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Implicating the reader : Audre Lorde's need for love in "Need, a chorale for black woman voices"

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Implicating the Reader:
Audre Lorde's Need for Love in
"Need: A Chorale for Black Woman Voices"

by

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A Thesis

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Acknowledgments

This thesis would not have been possible without the undying support and encouragement of Dr. Elizabeth Fifer. I would first like to thank her for including Audre Lorde's collection *Undersong* in her Contemporary American Poetry graduate seminar in the fall of 1998, where this powerful poem struck me as one in need, as it were, of further study. Dr. Fifer was in ready agreement, and she as readily agreed to work with me on this paper, first for the seminar and then as my thesis. Her knowledge, wit, patience, and commitment has indeed made the entire thesis writing and editing process not as difficult as it certainly could have been. It has been a privilege to work with her.

Implicating the Reader:
Audre Lorde's Need for Love in
"Need: A Chorale for Black Woman Voices"

Abstract

There is a surprising lack of criticism concerning Audre Lorde's poem "Need: A Chorale for Black Woman Voices," which deserves more attention both for its message and for what it does: it challenges the readers to participate in the poem as a unified collective voice, actually taking a stand against the kinds of violence that lead to the deaths of the poem's two main figures who speak from beyond the grave.

There is a surprising lack of criticism concerning Audre Lorde's poem "Need: A Chorale for Black Woman Voices."¹ Several critics gloss its title in a footnote for further reference to the point they are already making, but not one considers the messages inherent within it. Lorde's poem deserves more attention both for its message and for what it does: in addition to pleading for an end to violence against Black women while not blaming Black men for it, it challenges the readers—or in this case, the audience—to participate in the poem as a unified collective voice, actually taking a stand against the kinds of violence that lead to the deaths of the poem's two main figures who speak from beyond the grave.

As its title suggests, this poem is a chorale, or hymn, for Black women's voices. Specifically, it consists of four vocal parts: Lorde herself as "Poet," "Pat" (Patricia Cohen, who, at 21, was bludgeoned to death in Detroit in 1978), "Bobbie" (Bobbie Jean Graham, who was beaten to death in Boston when she was 34, one of twelve Black women murdered there in a three-month period during 1979), and an "All" voice. As the different speakers take turns, the voices become musical. Because Lorde reinforces this music of voices by dividing the poem into four sections, each with at least two voices, the

¹ With the exceptions of McRuer and a brief mention in Brooks, in which he calls the poem a "funeral antiphonal between the ghosts of two Black women and the chorus or congregation of all the living" (271-272); yet he incorrectly asserts that her poem contains the "vehement denunciation of Black men whose spurious 'need' spells destruction" (272), ignoring the central idea of the poem. While I agree that this need does spell destruction for women, it is my intent to argue here that Lorde is not denouncing or fighting against her Black brothers; rather, she is challenging them to love and work together with their Black sisters in an effort to overcome the oppression they (the men)

poem begins to resemble antiphonal singing, which consists of two or more alternating groups (Randel 20). Rather than a strict or traditional antiphonal psalmody, in which the congregation originally sang a short phrase (antiphon) after every two verses, or a responsorial psalmody, where originally the soloist would sing the entire psalm and the congregation respond with a short phrase, this poem-song grows in text and music as Lorde modifies the form. That Lorde chose this form is apt for her subject in that call and response is an Afrocentric mode of song. Vincent B. Leitch, in his gloss of Black aesthetics,² notes several mid-century Black critics who called for music as a form of Black expression, one that was not a part of the “elite Western” literature (337). He writes, “Since the springs of authentic black art were communal music and oral folktale, the new art [poetry] had to return to these sources so as to become an integral part of contemporary black life” (337). Lorde wanted “Need: A Chorale” to be part of contemporary Black life, so she wrote this performance piece to resemble those in religion. This performance piece does not stop at the end of the stage like a play, however; it implicates the audience, who is supposed to feel and see. Gloria T. Hull suggests that Black women’s poetry can be traced to slave spirituals and secular songs, with an “explicit black womanness in some of them” (166).

have suffered at the hands of a white-dominated world and in turn have made Black women to suffer as a result.

² While I appreciate Leitch’s historical undertaking for describing Black Aesthetics, I feel I need to note that he separates Black critics from Black *female* critics, much along the lines of what Barbara Smith and Barbara Christian denounce. He does name, in his eight pages devoted to “Black Feminist Criticism” such notable female critics as Michelle Wallace, Smith, Erlene Stetson, Gloria T. Hull, Christian, Deborah McDowell, Toni Cade Bambara, Mari Evans, and Lorde.

