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Diasporic Revelation

Audre Lorde, Sandra María Esteves,
and Ntozake Shange

They feel the blood of their mothers still flowing in them,
survivors of the diaspora.

—Ntozake Shange, *Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo*

Throughout her first novel, Ntozake Shange makes numerous references to the history of the Middle Passage, the dispersal of enslaved men and women throughout the Americas, and their descendants. Her protagonists are in contact with these spirits through their artistic expression: they play music, dance, and weave. The spirits communicate with them in their dreams as well as in their chosen professions; they inform every decision these young women make in their lives, and serve as both guides and witnesses to all that they do. The protagonists in turn pay tribute to these spirits by listening to them, following their cues about how to live their lives as they attempt to find that which is in keeping with their destinies. In her novel, Shange creates an atmosphere in which humans live alongside the spirits of long-dead ancestors, who guide humanity as they try to survive the trials of life, presented here primarily as sexism, racism, homophobia, and discrimination, as well as a rupture between spirituality and quotidian existence.

Writing about related spiritual traditions, Audre Lorde, Sandra María Esteves, and Ntozake Shange reveal the depth of the

spirituality of the African Diaspora, the strength of these beliefs in communities of African heritage in the United States, and their capacity to influence daily life on an ongoing basis. This chapter examines poems by Audre Lorde and Sandra María Esteves, as well as the first novel of Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982). These writers formulate an identity that is not confined to the experiences of the black woman just in the United States. Rather, they construct a diasporic identity that recalls the expansiveness of the African Diaspora. The poetic voices and protagonists of these works are not provincial in their self-constructed identities: they do not self-identify as women solely of the United States, as American women or even hyphenated identities of African American or Caribbean American. Instead, looking to the history of the dispersal of Africans in the Western Hemisphere, they gain strength from those stories and allow those narratives to aid them in their journeys of self-realization. Key to the formulation of this sense of self is the support and assistance of the divine entities of traditional Yoruba religion and their American variants. Lorde, Shange, and Esteves allow their interactions with the *orishas* of Yoruba and *Regla de Ocha* to inform their sense of themselves as women in the New World. They find in these religions an effective strategy for both personal and communal liberation.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the development of nationalist movements in the United States within African American, Puerto Rican, and Chicano communities inspired by the civil rights movement of the preceding decades. One feature of the Black Power Movement and its cultural offshoot, the Black Arts Movement, was the resurgence of pride in all things African within African Diasporic communities across the United States. Both the Black Panther and Young Lord Parties advocated the study of their histories, which included an acknowledgment that enslaved Africans were brought to all of the Americas. The African Diasporic religions that had been uprooted and transplanted to the New World countries of Cuba and Brazil, among others, gained popularity in such U.S. cities as New York and Boston, as African Americans and Puerto Ricans reclaimed religious practices that had been conserved in some respects in the Caribbean and Brazil.¹ The *orishas*, the entities that serve as protectors and guides for humans, began to appear by name in African American

and U.S. Latino/a literatures, underscoring the construction of a diasporic identity that supersedes nationalist affinities.²

The Call of Western Africa

Impatient legends speak through my flesh
 changing this earths formation
 spreading
 I will become myself
 —Audre Lorde, “Winds of Orisha”

Audre Lorde is a widely known and respected poet, essayist, and activist. Critics often focus on her autobiographical text *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name—A Biomythography* (1982) and on her essays, namely, those of *The Cancer Journals* (1980) and *Sister Outsider* (1984) such as “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” and “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” When they concentrate on her poetry, they often do so using as their lens her self-proclaimed identity as a “Black, Lesbian, Feminist, warrior, poet, mother,” as she stated in a 1990 interview with Charles H. Rowell, founder and longstanding editor of *Callaloo*, the journal devoted to literatures of the African Diaspora. During this conversation, Lorde explained why she had chosen not to include any poems published in *The Black Unicorn* (1978) in her subsequent reissue, *Chosen Poems, Old and New* (1982): “The poems in *The Black Unicorn* have always felt to me like a conversation between myself and an ancestor Audre” (58). Rowell quickly moves on to other subjects, leaving readers to ponder Lorde’s assertion; with this claim, she clearly posits that the source of her poetic inspiration is not her own intellect or experiences, but rather an interaction, or series of interactions, with an ancestral presence guiding her. Rowell’s apparent unwillingness to challenge his interview subject or at least to issue further questions about this topic conveys a nervousness experienced by her contemporaries as well.³ Throughout this, her seventh collection, Lorde invokes West African spiritual entities from both Fon and Yoruba cosmologies, interacting with Yemanjá, Seboulisa, Mawu Lisa, Orishala, Shopona, and Eshu, among others. She continues her relationship with these spiritual entities in *Zami*, in

