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“A rudder for my children”

The relationality and temporality of queer, Black parenting in the poetry of Audre Lorde

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Master's thesis in Comparative Literature

60 ECTS

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University of Oslo

Spring 2021

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2021

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<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

Print: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the poetry of Audre Lorde and on how the relationality of queer, Black parenting appears in a selection of Lorde's poems. The thesis fundamentally suggests that this relationality of parenting is connected to the way in which time appears in Lorde's poems, and that this connection can provide an important perspective on Lorde's poetics. More specifically, the thesis explores how the relationality of queer, Black parenting plays a role in how Lorde's poetry envisions and relates to the past, the present, and the future.

Theoretically, the thesis takes its starting point in perspectives on relationality, parenting, and temporality from the fields of Black feminist and queer theory. Drawing especially on Alexis Pauline Gumbs' work on Lorde, I argue that the relationality of parenting carries a critical and creative potential that affects how Lorde's poems engage with the past, the present, and the future, and which allows Lorde to investigate existing structures of relationality and articulate alternative ones within her poems.

The thesis is structured around the past, the present, and the future as temporal categories. Each chapter explores the connection between one of these temporal categories and the relationality of parenting in specific poems. Through these analyses, I discuss Lorde's poetics and ask questions concerning how the relationality of parenting impacts the poetic voice and situation, how poetic language is able to reach across time, and how Lorde envisions the role of poetry in relation to the world. I suggest that the relationality of queer, Black parenting is a kind of relationality that spreads through and affects the poetic situation of Lorde's poems, rather than something which is necessarily tied to specific subject positions within the poems. Based on this characterization, I argue that the relationality of parenting appears as something that can be created through the enunciation of the poetic voice and that this relationality in turn affects central aspects of Lorde's poetry. Thus, I understand Lorde's poetry as fundamentally concerned with relationality. Firstly, because the poems I focus on create situations in which the poetic speaker reaches across time to create relations of kinship. Secondly, as I read it, Lorde's poetry is interested in how poetry exists or happens in the meeting with the reader and how poetry is affected by, and in turn affects, the world that surrounds it.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Kjersti Bale for your guidance, kind encouragement, and always insightful comments this last year. I am deeply grateful for our conversations and for your supervision, which has been invaluable to my work with this thesis.

I want to thank my wonderful family for everything, especially my brother and my parents. You have given me a lifetime of love and support and made everything possible. Thank you, always.

I am beyond grateful to have been writing this thesis next to my dearest Harry. Thank you for being there while you've had your own thesis to write, for tired conversations, long evening walks, and for being my favorite person. Thank you endlessly for being part of my life every day.

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1 Parenting, poetry, and time

The relationality of parenting is inevitably entangled with questions of how to perceive and relate to time. Parenting prompts questions of heritage, who we understand ourselves to be connected to, how we are related to the surrounding world, and how the future might look for those who come after us. The poet Audre Lorde's (1934 – 1992) vast body of poetic work is filled with a variety of relationships between specific parents and children, but it also engages with wider networks of kinship relations that include spiritual or mythical ancestors and natural element such as water or wind. In this thesis, I will discuss how the relationality of parenting, especially Black, queer parenting, plays a central role in Audre Lorde's poetry, and how this relationality is connected to temporality in her poems.

Lorde is perhaps most widely known for her essays first collected in 1984 in *Sister Outsider* (Lorde 2007), or for her work of narrative prose *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* from 1982 (Lorde 2018), a 'biomythography' which builds on her early life. However, Lorde was primarily a poet. Her poetic voice and formal expression span a wide register throughout her body of work. There is something very distinct about Lorde's poetry, yet I always find it challenging to characterize it adequately. It is often noted that her poetry balances formally between a striking clarity on the one hand, and a sense of ambiguity, depth, and complexity on the other (Bowen 2003, 109). Lorde's poetic voice can be sarcastic, funny, joyful, and yet searingly critical, solemn, and full of anger. Intimate and vulnerable, bold and uncompromising.

Rather than throwing endless adjectives at Lorde's poetry in an attempt to characterize it, I will say that I am incredibly drawn by it and that focusing on Lorde's poetry and poetics is a crucial part of my motivation for writing this thesis. An important aspect of Lorde's poetics is her understanding of the intimate connection between poetry and the world around it. When talking or writing about poetry, Lorde firmly rejects a clear distinction between life and poetry and rather emphasizes how they mutually feed off each other. In the text "Poetry Makes Something Happen," Lorde writes: "Poetry makes something happen, indeed. It makes you happen. It makes your living happen [...] I cannot separate my life and my poetry. I write my living, and I live my work" (Lorde 2009, 184). Given this central aspect of Lorde's poetics and the engagement with kinship and parenting that runs through her poetry, I am

interested in exploring and discussing how Lorde's poetry might be characterized as fundamentally concerned with relationality.

I want to explore how relationality appears in Lorde's poetry because I believe such a focus can shed light on crucial aspects of her poetics. My specific focus is the relationality of Black, queer parenting in Lorde's poetry because I believe this relationality has a specific effect on how time works in Lorde's poems. To introduce why I find the relationality of specifically queer, Black parenting so interesting in relation to Lorde's poetry and its temporality, I want to turn to Lorde's own formulations of her experience of being a Black, lesbian mother of two children in her contemporary, American context.

In "Turning the Beat Around – Lesbian Parenting 1986," a speech delivered at a forum on "Lesbian and Gay Parents of Color" (Lorde 1987, 310), Lorde writes: "[W]hen I talk about mothering, I do so with an urgency born of my consciousness as a Lesbian and a Black African Caribbean american woman staked out in white racist sexist homophobic america" (Lorde 2009, 75).¹ Addressing the fact that many of her lesbian and gay friends of color were having children at the time, Lorde points out that this "feels quite benign because I love babies. At the same time, I can't help asking myself what it means in terms of where we are as a country, as well as where we are as people of Color within a white racist system" (Lorde 2009, 73). For Lorde, the implications of parenting as a racial and sexual minority, marginalized in relation to a white majority and a dominant ideal of the heteronormative nuclear family, make it urgently important to question one's position, responsibility, and agency within this world (Lorde 2009, 73). Black, queer parenting is both marginalized in relation to the dominant, social context and its norms, yet it offers a potential for a different, resistant relationality, as Lorde envisions it. In Lorde's poetry, the relationality of Black, queer parenting puts broader issues of relationality and collectivity into sharp relief.

The marginal and resistant position of Black, queer parenting influences both how Lorde understands the past, the present, and the future, and how these temporal categories are created within her poetry. In "Turning the Beat Around," Lorde points to the historical

¹ Throughout this thesis, I will capitalize 'Black' following contemporary anti-racist practice ("Explaining AP style on Black and white," 2020). Lorde sometimes, but not always, capitalized the word in her poetry and other writing. I will capitalize the word throughout for consistency, also when I discuss poems where Lorde herself doesn't. Lorde tended to spell 'america' – and 'europe' – with lower case letters. I understand this as a part of her critique of Western, globalized power, but I will stick to the more conventional way of capitalizing these words in this thesis. I also don't follow Lorde's occasional capitalization of 'lesbian.'

marginalization of communities of color and emphasizes how this impacts her perception of parenting. “As members of ethnic and racial communities historically under siege, every Gay and Lesbian of Color knows deep inside that the question of children is not merely an academic one, nor do our children represent a theoretical hold upon some vague immortality” (Lorde 2009, 75). The awareness of being, and having historically been, a community “under siege” affects Lorde’s conception of the past, how it is possible to relate to the past, and how to understand the concept of lineage or heritage. For racialized and queer people in a predominantly white, heteronormative context, the idea of tracing a past or a lineage is complicated by historical realities such as colonialization, displacement, and by being cast as outside, or on the margin of, dominant modes of family and kinship.

Lorde’s poetry engages with questions of heritage and the past in a way that makes it clear that these issues are complex, messy, and problematic. But for Lorde, the awareness that one is always connected to the past is crucial. She writes: “Our parents are the examples of survival as a living pursuit, and no matter how different from them we may now find ourselves, we have built their example into our definitions of self – which is why we can be here, naming ourselves” (Lorde 2009, 75). As I read it, Lorde is alluding to how she, as a queer parent, might have a quite different view of what the relationality of parenting should be than her parents did. Yet their care, love, failures, and successes are a precondition for her existence, something that must be acknowledged. The past might be fraught with complexity but relating to it is a central part of Lorde’s poetics. In the essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Lorde writes that “there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings [...] There are only old and forgotten ones. [...] along with the renewed courage to try them out” (Lorde 2007, 38). For Lorde, poetry can create a space in which this is possible. The past is not only complex and problematic, it also carries potentials for creating and exploring kinship and heritage. A vital part of what I understand as the relationality of queer, Black parenting in Lorde’s poetry is the attempt to establish relationships with the past and creating a sense of heritage that doesn’t rely on bloodlines but on the queer, imaginative potentials of the poetic situation.

In “Turning the Beat Around,” Lorde characterizes the American present in which she lives as one in which “social and political conservatism” is on the rise and “the definition of family is growing more and more restrictive” (Lorde 2009, 74 – 75). Lorde also touches upon the contemporary AIDS crisis and how it lays bare that narratives of racism and homophobia work in tandem. Remarking with chilling precision that “we are also asked to believe that this

monstrously convenient disease – and I say *convenient* here in the sense of *convenient for extermination* – originated spontaneously and mysteriously in Africa” (Lorde 2009, 74, emphasis in original). If the past is a complicated realm for Lorde, so is the present. This is a context in which the lives of marginalized people are structurally precarious, and in which the question of parenting from such a marginalized position, as Lorde writes, requires “close and unsentimental scrutiny” (Lorde 2009, 73). What I find interesting is that Lorde asks: “How do we raise children to deal with these realities? For if we do not, we only disarm them, send them out into the jaws of the dragon unprepared” (Lorde 2009, 74). Within her poetry, a similar question arises. How to write about and within a reality in which the lives of one’s children are precarious, neither turning away from the horror of the present, nor precluding the option of imagining change? As I will argue in this thesis, poetry offers a possibility for articulating and reimagining ways of relating and existing within the present that might be able to disrupt or deviate from the dominant logics of this same present.

For Lorde, the issue of Black, queer parenting in a destructive, racist, and homophobic world does not come down to whether it is ethical to *have* children. Lorde understands both life – and poetry – as fundamentally relational. One always exists in relation to networks of other living beings, and this awareness of the relationality and entanglement of existence is always present in Lorde’s work. Parenting for Lorde entails a relational horizon of imagination that stretches beyond one’s own lifetime into the past, but also into the future. For Lorde, then, parenting makes the issue of imagining and building a better world particularly urgent. In “Turning the Beat Around,” she writes: “I believe that raising children is one way of participating in the future, in social change” (Lorde 2009, 75). This emphasizes how Lorde understands parenting as a part of a relational approach to the world as well as part of a wider vision for social change. The future, as it appears in Lorde’s poetry, can be glimpsed as an open, uncertain potential for something different than the present. I will argue that this potential is closely tied to the relationality of queer, Black parenting and that poetry, as Lorde envisions it, plays a crucial role in imagining and manifesting this potential for a different future. I have suggested that I understand relationality, and particularly the relationality of Black, queer parenting, as central to Lorde’s poetry. I believe this fundamental relationality affects how Lorde’s poetry connects to and expresses both the past, the present, and the future.

1.1 Focus of the thesis

Above, I have outlined some of the main aspects of what parenting implies for Lorde as a Black, lesbian woman in the United States in the last half of the twentieth century, and how parenting relates to issues of temporality for her. In this thesis, I am interested in exploring the connection I see between the relationality of parenting and temporality within Lorde's poetry. More specifically, my hypothesis is that the relationality of queer, Black parenting plays an important role in the way in which both the past, the present, and the future appear within the poetic situation of many of Lorde's poems. I believe that analyzing and discussing these connections can add a valuable perspective on Lorde's poetics and can open a discussion of how Lorde's poetry might be characterized as fundamentally concerned with relationality.

In my discussions of the relationality of Black, queer parenting in Lorde's poetry, I will not be attempting to trace or characterize either a specific child, parent, or mother figure or subjectivity, neither will I define one specific parental relationship as central in Lorde's poetry. I am interested in characterizing what I understand as a specific kind of relationality, that which I refer to as the relationality of Black, queer parenting. This relationality is connected to relationships between specific parents and children but is not limited to biological kinship relations. Neither, as I will discuss, is it only tied to specific subject positions within Lorde's poetry. Rather, this relationality affects and runs through the poems I will discuss, often on the level of poetic form, structure, and enunciation, affecting the fundamental parameters of the poetic situation and its temporality.

Because I focus on the relationality of Black, queer parenting as a kind of relationality that runs through Lorde's poetry without exclusively being tied to relationships between specific parents and children, there are many of Lorde's poems which obviously center parental relationships that I have chosen not to focus on. I have, for example, chosen not to discuss poems that center birth specifically, even though this motif does play a part especially in Lorde's earlier collections of poetry. The motif of parenting is present and central all through Lorde's poetic career, and I will only be able to discuss a very limited selection of the relevant poems within this thesis. The poems I will discuss are chosen because I believe they can shed light on how the relationality of parenting appears in Lorde's poetry and on how this relationality connects to the temporality of those poems and to questions of Lorde's poetics more generally.

1.2 Audre Lorde's life and work

Audre Lorde was born in Harlem, New York on February 18, 1934, to Grenadian parents who had come to New York in the 1920's.² Her given name was Audrey Geraldine Lorde, but as a child, Lorde began spelling her first name without the 'y' because she didn't find the letter "neat" or "aesthetically pleasing" (De Veaux 2004, 18). Lorde wrote poetry from a young age, and she had her first poem, "Spring," published in *Seventeen* magazine in 1951. Lorde lived through massive historical and social shifts. Her early life was marked by the Great Depression and World War II, and her youth was marked by the rise of McCarthyism in America during the 1950's and the growth of the civil rights movement in the 1960's (Byrd 2009, 3 – 4). Her first collection of poetry was not published until she was in her mid-thirties, at which point she had obtained a degree in library science and had two children. Her debut collection was published in 1968, and the same year Lorde was invited to be poet-in-residence at Tougaloo College, a historically Black college in Mississippi. Being at Tougaloo marked a shift for Lorde. She was working as a professional poet teaching poetry workshops for the first time, and this both fueled her own writing and began her lifelong work as a teacher. Throughout the seventies and eighties, Lorde published most of her poetry collections, gave speeches, and took part in Black, feminist, and queer activism. She taught, travelled, and built political and literary coalitions and relationships transnationally. Lorde was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1978. She died, 58 years old, on the 17th of November, 1992.

Lorde's body of work is expansive and multifaceted. She was both influenced by and became a great influence on several literary contexts. She published eleven collections of poetry, from the debut in 1968 to her last collection published posthumously in 1993. As a young poet, Lorde was fascinated with and influenced by British Romantic poets such as Keats, Byron, and Shelley and modernists such as T.S. Eliot. The Romantic influence is quite clear in Lorde's first collection, *The First Cities*, from 1968 (Lorde 2000),³ which is preoccupied with seasonal and natural imagery and centers a fairly traditional lyric 'I.' Her second collection, *Cables to rage* (Lorde 1970), also to an extent reflects this influence. The modernist influence

² Unless otherwise indicated, the biographical information in this section is based on Alexis De Veaux's biography *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (De Veaux 2004).

