Norms, Myths, and Vulnerability: Audre Lorde's Reconstruction of Self in "125th Street and Abomey"

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ABSTRACT: In her poetry collection *The Black Unicorn* (1987), Audre Lorde shows the ways in which those who do not comply to the normative ideals of her contemporary US culture are especially vulnerable to societal marginalization and violence. Analyzing Lorde's construction of vulnerability in her poem "125th Street and Abomey," this paper argues that her drawing from West African cosmology constitutes one method through which Lorde reconstructs her speaker's vulnerable socio-cultural position as a potential site for transformative processes of intersubjective self-(re)formation.

KEYWORDS: Vulnerability; Audre Lorde; West African Cosmology; Abomey; Intersubjectivity; Mythical Norm; American Poetry; Queer; Diaspora

> Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows "that is not me." In america, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society.
>
> (Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex" 116)

Introduction

In her essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" (1980), Audre Lorde names and defines a "mythical norm" that draws attention to the ways in which certain markers of identity stand for a presumed cultural homogeneity that excludes all those who do not meet its ideals. In the epigraph, Lorde implies that this mythical norm discounts BI_POC[1] and queer people as well as women, poor people, and people of religious belief systems other than Christianity. Following Lorde, the "mythical norm" renders those excluded particularly vulnerable to "the trappings of power."

This interplay of normativity and vulnerability is a central theme of Lorde's poetry collection *The Black Unicorn* (1978). In this paper, I argue that Lorde's representation of her speakers' vulnerable selves and states allows her to create visions for self-transformation that exceed models of subjecthood presented by oppressive norms. To introduce my argument, I first establish the co-constitutive relationship of norms and vulnerability as presented by Erinn

[1] The intention of spelling BI_POC with an underscore is to make room for positive self-ascriptions that the acronym "BIPOC" does not explicitly indicate, e.g., "brown."

Gilson in her monograph *The Ethics of Vulnerability* (2014). Second, I use an exemplary diary entry of Lorde's to indicate in how far her writing can be read through the lens of Nadia Ellis's conceptualization of "queered diasporic belonging" (3). In doing so, I aim to illustrate the ways in which Lorde's work with West African cosmology stands in and advances the tradition of Black feminist thought. Finally, I offer a close reading of Lorde's poem "125th Street and Abomey" to foreground my arguments. Through my close reading, I illustrate the ways in which the representation of her speaker's vulnerable position allows Lorde to envision intersubjective modes of (self-)transformation that seek to go beyond her society's "mythical norm." In the article's conclusion, I summarize my findings and highlight the ways in which Lorde's construction of vulnerability functions as a method to develop new understandings of intersubjective modes of self-formation.

To begin with, I explain the interdependency of norms and vulnerability as Gilson sees it and indicate its relevance to my reading of Lorde's poem. In her monograph *The Ethics of Vulnerability* (2014), Gilson examines the ethical implications of vulnerability. The condition of vulnerability, in Gilson's understanding, is a fundamental "openness to being affected and affecting in relation to others" (91). This openness can be exploited, for instance by oppressive norms (see 91). However, Gilson argues that it is this openness that also enables learning and trust (91) as well as transformative change (96). Gilson exemplifies this transformative potential in her examination of the interplay between norms and vulnerability. Based on Judith Butler's insights in *Precarious Life* (2004), Gilson presents an understanding of norms and vulnerability as co-constitutive since "[v]ulnerability enables the functioning of norms and norms can render us vulnerable" (47). Due to this co-constitutive relation, "norms are also 'vulnerable' to destabilization and alteration through reiteration" (47). I maintain that, just like Gilson, Lorde understands the construction of vulnerability as "co-constitutive" with normativity. As I will show, Lorde represents the vulnerable positions of her speakers as potential sites of origin for transformative processes of self- and societal reformation.