which she encounters a woman named Afrekete. Widely considered her masterpiece, *Zami* is described on its cover as a “biomythography,” which critics see as a reclaiming of an autobiographical narrative so as to, as M. Charlene Ball explains it, “create . . . myth from her own life” (61). Critics who have examined Lorde’s interaction with these entities in her poetry often focus on how the inclusion of these figures allows her new feats with language in the creation of a woman-space. AnnLouise Keating notes that finding a West African spiritual heritage empowered Lorde: “By replacing her Judeo-Christian worldview with one which validates her African roots, she affirms her identity as a Black woman warrior poet. . . . By reclaiming figures from African mythology in these poems and others, Lorde simultaneously redefines herself and celebrates her access to language’s transformative power” (28). Rooting herself in a spiritual system that provides images of female strength, beauty, and fierceness, Lorde writes herself into a narrative that is predominantly white, male, and heterosexual. Identifying traditions extant for thousands of years liberates her: no longer does she feel the pain and guilt of the self-mutilation that is living an untrue, unexamined life, but instead she is freed to explore the world from a position of wholeness. With these poems, then, Lorde posits the invocation of these spiritual systems as liberatory practice.

In her 1968 poem “When the Saints Come Marching In,” Lorde writes:

Plentiful sacrifice and believers in redemption
 are all that is needed
 so any day now I expect
 some new religion
 to rise up like tear gas
 from the streets of New York
 erupting like the rank pavement smell
 released by a garbage truck’s
 baptismal drizzle.
 High priests are ready and waiting
 their incense pans full of fire.
 I do not know their rituals
 nor what name of the god
 the survivors will worship

I only know she will be terrible
 and very busy
 and very old.

1968 marked a year of crisis on an international level, as there were student protests around the globe leading to violent standoffs between soldiers and young people in the United States, Mexico, Brazil, France, and Czechoslovakia, among other places. The Padilla Affair in Cuba sparked a widespread disillusion with the Cuban Revolution for many, as the government imprisoned the poet Heberto Padilla for criticizing the regime.⁴ In the midst of a U.S. economic crisis, New York City neared bankruptcy, as it faced union strikes and white flight to the suburbs. The failure of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam caused widespread disillusion within the population, as the optimism of the Kennedy administration gave way to the realities of war under the Johnson administration; it would be the deadliest year for U.S. soldiers during the war, leading to President Johnson's choice not to run for reelection. In the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., significant parts of Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Chicago were affected by riots, which had already destroyed sections of Newark and Los Angeles in the recent years; the Democratic National Convention saw rioting in Chicago, and later that summer, the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. The nonviolent civil rights movement gave way to the militarism of the Black Panther Party, the members of which were explicit in their desire to protect members of black communities across the nation terrorized by police brutality, rampant unemployment, underfunded schooling, and the general disregard of the political system.

It is this environment that characterizes Lorde's "When the Saints Come Marching In." In the midst of widespread disenchantment with the institutions that undergird civil society, the poetic voice expresses the need for something else, for a new spirituality that can heal her broken city of New York. For her, it is a question of religion: "Plentiful sacrifice and believers in redemption / are all that is needed" (1-2). Rather than simply a question of faith ("believers in redemption"), healing will only come about through ample demonstrations of that faith ("plentiful sacrifice"). One detects a residing note of cynicism, irrespective of the assertion that opens the poem, as verses five through

nine reveal the poetic voice's belief that this religion will emerge from the streets themselves, "erupting like the rank pavement smell / released by a garbage truck's / baptismal drizzle" (7–9). The analogy brings forth imagery of urination and the disposal of waste.

In the subsequent stanzas, the poetic voice again asserts the need for such a religion, one that has existed for millennia: "she will be terrible / and very busy / and very old" (15–17). With the use of the female pronoun, Lorde subtly rejects the patriarchal thought of Judeo-Christianity, searching instead for an alternate system, though she proclaims ignorance of its precise identification. Still, she asserts that this system will be characterized by the natural ("incense," "fire") rather than the trappings of the modern world, which have been reduced to the collection and clearance of refuse. Civilization has faltered under the religious systems of the Father; it is the moment instead to appeal to the Mother.

