines histrionically evoke. The poetic persona’s voice in the poem’s closing lines are connotative of the strong willingness to subvert and reverse the current power structure:

I have not been able to touch the destruction within me.

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and one day I will take my teenaged plug  
and connect it to the nearest socket  
raping an 85-year-old white woman  
who’s somebody’s mother  
and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed  
a greek [Sic] chorus will be singing in ¾ time  
“Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are. (320)

The lines are strikingly indicative of the speaker’s involvement in an undermining and counter victimizing wish. In the process, the dream is capable of giving insights into a morbid reality. Accordingly, the poem relies for its effectiveness on an ongoing free association of opposite discourses, ideologies, and power relations. Thus, the poem figures amongst Lorde’s finest multi-vocal poems. It is a good model for the poet’s power to turn the poem into an amalgam of what Dunbrow labels “metalyric” and “metanarrative” (255).

In conclusion, Lorde remains a high profile model for the development of black feminism (or Womanism) with its intricacy of experience and vision together. Lorde’s literary approach as inspired by her socio-political and cultural contexts is anchored in the polemics of race, class, and the various sex relations and the different, and sometimes opposed, value judgments attached to them. She sets evidence permanently to be thought provoking, highly controversial, yet challengingly rewarding. Approaching her world of ideas, thereupon, raises a galaxy of responses to the woman and the artist depending on the beholder’s individual cultural background, preferences, and value judgments. Lorde’s redeeming factor for the

majority of her readers, however, is connected with her artistic stature. An ideal method of fathoming the depth of her poetry, accordingly, is to present a critique of her artistry.

The current study has endeavored, in this context, to assess a significant aspect of her poetry in its operation within the context of multiculturalism. Polyphony stands out, in this connection, as an instrumental weapon for an artist engaged in an incessant dialogue with the controversially unsettled issues of race, class, and sex and all the misconceptions consequent upon them. Lorde, understandably, proclaimed in all ways available her inherent affiliation with various unprivileged minority groups and expressed outspokenly her unrelenting resolve to be the mouth organ for them all. In *The Black Unicorn*, she managed to a large measure to give voices to such subaltern vulnerable communities either intra-/or inter-linearly so that they conspired together in a way or another to turn into a secondary culture engaging dialogically with the major Western phallo-centric heterosexual tradition. (This renders Bakhtin a significant source to rely on.) Throughout this central volume, in fact, main voices are recurrently heard, or overheard. The black, the womanist, and the lesbian/erotic voices thrust themselves in a variety of ways as discourses of secondary culture(s) worthy of scrutiny concerning their struggle against, or making connections with, the centrally hegemonic discourse.

In the course of the study, many findings and observations could be obtained. Firstly, Lorde could straddle the fences of race, gender, and sex masterfully. She might neither be quite originator nor innovator in most of the issues handled. That is, she joins the majority of the other practitioners in the various disciplines echoing in the texture of her poetic world. Her own practice, however, gains in power and effectiveness by virtue of the polyphony coloring the structure of her poetry as highlighted in the solidarity and accumulateness of the main voices recurrently haunting it irrespective of the inter-/or intra-textuality of their figuring. Secondly, Lorde's manipulation of sexuality, as mainly informed by her lesbianism, undergoes a distinct divergence from her approach in the autobiographical prose writings. She could do that euphemistically all the time rather than explicitly. So, Lorde is language sensitive regarding both genres. It is recommended, most significantly, that the working out into artistry of the various ideological issues running through the structure and texture of her poetry be considered seriously and deliberately for the attainment of a proper assessment Lord as a thinker and poet.

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Adel M. Afifi

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