More specifically, I argue that Lorde's lyric engagement with West African cosmology functions as a prime method to disrupt patriarchal, white supremacist norms in favor of a keen perspective on marginalized identities in the tradition of Black feminist thought. Lorde's reconstruction of a Black maternal ancestry constitutes one method through which she approaches and develops this perspective. The interest in Black maternal role models is a characteristic feature of Lorde's work:

> I have looked and looked for the black woman who would really be my mother – who could tell me how the lies we swallowed in the tenderest winters could be toughened and explored and thrown away, who would name me hers and sanction my suffering not by removing it which she could not because it echoed hers, not by reducing it because within lay the key to all our future powers, but by a recognition that would heal the gaps within my strength. Who would recognize me as both proud and loving. (Lorde, qtd. in de Veaux 127)

In this entry, Lorde expresses the wish for a Black maternal figure who does not perpetuate the "mythical norm" of a white supremacist culture. This longed-for mother need not be biologically related; instead, Lorde links this role of the Black mother to an eschewal of harmful normative ideals in favor of a recognition of the child's—in this case, Lorde's—own suffering. It is this recognition rather than an identification or intervention that, according to Lorde, would allow her, as a child, to grow into herself.[2]

This envisioned mother figure thus facilitates a process akin to what bell hooks describes as the decolonization of the mind. hooks defines this endeavor as a "breaking with the ways our reality is defined and shaped by the dominant culture and asserting our understanding of that reality, of our own experience" (10). Lorde's vision of a Black mother figure to recognize her Black child's suffering against the backdrop of US-American culture's "mythical norm" expresses a wish to achieve an understanding of the lived realities of Black people that is neither distorted nor guided by oppressive normative ideals. This wish stands in the tradition of Black feminist thought that foregrounds the notion of fostering a collective identity among Black women for a shift in perspective on "ourselves and our world" (Collins 32) to occur.

Lorde's emphasis on the fact that the search for this Black maternal figure remains unfulfilled underlines the gap between her lived and desired realities. This gap resembles those which Nadia Ellis identifies in various works of writers from the Black diaspora in her monograph *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (2015). Referring to Jose Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009), Ellis describes the "gap between the ground on which one stands and a compelling place beyond" with the word "queer," and explains, "queerness is that thing that lets us feel that the world is not enough" (3). Based on Ellis's work, I argue that Lorde's unfulfilled longing for the recognition of her suffering by a Black maternal figure may express such a feeling of insufficiency in light of the normative constraints of her world. Lorde's diary entry may be read as expressive of a "queered diasporic belonging" (Ellis 3) as it registers the tension between a "persistent sense of insufficiency of existing modes of belonging [and] an awareness that new forms remain inspiringly elusive" (3).

While this ambiguity remains unresolved in the diary entry, Lorde's lyric representation of her speakers' vulnerable positionalities in *The Black Unicorn* captures the queer gap between her speakers' oppressive reality and their desire for alternative modes of living. It is exactly this queer gap that allows Lorde to explore possibilities for societal and self-transformation. In what follows, I will expound on how Lorde's representation of an ancestral Black mother figure

[2] Amber Jamilla Musser presents a similar argument when she observes that "[b]y connecting herself with […] African female leaders [such as the Amazons of Dahomey, and the Queen Mothers of Benin], Lorde inserts herself into a narrative beyond her individual existence. This framing establishes a continuum between contemporary black [sic.] women and their African ancestors, thereby stretching the bounds of kinship away from the strictly biological toward an imagined female community" (355). These observations are highly important for a comprehensive understanding of Lorde's connection to African mother figures; still, Ellis's concept of "queered diasporic belonging" allows for a more fruitful examination of Lorde's poetic work than Musser's concept of a "continuum" as the former allows for a closer examination of the productive fissures and tensions defining the relationships between the ancestral maternal figures and speakers of Lorde's poems.

constitutes the background against which she reconstructs her speaker's vulnerable socio-cultural position as facilitating a search for (self-)recognition and (self-)transformation going beyond US culture's "mythical norm."