The first explicit mention of West African belief systems in Lorde's *oeuvre* is in 1970 with her poem, "The Winds of the Orishas."

I
 This land will not always be foreign.
 How many of its women ache to bear their stories
 robust and screaming like the earth erupting grain
 or thrash in padded chains mute as bottles
 hands fluttering traces of resistance
 on the backs of once lovers
 half the truth
 knocking in the brain like an angry steampipe
 how many long to work or split open
 so bodies venting into silence
 can plan the next move?

The poetic voice opens with a strong declaration: "This land will not always be foreign." There is the intimation that the land has been familiar in the past, which indicates that something in the course of humankind has gone horribly wrong. In the eyes of numerous cultures, there has always existed a strong relationship between the land and human beings. Indeed, we as humans are of the earth; from dust we arose and to dust we shall return. With this opening verse, the poetic voice establishes that a rupture has occurred, and

the employment of the demonstrative adjective “this” intimates that the poetic voice refers specifically to the United States.

For the next ten verses, she emphasizes the yearning, the necessity that women have to express themselves, to “bear their stories” (2). That desire for expression reveals itself in the physical, as an “ache” (2); “screaming” (3); “thrash” (4); “hands fluttering” (5). The poetic voice relates women to the earth, in one moment returning to a more mythic plane, in that women for millennia were, of course, associated with the earth for its fertility, for its ability to produce, to bring forth life. These figures toil to bring forth their stories and yet cannot, for they have gone “mute” (4). The poetic voice underscores another rupture, that which has divided the word, or the ability to formulate words, from the rest of the body. For while the verbs the poetic voice uses are ones that are violent (“screaming,” “thrashing,” “fluttering,”) or at the very least indicate fierce movement, they remain without a voice. An additional disruption can be identified in the fifth and sixth verses, in which we find “hands fluttering traces of resistance/ on the backs of once lovers.” There is the implication that an intimate act has now become one of force, where two who may have once shared love, in some form or another, now are in the midst of a powerful struggle, one in which someone loses “traces of resistance.” The act of lovers has now become one of brutality, and for at least one participant, one of futility. There is fracture and division all around.

In the second stanza of this first part of the poem, the poetic voice moves to the figure of the Greek prophet punished by the gods for insubordination with blindness. She writes:

Tiresias took 500 years they say
to progress into woman
growing smaller and darker and more powerful
until nut-like, she went to sleep in a bottle
Tiresias took 500 years to grow into woman
so do not despair of your sons.

In one account, Hera, goddess of women and marriage and wife of Zeus, changes the oracle from man to woman; the figure of Tiresias is, therefore, sexually ambiguous. Both man and woman, this personage may be considered the personification of balance between the male and female elements. Here, for the first time in the poem, we hear a tone of

defiance: he spent five hundred years “growing small and darker and more powerful,” says the poetic voice, concluding the stanza with the sardonic commentary, “so do not despair of your sons” (17). There is still hope if males choose to learn from females, if sons choose to learn from their mothers rather than view them as objects worthy of conquer, as in the Oedipal myth. By the poetic voice’s summation, woman, or at least the woman Tiresias became, was “small,” “dark,” and “powerful.” Here, of course, she defines “power” in a new way, refuting the thought that dictates power to be something characterized by great physical size as well as light in color; instead, she offers “power” as a synonym of strength that grows exponentially, as the nut is the seed from which the tree grows. The representation of woman has changed, from the first stanza to the second, from helpless, mute, and inarticulate to small, dark, and powerful. In an essay considering Lorde’s relationship between her texts and her body, Margaret Kissam Morris offers the following: “She repositions marginal categories, placing them in the center of her discourse” (178). Chinosole makes a similar argument, stating that at the center of Lorde’s project as a poet is an “affirmation of difference” (382); placing Lorde within a chronology of African American writing, she writes: “In the face of an oppressive culture bent on your obliteration, affirming difference as nonthreatening, a difference charged by change like the house of winds—a survival-oriented, self-defining change—is a current in slave narratives tapped and magnified in Lorde’s own special vision of matrilineal diaspora” (382). Though “small,” “dark,” and “powerful” are signifiers of weakness in a white supremacist patriarchal culture, she infuses these words with new meaning, so that they are no longer peripheral. Lorde does so throughout her work in order to combat racism, sexism, and homophobia; by the conclusion of this first section, then, we have a formula for the healing of the fractures described in the first stanza, balance between the male and female elements must be reached.