The form of the poem-song, or modified chorale, assigns different roles to each vocal part. Poet, as “preacher,” primarily observes the deplorable state in which women are living. Lorde had originally³ labeled her part as “I”; by renaming herself as “Poet,” placing herself within her rightful position, she brings the poem closer to the African spiritual tradition. As she reflects in her 1981 interview with Karla Hammond, in certain African poetry the poet “is the speaker of tradition’s deepest truths” (11), adding that “‘woman’ and ‘poet’ are synonymous” (17). The speaker of the deepest truths to be revealed in this poem, Lorde reinforces her role and also the connection between the Black spiritual and a chorale.⁴ Hull adds that Lorde “frequently assumes the role of prophetess, crying out for what she calls the most important human movement—‘the right to love and to define each of us ourselves’” (180-81). Poet’s role allows “All,” and thereby her readers, to define themselves in this collective cause.

Bobbie and Pat, given their true names rather than the initials Lorde originally uses for them,⁵ reveal what it is to actually live in this deplorable state. While their stories are specifically related to their own deaths, Lorde does not provide them with voices to serve only themselves; they speak for thousands of abused Black women. As the poem’s

³ The poem was written in 1979 but was first published in *Chosen Poems—Old and New* (1982), 111, revised in 1989 and reprinted in *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New Revised* (1992), 199, and reissued as a pamphlet in 1990 around the time of the “I Am Your Sister” conference in Boston in October, 1990,—a gesture to the continued violence against women that needed readdressing. References to the poem will come from the revised version in *Undersong*, although, incidentally, both volumes position “Need: A Chorale” as the last poem. Lorde commented in the 1990 revision that the alterations were the “result of hearing the poem read aloud several times by groups of women” (*Need* 3)—which is precisely how the poem ought to be read.

⁴ The spiritual is strongly influenced by Protestant hymn-singing, and the chorale is a German Protestant hymn tune used for congregational participation (Randel 479, 96).

⁵ As McRuer concedes, naming is a “central preoccupation” in this poem (276).

dedication states, "For... the hundreds of other mangled Black Women whose nightmares inform these words." The "All" voice brings in the readers or audience, as in a liturgy. Lorde wants this poem to become a religious experience for readers who become, through the act of reading, the audience, creating a much greater force to change this situation. By setting the poem as a chorale, Lorde is trying to evoke an emotional response, as if mere words are no longer effective; the song-like aspects are communal, so by reading this poem and becoming a vocal part of the "All," readers are actively involved in the poem.

Lorde's purpose, however, is more complex than raising awareness of the state of women. Her objective is to further raise awareness of the state of Black men. The oppression they feel from the world at large is what leads them to oppress their own women and women in general.⁶ But the poem is neither a battle cry against white oppression, for Blacks accept this oppression as a fact of life. This twofold approach to the poem further implicates the audience, who might not realize its dual significance, thinking they are speaking out solely against violence against women. This is a unique approach for Lorde, a lesbian feminist—labels which manifest themselves throughout her work, both verse and prose.⁷ She is insisting that without language, all women are

⁶ Georgoudaki, a prolific critical writer of Lorde, writes, in "Audre Lorde: Revising Stereotypes of Afro-American Womanhood," that although Lorde "avoids portraying her male characters in stereotyped roles, she focuses on male domination and violence and female subordination, humiliation, and victimization as basic features of heterosexual relationships. She also protests against the tendency of American society to justify male aggression and blame the victim" (64).

⁷ It is further significant that Lorde is a lesbian talking about heterosexual violence; she could have chosen to discuss male violence toward lesbians, but she chooses to show how *all* women are victims. While, as Hull suggests, Lorde generally writes from a black feminist perspective (180), Black lesbian feminist critic Barbara Smith—to whom I am indebted for describing the necessary ways one ought to approach such authors as Lorde—notes that Black lesbian writers are predominantly published by independent

powerless. She is reaching out here, in a sense doing what she asks of her audience. She is not saying it is primarily a woman's issue, but rather a collective Black issue.⁸ Black men, Lorde has said, internalize the oppressor; they learn the oppression of the white world and can only act and react within that framework:

We must remember that Black males have been the recipient of that evil to the extent that they have internalized it. What is terrible about oppression is that it becomes a part of your consciousness, and you become not only your own oppressor but the *oppressor of the people with whom you once shared a common goal*. Of course, this divide and conquer situation, ever prevalent in the Black community, is very evident. As Black people—male and female—we have to realize that it is not our destiny to repeat white America's mistakes. To the extent that Black men realize that, then they move out of the danger of that seductive trap. To the extent that they don't, they begin to ape the oppressiveness of the white American male.
(Hammond, 1981, 12-13, emphasis added)

Herein lies the inherent message of Lorde's poem: Black men need to break free of this oppressive cycle before they can stop abusing their women.⁹ This is a hortatory poem, exhorting men to stop the violence. Black writer and poet James Baldwin affirmed Lorde's position during a 1983 conversation when he said, "One of the dangers of being a Black American is being schizophrenic.... To be a Black American is in some ways to be

presses, but Lorde is an exception ("Truth," 692)—the point being that Lorde is reaching a broader audience. She is trying to reach the heterosexual women in her audience, as well, to accentuate the "All" feeling of the chorale she has set forth. Smith adds her definition of "feminism," which encompasses what Lorde is doing here: it "struggles to free *all* women" (694, her emphasis).