³ I am using *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (2000) as my main source for my readings of Lorde's poetry and will be referring to this volume throughout. I have, however, consulted some of the more central collections separately. I have been able to obtain some, but not all, of these individual collections in their original editions. When presenting the different collections in this section, I will include a reference to the different original or reprinted editions of individual collections that I have consulted in my work.

can be traced formally throughout Lorde's poetry. Lorde often works with ambiguous syntax and fragmentation both at the level of poetic subjectivity and formal structure, something which is often compared to modernist poets and their use of similar poetic tropes and devices (Avi-Ram 1986; Obourn 2005, 229).

Lorde is often described with her own term as a "sister outsider," since she was both related to and marginal within many contexts (Byrd 2009, 11). She was involved with several political movements and her poetry can be read in relation to tendencies connected to feminist, lesbian, and Black contemporary contexts. Yet, neither her poetic voice, political stance, or multifaceted identity can be captured in one category. Lorde's relationship with Black literary traditions and political movements of her time is one of the examples of a political and literary context Lorde engaged in, while she stood in a marginal and conflicted position towards it. The Black Arts movement (BAM) of the 1960's and 70's is significant in relation to the earlier part of Lorde's career as a published poet. The BAM is associated with the civil rights and Black Power movements, fueled by events of the 1960's such as the assassination of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., and by the general sense of racial frustration and need for change spreading at the time (Smethurst and Ramsby II 2011, 405 – 407). The BAM, aligned with the nationalist thinking of the Black Power movement, was invested in a project of Black self-determination in the face of white oppression. Artistically, this meant practicing an aesthetic aimed at speaking to Black audiences, rather than appealing to white aesthetic standards, and having ongoing discussions of what a "black-based evaluative system of arts" might look like (Smethurst and Ramsby II 2011, 405, 415; see also De Veaux 2004, 91).

Lorde's third and fourth collections of poetry, *From a Land where Other People Live* (Lorde 1973) and *New York Headshop and Museum* (Lorde 1974), were published by Broadside Press, one of the most important publishers associated with the BAM (Smethurst and Ramsby II 2011, 408). As noted however, Lorde stood in a marginal, and critical, position in relation to the movement whose nationalist project of self-determination was tied to masculinist and heteronormative ideas of gender, sexuality, and family. As Michelle M. Wright describes the ideology at the time: "Black men must fight for their rights and Black women should be satisfied with their subordinate roles as assistants, lovers, and mothers" (M.M. Wright 2004, 138). Personally, being a lesbian woman, Lorde had to fit into a concept of womanhood she simply didn't fit in. Aesthetically, as a poet who not only engages critically with race, but also with gender and sexuality especially, the position of Lorde's poetry in relation to the BAM is

complicated. Megan Obourn writes that Lorde's poems "could be incorporated along the lines of the Black Arts Movement for their racial content alone, flattening their multiply signifying language by making them 'about' racial blackness" (Obourn 2005, 234).

Following the nomination of *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973) for a National Book Award, and W. W. Norton's publication of Lorde's fifth collection, *Coal* in 1976 (Lorde 1996), which collected some new poems and edited versions of previously published poems, Lorde's poetry slowly gained wider recognition. During the seventies, Lorde began engaging more with global political issues and contexts and with her own immediate Caribbean and what she understood as her cultural West African heritage. She began visiting the Caribbean more, researching her family history, and in 1974 she travelled to West Africa for the first time. During this trip, Lorde experienced a connection to different West African cultures and religions which significantly influenced her life and poetry. Especially Lorde's following two collections would attest to this influence. *Between Our Selves* (Lorde 1976) is a short collection consisting of seven poems, but the following *The Black Unicorn* (Lorde 1978), which also includes all the poems from *Between Our Selves*, is one of Lorde's most voluminous collections and is considered a main work in her career.

Just as Lorde was related to and marginal within the BAM, she would be in a similar position in feminist political and literary contexts throughout her life, which were often implicitly white and heterosexual. Lorde served as poetry editor of the feminist journal *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture* launched in 1977 for two years, but she resigned because her editorial choices were not taken seriously and because she thought poetry was given a marginal position in the magazine (Mangrum 2018, 346 – 347). An earlier version of Lorde's famous essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury" was first published in *Chrysalis* in 1977 under the title "Poems Are Not Luxuries" (Mangrum 2018, 337). Core aspects of Lorde's view of poetry are formulated in this essay, especially her understanding of poetry as a "vital necessity of our existence" (Lorde 2007, 37). Read in the context of her frustrations with the other editors of *Chrysalis*, the essay seems to point to Lorde's dissatisfaction with the role poetry played in the magazine (Mangrum 2018, 348). In a similar way, Lorde's essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (Lorde 2007) was written as a paper for an academic conference on Simone De Beauvoir in 1979. A significant part of the critique in this text is aimed at white feminist academics for not being aware of significant differences

between women and for adopting the same exclusionary mechanisms as the patriarchal gatekeepers they themselves criticize.

Lorde time and again spoke out about shortcomings and exclusionary logics within political contexts and movements she herself strongly believed in. This attests to her uncompromising and complex vision of what social change must look like and to her understanding of poetry as “vital” to every aspect of existence. Difference is a keyword for her thinking, her poetry, and her life. Lorde’s attention to the importance of differences both within the self and in collective, social contexts is often what allows her to intervene into simplistic categorizations and oppressive social logics. In the essay “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving,” for example, Lorde writes about how mechanisms of oppression such as racism, sexism, and homophobia “stem from the same root – an inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening” (Lorde 2007, 45). This attention to complex and intricate connections also characterizes her poetry. Her poetic expression is uncompromising, formally complex, and often places a poetical finger right on sore, vulnerable, or complicated aspects of existence and relationality.

Lorde continued to be prolifically productive in the eighties, spending a lot of time travelling, teaching at home and abroad, and publishing several books. In 1980 Lorde was part of founding Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press along with Barbara Smith and a group of women of color, responding to their need for “feminists and lesbians of color to acquire autonomy in the publishing arena” (De Veaux 2004, 277). 1980 also marked the year of the publication of her first book of prose, *The Cancer Journals* (Lorde 1997), which contains essays on her experience with breast cancer. In 1982, both the collection *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (Lorde 1982a) and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Lorde 2018) were published. *Zami* is probably Lorde’s most well-known work, and its reimagining of her early life draws on Lorde’s Caribbean heritage and West African myths and spirituality. In the book, this cultural and spiritual heritage is closely tied to lesbian sexuality. In the epilogue, Lorde defines ‘Zami’ as “[a] Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers” (Lorde 2018, 303). *Sister Outsider* (Lorde 2007), a collection of speeches and essays, was published in 1984 and established Lorde as a major essayist and theoretical thinker. Lorde’s penultimate poetry collection, *Our Dead Behind Us*, was published in 1986 (Lorde 1994), and the last collection of essays published in her lifetime, *A Burst of Light*, came out in 1988

(Lorde 2009). Lorde was named New York State Poet Laureate in 1991, being both the first African American and woman to receive this title (Lorde 2009, 4). While Lorde lived on St. Croix towards the end of her life, Hurricane Hugo destroyed Lorde and her partner Gloria Joseph's home and library. During the process of clearing out the remains of her library, Lorde came upon a copy of *Chosen Poems: Old and New* and began revising it (Lorde 1993, xi-xii). The revised collection was published as *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and New* in 1992 (Lorde 1993). Lorde's last collection of poems, *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance*, was published posthumously in 1993 (Lorde 2000).

1.3 Reception and previous research

In recent years, Lorde's work has received renewed attention. In 2014, Lyndon G. Kill noted that Lorde is experiencing a "Second Coming" across academic disciplines and national borders (Gill 2014, 175), and many new collections of her writings are being published. Last year, *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde* was published (Lorde 2020), in 2009 *I Am Your Sister* collected both well-known and previously unpublished essays by Lorde (Lorde 2009), and *Audre Lorde's Transnational Legacies* from 2015 highlights Lorde's work outside an American context and gathers Lorde's own writing and new academic perspectives on her work (Bolaki and Broeck 2015). The collection *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (Lorde 2017) contains both prose and poetry by Lorde, and, as Reni Eddo-Lodge writes in her preface to the volume, the collection is the first specifically British publication of her work (Eddo-Lodge 2017, I). Lorde's work is also finally being translated into Scandinavian languages. A collection of her poetry was translated into Danish for the first time in 2019 (Lorde 2019), and this year her poetry has also been translated into Norwegian (Lorde 2021).

Lorde is a significant figure in recent American literary history, and the academic and critical reception of her work is too voluminous to outline completely here. However, because her work is relevant to a variety of political and critical contexts, it has often been read for one particular aspect in ways that tend to simplify and tokenize her work, thus demonstrating the kind of simplification and lack of awareness of the complexities of difference that Lorde sought to disrupt (M.M. Wright 2004, 161). This tendency goes for both her poetry and prose, but as some critics argue, the complexity of the formal language of Lorde's poetry makes it harder to simplify than her prose. This can perhaps partly account for why Lorde's essays and prose works are much more widely read and commented than her poetry (Obourn 2005, 240;

Gumbs 2010, 391). There is even a tendency in the academic scholarship on Lorde to focus disproportionately on her essays, prose writing, and the significance of her political and theoretical work rather than on her poetry and its formal aspects, a tendency that several scholars have drawn attention to and attempted to counter in their own work (Dhairyam 1992; Rudnitsky 2003; Obourn 2005; Gumbs 2010). My own project does focus on aspects of Lorde's work that have political significance, namely Black and queer relationality. My aim, however, is to use these factors to shed light on her poetry and poetics, rather than the other way around.

The scholarship focusing on Lorde's poetry contains many different approaches to her work. The perspectives on Lorde's poetry that have been most important to my own project tend to reflect on the complexities of Lorde's poetry in various ways, for example by addressing the ambiguous and multiply signifying formal language of Lorde's poetry, or discussing how Lorde's marginalized position, subjectivity, and her complex relationship with different political and literary traditions and movements affect the conditions of her poetic expression (Avi-Ram 1986; Hull 1989; Dhairyam 1992; Rudnitsky 2003; Obourn 2005; Leonard 2012). I will not be able to account thoroughly for these perspectives, but what I especially take from these readings is an awareness of how formal, syntactical, and also thematical complexities are intrinsic and important characteristics of Lorde's poetry, and that one should not attempt to 'resolve' them. Lorde's poetic expression is rich and complex, and it creates multiple, ambiguous, and sometimes paradoxical potentials for interpretation. This is an awareness that is fundamental to my analyses of her poetry.

Much has been written about how the trope or motif of mothering is central in Lorde's poetry, as well as in her 'biomythography' *Zami* (e.g. Hall 2000; Wall 2005; Betts 2012; Jacobs 2015). In my focus on the relationality of queer, Black parenting in Lorde's poetry, I draw on and am especially indebted to two readings of Lorde. Firstly, Michelle M. Wright's reading of the subjectivity or trope of the Black mother in Lorde's work, which especially underlines the intersectional connections between matters of race, gender, and sexuality and explores the way in which the trope of the Black mother can interfere in linear, masculinist ideas of time (M.M. Wright 2004). Secondly, Alexis Pauline Gumbs' readings of Lorde's work, and her extensive discussion of how queer, Black mothering in Lorde's work can offer a critical, disruptive, and creative relationality, provide an important starting point for my own analyses (Gumbs 2010, 2011, 2014). Gumbs' understanding of Lorde's work is by far the academic

approach to Lorde's work that most influences and is aligned with my own approach. I will both be referring to Gumbs' theoretical understanding of Black, queer mothering and discuss some of her readings of Lorde's poetry. My focus on the relationality of parenting draws on Gumbs' discussions of the resistant and creative potentials of Black, queer mothering. However, I focus on parenting rather than specifically mothering, and I am interested in the specific connection between parenting and the way in which the past, present, and future appear in Lorde's poems, and in how these aspects affect Lorde's poetics more generally.

1.4 Terms and theory

Here, I will outline my understanding and use of key terms in this thesis, particularly queerness and Blackness, and how they relate to relationality and temporality. Relationality is perhaps the most central term in my approach to Lorde's poetry. I will analyze poems in which the relationality of queer, Black parenting is central and discuss how networks, kinds, and structures of relationality appear through this selection of Lorde's poetic work. Running through these analyses is a more general discussion of how I understand Lorde's poetry and poetics as fundamentally relational. I will not be actively discussing theoretical accounts of relationality throughout the thesis as much as I will focus on characterizing the way in which Lorde's poems themselves manifest and articulate relationality. There are, however, a few key points concerning relationality that I wish to highlight here.

Understanding relationality as central and fundamental to Lorde's poetry implies attempting to move away from a framework which posits the independent individual as the naturalized starting point of existence. The tendency to regard the individual as the base of existence or subjectivity has deep roots in Western traditions of thinking. In their recent book, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (2020), Judith Butler argues for the necessity of turning towards a relational approach which acknowledges interdependence as fundamental to existence. As part of this argument, Butler analyzes and criticizes the prevalence of the idea of the 'self-made,' independent, and implicitly male individual in Western, liberal thinking. Noting the lack of an awareness of relationality in such accounts, Butler writes that this individual "who is introduced to us as the first moment of the human, the outbreak of the human onto the world, is posited as if he was never a child; as if he was never provided for, never depended upon parents or kinship relations, or upon social institutions, in order to survive" (Butler 2020, 37). Butler's discussion of the need to recognize relationality as a

precondition for existence is important to my project, and the quote above suggests that centering relationality can be understood as an intervention in traditional and dominant modes of Western thought. A further important aspect of Butler's thoughts on relationality is that they don't attempt to idealize relationality. Butler writes that

relationality is not by itself a good thing, a sign of connectedness, an ethical norm to be posited over and against destruction: rather, relationality is a vexed and ambivalent field in which the question of ethical obligations has to be worked out in light of a persistent and constitutive destructive potential.

(Butler 2020, 10).

This awareness is crucial to my project because I am not attempting to idealize or glorify parenting, or trace one specific parental relationship as central to Lorde's work, but am rather aiming to explore how the relationality of parenting influences Lorde's poetry and poetics. As I will discuss in my specific analyses, Lorde's poetical engagement with relationality is attuned to the complexities of relationality and aware of structures of power and oppression that mark the world in which she writes.

The relationality of parenting, as I have discussed, brings up general issues of temporality. Questions of past heritage, present kinship, and a future beyond the moment of the individual. In "Turning the Beat Around," Lorde reflects on the practice and experience of parenting as a Black lesbian in her present American reality. It is quite clear that in that context, this relationality of parenting is marginalized and stands in contrast to dominant, social norms of family. Lorde writes about her experience: "We had to learn and teach what works while we lived, always, with a cautionary awareness of the social forces aligned against us" (Lorde 2009, 76). I understand queerness and Blackness as factors that have particular importance to characterizing the relationality of parenting and how it is connected to temporality in Lorde's poetry. Throughout the rest of this section, I will account for how I understand and use queerness and Blackness in this thesis.

First, however, I will comment on what I refer to as the dominant norm of family in this project. This idea of family is tied to the institution of the heterosexual, patriarchal nuclear family. It is also, as I will argue, implicitly tied to whiteness. Pinpointing a pervasive social norm in so few, general words runs the risk of simplifying a much more complex, social reality. I want to emphasize that I don't understand the idea of the nuclear family to be

monolithic or universally ahistorical, but this dominant image or ideal of family *is* pervasive in the Western context and historical time Lorde lives in and writes from.