It is in the second section of the poem that the poetic voice makes mention of the *orishas*.

II

Impatient legends speak through my flesh
 changing this earth’s formation
 spreading

I become myself an incantation
 dark raucous characters
 leaping back and forth across bland pages
 Mother Yemonja raises her breasts to begin my labor
 near water
 the beautiful Oshun and I lie down together
 in the heat of her body's truth
 my voice comes stronger
 Shango will be my brother roaring out of the sea
 earth shakes our darkness
 swelling into each other
 warning winds announce us living
 as Oya, Oya my sister my daughter
 destroys the crust of the tidy beaches
 and Eshu's Black laughter
 turns up the neat sleeping sand.

In this second section there is a shift from the third person ("its women," "they say") to the first person *I*. The poetic voice incorporates the myths of old: "impatient legends speak through my flesh." In this formulation the body now has the capacity to speak, to articulate mysteries. The voice goes on to juxtapose herself with the written word, as she becomes an "incantation," a chant, a prayer set to music. She then goes on to name five of the spiritual entities known to have survived the Middle Passage, as each continues to be worshipped by practitioners of the Yoruba religions on both sides of the Atlantic. These are the *orishas*, those "unique manifestations of *ashé*, the power-to-make-things happen," as defined by Robert Farris Thompson in his seminal study *Flash of the Spirit* (1984). The poetic voice invokes all of these beings, calling their energies as a means by which to "change this earth's formation" (19). Again, her goal is one of fundamental restructuring: by calling on these beings, she hopes to reinstate balance. She calls on ancient spirits to remedy the fragmentation of the modern world, one in which a woman does not bear children but rather her angst, her pain, as she says in her first stanza. These are bodies that carry hurt and angst, and so must be "split open" (19), so as to release the grief and sorrow of progress, thereby bringing about healing and liberation.

This freedom may begin by interacting with Mother Yemanjá, who “raises her breasts to begin” (24) the labor of the poetic voice. This gesture of raising the breasts is one of generosity—Yemonjá, the deity widely identified with motherhood, offers to feed and nurture the “I” of the poem. Next she calls the “beautiful Oshun” (26), with whom she lives in order to make stronger her own voice. Here, the poetic voice, having turned from third person to first, has learned to rely on herself. Again, we see a reunification of the body and the voice: “in the heat of her body’s truth / my voice becomes stronger” (27–28). While one might be tempted to read this as a physicalization of this spiritual entity, it is not so. Recalling again that the voice begins the first stanza by saying that these legends “speak through the flesh” (18), here she demonstrates that she carries all of them with her, in her blood. Each entity reveals a different aspect of the poetic voice’s self to her self—here, with Oshun, it is her own body that strengthens her voice. The poetic voice moves on by calling on Shango, the entity that represents divine justice; he that will avenge slights for those he loves. Here, the poetic voice names Shango her brother (29), and so with him comes her defense, physical force in the form of the entity known to be the embodiment of masculine energy. She is also assisted by Oya, who she names her “sister, [her] daughter” (33). Oya is transformation. Symbolized by the tornado, she works alongside Shango, lovers and warriors both. The poetic voice states that she “destroys the crust of the tidy beaches”; indeed, Oya destroys so that new life may emerge.

She closes out this second part of the poem by invoking Eshu and his laughter (35). Widely characterized as the trickster figure, as in Henry Louis Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey*, Eshu is invoked at the beginning and the end of religious ceremonies, as he is both the beginning and the end. He has historically been mischaracterized as the equivalent of a devil, malicious, playful, and roguish. Robert Farris Thompson writes: “Outwardly mischievous but inwardly full of overflowing creative grace, Eshu-Elegbara eludes the coarse nets of characterization. . . . [He is] the ultimate master of potentiality” (19). As the personification of possibility, he embodies all that could be; invoking Eshu, therefore, does not simply convey mischief but also restitution: in this cosmology, the most important characteristic of life is harmony and peace, qualities attained through balance. And so the poetic voice ends this section by calling on Eshu, he who indicates whether paths that may be opened

or closed, and who in fact has the ability to open or close those roads. Here, we hear his “black laughter” (35), an indication, perhaps of success—the poetic voice has accomplished that which she set out to do in that she has become herself (21).

