ABOVE THE WIND
An Interview with Audre Lorde

by Charles H. Rowell

This interview was conducted by telephone between Charlottesville, Virginia, and St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands, during the morning of August 29, 1990.

ROWELL: Here on the mainland of the U.S.A., there are those of us who miss seeing and talking with you, and hearing you read your work. And we are concerned about you in your new environment. Will you talk about your stay in your new home in the U.S. Virgin Islands? How has it been? Why did you go there? Is being a writer there the same as being a writer on the mainland?

LORDE: Being a poet here is a very different experience from being a poet on the mainland, but poets become part of any community out of which they operate, because poetry grows out of the poet experiencing the worlds through which she moves. St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands is a very different environment from New York City, from Staten Island. Why did I come here? After three separate bouts with cancer it became very clear to me that I had to change my environment, that I needed a situation where I could continue my work for as long as I was blessed to continue it, but without having to face the pressures of New York. I needed to live my life where stepping out each day was not like going to war. Not that we are not always involved in the war which continues; it will continue until we are all free. But on the level of locks on the door, dealing with subways, traffic, winter cold, shoveling snow—I no longer had the physical stamina to do that as well as my own work. These are some of the reasons I had to leave the Northeast.

Coming to the U.S. Virgin Islands was a combination of many things. I was raised, Charles, in a West Indian household; my parents came from Barbados and Grenada. I talk about this in Zami. As children, in New York City, we were raised to believe that home was somewhere else. Home was Grenada or Barbados. My parents had planned to come to the U.S.A. for a little while, make some money and then go back home. That dream never materialized for them, but they raised us with the idea we were just sojourners in this place. There was an American culture, there were American people, but they were not us. We were just visitors, and someday we would return home. I think that was both an asset and a liability for me when I was growing up. I have always had this sense that the Caribbean was a place where someday I would live.

A group of Black women called the Sojourner Sisters invited me down to St. Croix in 1980, for a conference on violence against women, and I was instrumental in bringing about the formation of the St. Croix Women’s Coalition, a counseling and advocacy community group focused upon domestic violence. I read my poem “Need, a Chorale for Black Women’s Voices”

Callaloo 23.1 (2000) 52-63
at the conference. I returned almost yearly to meet with these women, and then to take part in the First Conference of Caribbean Women Writers, held in 1986 in St. Croix and organized by the Sojourner Sisters. I had a chance to come back here after my second cancer surgery in 1987, and I decided this was where I would like to live and continue my work. God knows the war continues here in many different faces.

This is a Black Caribbean island which exists in a frankly colonial relationship to the United States, and the issues this raises for us as Blacks and as people of color, anti-racist and anti-imperialist, cannot be underestimated. The Virgin Islands has a considerable, although relative, power that is not being used; at the same time, we need help. That involves strengthening our Caribbean ties, and at the same time, using the fact that we are citizens of one of the most powerful countries in the world, and a country that stands on the wrong side of every liberation struggle on earth! When I say we, I mean the indigenous people of these islands as well as those of us who have chosen to make the Virgin Islands home.

ROWELL: Will you be more specific about how living in the U.S. Virgin Islands differs from living on the mainland?

LORDE: As a Black woman, an African–Caribbean American woman, there are certain realities of our battles here that are similar to those of many others who are part of the African Diaspora.

The U.S. Virgin Islands is a part of the Caribbean. We are also for better or ill—and for the most part ill—supposedly part of the United States; we are a “territory,” which is a polite word for a colony. The U.S. Post Office, when it’s being really honest, refers to us, the Virgin Islands, as “minor outlying islands.” In reality, we exist in a colonial relationship to the States and the benefits which accrue from that relationship must be weighed against the severe alienation and exploitation which occurs.