Towards an Intersubjective Understanding of Self-Formation

Throughout *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde recreates her speakers in vulnerable socio-cultural positions outside the US-American "mythical norm." Especially in the collection's first part, she represents these positions against the backdrop of a Black maternal ancestry. In doing so, she explores various facets of her speakers' vulnerable positions and ultimately works toward a reconstruction of vulnerability that makes possible the emergence of new self-formation processes.

In his essay "Audre Lorde's Politics of Difference" (2021), Jack Turner remarks that

> Lorde figures the self as relational, as individualized through complex dialogical interaction. She is more sensitive to the ways parents, ancestors, friends, strangers, lovers, children – even landscapes, cityscapes, seascapes – all educe and shape the self, over and against conscious will and intention. At the same time, Lorde characterizes mutually related selves as meaningfully "separate"; hence, she figures them as "individual." (586-587)

Through the representation of her speaker's spiritual connection to the Dahomean mother goddess Seboulisa in "125th Street and Abomey," Lorde posits the experience and recognition of vulnerability at the heart of her US-based speaker's "relational individualism" (Turner 567). She does so by not representing the Black mother figure "as an absolute origin – rather, she is the point of orientation for all Black subjects, the medium through which, willingly or not, they negotiate their intersubjectivity. As a result, space becomes a series of conflation rather than strictly defined borders between subjects, races, and nations" (Wright 178). In other words, the divine African mother figure becomes a symbolic point of orientation that allows for the destabilization of interpersonal, cultural, and national demarcations without, however, merging those entities into one indistinguishable mass. Constructing the "intense affect and eccentric forms of intimacy" (Ellis 4) that characterize the US speaker's relation to the divine African mother figure, Lorde composes her speaker's queer diasporic belonging as the backdrop against which she represents the transformative potential of the intersubjective experience of vulnerability.

By representing her speaker in the vulnerable position of being temporally and geographically severed from the divine mother figure, and yet at the same time spiritually connected to her, Lorde develops a speaker whose relational individualism posits vulnerability as the cornerstone for (inter)subjective growth. Thereby, Lorde undermines "the antirelational tendencies of the competitive, atomistic individualism endemic to heteropatriarchal capitalism" (Turner 567) reinforced by the "mythical norm." In doing so, she implicitly

challenges the "kind of subjectivity privileged in capitalist socioeconomic systems, namely, that of the prototypical, arrogantly self-sufficient, independent, invulnerable master subject" (Gilson, "Vulnerability" 312). Seizing the potential of her speaker's queer diasporic belonging as involving a "desire for alternatives to racial, gendered, and temporal forms of affinity" (Ellis 5), Lorde breaks with the notion of an "invulnerable master subject" (Gilson, "Vulnerability" 312) brought forth by her reconceptualization of the "mythical norm." Thereby, she represents the transformative potential of vulnerability for an intersubjective relationality that fosters individual and communal growth.

In the poem's first stanza, the speaker describes how

> 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
> I surrender to you as libation
> mother, illuminate my offering
> of old victories
> over men over women over my selves
> who has never before dared
> to whistle into the night
> take my fear of being alone
> like my warrior sisters
> who rode in defense of your queendom
> disguised and apart
> give me the woman strength
> of tongue in this cold season.

Throughout the poem, the speaker addresses the goddess Seboulisa—defined by the collection's glossary as "[t]he goddess of Abomey—'The Mother of us all.' A local representation of Mawulisa, she is sometimes known as Sogbo, creator of the world" (127). Under the entry "Mawulisa," the collection's glossary continues:

> Within the major pantheon of the Vodu, Mawulisa is the Dahomean female-male, sky-goddess-god principle. Sometimes called the first inseparable twins of the Creator of the Universe, Mawulisa (Mawu-Lisa) is also represented as west-east, night-day, moon-sun. More frequently, Mawu is regarded as the Creator of the Universe, and Lisa

> is either called her first son, or her twin brother. She is called the mother of all the other Vodu, and as such, is connected to the Orisha Yemanjá. (125)

Just as Yemanjá, the goddess Seboulisa/Mawulisa occupies the position of a divine mother figure of high standing. As such, she encompasses seemingly opposite forces of male-female, sun-moon, and so forth. The theme of duality plays a central role in the poem, too. Not only does Seboulisa represent a fusion of opposites, but also does the poem's title indicate a fusion of apparent temporal and spatial discrepancies. In this manner, Lorde introduces the speaker's vulnerable position between two ostensibly separate and yet interconnected cultures.