III

The heart of this country’s tradition is its wheat men
 dying for money
 dying for water for markets for power
 over all people’s children
 they sit in their chains on their dry earth
 before nightfall
 telling tales as they wait for their time
 of completion
 hoping the young ones can hear them
 earth-shaking fears wreath their blank weary faces
 most of them have spent their lives and their wives
 in labour
 most of them have never seen beaches
 but as Oya my sister moves out of the mouths
 of their sons and daughters against them
 I will swell up from the pages of their daily heralds
 leaping out of the almanacs
 instead of an answer to their search for rain
 they will read me
 the dark cloud
 meaning something entire
 and different.

When the winds of Orisha blow
 even the roots of grass
 quicken.

Here in the third and final part, the poetic voice once again draws a stark contrast between the tradition of “this country” (37), and who she now is. Though she does not specify the name of “this country,” we are led to believe it is the United States: the reference to wheat reminds the reader of the naming of grain in the first stanza (3), wheat

being a staple crop in this country. Here, the poetic voice identifies capitalism as the malady that strikes its men who are dying: "money/water . . . markets . . . power" (38–39). Unlike the first part of the poem, in which the poetic voice merely describes the desperation of the powerlessness, here, in this final section, she inserts herself, proposing herself as an alternative vision, something that will resolve their yearning for "completion" (43). With her last stanza, she implies that this change, this transformation, this healing, is inevitable. The only requirement is that one look inward, into his/her own flesh, as the poetic voice does, in order to find and rescue those ancient truths that one carries. It entails the recognition of one truth, an ancient veracity that is older than the beginning of time.

Lorde continues to invoke the spiritual entities of both the Yoruba and Fon⁵ peoples in *The Black Unicorn* (1978). In her interview with Charles H. Rowell, Lorde reveals that this collection began after a visit to Dahomey (now Benin) in 1974 with her children (58). In the volume itself, she offers definitions of the entities she names in a glossary that concludes the collection, providing for her readers a foundation for understanding what she later calls the "archetypal experience" of black women.⁶ Many critics focus on Lorde's utilization of these entities as an assertion of her blackness and her womanhood;⁷ they have also drawn attention to the themes of motherhood and language.⁸ For Lorde, admittedly, these entities and their accompanying mythologies (born in Western Africa) provide an underpinning for her own experiences as a Caribbean American woman. We see in this collection, as we did in the previous poem, an entreaty for healing from Africa, the birthplace of the diaspora; in the collection as a whole, she reveals her belief in the ability of these entities to bring about this cure.

These spiritual entities appear in the first of four sections of the volume; one of the first poems of the collection, "From the House of Yemanjá" (6–7), alerts the reader of a consistent theme, that of the mother. As stated previously, Yemanjá is the *orisha* most widely identified with motherhood. In the glossary that appears at the end of the text, Lorde defines this entity as follows:

Mother of the other *Orisha*, Yemanjá is also the goddess of oceans. Rivers are said to flow from her breasts. One legend has it that a son tried to rape her. She fled until she collapsed, and from her breasts,

the rivers flowed. Another legend says that a husband insulted Yemanjá's long breasts, and when she fled with her pots he knocked her down. From her breasts flowed rivers, and from her body then sprang forth all the other *Orisha*. (121–22)

Lorde here emphasizes not only the violence, the hardships of these stories but more importantly, Yemanjá's ability to transcend that pain, transforming it into an act of creation. In calling out to her, then, Lorde implicitly seeks a similar goal for herself and indeed for all women. Her emphasis is therefore not on the tragic but instead on the sublime.

My mother had two faces and a frying pot
 where she cooked up her daughters
 into girls
 before she fixed our dinner,
 My mother had two faces
 and a broken pot
 where she hid out a perfect daughter
 who was not me
 I am the sun and moon and forever hungry
 for her eyes.