Those of us who come here to live seeking a Caribbean environment, or a black English-speaking society, have several political and emotional adaptations to make. First, as Black people on the continental U.S., we have become used to considering ourselves part of the mainstream—that is to say, it matters on the national stage, or at least in the national media, what happens in New York or L.A., even to Black people. In September 1989, when Hurricane Hugo wreaked Charleston, S.C., that news hit you, in Kentucky, and in California, and the people in Idaho. That’s true for Florida, and Detroit as well. But when Hurricane Hugo smashed the “minor outlying islands” totally destroying the homes and livelihood of 66,000 people, when our communities were in upheaval, that was not of particular interest to Detroit, Chicago, California, or New York. And Black people in those places don’t realize that these are Black communities that were decimated.

Now you can say that one of the functions of this is to teach us a certain amount of humility. That may or may not be true. The point is, what happens on these islands is directly involved with what is going on with Black people on the mainland and all over the world. I am speaking politically and economically as well as socially. For example, how many people are aware that on this tiny Caribbean island is the largest oil refinery in the Western hemisphere, Hess Oil of the Virgin Islands? Larger than their refinery in Jersey, larger than the one in Texas. What does that mean? What does it mean that two days after Hugo leveled St. Croix, when there was no electricity, no telephone, no water, no food, no diapers, when 98 percent of the dwellings on this island were totally destroyed, the United States government came onto this island with MPs
and U.S. Marshals and the F.B.I., and immediately guarded Hess Oil? What they first brought down were not emergency disaster relief supplies, but M-16s and military personnel. The U.S. military takeover of St. Croix reminded me of nothing so much as the U.S. military invasion of Grenada.

Now Hess Oil is in the process of literally ramming through the territorial government of the Virgin Islands an okay to build a catalytic cracker on this island. This was first voted down, then re-passed! The reason Hess wants to build a catalytic cracker on St. Croix is because it cannot build it any other place on the continental U.S. at this point, because of the environmental danger and safety concerns surrounding this kind of operation to produce cheap gasoline from crude oil. This island measures twenty-six by seven miles. The last time a catalytic cracker blew, reportedly, it sent up a fireball that traveled 500 miles.

So these are some of the living issues that we deal with on this island. Meanwhile, Hess Oil pays local workers here one-third less than it pays imported Continentals for the same job, and there is no labor statute to prohibit them from doing so. And rum is cheaper than fresh milk. Whether it's oil and land in California and Georgia or creating an oil plantation out of St. Croix, the issues of exploitation by a white militaristic economy are essentially the same, although expressed differently in different locales. How can we use our differences to work together better against the exploitation and destruction of our children, our land, our resources, our planet? And, as hyphenated people, and members of the African Diaspora, what is our relationship to the indigenous peoples of those lands we call home?

ROWELL: I want to go back to a part of my first question. Given the context you've described, will you say more about what you've discovered as the differences—and similarities—between being a poet in St. Croix and being a poet on the mainland of the U.S.A.? I'm referring largely to audience. What are the collective responses to the poet—or the artist in general—in St. Croix? Does he/she have any special responsibilities to the society? To the people?

LORDE: Being a poet is not merely a question of producing poems. Being a poet means that I have a certain way of looking at the world, involving myself in the community around me. I am committed to work, and I see myself as a poet moving through all of the things that I do. The Coalition for Equal Justice is a group I am currently working with, trying to focus attention, in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo, upon some of the very distinct and dangerous trends that are developing within the social, material, and economic structure of these islands, and St. Croix in particular. For example, over-development, increasing racial tensions, what I was just speaking about the role of Hess Oil—what do these issues have to do with being a poet? There is a poem in everything I lend myself to, and more than one. Poetry grows out of the textures of life. Local workers may or may not read poetry, but they know very, very well what it means to be paid half as much for the same kind of dangerous work as Hess Oil pays white workers sent down from the States. Now, being able to capture the feeling and sense and the experience of that worker and how I feel being part of a community that tolerates that—this is something I can evoke in poetry. That is what I mean when I say poetry is part and parcel of who I am, and how I experience my world around me; it is also part and parcel of the world in which I move. I am now part of the U.S. colonial community, as well as part of the international community of people of color. I am also part of the Black women's community. I am part of many communities. Poetry is a way of articulating and bringing together the energies of difference.
within those communities, so those energies can be used by me and others to better do what must be done.