⁸ Lorde argues for a collective Black struggle against sexism and racism in her essays "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving" (1978), 45, and "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" (1980), 114, both reprinted in *Sister Outsider*.

born with the desire to be white” (“Revolutionary” 72)—and to therefore oppress as do the whites.¹⁰ Lorde is not saying that male sexuality is a bad thing; the real enemy is the white society, which has caused an epidemic of violence of Black males against their own people.

To demonstrate that this oppression is indeed ingrained, Lorde places between the dedication and the poem a nursery rhyme epigram, demonstrating that these male abusive—and, consequently, female oppressive—feelings are learned when men and women are just boys and girls:

*tattle tale tit.
your tongue will be slit
and every little boy in town
shall have a little bit.*

The epigram is directed specifically to a little girl, but it applies to women in general, as shown by the adversaries and the word *tit*. *Tattle tale* implies that the results promised in the rhyme will arise when the girl tattles, thus warning her to keep quiet. For, when she tattles, her *tongue will be slit*, which, in addition to labeling violence, suggests violence of a sexual nature in that it is the tongue to be slit and served to every boy in town. In other words, no one will help her if she complains, and men will destroy her ability to talk. This girl and these boys will grow up to be the women and men about whom Lorde is writing. She specifically addresses the topic of youth in her conversation with Baldwin:

⁹ Keating notes that white men can be of no help, for they have “nothing to offer women”; a white man’s rationality’s “dominant/subordinate model of reality maintains the existing forms of oppression” (30). The responsibility, therefore, rests with the Black man.

¹⁰ In a 1979 interview between Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, Lorde calls the “effects of white racism upon the ways Black people view each other” “racism internalized” (*Sister Outsider* 96).

What I'm interested in getting across to adolescent Black boys [is that] I am not a legitimate target for their anger.... I want to deal with that so our kids will not have to repeat that waste of themselves.... I want those Black kids to know that brute force is not a legitimate way of dealing across sex difference. (74)

Her cry, therefore, the one that implicates her audience, goes further: not only are we crying out against violence against Black women and oppression against Black men but we are also recognizing that these conditions start at an early age. We must stop the cycle there.

The nursery rhyme further suggests that every man will have a piece of a woman who talks back or tells who did the deed of violence against her or others; she is not safe either if she tells or remains silent. Silence, therefore, is a critical concept in this poem.¹¹ The women learn early on that silence does not protect them from men's wrath. It is a double-bind, since speaking out will trigger rage, yet keeping quiet will invite violence. Rather than remain silent, however, Lorde opts to speak. If either route—speech or silence—is going to elicit the same response, she is at least going to voice her feelings in the hope that something may penetrate the learned oppressiveness of her attacker. Yet she realizes that not all women—particularly Black women—have this ability to speak, so the chorale places the words in all our mouths. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Lorde reiterates these sentiments:

I write for these women for whom a voice has not yet existed, or whose voices have been silenced. I don't have

¹¹ Upton, in a biographical review of Lorde, identifies silence as one of her main themes: "silence versus speaking out, the necessity of speaking/writing—speaking/writing for survival, speaking/writing in order to assert the difference that one constitutes as woman, black, and lesbian. Lorde's poems give voice to what has often been taboo, hidden, or ignored" (318), noting "Need: A Chorale" in particular.

the only voice or all of their voices, but they are a part of my voice, and I am a part of theirs.... I write for those women who do not speak, for those who do not have a voice because they / we were so terrified, because we are taught to respect fear more than ourselves. We've been taught that silence would save us, but it won't. (104–105)

Silence is equated throughout the poem with pejorative images. Lorde opens the poem with her own observation that a Black woman's blood is as meaningless as bird feces:

This woman is Black
so her blood is shed into silence
this woman is Black
so her blood falls to earth
like the droppings of birds
to be washed away with silence and rain.