Notable about this first stanza is the perspective of daughter that the poetic voice assumes: it is a daughter who is aggrieved by her mother's actions. The first deed that causes pain is that of socialization: in distinguishing between "daughters" (2) and "girls" (3), there is a suggestion of transformation from a claim of offspring to the detached biological status of being a young human female. The fourth verse indicates that the mother does this before the girls were either ready or prepared: they did not yet have the sustenance for this transition. In the next four lines, the poetic voice takes a more personal tone, as there is an implication of preferential treatment, of protection of a fellow girl-child. Taking into account the title of the poem, this voice resides in her mother's house, and yet there remains a constant yearning for this figure; the result is an attempt at self-consolation, as she attempts to convince herself of her own worth.

In the second stanza, there is a shift from a focus on the mother and her actions to a first-person voice. The girl has matured into a

woman, it appears, one who carries both the well-known and that with which she is not yet comfortable. In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde defines the black mother as the poet that each of us, male and female, carry within us (100). This figure is a metaphor for all that is feeling: “[It is] that back place, where we keep those unnamed, untamed longings for something different and beyond what is now called possible, and to which our understanding can only build roads” (101). Reviewing the second stanza of the poem, then, the reader understands that the pale mother is reason and logic, customs and behaviors that society has deemed acceptable. This mother brings a combination of sustenance and dread; this horror necessarily qualifies the kind of nourishment the poetic voice ingests. Also, she does so while the subject sleeps, which also qualifies the kind of rest the subject is able to enjoy. The pale mother, then, is one that ostensibly arrives with physical sustainment but who combines this with a psychological and spiritual means of control, that which takes advantage of worries and anxieties. Nevertheless, within that space is all that is inarticulate as of yet, natural, that which has not yet been disciplined by a society that has no use for its wildness. In her interview with Rich, Lorde resists simple characterization of the poem as an assignment of values based on racial identification, though the reader sees clearly how she has inverted values that assign all that is good to white and all that is bad to black. Notably, she does not use these colors, instead writing “pale” and “dark.”

She continues to call out to the dark mother in the penultimate stanza:

Mother I need
 mother I need
 mother I need your blackness now
 as the august earth needs rain.

In the repetition, the reader can see the urgency of the request: not only is this a daughter calling out to a mother but indeed a female voice calling out to the Source of all life. She pleads with that original foundation of life to save the rest. The “I” assumes more global resonances, as it is not one singular voice but instead numerous voices, asking for assistance, imploring the release of the undisciplined unchecked emotion, an

original sensibility that has been hiding. The global consciousness needs to be saved from analytic thinking that tends to destroy rather than repair; instead, it needs thinking that dictates that all is possible, without limitation.

She concludes the poem:

I am
 the sun and moon and forever hungry
 the sharpened edge
 where day and night shall meet
 and not be
 one.

Returning to the verses repeated in the first stanza, the poetic voice has now changed, as she is no longer hungry for the eyes of her mother (9–10); though she remains “forever hungry,” she has developed a response to the interminable yearning, “the sharpened edge” (27). As Chinosole points out,

the first and last stanzas, then, do not simply encapsulate duality, but are structured to represent progression from a tension-ridden difference to a non-threatening one. The power of unity is in that very separateness. Difference as a source of dread in the beginning, becomes the basis of self-acceptance still chanting its need and “ever hungry.” (390)

The Mother has responded to the entreaties of the poetic voice; the earlier tone of despondency has been replaced with strength and willfulness.

Lorde continues to invoke this maternal presence in her poem “125th Street and Abomey” (12–13) where she identifies a woman as Sebouliisa. She defines this entity at the conclusion of the volume as: “The goddess of Abomey [the capital of Dahomey]—‘The Mother of us all’. A local representation of Mawulisa, she is sometimes known as Sogbo, creator of the world” (121). In her entry for Mawulisa, Lorde underscores the connection between these figures and Yemanjá, saying that as Mawulisa is the Mother of the other *Vodou*,⁹ so too is Yemanjá Mother of all of the *Orisha*. In seeing this figure on the streets of Manhattan, as indicated by

the title, Lorde highlights how each person carries this legacy within him/herself, it is solely a question of accessing this consciousness. She writes:

Head bent, walking through snow
 I see you Seboulisa
 printed inside the back of my head
 like marks of the newly wrapped akai
 that kept my sleep fruitful in Dahomey
 and I poured on the red earth in your honor
 those ancient parts of me
 most precious and least needed
 my well-guarded past
 the energy-eating secrets