This physical material world that I function in right now affects my poetry. I was part of a St. Croix women’s art show called “Risking a Somersault.” It was arranged by a German woman here who runs a cafe. So many of the white artists who come down here, come with the attitude that “this is American paradise”; they become totally subsumed by the luscious blooms and the sea, the sand, the sunset, the trees. It’s a very physically seductive and beautiful place, but until you deal with the realities within the environment (because that’s a part of your art) you’re really doing something superficial. What Ulla wanted to do with the art show was focus upon some of the real concerns of St. Croix. Now one of the wonderful things about these islands (since the community is smaller) is that if you have an art show everybody comes. Culture is part of life, or the life of your next door neighbor, so you stop by the show. I did a couple of poems out of my experiences here. And I realized as I did them that one of the things about how the poems were becoming was a consideration of size or length. We’re going to have poetry in a public place, and this is one of the primary ways in which poetry gets to many people here, because a lot of people don’t buy books. I thought: I want these poems taught and read, so I’ve got to do them, not on four or five or six pages, but literally on the side of a poster. These were my first truly Cruzan poems.

ROWELL: You affixed a note upfront in your Chosen Poems—Old and New (1982). You wrote, “Here are the words of some of the women I have been, am being still, will come to be. The time surrounding each poem is an unspoken image.” You say so much in that statement. As I read it, part of what you say has to do with what poetry does for you—and, ultimately, for society at large: how poetry functions for you and how it might function for your readers.

LORDE: I’m so happy to hear those words, Charles. I don’t remember writing them, but as I listen to them, they’re like an echo that I agree with so much, and I say to myself, “Oh my, did I write like that then?” But yea.

ROWELL: Will you say more about that statement? It is, I think, very important for those of us who study your poetry.

LORDE: A poem grows out of the poet’s experience, in a particular place and a particular time, and the genius of the poem is to use the textures of that place and time without becoming bound by them. Then the poem becomes an emotional bridge to others who have not shared that experience. The poem evokes its own world.

I’m thinking about the poems that I wrote while I was in Germany. I’m involved in an experimental cancer treatment program, and it has been quite successful for me. I go regularly to Berlin, every year. One of the things that I’ve done during those times has been to become actively involved with the Afro-German movement. There are so many people who think “what?” when they hear that. In other words, what do you mean—Black German war babies? That’s the whole point; they’re not war babies. The recent changes in eastern Europe, the Wall going down—this has very direct implications for Black people, and other people of color in eastern Germany. Afro-Europeans are distinct minorities. We, as African Americans, need to recognize that, and make contact with our brothers and sisters in Europe. We need to begin to
ask some very essential questions about where our strengths and our differences intersect. We need to do this as people in the African Diaspora, and we need to know this as the “hyphenated people” upon whom, I believe, hope for the world’s future rests. That is a consciousness that continues, when I am in other places, but it is highlighted when I am operating in Europe.

Here in the Virgin Islands is where I’ve chosen to live. I feel that the strength, the beauty, the peace of life in St. Croix is part of my defense kit; it’s a part of what keeps me alive and able to fight on. Being surrounded by Black people’s faces, some of whom I like, some of whom I don’t like, some of whom I get along with, some of whom I don’t get along with, is very affirming. Basically there is a large and everpresent Blackfullness to the days here that is very refreshing for me, although frustrating sometimes, because as in so many places, we have so many problems with how we treat each other. But that’s part and parcel of learning to build for the future.

ROWELL: Will you talk further about your statement, which I quoted above, in relation to some of your poems? Your collection New York Head Shop and Museum is one of my favorites. And the two poems from that collection which immediately speak to me are “New York City 1970)” (it opens the volume) and “To My Daughter the Junkie on a Train.”