The poem's title situates New York City's 125th Street and Abomey side by side. This parallel establishes a connection between modern Black life in the US—specifically, Harlem—and the ancestral African Abomey, abode of Seboulisa. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies 125th Street as "[t]he chief artery of black Harlem" (116), while Abomey constitutes "[t]he inland capital and heart of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey. A center of culture and power, it was also the seat of the courts of the Aladaxonu, the famed Panther Kings" (Lorde, *Black Unicorn* 124). Thus, both places represent a "chief artery" or "heart" of Black culture. This connection suggests a queer diasporic potential to bridge the "gap between here and there" (Ellis 4); yet this potential remains just that: an unfulfilled potentiality. In this way, the poem's title indicates the speaker's queer diasporic belonging to two distinct cultures: a thriving Black past in ancient Dahomey and a diasporic Black present in twentieth century Harlem.

In the poem's opening lines, the speaker links her awareness of her New York City environment with an awareness of an African ancestry. In the poem's first line, the speaker describes how she walks through the snowy landscape with a bent head. Despite the weather and her own posture, the speaker addresses Seboulisa in the poem's second line, claiming that she can "see" her. While this statement suggests that Seboulisa appears in the speaker's immediate environment, the poem's third line establishes that the goddess is in fact "printed inside the back of" the speaker's head. Hence, the speaker is geographically isolated from the divine mother figure; yet the maternal goddess has left a spiritual mark on the speaker's consciousness that appears as palpable and real as her tight African hairstyle. In this manner, Lorde develops an intersubjective relation between the speaker and the divine maternal figure that blurs time, place, mental and physical sensations. With that, Lorde develops a diasporic connection between the present-day Harlem Street the speaker navigates and her West African heritage.

The speaker's awareness of Seboulisa prompts further remembrances of the speaker's time in Dahomey. These recollections express the speaker's present desire to attain a sense of belonging. As she states: "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 / I surrender, to you as libation / mother, illuminate my offering" (lines 6-12). In this flashback to her time in Dahomey, the speaker is making a ritual offering to the mother goddess. This offering does not consist of physical objects but of her "ancient parts" she considers "most

precious and least needed," suggesting that despite their personal worth, those "ancient parts" have not much use in the speaker's present environment. At the same time, however, her sacrificing these aspects suggests their relevance. By offering her "well-guarded past" and her "energy-eating secrets" to the goddess, the speaker reveals the innermost core of herself to the divine mother, utterly exposing herself to the goddess's mercy.

The fact that the speaker describes this act as her "surrender" underlines this point: the verb implies that by baring her thoughts, the speaker exposes and sacrifices herself to Seboulisa. Yet, she also asks the goddess to "illuminate" her "offering," indicating that by rendering herself utterly vulnerable to the divine mother, she hopes to see the truth of her life in a new light. The speaker's apparent surrender of her past self thus aims at surpassing the current version of herself with the help of the maternal goddess. This "tension between a quest for affinity and a desire to separate" (Ellis 6)—in this case, from a personal past—is, following Ellis, characteristic of the Black diaspora (6). Edgar J. Bauer expands on the complex function of the black mother figure in Lorde's poetry:

> the poetical figuration of the black mother proves to be not an extraneous graft onto the original African lore, but an interpretive reappropriation of its ancient mythical leitmotifs. Not by chance, Lorde highlighted the methodical correspondence between her own aesthetic and literary procedures, and the "fusion and refusion" of mythological contents from the Orisha (Yoruba) and Vodu (Dahomean) traditions, which she had observed in Dahomey and the Americas. (252)