The poetic voice immediately contrasts the wintry urban space referenced in the title and the first verse with the “red earth” of Dahomey (present-day Benin), creating a sense of discordance, in that tranquility evoked with “sleep” does not match the immediate surroundings. Nevertheless, as she trucks through the snow, she continues to carry her Mother within. In honor of this figure, she pours as a libation “my well-guarded past / the energy-eating secrets” (9–10); interaction with this figure empowers her so that she may discard those parts of her personality (“those ancient parts of me”) that no longer contribute to her evolution as a person and as a woman. Carrying Seboulisa as she moves in the world, then, confirms that there is a concerted effort to mature and transform. In verses 11–14, the poetic voice reveals a renunciation of her self as she presently understands that self, an indication of a willingness to change, to assume qualities that may not come naturally to her but that will serve her in the future. She also cedes previous identities for which she no longer has any use. In her uncertainty, she looks to other paradigms of courage, after whom she models herself, her “warrior sisters” (18). These are the women of Dahomey, whom she identifies in her glossary as the Amazons of myth. She looks to alternate models of womanhood as a means of integrating those qualities she admires into the best version of herself. In the last two verses of the stanza, the poetic voice calls upon all of these entities to

provide her with the “woman strength / of tongue” (21–22), which suggests language in both written and oral expression.

In the second stanza, she returns to the image of the Mother:

.....
 Seboulista mother goddess with one breast
 eaten away by worms of sorrow and loss
 see me now
 your severed daughter
 laughing our name into echo
 all the world shall remember

The poetic voice offers a vision of a decaying Seboulista, implying that the virtues for which this entity stands are in decline. Again, for this poet, Seboulista, like Yemanjá, is the Dark Mother, that version of being which she believes to be more available to women (though men can also reclaim this lost sensibility as well), intuitive understanding as opposed to knowledge. The act of calling these figures means to be decidedly un-ladylike, as per the definition offered by a patriarchal society invested in the majority of their citizens being silent, controlled, and domesticated. These entities are maternal in an aggressive way: warriors who defend not only their children but also their queen. In invoking these entities, Lorde amplifies the female imaginary; she is decidedly looking to other religious systems in order to find varied images of womanhood. The poetic voice recognizes that though she is severed, separated, from her mother, she will still laugh, recognizing both her maternal legacy and the contributions she makes to that legacy. The poem ends, then, with an optimistic tone, as she vows to remember her origins, and yet celebrating the new version of herself. Lorde implicitly asks her audience to do the same, amplify one’s sense of self so that it may include that which is not quantifiable but nonetheless feels suitable to his / her values. Looking to West African spirituality for inspiration, she urges her audience to do the same; like her ancestors before her, she shares with a new audience these beliefs in the hopes that they too might be protected from the corrosion of values in the present age.

Keating notes a fundamental truth in Lorde’s work, that is, the “acknowledgement of difference as an act of self-love” (31).

West African cosmologies focus on the balance of male and female principles, not on the domination of one over the other. With this spiritual heritage, Lorde found another source of permission to live her life fully, as a black lesbian mother warrior poet. In an essay describing her motivation for writing, she observes: "I feel not to be open about who I am in all respects places a certain kind of expectation on me I'm just not into meeting anymore. . . . I cannot simply be a Black person and not be a woman too, nor can I be a woman without being a lesbian" (262). Gloria T. Hull reminds readers that while one may be tempted to see Lorde's identities as static, in fact she wrestles with defining all of them at any given moment: "[These terms] represent her ceaseless negotiations of a positionality from which she can speak" (155). In writing, Lorde found a means by which to give voice to her multiple selves, and it is through writing that she creates a discursive space in which her readers can engage in similar exercises. The study of Yoruba and Fon philosophies allowed Lorde to reconcile seemingly disparate selves, not only in terms of personal identity but also ethnic affiliation: a black woman of Caribbean descent raised in an urban capital of African American life in the United States, she grew up learning to identify the West Indies as home, rather than the place in which she resided. Her poems suggest that the appeal to the *orisha* and *vodou* of West Africa bring her a sense of stability and permanence that she had not previously found. Acknowledging herself as a daughter of the diaspora and engaging the philosophies that were spread due to the enslavement of millions bring her peace. The inclusion of these entities is not a call to replace outright the "worship of rationality and that circular, academic, analytic thinking,"¹⁰ but is instead an act of restoration of a sensibility that has been lost to popular and mainstream culture in the United States. Sandra María Esteves will engage in a similar project in her own poetry; in looking to Africa as a source of spiritual strength, both women reconceive of themselves not solely based on their Caribbean heritage but instead as a member of the diaspora. Neither rejects their traditions; they instead expand their understanding of the foundations of these limiting identities by exploring to African and African diasporic spiritual systems and including them in their work.