LORDE: “New York City 1970,” the poem that begins New York Head Shop and Museum, gives me chills. It was so prophetic. You know, Charles, I have done a revision of Chosen Poems. I did it by candlelight, partly to keep myself sane during the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo when we had no lights, no power, no water, no contact with the rest of the world. It was life on a very basic and elemental level, compounded by the enormous amount of hostility directed toward this island from both the mainland and the U.S. occupying forces. The revision was an interesting project. I set myself to revising the poems rather than rewriting them, so, of course, I found myself back into the feeling of the time each was written. I had to project myself back into the poem in order to come out with, not the poem I would write in 1990, but “the” poem that Audre wrote in those days, heightened in that person’s voice. You see what the literary problem was? I found it a very good exercise. The themes I dealt with then are still pertinent today, and the concrete particulars are illuminating. I wrote the poem you mention in 1970. In re-writing, I remembered the ways in which I felt myself committed to the city then for a period of time. I thought about my children, who I had raised with those hopes. I thought of the anguish of New York City twenty years ago, and the anguish that is still New York City today. But we are developing new ways of handling that anguish, and time will tell whether we are learning fast enough.

“My Daughter the Junkie on a Train” is for me an essential question, still: what is our relationship to our bruised and damaged children? I see crack invading the streets of downtown Christiansted, and our young people kept off-center by the poor quality of the education that is offered them here, and I see how they, too, become “junk.” How do we involve ourselves with the young people of our community, of our society? This question is crucial for the survival of ourselves and our kids and our world. Whether that’s a question of giving poetry workshops in high schools here, which is what I am trying to do, or whether it involves counseling teen-aged mothers and fathers or taking to the streets for a new high school, it’s got to be done. These are our essentials. How do we involve ourselves in the future? It’s not as simple as saying, “Oh well, you know, the Black family,” because you have to think about how
we define, and keep redefining, the Black family, so that concept becomes relative to the needs of all the young people growing up in our community.

ROWELL: And then there's "Blackstudies," the poem that ends New York Head Shop and Museum. I want to read parts of it:

While I sit choosing the voice
in which my children hear my prayers
above the wind
they will follow the black roads out of my hands
unencumbered by the weight of guilty secrets
by remembered sorrows
they will use legend to shape their own language
make it ruler
measuring the distance between my hungers
and their purpose.
I am afraid
They will discard my most ancient nightmare
where the fallen gods become demon
instead of dust.

The final stanza of "Blackstudies" reads:

I step into my self
opening the door
leap groundward
wondering
what shall they carve for weapons
what shall they grow for food.

Will you talk about this poem?

LORDE: Hearing you read that is such a moving experience for me. I have just been reading about some young Black poets in the Village Voice. Barbara Smith sent me the clipping. Their work and vision sounds truly exciting. I have not seen these young people, but when I read this article my heart just swelled. One young woman named Malkia is fifteen years old and politically active. She writes, "Who's gonna go to school with me. I'm gonna get beat up tomorrow." And, I'm thinking, that's who I'm talking about in "Blackstudies." These are the poems I'd want to be writing if I were her age today, and I feel like these are my children. Children who are speaking. I believe that I'm part of their consciousness and part of what moves them to where they are. They are beautiful and embattled, and they know it. So that's the kind of thing that I was talking about in "Blackstudies." I'm saying, are you willing to put all of yourself on the line, and let the young people pick up whatever pieces they need, and run with it? The young people don't have to become you, they have to use something you've got that
they need. That’s what we have to teach them to do. But that requires a commitment (and openness) which, at the time that poem was written, was a very, very difficult one to make.