The repetition of the first and third lines shows that *because* the woman is Black, what happens to her has no importance. The tone is sarcastic, yet its meaning resonates with Poet's deeper truth. What is significant is the repeated word *silence* because, as indicated in the nursery rhyme, woman must remain silent.¹² Her blood is shed not only in silence, but *into silence*, or death, and it is *washed away with silence*, indicating that it is ignored by those in a position to help her—those who might notice it, but choose to ignore it.

Woman is essentially erased when her pain is not understood and discussed.

Bobbie's narrative exemplifies exactly how a woman's pain is erased. Her opening stanza relays two accidents that would be considered tragedies were they to happen: *if* you are hit by a truck, "your caved-in chest bears the mark of a tire," and *if* you

¹² Martin notes that part of Lorde's style is these "graphic concrete images" replete with metaphors (289) and that her tone is "for the most part... somber, angry, bitter, didactic" (290). Her use of repetition "allows her the opportunity to create some rather startling and impressive effects" (290).

are struck by a boulder, “your dying is stamped with the print of rock.” These “assailants” will leave behind visible marks (from the tire and the rock), the blame obvious. When the tragedy is domestic, however, it is not so easy to prove or place blame. Bobbie continues with the caution, “But when your boyfriend methodically / beats you to death....” *But* indicates that this is indeed a different scenario from the truck and the boulder. *When* signifies that this is not a conditional chance occurrence or accident; rather, as a Black woman, she can be sure she will be beaten. Lorde’s choice of *methodically* shows that he has done this before; the beating was routine. Further, while it makes little sense that Bobbie could be repeatedly beaten to death, this phrase refers to all Black women who have been attacked, maimed, raped, or killed by Black men. Lorde wants her audience to know these incidents keep happening. More significantly, while Bobbie is being beaten her cries are ignored by neighbors who “don’t want to get involved.” It is not clear if they are white neighbors who cannot be bothered with the plight of a Black woman, but whatever race they are the neighbors’ silence is also connected to the nursery rhyme: don’t tattle or get involved, and you’ll be fine. Silence, however, does not protect the victim.¹³

This non-involvement is taken further when Bobbie continues telling that when this beating takes place, the police “call it a crime of ‘passion’ / not a crime of hatred.” They refuse to acknowledge that beating to death should not be a normal activity among Black couples, that it is ingrained hate from the Black man towards the Black woman,

¹³ See “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (1977), 40, in *Sister Outsider*, where Lorde writes, “My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you... [because] we were never meant to survive.... But... by living and speaking

hate that the police and society have driven into him, that is causing this violence. With no efforts from her neighbors or police, Bobbie died with “a man’s heelprint / upon my chest,” much like the mark left behind the tire and boulder—as if these three assailants were on the same level. The heelprint is the mark of silence, the evidence of the tragedy that is being ignored, and so another woman will fall victim.

Silence plays a multi-layered role. In addition to giving voice to the ghosts of Pat and Bobbie, Poet, in a responsorial with Bobbie and “All,” attempts to free speech from the “Dead Black women [who] haunt the black maled streets.” The statement is a paradox because it is really the men who haunt and stalk the streets, making them fearful places for women, but the women of whom Poet speaks are the anonymous dead and silenced whom men have murdered—the very ones Lorde is attempting to describe in this poem. The pun on “black maled” is interesting because obviously Lorde means streets peopled by Black males (notice, however, that she does not capitalize “Black” in reference); blackmail also refers to the opening nursery rhyme: if women will tattle, men will harm, rape, and kill them. Black males are essentially blackmailing Black women who walk their streets—yet, their price is more than money. Blackmail signifies that the women will pay the price with blood. The idea of payment ties into the line, “paying our cities’ secret and familiar tithes of blood.” A tithe is a religious tax of one-tenth or, loosely, any ratable tax, so in other words, to keep these crimes secret the men are paying a tax to every city’s officials with the blood of female victims. They are *secret and familiar* because the officials know what is happening to their cities’ women, yet choose to do nothing.

those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding... we can survive” (41–43).

Because the cities condone this violence—or at least do not do enough to prevent or punish it—women’s blood is now on a sliding scale of payment. Lorde spoke of this “nameless” violence in her 1980 interview with Karla Hammond: “Enforced silence, the inability to speak, the refusal to speak is a very violent silence, where you know there is a great deal happening but it’s not spoken” (18).