The Griotte of the South Bronx

spiritual survivors reclaimed from a pilfered legacy
—Sandra María Esteves, “Bautizo”

Nuyoricán poetry gained a foothold in the artistic circles of New York City in the 1960s and 1970s.¹¹ The idealism of the early 1960s had given way to the disenchantment of the latter part of the decade, what with the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy and the ongoing conflict in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the influence of the nationalist movements at the time, particularly the black power movement, spawned the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords Party, groups promoting cultural pride, education and housing reform, and equal rights for all Third World peoples.¹²

The Young Lords Party in particular demanded an independent Puerto Rico, the establishment of a socialist society, control of all services that were benefiting their community (police, hospitals, firefighters, etc.), and an end to racism, sexism, and the imperialism of the United States government in the world.¹³ William Luis notes that members of this group represented the larger Puerto Rican community living in the United States; many of them were born in Puerto Rico and moved to New York City as children or were born in New York City.¹⁴ They were caught in an in-between space, belonging neither here nor there. He writes: “On the island, Puerto Ricans are subjected to a colonial status; on the mainland they do not escape a postcolonial condition, and they confront cultural and racial discrimination. Their double alienation, on the island and mainland, underscores Puerto Rican minority status and cultural identity” (xiv). Living in the United States, first- or second-generation Puerto Ricans often do not speak Spanish, and so face rejection when on the island. Dismissed as “American” on the island, they are often labeled “Hispanic” or “Latino” on the mainland. Much Nuyoricán literature of the 1970s captures the confusion and anger felt by many who did not know how to be comfortable in this liminal space. Critics have noted that the predominant themes of this writing are a search for identity, the negotiation of dichotomized categories, as well as expressions of cultural pride in the face of such perceived ambivalence.¹⁵ In her poetry, Sandra María Esteves posits a solution to

this bind, putting forth a diasporic subjectivity that links her Puerto Rican heritage not to a Spanish Caribbean context but instead with a larger, more expansive diasporic consciousness.

Sandra María Esteves is the sole woman poet within the larger group of Nuyorican poets that include Miguel Algarín, Miguel Piñero, Tato Laviera, Pedro Pietri, and Víctor Hernández Cruz, among others. Nineteen seventy-five saw the publication of the collection that effectively identified these poets as a collective, *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*. Edited by Miguel Algarín and Miguel Piñero, it established the defining characteristics of the artistic expression of these poets. For the editors, the creation of poetry is a survival technique that carries the potential of rebirth: "Poetry is the full act of naming. Naming states of mind" (10). Through this medium of expression, then, this disenfranchised community gained the divine power of creation. Algarín expands upon the responsibilities of the poet: "He tells the tale of the streets to the streets. The people listen. They cry, they laugh, they dance as the troubadour opens up and tunes his voice and moves his pitch and rhythm to the high tension of 'bomba'¹⁶ truth. Proclamations of hurt, of anger and hatred. Whirls of high-pitched singing" (11). For him, then, the poet serves a communal function, in that he (as the majority of the Nuyorican poets were men) gives voice to the frustrations, the pain, and the disappointment of living in the Northeast of the United States, the subject of racism and discrimination. The poet in this formulation is a priest in that he serves to exorcise the hurt, creating instead opportunities for celebration. Recalling Audre Lorde's comments about the recovery of the emotional, the dark and powerful, here Algarín reflects that the "tale of the streets" is felt not through analysis or rationale but with full bodies, as this community purges their sufferings and pains through dance and music.¹⁷ Like many other traditional cultures, including the many that make up the African Diaspora, the Nuyorican community is one that comes together in times of grief and joy, sorrow and delight.

Algarín focuses on the traits of Nuyorican literature as a whole in an article of the same name, published several years later; there, he puts forth that the community of Puerto Ricans in New York is one created under false pretenses. Promises made about employment opportunities on the mainland result in urban poverty, prevalent discrimination, lack of economic stability, and a psychic disconnection from the families that