To say in the early 1970s, about most of Black Studies, “so far, what we are considering represents a limited vision, we’ve got to be more adventurous, more imaginative; we need to teach blackness, not just in terms of history, not just the terms of who did what or when. Blackness is an approach, a way of taking in the world, and a way of giving back what we get. We need to teach Black everything; we need to teach Black mathematics, we need to teach Black cooking, we need . . . Blackness is an essential way of looking at life. And that’s what Black Studies should be about from the ‘get.’” Nowadays we talk about an Afrocentric epistemology. But in those days it was harder, without the language, only the sense, the feeling. When you said it, it sounded like a much longer journey was going to be necessary, and many of us weren’t ready for the long haul. A lot of black people in power were not willing to hear it.

In 1970, some of us in Black Studies wanted to discuss the dangers of a limited vision, and the necessity for broadening the definition and scope of Black Studies, if we were to make any genuine impact on the lives of our students and our children. We were accused of being too radical, beside the point, not contributing to nation time; we were called traitors or feminists; we were called liars. History has proven that there was something in what we were saying. Black is Beautiful, but a black machine is still only a black machine, and a Black fascist is a Black fascist.

When I read a poet like Essex Hemphill, my heart just comes up in my mouth and does an African folk-dance on the back of my throat. I think, Yea that’s what the brother is doing—he’s making something that has never been made or said before. He gives me hope and strength. That is what “Blackstudies” is all about. Carrying it forward. I love the sense of continuity and growth, Charles. It’s so deeply exciting to me.

There’s going to be a conference in October [1990] held in Boston. It’s a chance for people to come together and discuss some of the real issues and themes within my work, how they have been touched by them, and how those themes can best be put into practice, in their communities, in their lives. We are, after all, moving into a new century. What new structures can we build? What old ones can we reconstruct?

ROWELL: In *Chosen Poems*, you also tell us that you did not include any poems from your volume entitled *The Black Unicorn* (1978) “because the wholeness of that sequence/conversation cannot yet be breached.” Will you explain and illustrate that statement? For example, what makes it more a sequence than *Coal* (1976)—or your more recent volume, *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986). I like your calling the volume, *The Black Unicorn*, a “conversation.”

LORDE: The poems in *The Black Unicorn* have always felt to me like a conversation between myself and an ancestor Audre. The sequence began in Dahomey when I visited that country with my children in 1974, and continued for the next three years, resulting in *The Black Unicorn*.

ROWELL: I want to go back to something you were talking about earlier: about the Black population in Germany. I am not certain that our reading audience on the mainland of the U.S.A. is aware of that population—or of the vast Black population of Europe in general. Will you talk about the Black population in Germany—and about Black writers there? Of course, we’ll discover a lot about Black women writers in Germany from your forthcoming essay on the

58
subject. Did you say it will be the introduction to *Farbe Bekennen* [Showing Our True Colors], the anthology of black German women?

LORDE: One of the most interesting black writers that I met in Germany is a woman who was originally from East Berlin, a poet, Raya Lubinetsky. I find her work very, very exciting. She is doing in German what many of the Black poets were doing in the 1960s with the English language, creating a new Africanized linguistic approach to language that’s part and parcel of her poetry. It’s not something that translates very easily. I just really enjoy her work. Writing is not easy for a Black poet in Germany. It is very, very difficult to survive and to create as a Black person in a situation where you are not only discriminated against but wiped out in terms of your message and your identity and your consciousness.

ROWELL: In one of your essays in *Sister Outsider*—I think it’s called “Eye to Eye”—you say, “We can learn to mother ourselves. What does that mean for the Black woman? It means we must establish authority over our own definition, providing attentive concern and expectation of growth which is the beginning of that acceptance we came to expect only from our mothers.” As you talked about African-German women writers, I started thinking about that statement—and its implications, not only for writers, but for Black women and, ultimately, for Black people in general, wherever we are in the world. Will you talk about the statement I quoted from “Eye to Eye”?