Many theorists have engaged critically with norms of family and reproduction, but from a queer point of view Lee Edelman's polemic against what he calls "reproductive futurism" in his book *No Future – Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) has been one of the most influential in recent decades. To me, what is interesting about Edelman's argument is that he emphasizes the connection between biological reproduction within a heterosexual framework and the continued reproduction of the social order or status quo. To Edelman, this social logic claims any idea of the future to itself through the image of the innocent child which "has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust" (Edelman 2004, 11). The future becomes the domain of the symbolic child and of the heteronormative social order reproducing itself (see also Engelhardt Andersen 2020, 41). To Edelman, within this logic of "reproductive futurism," the queer position is "the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (Edelman 2004, 9). The crux of Edelman's critical stance towards this "reproductive futurism" is his rejection, his resounding 'NO' to any idea of the future, and his call to embrace the negativity structurally bestowed upon queers (Edelman 2004, 4, 16 – 17).

Edelman's characterization of the connection between the heteronormative family, the future, and the social status quo is important to my project. However, both his rejection of futurity altogether and his anti-relational stance are quite contrary to Lorde's poetic engagement with relationality and parenting, which can be understood as an alternative relationality that Edelman, briefly put, ignores in his focus on dominant norms of family. I mention Edelman here because he emphasizes how temporality and dominant images of the family are connected; How the heteronormative family is central to the social logic of the present, has a privileged hold upon the future, and, I would add, also on the past through the social legitimacy of lineage and bloodlines. Edelman also, despite taking an anti-relational stance himself, points to the important fact that parenting – whether biological or not, within or outside the nuclear family – is inevitably relational. Parenting exists and engages in and through the fabric of the existing world and its social structures.

Edelman has received much justified critique for omitting issues of race and gender in his focus on the structurally negative position of the queer. The, perhaps, most notable response comes from José Esteban Muñoz who, in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of*

Queer Futurity (2009), responds that “[t]he future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity” (Muñoz 2009, 95). In recent decades, there has been a general interest in the connection between queerness and temporality (Dinshaw et al. 2007). In relation to this connection, I draw on thinkers such as Muñoz and Judith (Jack) Halberstam who in different ways emphasize how queer relations can produce alternative temporalities which clash or break with heteronormative conceptions of time. Halberstam writes in her book, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), that

[q]ueer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. [...] If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity.

(Halberstam 2005, 1).

Here, queerness and time are related in that a heteronormative and perhaps more linear ordering of time, based on events such as marriage and reproduction, is queered (Halberstam 2005, 2). Or rather, alternative temporal conceptions and practices are part of constituting queerness. Muñoz is more specifically interested in the relation between queerness and the future. In his book, he understands queerness as a utopian impulse, asserting that “[q]ueerness is not yet here [...] Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough” (Muñoz 2009, 1). Drawing on Halberstam’s understanding of queer temporalities, Muñoz writes that “[s]traight time tells us that there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life. The only futurity promised is that of reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality, the spectacle of the state refurbishing its ranks through overt and subsidized acts of reproduction” (Muñoz 2009, 22). For Muñoz, the potentiality of queerness lies in being able to imagine a different future which doesn’t merely reproduce the logic of the present.

The reason I draw on these accounts of what queerness implies is firstly because they associate queerness with practices and conceptions of temporality that differ from a ‘straight’ conception of time, marking queer positions as both marginal and disruptive in relation to this dominant temporality. Secondly, I draw on Halberstam and Muñoz because they both emphasize how queerness is a relational concept tied to collective and social matters and practices (Muñoz 2009, 11; Halberstam 2005, 1, 6). My understanding of the term queer in this thesis is quite wide. I use it to describe an alternative relationality and temporality, not

just a sexual identity. Lorde described herself as a lesbian, and throughout this thesis I will use this term when referring to that specific sexuality. When discussing the relationality and practice of parenting in her work, however, I will primarily use the term queer because it points to how this relationality stands in a critical and resistant relation to normative conceptions of family.

Similarly, I use the term Black about the relationality of parenting in Lorde's work primarily to emphasize how the parenting that appears in Lorde's work is marginalized by and deviates from a white, racist context. In her book *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004), Michelle M. Wright highlights how Blackness in the West, since the beginning of Western colonization and slave trade, "has been produced in contradiction" as a "Black Other" again which white subjectivity defines itself (M.M. Wright 2004, 1, 3). Wright argues that, even though there is "no biological basis for racial categories," the lives of Black people in the West are shaped by "the very concrete" effects of Western racism (M.M. Wright 2004, 1). In a phenomenological discussion of whiteness, Sara Ahmed similarly emphasizes how racial categories and their social significance are very real, yet how race is not an essential or given property, but rather an effect of racialization (Ahmed 2007, 150). She writes that whiteness is not "ontologically given" but is something that becomes "given, over time" (Ahmed 2007, 150). Ahmed also describes how the history of colonialism "makes the world 'white'" (Ahmed 2007, 153) in the sense that it accommodates certain bodies that do not have to "face their whiteness" (Ahmed 2007, 156) and creates resistance for non-white bodies.

Interestingly, Ahmed points out that "whiteness itself is a straightening device: bodies disappear into the 'sea of whiteness' when they 'line up'" (Ahmed 2007, 159). This emphasizes what is crucial about both Blackness and queerness in this project and how these two terms intertwine. Blackness in Lorde's poetry, similarly to queerness, stands in an othered, marginalized position in relation to a white norm, but it also carries a critical, disruptive potential. Race and sexuality are neither separable in Lorde's work, nor in my understanding of the terms (M.M. Wright 2004, 6). However, queerness and Blackness can also engage critically with, and complicate, each other (see Cohen 1997). For example, even though Halberstam and Muñoz lay the ground for my understanding of the term queer and its temporality, they both seem to understand queer relationality mainly as disconnected from reproductivity and parenting in a way that doesn't pay much attention to marginalized,

resistant, or indeed queer modes of parenting or mothering. Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes that they, in their critique of Edelman's omission of race, "shy away from the complexities of birth and the presumed heteronormativity of intergenerationality" (Gumbs 2010, 12).

In Lorde's work, the relationality of parenting is queer, but also Black, and Gumbs' crucial critique of a queer perspective that automatically assumes that parenting is heteronormative also extends to a critique of a queer perspective that omits Black mothering and parenting. Gumbs writes that "[i]f queer theory is meant to challenge the 'reproductive narrative' as it emerges in social institutions, then queer theorists must disrupt the reproduction of a racist narrative that criminalizes the birth and mothering of Black life" (Gumbs 2010, 50). Here, Gumbs refers to the structural oppression and marginalization of Black reproduction in a past and present colonial system. Gumbs' approach to the relationality of queer, Black mothering is crucial to my own understanding of how queerness, Blackness, and the relationality of parenting are intimately connected.

In this context, I want to briefly outline a few aspects of Black feminist accounts of the historical and contemporary structural position of Black mothering and reproduction in a colonial American context because these aspects are important to Lorde's work and provide a relevant background for Gumbs' perspective. In her book, *Women, Race & Class* (1981), Angela Y. Davis unfolds an historical analysis of the intersections between racism, misogyny, and classism in America. Going back to discuss the role of Black women during slavery, Davis describes how "[t]he slave system defined Black people as chattel" (Davis 1981, 5) and how this objectification, dehumanization, and commodification of Black people is central and intrinsic to the structure of slavery. Further, this slaveholding logic excluded Black women from prevailing ideas and ideologies of womanhood at the time. Davis specifically discusses the 19th century where femininity was tied to frailty and delicacy, and which saw white women "as inhabitants of a sphere totally severed from the realm of productive work" (Davis 1981, 12). In relation to these ideas of femininity, "Black women were practically anomalies" (Davis 1981, 5). This ideological division served the purpose of exploiting Black women's labor on an 'equal footing' with the labor power of Black men (Davis 1981, 5 – 6). However, it did not stop slaveholders from additionally exploiting Black women sexually and reproductively, using rape as "a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression" (Davis 1981, 23).

These intersecting mechanisms of racism and misogyny impacted the dominant view on Black mothering, parenting, and family. Davis writes that “[i]n fact, in the eyes of the slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all” (Davis 1981, 7). To put it very simply, the term ‘motherhood’ and its connotations, in a similar way to the prevailing idea of ‘womanhood’, was reserved for white women. Hortense Spillers also discusses the effect of the objectivization and cruel commodification of enslaved Black people on the cultural conceptions of family or kinship. She writes that “[f]amily,’ as we practice and understand it ‘in the West’ – the *vertical* transfer of a bloodline [...] – becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community [...] captive persons were *forced* into patterns of *dispersal*” (Spillers 1987, 74 – 75, emphasis in original). This quote sheds light on a crucial connection; the way in which the fragmentation of the experience of colonialism and the slave trade played a role in placing Black Africans not only in an enslaved position but further in a structurally marginal position in relation to the patriarchal bloodline-structures of dominant, white, American conceptions of kinship and family.

The historical realities and specific ideological connotations of Black mothering during slavery are clearly far from the historical reality of Lorde’s contemporary context. However, Davis and Spillers both describe how these mechanisms and conditions during slavery, which excluded Black families from being seen as adhering to the dominant and normative ‘vertical’ family patterns regardless of their actual family structures, became signs of a perceived, inherent ‘deviance’ or ‘pathology’ associated with Black reproduction, mothering, and family structure. This point is particularly important to understanding the way in which Black parenting has been and is still being stigmatized and pathologized in contemporary times. Davis writes about more recent examples of state sanctioned reproductive control, specifically sterilization abuse targeted at poor women of color. Davis recounts several cases from the 1970’s of involuntary sterilization of predominantly Black women and concludes that “[t]he domestic population policy of the U.S. government has an undeniably racist edge. Native American, Chicana, Puerto Rican and Black women continue to be sterilized in disproportionate numbers” (Davis 1981, 219). Black mothering, parenting, and reproduction are clearly structurally marginalized historically and in Lorde’s contemporary America. However, this marginalized position can carry a disruptive, queer potential. It is especially in this context I draw on Gumbs and her reading of Lorde. As Gumbs formulates it,

the reclamation of the practice of Black mothering is a queer act because it disrupts the devaluation of Black life, and by extension the differential value of life in general. [...] So while a normative reading of mothering seems to reify a reproductive narrative [...] the work of Black mothering is queer.

(Gumbs 2010, 63).

Gumbs' understanding of the queerness of Black mothering, and I would add of Black parenting, forms the main theoretical foundation for my own project. Gumbs' thoughts are particularly relevant to my project because she doesn't restrict her thoughts on Black mothering to 'biological' mothering or understand that kind of mothering as somehow primary or more natural than other kinds of mothering, parenting, and kinship relations (Gumbs 2010, 191). Rather, Gumbs emphasizes the disruptive, radical, and creative potentials of queer, Black mothering and shows how it can provide "a deviant energy for counternarrative and poetic interruptions that not only threaten the reproduction of the narrative of heteropatriarchal capitalism, but also offer something else in its place" (Gumbs 2010, 57). What is especially important to my project is that Gumbs emphasizes how this queer, Black mothering produces an alternative temporality that is critical of the status quo and directed towards a different future in which the racialized violence of the present is not reproduced (Gumbs 2010, 63).

In this thesis, I will mainly be using the term 'parenting' for the relationality that I focus on. Firstly, I prioritize this verb form over 'parenthood' or 'motherhood' to emphasize that I am interested in parenting as an active practice which is not necessarily tied to either biological parent-child ties or even to specific subject positions in Lorde's poetry. Secondly, based on Davis' analysis of how motherhood and whiteness have historically been connected, I use the verb form of parenting to refer to this background and to the queer, disruptive potentials of the practice and relationality of Black, queer parenting which Gumbs points to. I want to emphasize that in using the term 'parenting' and not 'mothering,' I am not attempting to disregard the gendered specificities of Black mothering or to reproduce the structural marginalization of this subjectivity. The accounts of the structural position of the Black mother I have outlined above are very important in relation to Lorde's poetry. My focus is, however, slightly different to those I have described above. I am interested in how the relationality of parenting permeates Lorde's poetry as a poetic structure of relationality rather than as something that is tied to specific relations between, for example, mothers and

children. To emphasize my focus on the connection between parenting and the poetic voice and situation, the term parenting seems more fitting to my project.

1.5 Structure of the thesis and selection of poems

In this thesis, I focus on the connection between the relationality of queer, Black parenting in Lorde's poetry and the way in which time appears, or is created, in these poems. More specifically, I want to discuss how this relationality affects the way in which the past, the present, and the future are formed in Lorde's poetry. The chapters in this thesis will be structured around past, present, and future as temporal containers, and the poems I analyze are chosen to shed light on the connection between parenting and time in Lorde's poems. This means that I will be focusing quite specifically on these connections in my analyses and will not always be able to analyze the poems in full. I have included an appendix with the full poems at the end of the thesis. I will be analyzing and discussing nine poems. These poems appear in collections from roughly the middle of Lorde's career. The poems I discuss come from collections between Lorde's third collection, *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973), and her penultimate collection, *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986). As mentioned, the poems are chosen based on my focus on the connection between parenting and time in Lorde's poems and not based on what specific period of her poetic career they stem from. That being said, the poems I discuss do all come from the two decades in which Lorde published most of her work. This is a period in which Lorde has already established her own poetic voice and expression, and in which her status as a significant poet of her time is gradually solidifying.

Structuring the thesis around the past, present, and future as temporal categories is not meant to suggest that time in Lorde's poetry follows a linear, progressive path. On the contrary, Lorde's poems often work directly against such a conception of time. Structuring the thesis around these temporal categories, then, is an attempt to look at the specific ways in which the relationality of Black, queer parenting relates to the past, the present, and the future respectively and to provide a structural framework within which I can explore how Lorde's poetry works with and against more linear and dominant ideas of time. In each chapter, I will be focusing my analyses on the connection between parenting and time in specific poems, but underlying these analyses is a general interest in, and discussion of, how the relationality of parenting and its connection to time affect Lorde's poetics.

In the second chapter, I will explore how Lorde's poetry traverses time to reach out for an ancestral past from a Black, queer, and relational perspective. I will discuss three poems: "Between Ourselves," "Prologue," and "125th Street and Abomey." The past that appears in these poems is both fragmented and complex, yet the act of engaging with it is a crucial aspect of how the relationality of Black, queer parenting appears in Lorde's poetry. The underlying poetical question of this chapter concerns how the poetic voice is able to relate to a time that is gone, or lost, but which still reaches into and affects the present, and how this past is inscribed in the poem both formally and thematically.

The third chapter focuses on how the relationality of queer, Black parenting appears in relation to the present and the pervasive sense of destruction and oppression that, for Lorde, dominates this present. Here, I discuss four poems: "Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot," "Afterimages," "Power," and "Outlines." This is the chapter in which I discuss the largest number of poems both because Lorde's poetic engagement with the present is especially central in her body of work and because I believe these particular poems can shed light on each other in an interesting way. Many of these poems center the precarity of, and racist violence against, Black children in the present. In this chapter, the pressing, poetical question concerns how it is possible to adequately express or represent the urgent and overwhelming horror and reality of this present, and how the relationality of Black, queer parenting can exist and be expressed in relation to this present.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss how the relationality of parenting in Lorde's poetry sparks questions of what the future might look like, how one affects it, and what role poetry plays in this context. In this chapter I discuss the poems "The Winds of Orisha" and "On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge." The question relating to Lorde's poetics in this chapter revolves around how, and if, it is possible to manifest the potential of an open, different future within the poem itself. This leads to a discussion of Lorde's thoughts on the specific potentials of poetry.