In her poem, Lorde uses the Vodun goddess to fuse her speaker's consciousness and contemporary US environment with the spiritual strength the West African mother goddess represents. By relating the speaker's contemporary search for enlightenment to the mercy of the maternal goddess, Lorde suggests that it is only through the reintegration of her West African heritage into her contemporary US life that the speaker's sense of self can be re-created. In constructing her speaker's deliberate act of utter exposure as a means to bridge temporal, geographical, cultural, and intersubjective boundaries, Lorde indicates that it is the speaker's vulnerable position of complete openness that may enrich her understanding of herself as much as it may unsettle it.

Whilst making her sacrifice, the speaker asks Seboulisa to "take my fear of being alone / like my warrior sisters / who rode in defense of your queendom / disguised and apart / give me the woman strength / of tongue in this cold season" (lines 17-22). In the final lines of the first stanza, the speaker "trades her fear and silence for 'woman strength / of tongue'" (Garber 110). In this context, the speaker evokes her "warrior sisters" who defended Seboulisa's realm. Lorde's glossary identifies these "warrior sisters" as the Dahomean Amazons: "Unlike other African systems of belief, women in Dahomey, as the Creators of Life, were not enjoined from the shedding of blood. The Amazons were highly prized, well-trained, and ferocious women warriors who guarded, and fought under the direction of, the Panther Kings of Dahomey" (124). By identifying these "women warriors" as her "sisters," the speaker broadens the Black

ancestral kinship structure she began to develop with her address of Seboulisa as "mother." By imploring Seboulisa to endow her with features that render her closer to her ancestral "sisters," the speaker articulates her hope for gaining strength through the spiritual connections to a woman-centered West African ancestry. Thereby, the speaker implicitly rejects the supposed desirability of the "mythical norm" that implies a "self-sufficient, independent, invulnerable master subject" in favor of the strength that may be gained within an ancestral Black feminist kinship structure, which requires a conscious engagement with vulnerability to foster growth.

In asking Seboulisa to take away her fear as she took the fear of her "warrior sisters" from whom the speaker stands "disguised and apart […] in this cold season" of a Harlem winter, the speaker indicates that it is only through a successful re-connection to the ancestral mother goddess that she may overcome her isolated state in the contemporary US. To do so, the speaker does not ask for material weapons but "the woman strength / of tongue," insinuating that it is not physical weapons but the mastery of speech that will render her as ferocious and strong as the Dahomean warrior women. Linda Garber remarks on the recurring image of the "tongue" in Lorde's poetry that "Lorde's tongue is her translator's tool, giving her the ability to speak truth to her multiple communities, her warrior/orator's weapon" (117). In this sense, the speaker's request to receive the "strength of tongue" from the African mother goddess represents an appeal to both claim her part in an ancestral West African lineage and gain the strength to voice her own truths in her contemporary moment.

In her poem, Lorde represents her speaker in the vulnerable position of being in the queer diasporic "gap between the here and there" (Ellis 4), of being both isolated in her contemporary moment in New York City's Harlem yet also closely connected to a maternal West African ancestry. By representing her speaker as sacrificing her past, her secrets, and her fears to the maternal goddess to gain a new understanding of herself, Lorde constructs an intersubjective relationship between the maternal goddess and the speaker. Her construction of this relationship suggests that the speaker's subjectivity may only unfold in relation to her spiritual connection to an ancestral maternal lineage; however, Lorde does not develop her speaker in a way that posits her as synonymous with this maternal lineage. The reconstruction of a divine mother figure thus allows for a poetic fusion of differing times, locations, and cultures; yet this fusion does not fully erase the speaker's individuality. Instead, the speaker's vulnerable position of fearful isolation and longing for the support of an ancestral maternal figure involves a "productive tension between attachment [to the ancestral heritage] and a drive toward intense and idiosyncratic individuation" (Ellis 6). The speaker's vulnerable position thus indicates a queer diasporic potential for (spiritual re-) connection and intersubjective (self)renewal.