LORDE: Charles, I consider that essay, “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” to be one of the two core pieces of my prose writing. The other one is “Poetry Is Not a Luxury.” I think both deal with difficult questions we have got to raise among ourselves. In “Eye to Eye,” I started with a question. Why do we allow ourselves to be used as the primary weapon against each other? What is that all about? We know what it’s about externally—divide and conquer—but what is it about internally? And we need to look at this dynamic also between Black women and Black men, Black men and Black men. How do we make necessary power out of negative surroundings? How do we define where we want to go? How do we use whatever we have to help us get there? Within the context of a hostile 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? How do we kill that little voice that says “no good,” planted in us by this society because we were born Black and female, because you were born Black and male, because we were born Black?

ROWELL: Why do you say these two essays, “Eye to Eye” and “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” are central to your prose? What makes them the core of your prose writing?

LORDE: Because I feel they are. To write each of those essays I went down really deep, and I started with core questions. I had never written prose like that before. I’m not basically a prose writer, I’m a poet. So I’ve had to teach myself how to write prose, how to think in solid, linear paragraphs. And it has not been an easy task. I have always felt that “poetry is not a luxury,” so I began to investigate, exactly what is poetry in my life? I found myself going deeper and deeper, down to my toes, and having to come back up through the writing process. In doing so, I realized how much of my growth and development, my work, my hopes, my
struggles, my triumphs, how much of my personal history was informed and chronicled by the stuff I was dealing with in these two essays. An enormous amount had to be reexamined, rethought, rewritten, rebased and put together, and when the essays finally happened, each one of them felt like a process I think of only in terms of making a poem. I learned an enormous amount in the writing. They felt like black holes—these small, but incredibly condensed pieces of matter. The ideas and the feelings and questions that are raised in each one of them proliferate through everything I have ever written. They serve as a take-off point for later work; my own, and, I hope, other people’s.

ROWELL: And, in fact, in “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” you say, “Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.” I hope you’ll comment on that passage.

LORDE: We live in a society grown hysterical with denial, with contradiction, dishonesty, and alienated values; a society predicated upon white patriarchal thought. We are moving into the 21st century, and the primary question is, what is our position in a world that is seven-eighths people of color? How does our Blackness, our Americanness, fit into that world? What is our function in a livable future? Because there has got to be a better way. How do we use ourselves to help bring that future into being? What do we salvage from the past? Our visions are essential to create that which has never been, and we must each learn to use all of who we are to achieve those visions. And I am a poet to my bones and sinews.

ROWELL: Do you see a relationship between one’s sexuality and/or sexual preference and one’s art? I raise this question for many reasons, two of which relate to different important movements in the U.S.A. and to the current political debate surrounding the future of the National Endowment for the Arts. During the 1960s with the Black Arts Movement, Black artists talked about the relationship of one’s Africanness to art. The Women’s Movement, which talks about the importance of the womanist or feminist component in art, followed. The Gay- Lesbian Movement, commenting on art, continues to be muted by strident, self-righteous voices which try to impose their visions on the rest of the world. Then there is the silence of the so called “liberal” ranks of the intellectual community, in and outside academic institutions in the U.S.A. There has also been a strange silence in the intellectual ranks of the Black community on the issues surrounding the exhibition of the Mapplethorpe photographs. More Black intellectuals have been willing to talk (in public and in private) about the rights of museums and the right of the general public to see the art it elects to see—and let me tell you, during these repressive times in the U.S.A., a defense of human and civil rights is becoming as necessary as air and water. But what has bothered me about the Mapplethorpe situation is the continued silence of the Black community in the face of Mapplethorpe’s obvious objectification and commodification of Black men in his photographs. My judgment here should not in any way be taken as possible support for Jesse Helms’s anti-American campaign against art or the fascist vision of the so called “Moral Majority,” because neither Helms nor those people give a hoot about black or Third World people. Or about the rights of women in general. I apologize for my long speech. I must not forget: you are the person interviewed, and I am the interviewer. [Laughter] Again, do you see a relationship between art and sexuality? And will you talk about the Gay-Lesbian Movement and the creation and dissemination of art in the U.S.A.?
LORDE: I am a Black, Lesbian, Feminist, warrior, poet, mother doing my work. I underline these things, but they are just some of the ingredients of who I am. There are many others. I pluck these out because, for various reasons, they are aspects of myself about which a lot of people have had a lot to say, one way or another. My sexuality is part and parcel of who I am, and my poetry comes from the intersection of me and my worlds. There is nothing obscene about my work. Jesse Helms’s objection to my work is not about obscenity, however; or even about sex. It is about revolution and change. That is what my writing serves. We are living in a sick society, and any art which does not serve change—i.e., does not speak the truth—is beside the point. Jesse Helms represents the primary obscenity that is crushing not only black people but this country and the world into dust. It is called white patriarchal power. There is nothing obscene about my life nor the art that I create out of my experiences. But by the same token Jesse Helms knows that my writing is aimed at his destruction, and the destruction of every single thing he stands for. That is a basic premise of all my work. If that is a reason for the NEA to take back my grant, hey, let them do it. But don’t say it’s about obscenity. It’s about politics and survival: who will survive, and on what terms? The white artistic community has very belatedly seen the handwriting on the wall, which says no society is going to finance its own reorganization or demise, or contribute to a culture bent upon radical change, not for long. I mean, Black people, Black writers, and other artists of color have known that for a very long time.