Silence works on another level for Poet when she makes an honest statement: “I do not even know all their names.” She seems remorseful about this (*even* and *all*), yet she is making a statement that there are far too many victims for all their names to be known. If all their names could be remembered the way people remember the names of assassinated U.S. presidents, she suggests, then perhaps there would not be such a problem. Again, in the 1980 Hammond interview, Lorde discusses the importance of Black women gaining their identity by naming themselves because until they do so they do not exist in anybody’s eyes; by naming themselves, however, and not letting the world do it (with pejorative stereotypes, for instance), “it becomes a survival situation” (19). Poet further emphasizes her point using paradoxes that at first sound sarcastic, but on a closer look really comprise the truths that Black women’s deaths do not matter: they are not “noteworthy,” “threatening,” or “glamorous enough / to decorate the evening news,” nor are they “important enough to be fossilized / between right-to-life pickets / and a march against gun control.” The significance of *fossilized* is that the issue of violence against Black women has never been dealt with, so it can never become the old news, like the right-wing abortion movement and the left-wing movement for gun control. Her use of *right-to-life pickets* is highly ironic; while these people are picketing for a fetus’s right

to live, they are ignoring Black women's rights. Referring to gun control shows how guns can be used in violence against women; they also signify any weapon, including the penis, used against women. Like the anti-abortion people, gun control lobbyists do not target violence against Black women as a main reason for limiting gun use. Black women are invisible to the world. Mary K. DeShazer notes that women of color have continually had to "proclaim their centrality in any struggle for liberation, indeed to assert their very presence. There they have become warriors, raging against their own invisibility" (264).

Lorde, as Poet, pleads with Black men to stop the violence in terms she feels they will understand: ironically, war. By putting the abuse in male terms, she hopes to elicit their understanding of the destruction they are at once object of and cause—again, not to place blame on them, but to clarify that the cities' ignorance of this violence is really a war on its women (parenthetical comments [italicized in brackets] and line breaks added):

we are refuse [*remnants, garbage*] in this city's war [*on women*] /
with no medals [*of honor*] no exchange of prisoners
[*because only women are harmed, not men—and prisoners have to survive to be up for exchange*] /
no packages from home [*as consolation; no amenities or niceties to ease our fight*] no time off [*ever*] /
for good behavior [*because "goodness" goes unrecognized by men*] /
no victories [*for women*]. No victors [*because they are all dead*].

The analogy becomes, then, a challenge, a rallying cry, and above all an elegy for war veterans, namely, the fallen women. Since the object of war is to win, to gain a victory, Lorde sets off the words *victory* and *victors* on a line of their own, both followed by periods, to emphasize the negative words *no*. This loss, however, is not just for women; it

is a loss for Black men as well, because there can be no victor in a battle between members of the same side. The war analogy is a last-ditch effort for Poet to make men understand that there are no winners in this war. Black males fighting against Black females are really fighting a war against themselves, a war of attrition that will inevitably destroy them both.

Bobbie likewise brings out the war imagery. She compares herself lying in “midnight blood” (indicating both Black and night) “like a rebel city / bombed into submission.” Like innocent civilians who do not deserve to be bombed, she is a woman who has been annihilated without need—or without negotiation. At the same time, “our enemies still sit in power / and judgment / over us all.” Of note is the wordplay in the first line: the enemies—the men and the city officials who do nothing to prevent or punish violence—“still sit in power,” but they also *sit still* in power; i.e., they do nothing. They pass judgment over what will happen to these women, like a Higher Being, forcing women to always be at their mercy. Like the people who cause bombing, the city officials are always safe. They are in league with another country’s enemy.

In her conversation with Baldwin Lorde clarifies that Black women have to realize that it is not men’s fault when they act violently toward them. “It is not the Black cat’s fault who sees me and tries to mug me.... It’s his *responsibility* but it’s not his *fault*.... I got to know that it’s not him who is my enemy.... One’s got to see what drove both of us into those streets” (130). When confronted by Baldwin saying she is blaming men, she is forthright:

I’m not blaming the Black man; I’m saying don’t shed my blood.... I’m saying if my blood is being shed, at some

point I'm gonna have a legitimate reason to take up a knife
and cut your damn head off, and I'm trying not to do it.
(130)

Again she denounces people on the same side fighting each other. Here she clarifies what she leaves unsaid in the poem: women will fight back if men keep pushing them. By writing this poem and calling her audience into action Lorde is already fighting. But women recognize that the two genders have to work together to combat their common enemy of white oppression.¹⁴ She continues to Baldwin: "There is a larger structure, a society with which we are in total and absolute war.... We must be able to use each other's forces to fight [the dragon] together, because we need each other" (130).

"All" has an opportunity to make all women's voices heard in a short response: "How many other deaths / do we live through daily / pretending / we are alive?" We are not really alive when we fear to go out or to even speak, when no one cares for our welfare. Reflecting Poet's earlier lament ("I do not even know all their names"), we do not know how many deaths there are because the numbers are insignificant to the people who could really protect us. The use of *daily* deaths that we *live* through shows it is not just a few isolated instances. It is everywhere, everyday. We live through death and therefore possess no identity. Ekaterini Georgoudaki writes that Lorde "equates silence and namelessness with lack of identity, non-existence, and powerlessness, and she connects self-definition with existence, survival, and power in a hostile world" (51). With this poem, however, Lorde wants to equate action with a collective Black identity.