In the poem's second stanza, Lorde continues to develop this transformative potential. After her appeal to the goddess, the speaker continues:

> Half earth and time splits us apart

like struck rock.
A piece lives elegant stories
too simply put
while a dream on the edge of summer
of brown rain in nim trees
snail shells from the dooryard
of King Toffah
bring me where my blood moves
Seboulisa 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 speaker reinforces the temporal-spatial distance between her location in Harlem and the ancient city of Abomey. Comparing this split to a "struck rock" suggests the violence and irrevocability of this separation. At the same time, the speaker asserts that a singular "piece" may "live elegant stories" but does not capture their full complexities. Instead, it is through her spiritual, dreamlike state that the speaker may traverse geographical, temporal, and cultural distances to reach the realm "where [her] blood moves," namely the crossroads of 125th Street and the ancient kingdom of Dahomey. Cheryl A. Wall states:

> The poem collapses distances of time and space, traversing centuries and continent to envision a new symbolic geography. The fabled Harlem thoroughfare intersects with the capital of the fabled West African kingdom of Dahomey. Fragments of history are passed on (King Toffah is a historical monarch), but the source of the speaker's knowledge is a dream. The poem merges dream and reality, history and myth, to create a new sound, the sound of "our name," which "all the world shall remember." Laughing that name and hearing its echo is an act of healing and renewal. It gives the poem's persona "the woman strength of tongue in this cold season." (41)

I concur with Wall's observations but suggest reading the speaker's dreamlike state as expressing "the dynamic of belonging to a territory of soul" (16) in Ellis's terms to gain an even deeper understanding of the visionary implications of this "renewal" Wall observes. In the context of her conceptualization of queer diasporic belonging, Ellis defines the "territory of soul" as "a structure of belonging and a metaphorical space of multiplicity and suspension" (11).[3] The speaker's dreamlike state transcends geographical space and cultural barriers, thereby allowing for the vision of a metaphorical "territory of soul" in the convergence of ancient Dahomey and present-day Harlem with the help of the Black maternal goddess. While

[3] Ellis uses this concept to examine the ways in which the interplay of rituals and land produce the "felt experience of being black in space" (16).

this "territory of soul" remains imagined, it nevertheless allows for a utopian reach for "possibilities of belonging that exceed the ground and materiality of any one location" (10). On the remaining pages of this article, I will take a closer look at the ways in which Lorde's construction of vulnerability in the poem's closing lines shapes this movement toward potential renewal.

Toward the poem's end, the speaker directly addresses Seboulisa once again. She does so by identifying the deity as the "mother goddess with one breast / eaten away by worms of sorrow and loss" (lines 32-33). Many scholars linked Lorde's recurrent emphasis on the Dahomean Amazons' as well as Seboulisa's having only one breast to her own experience of her single mastectomy due to cancer. Such readings suggest interpreting Lorde's refusal to wear a prothesis "as a crucial moment in her 'self-styled transfiguration as Seboulisa incarnate'" (Bauer 257). While this paper does not present a biographical or psychoanalytical reading of Lorde's poem, interpretations like these nevertheless highlight the relevance of this vulnerable experience to Lorde's reconstruction of an African ancestry and her concomitant reconfiguration of selfhood from a Black feminist point of view. By representing the divine mother goddess Seboulisa as not immune but excruciatingly vulnerable to experiences of "sorrow and loss," Lorde once again breaks with the heteropatriarchal notion of an "invulnerable master subject" such as the Christian God is deemed to be. Though she is one of the most powerful goddesses in West African cosmology, Seboulisa's divine status does not annul her fundamental vulnerability. Thereby, Lorde insinuates that for all her might, the divine mother goddess remains vulnerable to sorrow and loss just as her earthly descendants.[4]

It is the recognition of this shared vulnerability to loss and suffering that prompts the speaker to demand of Seboulisa to relate to her in turn, to "see [her] now / your severed daughter" (lines 34-35). Recognizing her own suffering and estrangement in the mother goddess's severed breast,[5] the geographically and temporally separated, "severed daughter" asks the