Throughout the thesis I will refer to *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (Lorde 2000) which was first published in 1997 to provide a collected point of reference for my analyses. Many of Lorde's poems were published in different collections across her lifetime. I will generally discuss the version of a poem as it appears in the first collection it was published in. This means, for example, that I will not be discussing the collection *Undersong* from 1992, which is the revised version of *Chosen Poems* from 1982. In *Undersong*, many of the poems I

discuss appear, often quite thoroughly revised. Focusing on these revisions would require a thorough discussion of the diachronic development of Lorde's body of work, something that is not within the scope of this thesis. I will, however, deal with the collections *Between Our Selves* (1976) and the following *The Black Unicorn* (1978) slightly differently by not focusing primarily on the first of these two collections. All the poems from *Between Our Selves* were included in *The Black Unicorn*. Since I will discuss two poems that appear in both these collections, ("Between Ourselves" and "Power"), as well as one poem that only appears in *The Black Unicorn* ("125th Street and Abomey"), I will take the versions of all these poems from *The Black Unicorn* as the primary versions for my analyses to have a more cohesive point of reference. Given that the collections were published just two years apart, I believe that the fact that I deal primarily with the later collection doesn't create any significant disturbance in relation to my general choice of discussing the earlier, rather than later, versions of Lorde's poems.

2 Past

“and through my lips come the voices
of the ghosts of our ancestors”
(Lorde 2000, 96).⁴

Lorde’s poetry engages with the past in many ways across her body of work, but here I am interested in how her poetry explores issues of ancestry, kinship, heritage, and their complexities. Poetically evoking the past, compared to engaging with the present or the future, entails attempting to evoke something that has existed, but is no longer present. At least not in the here and now that the poem creates. Or perhaps the evoked past is present, but as traces, echoes, hauntings, as a sense of fragmentation or loss. Whereas poetically evoking the future is also a move that demands a traversing of time into something unknown, evoking the past raises questions not only of how the poem reaches out in time but of how the past reaches into the poem and continually affects the poetic voice and situation. Reaching out for the past to explore a sense of kinship from a queer, Black perspective affects the poetic situation of Lorde’s poems in an interesting way and poses specific temporal questions. In this chapter, I will focus on how Lorde’s poetic engagement with the past queerly disrupts dominant notions of history and heritage, and how this engagement creates a temporal situation within the poem where the linear temporality of history might be, for a moment, disturbed.

The past that appears in Lorde’s poems is often complicated, fragmented, or simply violent. One aspect that complicates Lorde’s poetic relationship to the past is the general assumption that parenting, reproduction, and thus heritage belong to the realm of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, positing queerness as marginal, or even antithetical, to these realms and thus to a sense of heritage.⁵ Further, the history and reality of colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and its disruption of lives and family ties play central roles in Lorde’s engagement with the past. Hortense Spillers writes about how the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade caused “massive demographic shifts,” violently formed “a modern African consciousness” and “interrupted hundreds of years of black African culture” (Spillers 1987, 68). Interestingly, she comments that this beginning of the history of the African diaspora constitutes “a rupture

⁴ From the poem “Prologue,” *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973).

⁵ This characteristic is informed by Edelman’s fundamental analysis of the privileged position of the heteronormative family in a Western, social logic (Edelman 2004).

and a radically different kind of cultural continuation” (Spillers 1987, 68). I find Spillers’ formulation crucial because it emphasizes both the violent impact and disruption of colonialism and the “cultural continuation” that happens in the diaspora. This is a “radically different” kind of continuation which is inscribed with the disruption and fragmentation of its beginning. These general aspects of the past seen from a queer, Black, and diasporic perspective have profound impact on issues of ancestry and heritage for Lorde, and on how she writes from her position as a “Lesbian and a Black African Caribbean American woman staked out in white racist sexist homophobic America” (Lorde 2009, 75).

Given these complications of the question of Black, queer heritage, I find it interesting that Lorde’s poetry *does* engage actively with issues of heritage. Fundamentally, I understand this wish to relate to the past and its complications as a central part of the queer, Black relationality of parenting that runs through Lorde’s poetry. In her doctoral dissertation, Alexis Pauline Gumbs comments that the word diaspora “is not necessarily very queer. Diaspora, from the Greek, meaning the scattering of seed or sperm is classically patriarchal, and impossibly patrilineal” (Gumbs 2010, 7). Further, Gumbs notes that studies of the African diaspora can take the form of a “pursuit of an impossible lineage” (Gumbs 2010, 7). Searching for a lineage that has been disrupted is not necessarily a queer project since, as Gumbs notes, it might build on an assumption that biological bloodlines and linearity are what determines relationality and belonging (Gumbs 2010, 7).

In her poetry Lorde *does* pursue a sense of heritage, for example through drawing on spiritual, historical, and mythical elements of West African cultures. As I understand it, when Lorde relates to and engages with the past in her poems, she is not attempting to (re)establish factual or linear kinship ties that would create a ‘legitimate’ lineage in a framework based on heteropatriarchal bloodlines. Lorde’s very engagement with such aspects of the past is disruptive and queer in that she, from a queer, Black perspective insists on relating to the past poetically, countering the idea that kinship bonds and heritage are only accessible through the heteronormative family. As I will discuss in this chapter, it is the poetic voice and the poetic situation itself that make it possible for Lorde to create these queer relations to the past.

One of the ways in which Lorde’s poetry relates to the past is by engaging with what she understands as her West African heritage through addressing or incorporating West African myths and spirituality in her poems. Lorde’s perception of West African cultures, spiritualities, and history as a part of her own heritage became especially pronounced in both

her work and life after her first trip to Africa in 1974 where she visited Ghana, Togo, and Dahomey – present-day Republic of Benin.⁶ As mentioned in the previous chapter, this influence is particularly central in her two following poetry collections *Between Our Selves* (1976) and *The Black Unicorn* (1978). *The Black Unicorn* even includes a glossary introducing the deities and cultural practices that appear in the poems (Lorde 2000, 330 – 333). Lorde refers to different West African cultures and traditions but most often to elements of Yoruban, Dahomean, and Fon culture and religion (Keating 1996, 14; Valdés 2014, 30; Coleman-Tobias 2018, 68). I will mostly use the general term ‘West African’ to discuss Lorde’s engagement with these cultures because she often refers to and mixes several contexts.

In relation to the poems I discuss in this chapter, it is most important to note that Lorde’s engagement with West African cultures constitutes a part of her exploration of what she understands as her own diasporic, cultural heritage. As Alexis De Veaux formulates it, while Lorde visited Dahomey in 1974, she “found what she believed was the religion of her foremothers and her spiritual connection to them” (De Veaux 2004, 151). This shows that Lorde personally connects this spirituality to her ancestry, and that this sense of heritage is based on her own perceived connection to West African myths, history, and spirituality rather than based on a factual bloodline she could trace back to Dahomey. Lorde’s relation to West Africa has been discussed by many scholars, and it is often pointed out that when Lorde refers to myths or to different *orishas* – the deities of the Yoruban pantheon (Brandon 2009a) – she does so through her own creative interpretation of these myths and deities which are not necessarily factually accurate (De Veaux 2004, 151; Wall 2005, 54).

Some scholars emphasize the creative potentials these relations to myths and spirituality afford Lorde (e.g. Chinosole 1990; Keating 1996), while others are more critical towards this move and its potentials (e.g. Dhairyam 1992; Oyěwùmí 2003, 13 – 16). I will not go much into this discussion since, to my reading, the most important point is that Lorde’s references to West African cultures form a part of her poetic engagement with a sense of heritage. These references also play a part in Lorde’s creation of a queer temporal situation within her poems in which linear notions of history and heritage can be disrupted. My understanding of Lorde’s

⁶ Dahomey was an independent kingdom from around 1600 – 1904, and in 1975 the country changed name to the People’s Republic of Benin, later Republic of Benin (1991) (De Veaux 2004, 142). Thus, the name change happens shortly after Lorde’s first visit, and she herself refers to the country as Dahomey in her poems.

West African influence builds on other arguments for how these engagements with a mythical sense of heritage form part of Lorde's attempt to disrupt, or move away from, a normative American concept of family and heritage. Cheryl A. Wall, for example, writes that "Lorde's appropriation of West African cosmology allows her to displace altogether the idea of the patriarchal family" (Wall 2005, 42).⁷ The way in which Lorde challenges a linear temporality and attempts to disrupt normative, Western notions of family through engaging poetically with a perceived, West African heritage, form the basis for why I discuss these elements in the context of queer, Black parenting in Lorde's poetry.

I will be analyzing three poems in this chapter. First "Between Ourselves," which first appeared in the short collection *Between Our Selves* (Lorde 1976) and again, slightly revised, in *The Black Unicorn* (Lorde 1978).⁸ This poem explores complicated and problematic issues of the past and emphasizes the importance of recognizing how the past affects conceptions of identity, belonging, and relationality in the present. I will argue that this poetic engagement with the past functions as a disruption or critique of logics of relationality and collective belonging that are too simplistic, exclusionary, or oppressive. In this analysis, I will mainly be focusing on thematic aspects and on fundamentally characterizing how Lorde's engagement with the past is connected to the relationality of queer, Black parenting. This analysis will form the foundation for my analysis of the poem "Prologue" from Lorde's earlier collection *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973). Formal and meta-poetic aspects of this poem reflect central characteristics of Lorde's poetic engagement with the past. Here, I will also discuss the ways in which Lorde creates a queer relationship to the past by criticizing certain restrictive aspects of the past while intentionally relating to and drawing poetic power from other elements of the past. Finally, I will discuss the poem "125th Street and Abomey" from *The Black Unicorn* (1978), focusing on the way in which Lorde evokes and addresses a spiritual heritage. I will argue that this poetic address reflects how Lorde's engagement with the past is central to the relationality of parenting that runs through her poetry, and how poetry and the poetic voice can create a queer temporal situation in which such relations become possible.

⁷ (see also Keating 1996; Valdés 2014, 21-22).

⁸ As mentioned in the previous chapter, I take the version of the poem published in *The Black Unicorn* as the starting point for my analysis, because I discuss other poems from this collection in this and following chapters. There are slight variations between the two versions which I will comment on when relevant in the quotes I draw out.

2.1 Entanglements and ancestral relations

I will begin by discussing a poem that connects issues of how to envision relationality as such with issues of engaging with the past. A poem which both makes it clear that engaging with the past is central to Lorde's poetry, yet which shows how complicated and messy it is to do so. The poem "Between Ourselves" creates a poetic situation and a vision of relationality and kinship attuned to and concerned with complicity, accountability, and complexity, aspects that I understand as fundamental to the relationality in Lorde's poems more generally. Within the poem, Lorde uses this understanding of relationality to criticize or disrupt understandings of relationality that she finds exclusionary and too simplistic. The title of the poem already alludes to its interest in collectivity and relationality. However, the complexity of this relationality is also clear already in the first stanza.

Once when I walked into a room
my eyes would seek out the one or two black faces
for contact or reassurance or a sign
I was not alone
now walking into rooms full of black faces
that would destroy me for any difference
where shall my eyes look?
Once it was easy to know
who were my people.

(Lorde 2000, 323).

Here, the speaker first gives voice to a longing for a sense of belonging or community with other Black people in a context probably dominated by whiteness, describing how "once" she would "seek out the one or two black faces" in order to not feel alone. Then, the speaker turns to a now in which she does find herself "walking into rooms full of black faces," yet being in these rooms seems to come with a demand for uniformity or sameness that would "destroy" the speaker "for any difference." These lines clearly refer to Lorde's understanding of difference "as a dynamic human force" and her critique of how difference is often used in the service of oppressive logics (Lorde 2007, 45).

Lorde's visions of and poetic engagement with questions of difference, identity, and relationality are, on the one hand, articulated in dialogue with contemporary understandings of identity and relationality formulated in the contexts of the BAM as well as in feminist and

queer contexts Lorde moved in. On the other hand, as I will discuss in relation to this poem and the poem “Prologue,” Lorde’s understanding of both identity and relationality is, simply put, a lot more complex than many current, often essentialist and exclusionary, formulations of these terms. Further on in the poem, Lorde points to what she calls “easy blackness” as problematic (Lorde 2000, 324). This alludes to the contexts of Black nationalism and the BAM which were focused quite exclusively on race. I bring in these contextual factors because Lorde deals thematically with them in this poem and because her attempt to disrupt or complicate simplistic notions of relationality informs how she evokes the past poetically in this poem.

Throughout the poem, Lorde plays with imagery of color, often referring to something as being “black,” “white,” “bleached,” or “without color.” I will comment on some of these instances but will not be able to go through all of them. Generally, I believe the way in which Lorde uses this color imagery both refers directly to issues of race and yet deliberately disrupts any simple, dichotomous, or stable associations between race and color. In the second stanza, Lorde quite clearly confronts an idea of race as biologically essential.

If we were stripped to our strength
of all pretense
and our flesh was cut away
the sun would bleach all our bones as white
as the face of my black mother
was bleached white by gold

(Lorde 2000, 323).

The first lines might seem to appeal to a universal humanity ‘beneath’ color, but such a reading would disregard how color matters and signifies throughout the poem. Rather, I read this paragraph as disrupting an essentialist, biological notion of Blackness or whiteness through, for example, associating bleaching with gold, and thus capitalism, giving whiteness a structural and not purely racial significance. I understand Lorde’s engagement with the past throughout the poem as crucial for her invention into simplified notions of relationality that see difference as a reason to destroy or exclude. Further, I understand the poetic engagement with the past as an important part of Lorde’s construction of an alternative queer, Black relationality attuned to the complexity of the past.

This poem is, as suggested earlier, infused with an awareness of accountability and complicity when considering relationality and the past. In the poem, a set of lines appears twice, establishing this awareness as central: “I do not believe / our wants have made all our lies / holy” (Lorde 2000, 323). The second time they appear, the line breaks are different: “I do not believe /our wants / have made all our lies / holy” (Lorde 2000, 324). The additional line break adds emphasis and slows down the reading of these lines. I read the lines as a kind of chorus which places accountability centrally in the poem. The first time the lines appear, they are followed by a stanza that introduces the poem’s connection to the past. Through pointing to the problem of a lacking awareness of complexity and complicity, the chorus lines connect the issues of community between Black people in the present with a scenario from the past. This past scenario describes a crucial part of Western colonialism; the transatlantic slave trade and the violence it inflicted on African populations. Here the poem’s relational focus turns more specifically towards relationality in the form of kinship or ancestry.

Under the sun on the shores of Elmina
a black man sold the woman who carried
my grandmother in her belly
he was paid with bright yellow coin
that shone in the evening sun
and in the faces of her sons and daughters.

(Lorde 2000, 323).

The poem establishes a clear kinship connection between the ‘I’ and the great-grandmother in Elmina where the first European settlement in West Africa was situated. The importance of this connection and the impact of this situation become apparent partly through how the bright coin shines “in the evening sun” as well as “in the faces of her sons and daughters.” Of course, there might be sons and daughters present in this past scenario, but the poem doesn’t explicitly clarify this, and my impression is that the sons and daughters mentioned can be understood as referring to future generations. Thus, as I read it, the scenario stretches beyond its own temporal limits and creates a poetic situation in which both past and future generations are present. This poetic situation both mimics the continuous effects and harm of the transatlantic slave trade and clearly establishes this West African heritage and past as important to the poem and its speaker.

The man who sold the speaker's great-grandmother in Elmina acts as an easily identifiable figure connecting the past scenario and the present described in the first stanza of the poem. Further on in the same stanza this connection is made clear.