¹⁴ Georgoudaki comments that "black woman's sexual devaluation and exploitation inside or outside her community originally came from the white racist-sexist society" (64).

The two dead women in the poem attempt to offer answers of their own for the brutality they suffered. Pat asks her killer what enemy of his did she look like to make him attack her: “what unchallenged enemy / took on my sweet brown flesh / within your eyes.” In other words, he wanted to challenge someone else. Next to her is her “bleeding son.” His hands are “bloody” because he is going to turn into such a man: he is “decaying into my brother / who stalked me with a singing hammer.” *Decaying* is an apt choice to show the degeneration of a young Black boy as he grows into an abuser of women. It is always someone’s son who grows into a figure to fear. *Brother* refers, as elsewhere in the poem, to any Black man, any harmer of women, but it is also ironic because of the family relationship of Black people. *Stalked* signifies that Black men are naturally the stalkers of Black women. Her next stanza opens with the line, “*I need you*. For what?”—the italics indicating that this statement comes from the man who killed her, and all men, and the question is her response. She is again incredulous, insinuating, what do you need me for since all you men do is abuse women? She is trying to unearth that he needs her to feel like a whole man.¹⁵ Baldwin posits some very crucial questions regarding the Black male and his sense of worth:

Do you know what happens to a man when he’s ashamed of himself when he can’t find a job? when his socks stink? when he can’t protect anybody? when he can’t do anything? Do you know what happens to a man when he can’t face his children because he’s ashamed of himself? (133)¹⁶

¹⁵ Psychiatrists Grier and Cobbs note in their book, *Black Rage*, that males learn early on that “a certain amount of aggression and assertion is manly,” which is also associated with money making and power—a power that “has been denied the black man” (60). The Black man is still experiencing psychological conditions from slavery, they write.

¹⁶ Hymowitz and Weissman, in their *A History of Women in America*, support Baldwin’s sentiments when they note that two forces were at work to cause the conflict between Black men and women: one was the idea, created by white social scientists, that Black

Georgoudaki affirms Baldwin, when she writes that Lorde “discusses the black woman’s devaluation in the black community within the context of her historical oppression in a racist society dominated by white male privilege and white male ideals of womanhood” (48).

Bobbie and Pat represent any and all woman(en). They continue the cycle of questioning need, asking whether this domination and abuse of women is a Black male trait: “Do you *need* me submitting to terror...” They question whether these violent acts are *necessary*, using the word “need” several times in minimal lines. Finally, “All” speaks up to combine what has been written in all parts of the poem, particularly Bobbie’s first monologue in which she describes her death:

Do you need me imprinting upon our children
the destruction our enemies print upon you
like a Mack truck or an avalanche
destroying us both
carrying their hatred back home
you relearn my value
in an enemy coin.

women created a “matriarchy” that therefore “castrated” the males; the other was the myth that “liberated” Black women had to work to support their unemployed husbands (337). They clarify that Black women did not work to supplement the family income; rather, they were the family income, so many people distorted this fact to mean that the women took over. White society denied Black males access to jobs to support their families and therefore “denied a feeling of manhood”; women had to work because their men weren’t given jobs, and in reality, the women don’t run anything (337). Grier and Cobbs add, “The simplistic view of the black family as a matriarchy is an unfortunate theme repeated too often by scholars who should know better” (61). Georgoudaki notes Michelle Wallace in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, who reveals some of the marks of misogyny from Black men to their women: they were excluding Black women, they maintained the “Anglo-American middle-class ideal of beauty and womanhood,” and they saw Black women in certain pejorative stereotypes, which were originally created in the white slave society, such as “domineering,” “masculine,” “Amazon-like matriarch castrating the black man,” a “monster,” and a “sex toy” (48).