[4] Some scholars, like J. Edgar Bauer, approach this representation of the mother goddess with a stronger emphasis on gender; accordingly, Bauer argues that "[c]ombining the signs of motherly nurture and bellicose loss, Seboulisa emblematizes a principled juxtaposition of maleness and femininity that disrupts the nearly universally accepted hiatus between the dimorphic sexes. Moreover, as a local embodiment of hermaphroditic Mawulisa, the goddess of Abomey overreaches toward the nonfeminine, belligerent pursuits of men, and, for this reason, is generally considered, 'The Mother of us all.' Acknowledging Seboulisa as its immemorial originator, the 'tradition of warlike women, amazons who figure as especially dangerous warriors' developed into the exceptional Dahomean belief system, in which women 'as the Creators of Life, were not enjoined from the shedding of blood.'" (249). In this reading, Seboulisa's androgyny takes precedence over her vulnerability.

[5] In her paper "Marvelous Arithmetics: Prosthesis, Speech, and Death in the Late Work of Audre Lorde" (2008), Sharon L. Barnes links the function of Seboulisa in Lorde's writing to the Lorde's engagement with her own diagnosis of breast cancer, the resultant single mastectomy, and her eventual death. Citing Lorde's diary entry from November 6, 1986, in which she asks Seboulisa to "protect me from throwing any part of myself away", Barnes argues that Lorde understands the goddess "as the muse for her death journey" (783). In this sense, Barnes concludes that "[c]elebrating life through her relationships, her spiritual connections to ancient goddesses and women-warriors, thinking about love, difference, and survival, positing a future that extends beyond her life – with her existence a mere 'comforting hum' – Lorde is at peace with her life and her work" (786). Approaching Lorde's late work against the backdrop of her impending death leads Barnes to highlight

mother goddess to relate to the speaker through their shared experiences of severance and loss. As such, vulnerability lies at the heart of the relational individualism that Lorde develops in this poem: while the speaker strives to develop a spiritual connection to the ancient maternal figure, this connection only comes to full fruition upon the recognition of relatable experiences of sorrow, loss, and separation.

By declaring that she "laugh[s] our name into echo / all the world shall remember" (lines 36-37), the speaker is now able to give a common name to them that originates from their respective positions of severance. AnnLouise Keating argues that in this manner, Lorde "establishes her linguistic authority by identifying herself with this goddess; she unites her voice with Seboulisa's, and together they laugh […] By claiming figures from African mythology […] Lorde simultaneously redefines herself and celebrates her access to language's transformative power" (28). Within the logic of this poem, it is the speaker who identifies with Seboulisa: toward the poem's end, it is neither the goddess who possesses the "linguistic authority" nor does she redefine herself, but the speaker does. Lorde produces this development in the first place through the representation of her speaker's and the divine maternal figure's related vulnerability to severance and isolation. Only by the recognition of each other's vulnerability does a new, relational self-understanding become possible.

Conclusion

In contrast to the notion of an "independent" and "invulnerable master subject" reinforced by the US's "mythical norm," Lorde draws from West African cosmology to construct highly vulnerable selves from a queer diasporic point of view. By representing the relationship between a US-based speaker and an ancient West African maternal figure in the queer diasporic "gap between the here and there," Lorde shows the transformative potential of vulnerability as a condition that allows for new, intersubjective understandings of the self to emerge. The fact that the echo of the speaker's and Seboulisa's common name will resound long after the actual laughter ceases suggests that their rediscovered common heritage and their relational vulnerability will carry on for generations to come; thus, it may provide the basis for future Black "territories of soul." In this manner, Lorde's poem proposes a futurity of Black feminist thought that posits vulnerability at the heart of relational individualism and intersubjective growth.

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the personal meaning of African cosmology, and especially Seboulisa, to Lorde; while insightful, Barnes neglects the intricacies of the aesthetic representations and functions of the goddesses in Lorde's poetic work.

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