When I see that brother behind my eyes
his irises are bloodless and without color
his tongue clicks like yellow coins
tossed up on this shore
where we share the same corner
of an alien and corrupted heaven
and whenever I try to eat
the words
of easy blackness as salvation
I taste the color
of my grandmother's first betrayal.

(Lorde 2000, 323 – 324).⁹

The poem criticizes an analysis of oppression and a call for community and unity under the banner of “easy blackness” exactly because such an attempt is too simple, dichotomous, and not built on an awareness of accountability and the historical complexities and differences among Black people. However, I want to stress that I understand the poem's critique of “easy blackness” as one part of a wider call for an awareness of complexity and accountability – both when it comes to relationality and to issues of the past. What this poem makes clear is that an engagement with the past cannot rely on ideas of innocence or ‘pure,’ easily distinguishable categories.

In this context, I find the lines describing how the speaker and the man who sold her great-grandmother are both “tossed up on this shore / *where we share the same corner* / of an alien and corrupted heaven” crucial (Lorde 2000, 323, emphasis mine). Lorde turns the reader's attentions to the pitfalls of “easy blackness” and further points to the complicity and responsibility of the Black man who sold the speaker's ancestor, but this does not mean that the poem is trying to ‘point fingers’ or blame this man for the violence and continuous impact

⁹ In the earlier version of the poem, the word “color” is spelled as “colour” (Lorde 2000, 223-224). In the earlier parts of her career, Lorde tended to prefer this British, or old American, way of spelling the word as “colour” (Gumbs 2010, 146).

of Western colonialization and slave trade. Rather, the lines I just quoted, the descriptions of the “bright yellow coin,” and of how the man’s “tongue clicks like yellow coins” (Lorde 2000, 323) establish Western colonialization and capitalism as a wider framework and problem of oppression.¹⁰

2.1.1 *Impurity, complicity, and the poetic voice*

In his book, *Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss* (2016), David W. McIvor writes about what he understands as a particularly American investment in innocence and a reluctance to engage with the past, especially problematic parts of it. He writes

Dwelling on the past is not only a waste of precious energy; it is practically un-American. If the power of this myth is understandable, it is nonetheless powerfully misleading and profoundly problematic in a country marked by historical brutalities and by ongoing realities of disrespect and despair. This myth reflects a political and psychological investment in innocence, a belief that each new dawn is a potential rupture from the past.

(McIvor 2016, xv).

I understand Lorde’s engagement with the past in “Between Ourselves” as actively opposed to such an “investment in innocence.” Lorde is not only directly criticizing the historical and contemporary facts of colonialism and capitalism and their logics of oppression, she is also creating a poetical situation that centers relationality and the importance of engaging with the complexities of the past. The act of engaging with the complexities of relationality, with painful elements of the past, and further being aware of the necessity of accountability can with McIvor’s words be described as “practically un-American.” It is not a far stretch to understand this as a critique of the structural whiteness that Lorde understands as dominant in America.

However, I dwell on Lorde’s insistence on relating to the past and its complexities because it is also relevant in relation to her poetic disruption or critique of “easy blackness” in this poem. As mentioned, this critique is quite clearly aimed at tendencies of Black nationalism in Lorde’s contemporary context. In her book, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (2004), Michelle M. Wright discusses Lorde’s marginal position in relation to the

¹⁰ This interpretation builds on Michelle M. Wright’s reading which emphasizes that Lorde suggests that “racial capitalism” is at the root of the betrayal (M.M. Wright 2004, 174).

BAM and her critical dialogue with the Black nationalist ideas it sprang out of. In the context of “Between Ourselves,” the similarities between this nationalism and the American tendency to believe that “each new dawn is a potential rupture from the past” are interesting (McIvor 2016, xv). Wright writes about the Black nationalism that the BAM grew out of that “like other forms of Western nationalism, this one also insists on a clean break with the past that enables a discourse of ‘new’ beginnings” (M.M. Wright 2004, 139). Further, she comments that in this nationalist context “unity is forged through an enforced homogeneity, and difference is established through dichotomies” between what is considered “Black” and “Western” (M.M. Wright 2004, 140). Thus, Wright points to how Black nationalism is built on some of the same assumptions as “other forms” of Western nationalism, although it aims to break with Western modes of thinking.

When Lorde engages with the past in “Between Ourselves” and insists on its connection to and impression upon the present, she is performing a poetic critique of ways of thinking that wish to “break” with the past, whether in the form of Black nationalism or other Western nationalist projects, something Wright also emphasizes in her reading of Lorde (see M.M. Wright 2004, 168 – 176). In engaging with the complexities of the past, Lorde also counteracts categorizations or divisions between past and present or between categories such as white and Black that, to her, are too easy. In this poem, Lorde emphasizes how the past is entangled with and affects the present and how distinctions between relational categories can rarely be drawn neatly or definitively.

In Wright’s discussion of Black nationalism, and in her own reading of Lorde’s poetry, she posits the figure of the Black mother as disruptive to how such nationalist narratives rely on the idea of breaking with the past. Describing how such narratives rely on a linear idea of time, Wright argues that “the trope of the mother speaks to circularity, connecting peoples not only to future generations but to previous ones” (M.M. Wright 2004, 141). Like Wright, I understand the relationality of parenting as closely connected to Lorde’s poetical engagement with the past. Lorde poetically evokes the past and how it affects the present in a way that very clearly centers relationality, especially a relationality connected to kinship through the image of the great-grandmother. In doing this, Lorde both challenges and complicates a view of relationality based on easy and clear distinctions – between, for example, racial and cultural modes – and disrupts a conception of the past as something neatly closed or cut off from the present.

This poem engages with the past and with the complicated issues of ancestry and relationality in the context of colonialism and slave trade with an awareness of complicity, and it envisions relationality as messy and entangled. It is this disruption of neat categorizations that I understand as queer, even though this poem doesn't center explicitly queer modes of relationality. The queer relationality of the poem, I believe, also entails that the different agents in the poem are understood as entangled rather than separate and independent.¹¹ This aspect is clear in the penultimate stanza.

I have forgiven myself
for him
for the white meat
we all consumed in secret
before we were born
we shared the same meal.
When you impale me
upon your lances of narrow blackness
before you hear my heart speak
mourn your own borrowed blood
your own borrowed visions
[...]
for we are all children of Eshu
god of chance and the unpredictable
and we each wear many changes
inside of our skin.

(Lorde 2000, 324).

I have suggested that an awareness of complicity and accountability is important in this poem's relation to the past. This stanza again shows that rather than placing blame or fault on any particular subject, the poem contests and complicates notions of easily distinguishable individuals as well as notions of purity or innocence. The speaker of the poem has forgiven herself for the man who sold her great-grandmother, and the suggestion that anyone attacking or impaling her ought to "mourn" their own "borrowed blood" further suggests, I believe, the connection between the different agents in the poem.

¹¹ This reading is generally inspired by Wright's work on Lorde (M.M. Wright 2004).

The god or *orisha* introduced here – who in the Yoruban pantheon is called Eshu or Esu (Euba 2009; Brandon 2009a)¹² – is presented within the poem as “god of chance and the unpredictable.” In the glossary accompanying *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde writes that Eshu is the “mischievous messenger” between gods and humans (Lorde 2000, 330; see also Euba 2009). As I understand the appearance of Eshu in the poem, he emphasizes the focus on relationality in the sense of communication and indicates the messiness and unpredictability of communication and relationality. Lorde’s poetical engagement with the past in this poem emphasizes how relationality in her work is not an ideal but a fundamental, and fundamentally complicated, condition, something that resonates with Judith Butler’s understanding of relationality as a “vexed and ambivalent field” (Butler 2020, 10). The last stanza further shows that entanglement and relationality is fundamental in the poem, also on the level of the self.

I look in my own faces
As Eshu’s daughter crying
if we do not stop killing
the other
in ourselves
the self that we hate
in others
soon we shall all lie
in the same direction

(Lorde 2000, 325).

Here, the self is clearly envisioned as relational and entangled with the other which again disrupts an idea of clear or pure divisions between agents in this poem. What is interesting, however, is the urgency of this recognition. The speaker exclaims, or cries, that unless ‘we’ stop understanding ourselves as separate, unless ‘we’ stop weaponizing difference, “soon we shall all lie / in the same direction.” Wright comments that these lines “evoke both a restrictive uniformity and the grisly image of mass graves” (M.M. Wright 2004, 176). These two threats seem connected to me and emphasize the urgency of recognizing the relational entanglement this stanza describes. The double meaning of the word “lie” in these lines

¹²In the glossary to *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde specifies that Eshu is “[a]lso known as Elegba in Dahomey and the New World” (Lorde 2000, 330). In the *Encyclopedia of African Religion*, the name is spelled “Esu” or alternatively “Elegba, short for Elegbara” (Euba 2009).

suggests not only uniformity but also untruthfulness. Finally, I will point to how this stanza, through calling the poetic speaker the daughter of Eshu, can be understood as commenting on its own poetic situation and on the relationality of poetry more generally. Eshu is characterized in Lorde's glossary as a "mischievous messenger." Even though the poem earlier points to how "we are all children of Eshu," I argue that singling out the poetic speaker and her poetic 'cry' as the daughter of Eshu marks the poetic speaker as a mischievous messenger, or perhaps a disruptive, queer messenger. The image of the speaker as Eshu's daughter suggests that this queer disruption of simplistic notions of race, gender, and other categories of identity and relationality is made possible because of and through the poetic voice and its fundamental awareness of relationality.

I have so far been attempting to outline some of the fundamental aspects of how Lorde engages with the past in a way that is connected to and informed by her relational approach to poetry and time. I understand this engagement with the past as an important part of the relationality of Black, queer parenting as it appears in Lorde's poetry. I have mainly discussed thematic issues in relation to this poem, but I will now turn to a poem in which Lorde's engagement with the past queerly disrupts models of relationality and family in a way that also clearly affects the formal structure of the poem.

2.2 Beginning before the 'I'

The poem "Prologue" explores the complications and complexities of inheriting, the imprints left by earlier generations, and the imprints we ourselves leave behind. It is especially interesting to me that the poem centers the complicated, queer position of being entangled in collective contexts and specific family relations while simultaneously being critical towards the norms governing relationality in these contexts. This marginal and queerly disruptive position also characterizes the poem's formal structure. The poem begins self-reflectively:

Haunted by poem beginning with I
seek out those whom I love who are deaf
to whatever does not destroy
or curse the old ways that did not serve us
while history falters and our poets are dying
choked into silence by icy distinction
their death rattles blind curses

and I hear even my own voice becoming
a pale strident whisper

(Lorde 2000, 96).

Here, the poem brings issues of the past, subjectivity, and relationality into play. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes in her illuminating reading of the poem, the first line creates a “meta-critique of the act of beginning a poem (within the act of beginning a poem)” (Gumbs 2011, 136). The first line, as Gumbs also points out, is an instance of the formal device *apo koinou* (Gumbs 2011, 139). Amitai F. Avi-Ram characterizes *apo koinou* as “a single word or phrase [...] shared between two distinct, independent syntactic units,” a device which generally creates “a dizzying ambiguity” (Avi-Ram 1986, 193). As is the case in the first lines of “Prologue,” a poetic line break can create this effect, causing the ‘I’ to be the object of the first line and the subject of the next, thus disrupting “the unity of the subject” (Gumbs 2011, 139). The statement in the first line – which suggests a critical or complicated relationship to “poems beginning with I” – is itself complicated by the following line in which the ‘I’ that was the object of the first line becomes the subject. The construction “I / seek” is, after all, given the agency and importance of initiating the first active verb construction and action in the poem. The second line both performs and undermines the statement in the first line by “haunting” and destabilizing the first line itself.

I understand “Prologue” as engaging with many of the same themes of relationality as “Between Ourselves” but, as these first lines demonstrate, this poem also clearly engages with relationality and subjectivity on a formal level. Gumbs reads the formally ambiguous engagement with the ‘I’ in these lines in relation to Lorde’s queer position within, or on the margins, of the BAM. She notes that this poetic distortion or critique of the unity and centrality of the ‘I’ can be read as

a reminder of the identity-based poems that characterize Lorde’s colleagues in the Black Arts Movement. [...] The work of Black poets testifying, declaring their humanity, their first-person stances on life has created a position that haunts the poet who might seek to speak outside of such a straightforward concept of subjectivity.

(Gumbs 2011, 136).

As Gumbs suggests, the syntactical ambiguity of the ‘I’ balancing between two lines echoes Lorde’s own contested and marginal position in relation to the Black Arts context. Gumbs

points out the boldness of putting forth this critique in a collection published by Broadside Press which held a central position in the BAM (Gumbs 2011, 136). I follow Gumbs in how she ties the ambiguous formal situation of the poem's first lines to Lorde's queer position in relation to the BAM. The nationalist foundation of the BAM was generally invested in a heteropatriarchal vision of family which would understand homosexuality as something external to Black communities, something that would be a threat to a "Black reproductive future" (Gumbs 2011, 136). Gumbs argues that this homophobia "positions Lorde's poetic speaker to haunt the imagined Black community with her alternative relational and poetic structure, her dangerous subjectivity, her queerness" (Gumbs 2011, 136). Lorde's poetic 'I' is placed in an ambiguous position in relation to the unified 'I' which is predominant in the poetry of the BAM. This both entangles the speaker in a vision of subjectivity she might find too 'easy and which haunts her, and it also makes her able to threaten or challenge this conception of the 'I' as that which must 'begin' the poem (Gumbs 2011, 135 – 136). I understand this queerness which also marks the formal, poetic situation as very similar to how Lorde in "Between Ourselves" challenges 'pure' or 'easy' definitions of relationality and categories of belonging on a more thematic level.

Referring to how the prologue as form, though commonly placed at the beginning of a text, is most often written after the text itself, Gumbs characterizes the temporality of the prologue as queer and more specifically as "queerly futuristic" (Gumbs 2011, 135). Gumbs takes her starting point for this reading in the fact that the poem "Prologue" is placed as the last poem in *From a Land Where Other People Live*, pointing to what happens after, outside the text (Gumbs 2011, 133). The poem's engagement with the future is interesting. However, I am interested in how the poem and its queer temporal situation engages with the past. While, as Gumbs writes, the poem acts as a prologue, pointing forward, the poem also engages with past elements that reach into the poem itself. As I will argue in the following, I understand the poem's engagement with the past as closely tied to the marginal and disruptive position established formally in the first lines of the poem. In addition to challenging the idea that the poem should begin with the individual 'I' which suggests a relational starting point, I believe the first line of the poem challenges the idea that the poem should begin with the 'I' in a temporal sense. The first lines thus also suggest a complicated or "haunted" relationship to poems that don't recognize their relation or connection to the past. As I have suggested in relation to "Between Ourselves," what is particularly interesting about Lorde's poetical

engagement with the past is how she queerly and critically engages with complexities, entanglements, and problematic aspects of the past. As I understand it, the willingness to recognize these aspects is a crucial part of the relationality of Black, queer parenting in her work.

I want to look more closely at the three lines following the first “haunted” line of the poem. These lines describe how ‘I’ “seek out those whom I love who are deaf / to whatever does not destroy / or curse the old ways that did not serve us” (Lorde 2000, 96). The ambiguity that figures formally through *apo koinou* in the line break between the first two lines also characterizes these lines. They joggle with multiple negations following upon each other, and the relation the ‘I’ seeks is marked by negation. Rather than a more prosaic or affirmative formulation along the lines of ‘seeking those whom I love who only hear whatever destroys or curses the old ways that did not serve us,’ the lines are composed and connected through a *lack* of hearing whatever “does not” destroy these old ways. I understand this relation, sought after by the speaker, as marginal and critical. This relation echoes the ‘I’s ambiguous position on the margins of a literary context apparent in the first lines of the poem.