In the beginning of the 1980s, Judy Simmons and I, along with other artists of color, tried to get an organization together to question the racist distribution of NEA grants; white writers weren’t interested in hearing about it, let alone joining. Why should they? So now that the white arts community is beginning to see that there’s a real difference between “take-their-money-and-run” and believing that the political structure is quietly going to underwrite or finance its own alteration, the question arises, once again: what is our art about? What is the real function of art, our goals, our visions as creative cultural workers?

The visions that move me through my life and through my work are diametrically opposed to whatever vision moves Jesse Helms. If he approves it, I certainly won’t. Of course I believe that art should enjoy public funding in this wealthy country. The NEA should exist. I can devote a certain amount of my energy to fighting for it, but I cannot devote all my energy to that alone. Jesse Helms’s real threat is not just because he wants to muzzle artistic culture in this country, which of course he does. His real threat is because he wants to muzzle or destroy any people-centered culture worldwide. I fight Jesse Helms because he wants to destroy Black people in Angola and North Carolina and Cuba and South Africa, and eradicate the babies of the South Pacific Rim, and starve school children to support R.J. Reynolds and the tobacco industry, and deny women control over their own bodies. I mean, I can run right down the line of obscenities Jesse Helms represents and why he must be stopped.

Now, what does my sexuality have to do with my writing? I believe in the power of the erotic. What does my blood, or my heart or my eyes have to do with my writing? They are all inseparable.

ROWELL: And you know the issues surrounding the question of obscenity are couched in terms of pornography. In your essay entitled “Uses of the Erotic,” you say that “pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.”
LORDE: The function of the erotic is to deepen the experience of the life force; the function of pornography is to deaden or destroy what is living. When Jesse Helms reads safe sex pamphlets on the Senate floor and calls them obscene, he is being pornographic. He is taking something whose aim is to preserve life and trying to turn it into filth.

ROWELL: I describe the voice in your poems and essays as powerful (or as Brenda Marie Osbey once said in a poem—and I think I might be paraphrasing her here—"it’s called having a commanding air"). But some of your detractors have accused you of being a strident poet. I am suddenly reminded of two words which appear over and over in The Cancer Journals: “silences” and “invisibility.” Your poetry says to me: “I will not be silent while people die unnecessary deaths.” And I mean that in a very large sense; that statement has many implications. It is through those words that I see you as poet, and it is with those words that I read your poems.