Again is the word *need*, and again the use of an (im)print(ing) metaphor for the violence that leaves its mark,¹⁷ like the tire or the heel print. Here, however, “the destruction of enemies” leaves no visible mark except the violence it brings out against women—and this will leave its “invisible” mark upon sons who will eventually commit the same offenses. *Children* refers back to Bobbie’s son. The first line asks, do you (man) need to hurt me (woman) to give an impression to kids about what your life is like?¹⁸ Bobbie’s original descriptions are here condensed to “Mack truck” and “avalanche”—the latter word much upgraded from boulder to demonstrate how the situation is increasingly more terrible as it goes along. The use of *avalanche* to replace the single *boulder* from Bobbie’s original monologue has two effects: it evokes the image of more than one boulder in a *snowy* avalanche—i.e., white society (predominantly in the positions of city officials, who comprise “enemies”) is crushing Black men *and* women. What society does to Black men (oppression) destroys both Black men and women, since they are the ones turning around and unleashing their frustrations on their women. Lorde has said, “The primary obscenity that is crushing not only black people but this country and the world into dust... is called white patriarchal power” (Rowell 92). (Im)print(ing) runs through this stanza, transforming to take on an additional meaning—that of minting money—with the words “value” (also a pun on what the Black woman means to him emotionally) and “coin.” More significantly, what is left on these women is the print of violence, not of art. The “printing” of these words, however, gives Lorde and other

¹⁷ DeShazer feels that Lorde “relies on repetition to strengthen her audience’s resolve” (262).

women the last word. His art is to print violence; Poet's art is print—she is tattling, in effect, in retaliation.

Bobbie reiterates Pat's question, asking, "And what do you need me for, brother," which again emphasizes the predator as a Black male and the futility of a man needing a woman only to serve as a punching bag. She is saying he is her brother and he does not recognize their true relationship. She is aggressive in her questioning, asking more specifically what her attacker (and all men) could need her for: "to move for you feel for you die for you?" Each act increases in order of sacrifice, ending with the ultimate blood sacrifice. She asserts, "We have a grave need for each other," with the obvious pun on *grave*, meaning they need each other so desperately in this cruel world. Yet even with this need for her, his "eyes are thirsty / for vengeance"; the synaesthesia of eyes thirsting helps show the absurdity of his wreaking vengeance on her as the cause of his oppression. Again, Bobbie is pleading that if they need each other so desperately to face racism, why fight each other? Society is a danger to them both. As Angela Davis says, "As Black women, we must liberate ourselves and provide the impetus for the liberation of Black men" (186). Lorde shares these themes in her essay "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,"¹⁹ which she discusses in an interview with Charles H. Rowell: "Why do we allow ourselves to be used as the primary weapon against each other? How do we make necessary power out of negative surroundings? Within the context of a hostile

¹⁸ Grier and Cobbs write that the mother "interprets the society to the children... [but] the child must know that the white world is dangerous and that if he does not understand its rules it may kill him" (61).

¹⁹ In *Sister Outsider* 145.

environment, how do we provide ourselves with what we need? How do we, in effect, make ourselves recognize how important we are to each other?" (91)

Pat returns, asking her attacker if he is satisfied now that she is dead: "did terror run out of you like curdled fury"—*curdled* because rotten, sour, cowardly. She asks about his manhood, which is a man's identity: "And did your manhood lay in my skull / like a netted fish / or did it spill out like milk or blood / or impotent fury..." Literally, his manhood is the hammer, but it is also a euphemism for his penis, like the guns. As a netted fish, he is trying to survive out of his element. He too is caught, which is why he must vent his anger; he is caught out of his context like a fish out of water. Spilled milk refers to semen, and calling his fury impotent seems to answer the question she seeks: he is impotent and afraid of woman's sexuality, so he is angered and must control her in another way to prove his masculinity. By wielding the hammer as power, he asserts himself. Pat finally increases the emotion in the scenario with heavier words by asking if, when his "sledgehammer clove [her] bone / to let the light out," did he touch the light, or her life, her spirit, as it left her body? She wants him not only to face what he did by using a powerful word like *clove* and upgrading the hammer to sledgehammer—which requires more strength and power to use effectively—but to again question his manhood. Was he anxious to release her spirit, since he could not understand it? The choice of "clove" shows that they should cleave to each other, have the love and connection of marriage rather than fear and hatred.

This idea of love, of a brother- and sisterhood, is what Lorde seeks. Joan Martin feels one of Lorde's "favorite" themes is love; "the absence of love is treated with the

same power and intensity as love secured” (281). “Need: A Chorale,” while on the surface appearing to condemn Black men, really cries for understanding between the genders. Pat’s narrative provides an example of this need. We learn she is the single mother of a small boy, a recluse until her boy started asking about his father, which “made me feel / like connecting to the blood again”—blood meaning Black blood. She is hopeful that she might meet someone with whom she could *move on*. She does not write, “move in together”; “move on” signifies moving away and leaving negative emotions behind. She is ready to move out of her solitude and find a man to be with again, someone to “help make the [American] dream real” of, perhaps, a two-parent household. Her search, however, leads to this violent act: “he put a hammer through my head.” The idea of a hammer not just striking, but going *through*, a person’s skull is gut-wrenching. Instead of the artistic experience she had expected (she answered an acting ad), she was to be killed playing a role she never expected in his own senseless play. She sought a role in harmony with a Black man, but the drama in her mind was different from the role he wrote.