I have just pointed out that I want to focus on Lorde’s engagement with the past. However, these three lines seem to suggest a wish to break with the past and its “old ways.” As I will argue, this is not exactly the case. Rather than a wish to break with the past *entirely*, I believe the “old ways that did not serve us” refer to specific patterns or aspects of the past. I understand these lines, and the relation the ‘I’ seeks, as critically engaging *with* the past rather than breaking with it. So, what might “the old ways that did not serve us” refer to? To answer this question, I want to jump ahead in the poem to the second stanza which begins with an imperative.

Hear
the old ways are going away
and coming back pretending change
masked as denunciation and lament
masked as choice
between eager mirrors that blur and distort
us in easy definitions
until our image
shatters along its fault

(Lorde 2000, 96).

Here, I especially notice the description of how the “old ways” are “coming back pretending change,” and how these old ways disguised as something new offer distorting mirrors of “easy definitions.” This description resonates with how “Between Ourselves” criticizes “easy blackness” for repeating oppressive and exclusionary logics practiced by a white majority in relation to a Black minority onto other positions. Seen in relation to what I, drawing on Gumbs’ reading, understand as this poem’s queerly marginal and disruptive position in relation to the BAM, the “old ways” that are “pretending change” can be understood as the exclusionary, patriarchal, and heteronormative norms of subjectivity, relationality, and family that dominated this context.

Further, I believe these lines articulate something crucial in relation to the *way* in which Lorde engages poetically with the past. The description of the “old ways” coming back pretending change criticizes a way of envisioning change as a rupture or break with the past. Here, I am again drawing on Wright’s formulation of how Black nationalist approaches to change were generally invested in such a revolutionary narrative (M.M. Wright 2004, 139 – 140). As I argued in relation to “Between Ourselves,” Lorde is fundamentally interested in relating to and engaging with the past in a way that acknowledges how one is inevitably entangled in it – however much one might wish to counter inherited norms and traditions.

2.2.1 *Voices of the past*

I want to turn to how Lorde’s poetic speaker seems to find a source of power and potential resistance in her relational approach to the past. Following the first lines of the poem and the ambiguous position of the ‘I’ in a context in which “poems beginning with I” dominate, the speaker describes how “I hear even my own voice becoming / a pale strident whisper.” I read this as the haunting, heavy impact of being related to a certain context yet resisting or standing in a queer, marginal position to this same context. The lines describe the strain this puts on the poetic voice itself. But then, further along in the first stanza, the poetic voice is in focus again, resonating quite differently.

I speak without concern for the accusations
that I am too much or too little woman
that I am too black or too white
or too much myself

and through my lips come the voices
of the ghosts of our ancestors
living and moving among us
Hear my heart's voice as it darkens
pulling old rhythms out of the earth

(Lorde 2000, 96).

The speaker's connection to the past and to the "ghosts of our ancestors" seems to fuel a poetic drive or power in her voice exclaimed in the imperative to "Hear my voice as it darkens." This is a resistant poetic drive because the speaker in this passage is able to speak "without concern for the accusations" of not fitting into exclusionary categories of gender or race; the categories of identity and collective belong the speaker is haunted by and herself queerly haunts with her presence, as Gumbs puts it (Gumbs 2011, 136). The speaker cannot be contained by these categories. She is either "too much" or "too little" *something*. The relation to the past plays a crucial role in disrupting these neat categories and allowing the speaker to speak "without concern" for them. Just as Lorde in "Between Ourselves" uses imagery that alludes to race while complicating racial categories, the descriptions of the poetic voice as either pale or darkening seem to have racial connotations. Yet these are more structural or symbolic; "pale" alludes to a restrictive context, while the voice when it "darkens" carries a freer potential. As it appears in this stanza, the relation to the ancestral ghosts allows the speaker's voice to "darken" and thus disrupts the neat, dichotomous categorization inherent in the accusation of being "too black or too white."

The way in which the past provides a source of power for the poetic voice is closely linked to a thought from Lorde's essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." The essay unfolds Lorde's thoughts on poetry, the central argument being that "poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. [...] It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change" (Lorde 2007, 37). I want to draw attention to how Lorde, within the same essay, writes that "there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings [...] There are only old and forgotten ones" (Lorde 2007, 38). This thought adds to what I understand as Lorde's poetic critique, in both "Between Ourselves" and in "Prologue," of revolutionary narratives that imagine themselves as 'inventing' something entirely new in order to break with existing structures. Lorde's speaker in "Prologue" relates to elements of the past as a creative and resistant force when describing how the "ghosts" of ancestor are "living and

moving among us” and how their voices come “through my lips.” There are “no new ideas” here. Rather, this poetic engagement with the past can be understood as the speaker remembering a connection, a relational lifeline, to someone and something that existed before her and made her own existence possible.

There is a risk that such an approach to the past would manifest as a nostalgic longing for an idyllic past, but as I read it, Lorde’s poetic reach for the past in this poem doesn’t just entail ‘positive’ elements. It also shows how one is related to the past in uncontrollable and often unwanted ways. Later in the poem, the speaker addresses what appears as a personal childhood and refers to how her own mother practiced a kind of parenting against which the queer, Black parenting that Lorde envisions poetically comes to stand in clear contrast.

Yet when I was a child
whatever my mother thought would mean survival
made her try to beat me whiter every day
and even now the colour of her bleached ambition
still forks throughout my words
but I survived
and didn’t I survive confirmed
to teach my children where her errors lay
[...]
my father loved me alive
to grow and hate him
and now his grave voice joins hers
within my words rising and falling

(Lorde 2000, 97).

The speaker’s mother’s attempt to survive in a white world includes trying to beat her child “whiter every day,” an action which passes on the racial oppression she herself faces. The speaker’s need to do things differently, to “teach my children where her errors lay,” marks the difference between a kind of parenting that attempts to conform to the oppressive, dominant structures of a racist society, and a queer, Black parenting that defiantly chooses not to try to conform like that. The interesting point here is that Lorde’s speaker doesn’t attempt to deny or break completely with her mother and her abuse but instead acknowledges the ways in which she *is* related and connected to this past; “and even now the colour of her bleached ambition /

still forks throughout my words.” The act of bleaching as attempted survival is, in some form, passed on to the speaker. Like the voices of ancestors come “through my lips” and prove a resistant drive in the first stanza of the poem, here Lorde’s speaker describes how the “grave voice” of her father joins that of her mother “within my words rising and falling.” This fundamental awareness of the past as acting upon the present in ways that cannot be controlled is crucial to the relationality of queer, Black parenting that Lorde envisions. In this stanza, Lorde’s speaker clearly states a wish to parent in a very different way than her own mother in the lines “and didn’t I survive confirmed / to teach my children where her errors lay.” These lines are both determined, but they are also formulated as a question which makes it clear that it is not given whether she will manage to do so, that she is aware of how she is entangled in and affected by her past.

The imagery related to the speaker’s poetic voice in “Prologue” both emphasizes how constricting and oppressive mechanisms of the past can “haunt” the poetic voice and how the past can provide a resistant, poetic power. I read these images as a meta-poetic comment on the way in which Lorde’s poems relate queerly to the past and its messiness, complications, and potentials. In the following section, I will discuss a poem in which the poetic voice and formal situation make it possible to queerly connect to the past. Yet, the fraught and complicated nature of this relation to the past is also inscribed into the poem’s formal structure.

2.3 Addressing the mother goddess

The poem I will focus on in this section, “125th Street and Abomey,” is a poem that formally and thematically centers the possibility for relating to the past and creating queer kinship bonds within a poetic situation and simultaneously inscribes this relation with the complexity and limitations of such a poetic, queer relationship. It is one of the poems in which Lorde engages with West African cultural and spiritual heritage. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Lorde’s engagement with such cultural and spiritual elements can be understood as a part of her attempt to create a chosen heritage, rather than a given, biological one. This is also the reason why I understand this engagement as a part of the relationality of queer, Black parenting and kinship in Lorde’s poetry.

In “125th Street and Abomey,” the speaker of the poem addresses Seboulisa, the goddess of the Dahomean city Abomey. Seboulisa is presented in the glossary to *The Black Unicorn* as

“the goddess of Abomey – ‘The Mother of us all.’ A local representation of Mawulisa, she is sometimes known as Sogbo, creator of the world” (Lorde 2000, 332). Lorde’s biographer Alexis De Veaux writes that Lorde “was convinced that a maternal, spiritual bloodline had been revealed to her in Dahomey” and that “Lorde adopted Seboulisa as her spiritual mother” (De Veaux 2004, 154). There is clearly a wish to connect to a sense of heritage here, but the fact that this ‘bloodline’ is a spiritual rather than a factual or biological bloodline marks kinship and heritage as things that exceed biological bloodlines and which can be chosen. There is a yearning for relation and connection here, but for Lorde, this is not understood as a way of ‘mending’ or reestablishing a legitimate or linear lineage.

The title of “125th Street and Abomey” marks a place, or a crossing between two places, and echoes a typical American way of indicating a location at a street corner by naming the intersecting streets. 125th Street is a street in New York, running through Harlem, but rather than intersecting with another New York street it meets Abomey, a city in present day Republic of Benin (see Wall 2005, 41). In the glossary to the collection, Abomey is presented as “[t]he inland capital and heart of the ancient kingdom of Dahomey” (Lorde 2000, 330). The name of the country changed from Dahomey to Republic of Benin in 1975, so the fact that Lorde uses this name at the time of writing is not in itself strange given that she visited the country in 1974. However, this glossary entry for Abomey stresses the fact that it was the capital of the “ancient kingdom” of Dahomey, not mentioning that the city Abomey still exists today. This suggests that Lorde is primarily interested in the cultural and spiritual heritage of this kingdom of the past and quite deliberately associates and infuses the geographical Dahomey and Abomey with the historical and mythical gravity of the “ancient kingdom.”

The title, read along with the glossary, suggests that the poem balances between different temporal and spatial planes by connecting the coordinates of 125th Street, New York, with Abomey and infusing Abomey with the weight of its history. As Wall articulates it in her reading, “[t]he poem collapses distances of time and space, traversing centuries and continents” (Wall 2005, 41). Time and space are thus already central and destabilized from the beginning. I will argue that the poem’s “traversing” of time centers the importance of the attempt to create relations across time, but this poetic reach for the past is also fraught with complexities and complications. These conditions become very clear in the way in which the speaker addresses Seboulisa poetically.

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

(Lorde 2000, 241).

In the second line of the poem, the speaker poetically addresses and attempts to create a connection to the mother goddess; “I see you Seboulisa”, but the next line establishes this vision of Seboulisa as part of the ‘I’; “printed inside the back of my head” like marks of the “akai,” which are a type of braid part of “modern Dahomean high fashion” (Lorde 2000, 330). Already here, there is a tension between presence and absence in the poetic encounter. Seboulisa is brought into the situation of the poem through the poetic address yet is only present as a print inside the back of the speaker’s head.

The term ‘apostrophe,’ I believe, is useful to discuss how the poetic address of Seboulisa both demonstrates the significance of relating to a spiritual and cultural heritage and Lorde’s awareness of the complexities of doing so. Here, I draw on Jonathan Culler’s discussion of the term. As Culler explains it, the apostrophe is a form of address which turns “away from empirical listeners” to address something or someone else, for example “natural objects, artifacts, or abstractions” (Culler 2001, 152). I understand the speaker’s address of Seboulisa in this stanza – “I see you Seboulisa,” “mother, illuminate my offering” – and further throughout the poem as an apostrophic address. Culler points out how the apostrophe “makes its point by troping not on the meaning of a word but on the circuit or situation of communication itself” (Culler 2001, 149). This characteristic of the apostrophe is particularly important to the relation between Seboulisa and the speaker, since it points back to the poetic

situation itself and to the specific possibilities for communication or relation within this situation. Culler's discussion of the apostrophe suggests that the connection between Seboulisa and the 'I' is formed in and through the poetic situation and emphasizes how the vocative nature of the apostrophe "posits a relationship between two subjects" (Culler 2001, 156). However, as I will discuss shortly, Culler also shows how this relation created between subjects through the apostrophe is paradoxical.

The speaker's apostrophic address establishes the wish to connect or relate to Seboulisa, yet Seboulisa is both absent and present, apparent mainly as a part of the speaker's mind. The whole first stanza is occupied with the act of addressing or evoking Seboulisa. After the first lines, the stanza dives into a scenario belonging to the speaker's past: "and I *poured* on the red earth in your honor / those ancient parts of me" (my emphasis). Here the 'I' is also actively reaching out to Seboulisa through these offerings of parts of her own past. Interestingly, this offering which is described in a past tense glides quite seamlessly back into the present tense, and the now of the poem, through another direct, apostrophic address: "I *surrender* to you as libation / mother illuminate my offering" (my emphasis).

These acts of reaching out through poetic address and offerings set the tone for the rest of the poem and for how the speaker relates to other elements of Dahomean culture and legend. Further in the first stanza, the speaker continues addressing Seboulisa with a plea 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.

(Lorde 2000, 241).

Here, the 'I', through the plea to Seboulisa, clearly wants to establish a kinship relation to "my warrior sisters" who probably refer to what were called the *ahonsi*, a "regiment of female soldiers in the Dahomean army in the nineteenth century" (Oyěwùmí 2003, 14). These warrior sisters are, along with Seboulisa, associated with "the woman strength / of tongue" which, as I read it, alludes to the strength of (poetic) speech and to (lesbian) sexuality. Whereas Seboulisa's ambiguous absence-presence in the poem's first lines could be attributed

to the fact that she, as a goddess, is not bound to any time or place, these following lines quite clearly place Seboulisa – through the association with the warriors who “rode” in defense of her queendom– in the past. I mention these elements to emphasize that the poetic address of Seboulisa and the reference to the “warrior sisters” are part of a poetic engagement with what Lorde understands as her own spiritual and cultural heritage. This does not entail that these references are factually accurate, or that this sense of heritage is built on actual ‘bloodlines.’ The relations here are chosen and come into existence through and because of the poetic address.

Here, I again want to draw on Culler’s account of ‘apostrophe.’ As mentioned above, the vocative nature of the apostrophe enacts or “posits” a relationship between subjects, which seems to presuppose that the addressee might respond to the address (Culler 2001, 156). However, Culler further argues that an apostrophic address might itself be aware of how this situation is in fact constructed or fictive. The apostrophe can be read “as sign of a fiction which knows its own fictive nature” and doing so is to “stress its optative character, its impossible imperatives: commands which in their explicit impossibility figure events in and of fiction” (Culler 2001, 161). It is this aspect of the apostrophic address that, to me, encapsulates the poetic situation of “125th Street and Abomey” and the way in which the poem itself understands the implications of attempting to relate to the past and create a sense of queer, poetic heritage. The poetic address creates the possibility *for* that relation, yet that possibility is contingent, the relation is fragmented, complex, and the presence is always infused with absence. This poetic situation is, to say it clearly, a situation that creates a diasporic and queer relation to the past and to a sense of heritage. A poetic situation that formally and thematically centers both the complexity, difficulty, and possibility of attempting to create such a relation. Rather than attempting to mend the fragmentation of the past, Lorde is addressing a spiritual and chosen heritage. This relationship is queer, Black, and diasporic, not bound by blood or by patriarchal or heteronormative ideas of lineage, and it is inscribed with a sense of historical violence, fragmentation, and complexity.