LORDE: Whenever a conscious Black woman raises her voice on issues central to her existence, somebody is going to call her strident, because they don’t want to hear about it, nor us. I refuse to be silenced, and I refuse to be trivialized, even if I do not say what I have to say perfectly. What I write is important, and I insist that you feel out what you have to say on the subject, and then maybe you can say it better. But it must be heard. I refuse to be silenced, that’s right. And I will not allow my work to be trivialized because what I am writing is not only about me, it is about the lives of many voiceless people, and the life of the planet that we share. You can’t get rid of me just by saying I’m strident, or I’m too intense, or I’m silly, or I’m crazy, or morbid, or melodramatic: hey, listen, I can be all of those things, and you still must open yourself to what I am talking about, in the interests of our common future. I won’t be here 300 years from now, but I hope this earth and others will be, and maybe something I’ve said will contribute to making that more possible.

ROWELL: Do you want your poems to empower your readers to think the same or to act also after reading your poems?

LORDE: I want my poems—I want all of my work—to engage, and to empower people to speak, to strengthen themselves into who they most want and need to be and then to act, to do what needs being done. In other words, learn to use themselves in the service of what they believe. As I have learned to use whoever I am in the service of what I believe. As we move toward empowerment, we face the other inseparable question, what are we empowering ourselves for? In other words, how do we use this power we are reaching for? We can’t separate those two. June Jordan once said something which is just wonderful. I’m paraphrasing her—that her function as a poet was to make revolution irresistible. Well, o.k., that is the function of us all, as creative artists, to make the truth, as we see it, irresistible. That’s what I want to do with all of my writing.

ROWELL: Do you think that two of the most recent movements in this country helped people in the same way you speak here? And I think of the Black Arts Movement which was attached to the Black Power Movement. Although Addison Gayle was right when he said that it was a Northern urban phenomenon, the Black Power Movement grew out of the Civil Rights Movement (or some people might argue that it was a response to the failures of the Civil Rights Movement). The other is the Women’s Movement.
LORDE: They’re both very important. God knows we would not be talking here without each of them. However, let us not romanticize the truth . . . Julius Nyerere once said, just before he left office, “all governments by their nature are reactionary.” Well, I don’t know whether all institutions have to become reactionary when they get large enough, but both the Black Arts Movement and the Women’s Writing Movement, although certainly very important to the development of my work, have presented problematic barriers to creativity. For example, the white Women’s Literary Movement certainly gave space and voice to many of my concerns. Nonetheless it has not functioned, by and large, always in the best interests of Black writers, because of its reluctance to deal with racism as a core issue.

There’s been a long-standing and very aggressive reluctance on the part of many within both these literary communities to deal with the essential questions of Black women’s writing and Black women’s work, or to move on the questions we raise, despite the media exploitation of a laudatory few of us. Certainly, in the Black literary community in particular, those of us who are Black Lesbian writers are frequently, as Barbara Smith recently said with her characteristic wit and pointedness, “the 13th Fairy.” Who’s the 13th Fairy? That is the godmother who is always forgotten, who is not invited to the ball, or invited too late. Black Lesbian writers are very frequently the “13th Fairy” of Black arts. For example, look at the writers invited to present at the recent Black Arts Festival held in Atlanta. Were you there, Charles?

ROWELL: No, I was in Santo Domingo presenting a paper on Derek Walcott before members of the Caribbean Studies Association. I did send some members of the staff there, to Atlanta, to promote Callaloo.

LORDE: Well, that’s just an example. The Black Lesbian-bashing that takes place in the Black Arts Movement is notorious, and I don’t have to discuss that here, or discuss the origins of it, but the fact that it still exists when our communities need cultural workers of vision so much is terribly wasteful. When I talk about battling silences, battling invisibility, battling trivializations, I am not only speaking about fighting them in the white literary establishment. If establishment Black male writers cannot see that Barbara Smith and Cheryl Clarke and Pat Parker and I are their sisters in struggle, and that we fight on the same side, then the question is, “What are we fighting for?”