Bobbie echoes Pat’s sentiments, illustrating the arresting power of the male presence, both known and unknown. She essentially asks, how can she be alive/be strong/be active/do anything when she is afraid to walk outside at night, “lest I lose my power,” and afraid to speak up in her defense, “lest my tongue be slit”? By going outside, she loses all protection home offers, yet indoors with her boyfriend she is vulnerable, where she should be protected by him. She concludes referring to her “bleeding life,” which represents death, or the letting go of life—which is how Bobbie is forced to live

when she cannot even go outside or feel safe in her own home. Bobbie continues with the phrase “misplaced hatred,” reinforcing that she—and all women—did not deserve the beating death she received. The particulars of her death, however, do not matter because every Black woman harmed or killed hurts them all. She reiterates the question of a man’s supposed need of a woman by repeating “you need me” three times, like “a broken drum.” She is trying to convince him that he does need her; they need each other to live and to love, though Lorde admits, “love is often pain” (Tate 107). Lorde said in her Tate interview that men “keep women around to do their feeling for them” because they have suppressed their capacity to feel, and until they

begin to develop that capacity within themselves, they will always be at a loss and will always need to victimize women. The message I have for black men is that it is to their detriment to follow this pattern. Too many black men do precisely that, which results in violence along sexual lines.... [and] gives birth to the kind of hostility that will destroy us. (107)

She seeks solidarity rather than a rift between the two genders. They need each other.

The final part of the poem is a call-response between Poet and “All,” the guide and the flock. Poet simply states, “I am wary of need that tastes like destruction.” Obviously she is concerned and tired that destruction and hate—rather than love—is a human need, yet the yoking together of *taste* and *destruction* calls attention to the latter word. It has moved beyond a basic need when the man hungers for the woman’s destruction. “All” then repeats, but with a line break after *need* to emphasize that this need is not a healthy one.

Poet's second stanza bursts through the world of the poem and steps into reality: "The simplest part of this poem / is the truth in each one of us / to which it is speaking." By calling attention to the fact that this is a poem, Lorde can clearly state its mission, as if participants in the performance have missed it. She addresses a collective womanhood (*each one of us*), emphasizing that the stories of Patricia Cohen and Bobbie Jean Graham are not individual. The poem is *speaking to* the truth within each of us. "I want my poems... to engage, and to empower people to speak, to strengthen themselves into who they most want and need to be and then to act, to do what needs being done," Lorde has said (Rowell 94). The truth is that the knowledge we possess is ignored by city governments. Unlike those "blind" officials, however, and the men who commit the crimes, women will not—cannot—simply sit by and watch; yet facing the truth is not a simple task: "How much of this truth / can I bear / to see / and still live / unblinded?" Having been born almost blind, Lorde is very conscious of sight; when the terror of things is blinding, the Poet, as speaker of truths, must see clearly. As a "Black, Lesbian, Feminist, warrior poet,"²⁰ she turns this truth—the pain suffered by women—into a battle cry: "How much of this pain can I use?" DeShazer adds that for Lorde, "the term *warrior* evokes centuries of history of African women's resistance to white authorities and other forces of suppression" (266). The centuries of resistance can now end. Lorde finishes with a line from a poem by Barbara Deming—a civil rights activist in Georgia who was imprisoned in 1964 and wrote *Prison Notes* as a record of her time in jail—which echoes

²⁰ See Lorde, *Need* 102, among several other sources.

Bobbie's earlier voice: "*We cannot live without our lives.*"²¹ Then Poet transforms into a collective "All" and repeats, breaking the line at "live," to emphasize that women cannot live proper, healthy lives as long as they are forced to live in fear.

"Need: a Chorale for Black Woman Voices" is more than a poem. It is an elegy sung for the women who have fallen on the battlefield of domestic and street violence. However, people do not want to hear of violence and blood in their art—and this is why Lorde has chosen a song of voices to present women's plight. Because this is a warning in addition to an elegy, it will make people listen. It warns that Black women are not going to take this violence lying down. They are ready to fight. But it also tells men that women can redeem them through their love, not their blood. The message is men, we are your family, not your enemy; we need to work through this together. This poem takes the fallen women's memories with the intent of using them to keep others from destruction.

²¹ Lorde wrote in the preface to her 1990 revised version of this poem that after the twelve Black women were killed in Boston, there was a rally of Women of Color (straight and lesbian), who marched behind a banner with Deming's slogan (3). McRuer notes that this action reinforced the collective identity of the marching women, Deming, Lorde, and all women (278).

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