2.3.1 *A fragmented and queer heritage*

I have characterized the poetic address and situation of “125th Street and Abomey” as marking a Black, diasporic, and queer relationship to the past. I will further argue that the poem envisions poetry itself, and its temporal possibilities, as a situation that has the potential to

create or relate to time in a queer way. As I understand it, there is something quite queer about Culler's account of the apostrophe and its relation to time. He writes that "[a]postrophe resists narrative because its *now* is not a moment in a temporal sequence but a *now* of discourse, of writing" (Culler 2001, 168, emphasis in original). He also points out how "[e]ven poems which explicitly narrate a loss which they know to be irreversible may find this knowledge undermined by the apostrophes they use" (Culler 2001, 167). That is, the poetic situation created by the apostrophe can intervene in or disrupt a narrative, or linear, sense of temporality. The address of Seboulisa in this poem, and the way in which the apostrophe inscribes a sense of fragmentation or impossibility within the apostrophic address even as it is being spoken, point to how the address of the Dahomean goddess in this instance can be understood as a part of Lorde's engagement with her perceived West African heritage. Seen on this background, I believe the description of how the apostrophe can "undermine" a loss that the speaker knows is irreversible describes the queer temporality of "125th Street and Abomey" quite well. The last lines of the poem again call to Seboulisa to "see me now / your severed daughter / laughing our name into echo / all the world shall remember" (Lorde 2000, 241). These lines again emphasize both the reach for connection through the apostrophic address and through the act of "laughing our name." However, this laughter, which might seem to affirm the connection through "our name," is laughed into an echo, and the 'I' is still Seboulisa's "severed" daughter. The distance or loss is not reversed or mended, yet the poetic voice and situation create a space within which that temporal reality can make a queer meeting possible, a meeting which is at the same time inscribed with its own impossibility.

All the three poems I have discussed in this chapter clearly demonstrate that the very act of relating poetically to the past is a crucial part of Lorde's poetics and, I will argue, form a central part of why her poetics can be understood as fundamentally relational. In all three poems, an awareness of how the past reaches into and continually affects the present permeates thematic and formal aspects of the poems. Lorde's poems relate to the past in a way that recognizes and incorporates oppressive and problematic mechanisms and relations of the past and points to the need for an awareness of and accountability for these entanglements. It is this will to face the past *with* its problems that lays the foundation for the disruptive and critical potential of these poems' queer, Black relationality because it counters dominant norms that do not necessarily recognize these complex entanglements and consequently form exclusionary categories of relationality.

3 Present

“How much of this pain
can I use?”

(Lorde 2000, 354).¹³

“For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson – that we were never meant to survive. [...] We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid.”

(Lorde 2007, 42).

The quote above, from the speech “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” articulates some of the central aspects of Lorde’s understanding of the structure of the American present, the “mouth of the dragon,” she lives and writes in. In the previous chapter, I explored how complex it is for Lorde to poetically establish a queer, Black relationship to the past, and yet how this reach for the past can provide the poetic voice with a disruptive, queer potential. In this chapter, I turn to question how the relationality of parenting is central to characterizing Lorde’s poetic engagement with the present, and what significance these aspects have for discussing Lorde’s poetics.

The present that appears in the poems I will focus on in this chapter is marked by a pervasive sense of destruction and crisis that is connected to the dynamics and dominance of capitalism, American imperialism, and different kinds of racial, gendered, and ecological oppression enacted by the power of these systems. In the essay “Apartheid U.S.A.,” Lorde discusses contemporary events in the U.S. and South Africa and points to what she understands as a “worldwide escalation of forces aligned against people of Color the world over: institutionalized racism grown more and more aggressive in the service of shrinking profit-oriented economies” (Lorde 2009, 65). The status quo of the present is, to say it simply, hostile to marginalized people. In Lorde’s poetry these destructive social realities are particularly pressing in relation to queer, Black parenting and in relation to the realities and lives of Black children. As Lorde also writes in this essay “it is our lives and the lives of our children that are at stake” (Lorde 2009, 70).

¹³ From the poem “Need: A Choral of Black Women’s Voices,” *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (1982).

Given this understanding of the structural destruction and racism of the present, it is perhaps not a surprise that violence towards and murders of racialized children is a central motif in Lorde's poems. The poem "Vigil," from the collection *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986), is one of the poems in which the fear of racially motivated violence on a local, personal level is connected to the deaths of children globally, as this short quote shows.

my son's bullet-proof vest
dark children
dripping off the globe
like burned cheese.

(Lorde 2000, 374).

These four lines move from the 'I's anxiety and care for her own son – dressing him in a bullet-proof vest – to the chilling image of dark children “dripping off the globe / like burned cheese.” The lines show the global scale of this violence. The horror of the image of dark children dripping “like burned cheese” both refers to the incomprehensibility of the violence directed at racialized children in the present context and to its pervasiveness; how this violence occurs, or drips, continually within this present. Lorde writes about violence against racialized children in a way that makes it clear how the present status quo in the U.S. and globally is conditioned upon a structural disregard for Black lives that means that the lives of Black children are undervalued and especially precarious. In “Apartheid U.S.A.,” Lorde speaks about how Black people are “more frequently seen as expendable” and, crucially, she points to how Black youths are “hopeless and distrustful” of their ability to “connect with any meaningful future” (Lorde 2009, 70). The present, as it is, precludes the possibility of imagining a future for Black children (see Gumbs 2011, 133). This racial oppression is the main aspect of the destructiveness of the present social logic that Lorde deals with poetically. It is also the most central concern in relation to my discussion of the relationality of queer, Black parenting. However, as Lorde clarifies in “Apartheid U.S.A.,” she understands this racism as tied to other issues of destruction, especially capitalism, and how it relates to the planet as a resource to extract and exploit. In Lorde's poetry and its engagement with the present, the ecological sphere is also a part of the network of kinship that emerges through the relationality of queer, Black parenting.

The central question in relation to Lorde's poetics, and to how the relationality of Black, queer parenting affects her poems' relation to the present, is how it is possible to engage with

or write poetry that relates to this present status quo and its oppression. Further, is it possible to do so in a way that doesn't ignore or turn away from the destructions of the present and its social logic on the one hand, and on the other, is it possible to create a poetic situation that still counters the status quo and opens other possibilities for relating and existing in the present? The issue of what is legible or comprehensible within the discursive logic of the present is central in this context. The poems I discuss in this chapter are all, in different ways, interested in how modes of writing, visualizing, or generally representing the overwhelming horrors of the present can affect how we relate to this present. I will be engaging with these questions through analyzing and connecting poems which center the present and its destruction; particularly poems that engage with racist violence towards and murders of children. These poems all engage poetically with questions of how to talk, write about, visualize, or in other ways represent such violence. On the background of these analyses, I will discuss what potentials poetry, as Lorde envisions it, carries in relation to this present.

Firstly, I will discuss the poem "Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot," one of the new poems from the collection *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (1982), in which many of these issues are at play. I will focus on how the poem expresses the need to collectively mourn, communicate, and write about the violence and horror of children dying. Yet the poem also states that "there is no metaphor for blood / flowing from children" (Lorde 2000, 338), touching upon the complexities of representation in the face of such violence and pointing to the importance of being aware of how, and with what purpose, such lives and deaths are represented. Further, I will discuss the poems "Afterimages" and then "Power." "Afterimages," published in *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (1982), centers the role of visual imagery in the public sphere, specifically in relation to the death of Emmett Till. I will discuss how the poem shows that such images can both end up making a hollow spectacle out of the complexities of a life and death and can also play a necessary part in recognizing and mourning such deaths collectively. On this background, I will bring in the poem "Power," which appeared in *Between Our Selves* (1976) and then again in a slightly revised version in *The Black Unicorn* (1978). I will not analyze this poem in so much detail but focus on how it presents a distinction between poetry and rhetoric within the poem, which can shed light on how Lorde understands the role of poetry in the context of the present and its destructive logics. I will argue that the relationality of parenting is central to understanding how poetry might carry a potential to represent and relate differently to the present. Finally, I will turn to the poem

“Outlines,” which was published in the collection *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986). This poem centers the poetic, relational potential of queer, Black parenting. Here, I will discuss how this relationality sheds light on how the poem itself resists the logics pervading the present and thus positions both the relationality of queer, Black parenting and the poem slightly outside what is intelligible or comprehensible within the present.

3.1 A call to mourn

Many of Lorde’s poems that deal with the present are preoccupied with loss, sorrow, or mourning. This mourning often has to do with the deaths of those who should still be alive in the present, especially racialized children who either die or whose lives are marked in other ways by the violence of the racist present. This mourning and loss of life, I believe, have profound implications for the poetic situation, the poetic voice, and formal aspects of the poems I discuss. The first poem I will focus on is formally structured around one sentence, which is repeated throughout as a chorus and which is also the title of the poem: “Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot.” The title carries an asterisk referring to a footnote which explains that this sentence is “[c]alled in the streets of Carriacou, West Indies, before a funeral or burial” (Lorde 2000, 338).¹⁴ The use of this phrase points to Lorde’s own Caribbean heritage; Carriacou is a small island off the cost of Grenada where her parents were from (see De Veaux 2004, 8 – 9). Within the poem, the sentence is repeated in English after the original patois as “you who hear tell the others.” This line already centers the issue of talking and writing about the inexplicability, incomprehensibility, and horror of death. It is soon clear that the poem is specifically referring to the deaths of children. The poem is short and not divided into stanzas. Here I quote roughly the first half of the poem.

Oh za ki tan ke parlay lot
you who hear tell the others
there is no metaphor for blood
flowing from children
these are your deaths
or your judgments
za ki tan ke parlay lot
you who hear tell the others

¹⁴ I have not been able to find a source to support Lorde’s description of the ceremony, but I take her word for it.

this is not some other cities' trial
your locks are no protection
hate chips at your front doors like flint
flames creep beneath them

(Lorde 2000, 338).

The poem addresses many of the things that I understand as crucial in relation to discussing Lorde's poetics, parenting, and the pervasive violence of the present. First, I want to dwell on the 'you' that is addressed throughout the poem. I understand the 'you' in the chorus line "you who hear tell the others" as a very broad, general 'you.' In contrast to the address of Seboulisa in "125th Street and Abomey," I don't understand this address as an apostrophe because the poem doesn't explicitly point to someone or something within the poem that might be understood as the 'you.' Rather, the address of this general, collective 'you' doesn't turn explicitly away from the empirical readers or listeners but implicitly includes the readers in the 'you' (see Culler 2001, 149). The character of this 'you' indicates that the poem is fundamentally concerned with a broad, collective sphere and with issues of death and mourning within this context.

Having said that, what I find especially interesting about the 'you' is that the poem sometimes refers to this general 'you' in the first lines and other times refers to a more narrow or specific 'you.' As I read it, the poem fluctuates between more narrow and general aspects of the collective 'you' throughout. The first time the differentiation within the general 'you' appears is in the lines "these are your deaths / or your judgments" (Lorde 2000, 338). I believe the differentiation between these two 'you's points to a central aspect of how Lorde's poetry examines questions of how to write about or collectively mourn the deaths of children. Namely that even though such deaths should concern the collective sphere in the widest sense; the whole society, it makes a difference what *relation* one has to these lost lives. One should not assume they affect all parts of society in the same way, hence the need to specify that "these are your deaths / or your judgements."

A different version of the poem, which was published in the journal *Callaloo* the same year as the version from *Chosen Poems*, can help shed light on the 'you's that appear in these lines and the differentiation between 'you's that I argue is at play in the version of the poem from *Chosen Poems*. Even though the two versions were both published in 1982, the version in *Callaloo* is copyrighted to Lorde and dated 1981, which suggests that it is the earlier version

of the two. Regardless of the chronological order, the version in *Chosen Poems* is the one that is most interesting in relation to my perspective. I mainly draw on the *Callaloo* version to shed light on the version in *Chosen Poems*. Overall, the two versions are very similar, which is why I find the few differences significant. In the *Callaloo* version, the lines I've discussed so far read: "these are all our deaths / all our judgements" (Lorde 1982b, 158). These lines and the repetition of "all our" clearly allude to a very broad, expansive us – like the more general 'you' I commented on in the first lines of the *Chosen Poems* version. In the lines from *Chosen Poems*, the 'or' also stands out: "these are your deaths / or your judgments" (Lorde 2000, 338). Whereas the second of the lines in the *Callaloo* version comes across as an addition or expansion; seemingly saying 'these are all our deaths [and] all our judgements,' the two lines "these are your deaths / or your judgments" in the *Chosen Poems* version signal differentiation within the more general 'you.' The lines still address a collective 'you,' but rather than pointing to the broader, collective impact of the deaths, the lines are suggesting that *either* these are your deaths; you are connected to and affected by them, *or* you have enacted judgment over those lives. Thus, as I read it, the version of the poem from *Chosen Poems* expresses the differential impact of these deaths within a wider social context. The poem is still concerned with a broader, collective 'you,' but it is not interested in an undifferentiated or unnuanced understanding of this 'you.' Instead, the poem insists that these deaths concern all within the social context but by no means affect all similarly or equally.

This poem is not very concrete or specific about exactly what blood is flowing and from which children – in contrast to some of the poems I will discuss further in this chapter. The tone of the poem has an ambiguous, opaque, even chanting quality, which is intensified by the repetitions of the ceremonial lines "za ki tan ke parlay lot." The same goes for the different 'you's that are at play in the poem. Taking the risk of reading too much into the poem, I will argue that the general 'you' who has enacted judgment refers to a dominant or mainstream collectivity, and that the narrower 'you' closely affected by these deaths refers to a minority, or marginalized, group within the wider social context. To take a jump outside the poem altogether and position the poem in relation to Lorde's general understanding of the global and structural racism of the present, I argue that the children whose blood is flowing in this poem can be understood as racialized children within the context of a racist present.

Though I believe the differentiation between the general and more specific 'you' in the poem is very important, I also want to emphasize how there is an awareness in the poem of how

these deaths concern and should matter to *everybody*. This, for example, is clear in the lines “this is not some other cities’ trial / your locks are no protection / hate chips at your front doors like flint” (Lorde 2000, 338). While holding on to my reading of the differentiated ‘you’s within the collective sphere – in the lines “these are your deaths / or your judgments” – in terms of *how* these deaths affect you, how you are related to them, I want to argue that there are further interpretive potentials in the lines, and that the distinction I have argued for above is not absolute. So far, I have read “your judgments” to mean that the general ‘you’ *enacts* the judgment in question. But perhaps the line can also carry the less obvious meaning ‘these are judgments *upon* you.’ Read together, this double meaning-potential might be understood like this: The general, or dominant ‘you’ has enacted judgment – perhaps unwittingly – over the children whose blood is flowing, and this is, or will become, the judgment over themselves. “[T]his is not some other cities’ trial,” and even though it might not be the children of the general, dominant ‘you’ who are dying in the present, even though these current deaths might not be “your deaths,” the poem nevertheless warns that “your locks are no protection / hate chips at your front doors like flint.” The point of focusing on these ambiguous meaning potentials is that I believe they suggest how it is the blood of *some* children which is flowing in the present, yet the violence is pervasive and might eventually impact the wider social ‘you’ of the poem. I am not arguing that the ambiguity of meaning-potentials in these lines should be resolved or settled. The poem is ambiguous throughout and my reading here only suggests one interpretation. Ultimately, the difference between the general and the specific ‘you’ is central but never entirely clear or absolute.

3.1.1 *“there is no metaphor for blood / flowing from children”*

I want to turn to how this poem addresses the issues of how to talk or write in the face of the incomprehensibility of the deaths of children and the pervasiveness of destruction in the present. The title and chorus-line “za ki tan ke parlay lot / you who hear tell the others” is a call to pass on, to communicate, the message of someone’s death and burial. Formally, through the repetition of the line, the poem mimics how the message travels through a community, being passed on from person to person. This line thus echoes the ritual of calling this out in the streets before a funeral, bringing into focus the collective need to mourn, honor, and pay ritualized tribute to the dead, a need that also underpins the poetic situation of this poem. It is clearly not an option to not talk or write about these deaths.

However, this need is complicated by the lines “there is no metaphor for blood / flowing from children,” which follow the first appearance of “za ki tan ke parlay lot” within the poem (Lorde 2000, 338). These lines are quite complex, and I will be discussing and unfolding my understand of them throughout this chapter. They point, generally, to the difficulty and complexity of talking about the horror of blood “flowing from children.” The fact that they appear right after the call to “tell the others” marks the whole poetic situation and the need to address these deaths as paradoxical. I find Lorde’s use of the word metaphor especially important and interesting. Given that the metaphor as a device and its ability to create images are often associated with poetry, or at least figurative language use, it is intuitive to think that Lorde, in these lines, is addressing the use of the metaphor as a poetic device. That she might be aiming to say something about the realm of poetry and its specific abilities to speak about or represent the deaths of children. However, I firmly believe this is not the case partly because Lorde, in her own poetic language, doesn’t shy away from the use of metaphors. I will argue that when Lorde uses the term ‘metaphor’ in these lines, it should not be understood as referring to metaphor as a specific stylistic device or strictly to how the word is defined in a dictionary. Rather, I believe these lines are commenting on, or criticizing, a more general way of (mis)representing and simplifying incidents of violence towards racialized children within a collective context. In my reading, ‘metaphor’ as Lorde uses the term within “Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot” has to do, not with the realm of poetry, nor with the metaphor as a stylistic device, but with the realm of public discourse and representation.

To clarify, I want to briefly discuss a sentence from Lorde’s essay “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger.” What I want to point out is a minor detail within the essay that I think can help clarify my understanding of the way Lorde uses the word metaphor in this poem. In the essay, Lorde is describing how “[t]here has been so much death and loss around me recently” and then, crucially, she adds “without metaphor or redeeming symbol, that sometimes I feel trapped into one idiom only – that one of suffering” (Lorde 2007, 163). With this quote in mind, I believe what Lorde is addressing in “Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot” is that there are no metaphors or symbols, perhaps no ways of representation, that can ease the suffering of such a death or express it adequately. There are no metaphors or symbols that can make the murders of children comprehensible or acceptable, no metaphor that can redeem “blood flowing from children.”

I will expand and argue more for my reading of these lines in the following sections by discussing the complexities of these lines in relation to the poems “Afterimages” and “Power.” These poems engage with different aspects of the issue of representation in the face of the structural violence that is pervasive in the present of these poems. As I will unfold, I believe the lines “there is not metaphor for blood / flowing from children” can be read as a critique of a tendency in public discourse and mainstream media to attempt to make comprehensible, digestible, redeeming public symbols out of the murders of, especially Black, children.

As I read it, this critique of the tendency to ‘gloss over’ or redeem the horror and incomprehensibility by making symbols out of the deaths of children in a mainstream context is connected to the lines “these are your deaths / or your judgments” (Lorde 2000, 338). As I discussed above, those lines emphasize how important it is to recognize the differentiated impact of these deaths on different people and groups within the broader social context, but these lines also show how everyone within the social context is *implicated* and thus responsible for recognizing and responding to these deaths. So, when Lorde writes “there is no metaphor for blood / flowing from children,” I also read it as a reminder of responsibility in terms of how to respond or speak about these deaths. “Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot” draws attention to how important it is to speak about, mourn, and represent the lives of children who are killed, particularly in the face of the destructive structures of the present, and how crucial it is to be aware of *how* one represents these things.

3.2 Dragonfish and hungry eyes

“Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot” is a poem that engages with a lot of the central issues concerning Lorde’s engagement with murders of and violence against racialized children in a present which structurally undervalues such lives. It also reflects on the following issues and questions regarding mourning and representing such lives and deaths. However, it doesn’t explicitly address real, historical incidents like many of her other poems do. In this and the following section, I will turn to two of Lorde’s poems which in some way relate to actual, publicly known incidents of Black children being victims of racist murders. First the poem “Afterimages,” which addresses the murder of Emmett Till, and then “Power,” in which the murder of Clifford Glover is central. Through the discussion of these poems, I will move

closer to an understanding of the lines “there is no metaphor for blood / flowing from children” and of the significance of these lines for Lorde’s poetics.

The poem “Afterimages” also deals with the predicament of the need to speak about, mourn and represent the murders of children in the face of structural racism, and the simultaneous risks and potential problems of doing so, especially in a mainstream, public context. Emmett Till, a Black 14-year-old boy from Chicago, was lynched in Money Mississippi while visiting family in 1955. The men who murdered Till – after he allegedly whistled at Carolyn Bryant, a white woman and one of the killers’ wives – were acquitted. Till’s death became widely known and played an important part in fueling the civil rights movement (Edwin 2014, 711 – 717). Whereas spoken, collective mourning is the starting point in “Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot,” “Afterimages” centers the issue of visibility; the power and aftereffect of the ‘image,’ as the title suggests. The poem is divided into four sections marked by roman numbers. The speaker of the poem is established as a spectator already in the first lines of the poem: “However the image enters / its force remains within / my eyes” (Lorde 2000, 339). The poem then folds out a dreamlike image of dragonfish evolving and living in a cave.

rockstrewn caves where dragonfish evolve
wild for life, relentless and acquisitive
learning to survive
where this is no food
my eyes are always hungry
and remembering
however the image enters
its force remains.

A white woman stands bereft and empty
a black boy hacked into a murderous lesson
recalled in me forever
like a lurch of earth on the edge of sleep
etched into my visions
food for dragonfish that learn
to live upon whatever they must eat
fused images beneath my pain.

(Lorde 2000, 339)

The dragonfish imagery reappears throughout the poem. This stanza, I believe, lays the ground for how the image of dragonfish evolving in a cave comes to be an image of the fight for survival within a brutal world or society where one must learn “to survive / where there is no food.” The intertwining of the lines evoking the dragonfish imagery and the lines dealing with visuality in the beginning of this stanza establishes the power of visuality within this social logic. The line breaks in the beginning of the stanza “its force remains within / my eyes / rockstrewn caves where dragonfish evolve” create an instance of *apo koinou*, where the line “my eyes” plays different and ambiguous syntactic roles in relation to the two surrounding lines (Avi-Ram 1986, 193). The brutality of the rockstrewn caves characterizes “the image,” but the lines can also be understood as describing how “my eyes” are “rockstrewn caves.” The ambiguity of these lines suggests that the brutality is imprinted within the eyes through “the image.” Food and hunger are also used to connect the lines about how the dragonfish are “learning to survive / where there is no food” and the next line “my eyes are always hungry,” again emphasizing visuality as central. Whereas the speaker in “Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot” asserts that “there is no metaphor” when it comes to children being murdered, the speaker in “Afterimages” turns the attention towards the *role* that visual images play in the brutal “rockstrewn caves” of society and the impact of images on the eyes of the speaker.

I want to clarify that I don’t understand the metaphor in “Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot” and the image in “Afterimages” as synonymous. Fundamentally, one has to do with language, the other with the visual realm. Both, however, can express ‘reality’ in some form; both verbal and visual representation can edit, interpret, and potentially distort what is being represented. What I believe connects the two terms in these two different poems is that Lorde in both instances points to the power of an image or a ‘metaphor’ within the public sphere. Again, I am not referring to metaphor strictly as a stylistic device, but to how I believe Lorde uses the term to point to a tendency of collective representation, a tendency to make neat, collected metaphors or symbols out of something that is quite outside the realm of comprehension. In this light, I understand the description of the force of the image in “Afterimages” as the shock-like effect not just of the *content* of the image, but also of the experience of the image being suddenly everywhere in the public. This experience is described in more detail further on in the poem, and I will return to this point shortly.

The first lines open onto the two main scenarios that the poem is concerned with. I am referring to the two lines “[a] white woman stands bereft and empty / a black boy hacked into

a murderous lesson” (Lorde 2000, 339). Again, the connection between these lines and the image of the dragonfish underlines the powerful role of such images in the social logic the dragonfish come to figure; the images of these events are “etched into my visions [...] fused images beneath my pain.” As becomes clear throughout the next stanza, the white woman refers to a woman who the speaker of the poem sees on the news after the flooding of Pearl River in Jackson, Mississippi in 1979.

The Pearl River floods through the streets of Jackson
A Mississippi summer televised.
Trapped houses kneel like sinners in the rain
a white woman climbs from her roof to a passing boat
(Lorde 2000, 339).

The stanza quotes the white woman being interviewed, and the speaker describes how “[d]esperair weighs down her voice like Pearl River mud” and further how the woman’s husband interferes in the interview, pulling her away and “snarling ‘She ain’t got nothing more to say!’ / and that lie hangs in his mouth / like a shred of rotting meat” (Lorde 2000, 340). The next stanza focuses on the second scenario and more firmly establishes the connection between the two events. The images of the white woman experiencing the flood of 1979 are propelling the speaker of the poem back in time to an event and to images whose “force” have remained with the speaker. The stanza begins

I inherited Jackson, Mississippi.
For my majority it gave me Emmett Till
his 15 years puffed out like bruises
on plump boy-cheeks
(Lorde 2000, 340)¹⁵.

As the speaker states in the poem’s first stanza, the images of Till’s murder in 1955 and the televised scene with the white woman in 1979 are “fused images beneath my pain” (Lorde 2000, 339). They are also explicitly connected within the poem by violence and dominance

¹⁵ The line that states that Till was 15 years old in this version of the poem from *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (1982) was changed in the later, revised collection *Undersong: Chosen Poems Old and News* (1992) to read: “his 14 years puffed out like bruises” (Lorde 1993, 187). Even though I am not including this later, revised collection in my readings in general, I wanted to point out this since the line I am analyzing here is factually incorrect. Because it was later revised, I understand this as a simple mistake, not a conscious choice.

perpetrated and perpetuated by white men. The way in which the poem connects the two events, thus demonstrating an intersectional understanding of the violence running through the poem, is often commented upon in readings of the poem. Steve Edwin, for example, notes that Lorde “examines the historical continuities of white male dominance that link the two events” (Edwin 2014, 711). The following stanza makes the connection very clear.

A black boy from Chicago
whistled on the streets of Jackson, Mississippi
testing what he'd been taught was a manly thing to do
his teachers
ripped his eyes out his sex his tongue
and flung him to the Pearl weighted with stone
in the name of white womanhood
[...]
Emmett Till rides the crest of the Pearl, whistling
24 years his ghost lay like the shade of a raped woman
and a white girl has grown older in costly honor
(what did she pay to never know its price?)
now the Pearl River speaks its muddy judgment

(Lorde 2000, 341).

What makes Lorde’s poetic connection of these two events interesting and characteristically complex is that she not only points out how white male dominance harms white women and Black people – here by casting a boy as a threat – respectively, she also shows the interlocking mechanisms that make different groups instrumental in each other’s oppression. Here, it is the white woman who becomes instrumental in enforcing the white male violence to which she, as a woman, can also be subject to. I suggested in the beginning of this chapter that Lorde understands the present structure’s racism as connected to its exploitative relationship to the environment and to natural resources. Both are instances of a wider, destructive status quo and social order governing the present. In this context, it is very interesting that the Pearl River, in the quote above, has agency. It “speaks its muddy judgment,” very actively tying Emmett Till’s murder to the flood in 1979. Here, the agency of the Pearl River clearly speaks its “muddy judgment” over the destructive logics of the

present.¹⁶ I believe that, in Lorde’s poetry, the potential for forging a different kind of present or reality through the relationality of Black, queer parenting also entails relating to the environment as part of a web of kinship relations.

3.2.1 *In whose hands?*

I will now turn to discuss how “Afterimages” engages with issues of seeing the images of Emmett Till after his murder and with issues of the public viewing, mourning, and (lack of) recognition of such deaths. Further, I will discuss how I understand these issues to be connected to the relationality of parenting in this poem. I want to recall that the speaker of “Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot” emphasizes how such murders have different impact upon different groups within a general social context, and yet how they should concern all members of a society. The poem further asserts that it is not possible to justify or redeem such deaths by making metaphors or symbols out of them. Earlier, I suggested that the lines “there is no metaphor for blood / flowing from children” (Lorde 2000, 338) have a critical ring to them since what often happens in a mainstream collective context is that such tragedies are made into symbols. Emmett Till’s murder, and the images of him and his body, certainly became a symbol in the public through the media’s circulation of the pictures and story of his death.

In “Afterimages,” the awareness of the different connotations and effects an image has, depending on the context and position from which it is shown, is central. In the fourth stanza, Lorde’s speaker recalls the need to turn away from images of Till’s body circulating publicly at the time of the murder. I quote the stanza here in its entirety.

His broken body is the afterimage of my 21st year
when I walked through a northern summer
my eyes averted
from each corner’s photographs
newspapers protest posters magazines
Police Story, Confidential, True
the avid insistence of detail
pretending insight or information
the length of gash across the dead boy’s loins

¹⁶ As Steve Edwin points out in his reading of the poem, Emmett Till was actually not found in Pearl River but in the Tallahatchie River (Edwin 2014, 719). Lorde’s choice to use the Pearl River further emphasizes how the connection between Till’s murder and the flood in 1979 is a very conscious, poetic choice.

his grieving mother's lamentation
the severed lips, how many burns
his gouged out eyes
sewed shut upon the screaming covers
louder than life
all over
the veiled warning, the secret relish
of a black child's mutilated body
fingered by street-corner eyes
bruise upon livid bruise
and wherever I looked that summer
I learned to be at home with children's blood
with savored violence
with pictures of black broken flesh
used, crumbled, and discarded
lying amid the sidewalk refuse
like a raped woman's face.

(Lorde 2000, 340 – 341).

It's important for me to stress that I understand the turning away; "my eyes averted," not as a refusal to face the fact of Till's death but as a need to turn away from the public spectacle that is made of his death. Here, Lorde describes how the image of Till is sucked into the whirl of the mainstream public discourse and eye, while Till's own "gouged out eyes" are "sewed shut upon the screaming covers" of newspapers. The media becomes a particularly clear example of how Till's image is circulated within the public. Thus, the media plays a central role in the poem's critique of what Steve Edwin, in his article on "Afterimages," calls "a dominant visual economy that amplifies the terrorizing effects of racist and sexist violation" (Edwin 2014, 711). A significant aspect of the poem's critique of this "visual economy," I believe, is aimed at the way in which Till's whole life, through the images of his body, becomes an anatomized and dehumanized spectacle to serve the always hungry eyes of the mainstream public.

Lorde describes how the severed and violated parts of his body become "louder than life," a clichéd expression that I take to suggest that these images of his death become louder, seemingly more significant, than his actual life. The line "the veiled warning, the secret relish" further establishes how, in this mainstream context, the images have little to do with

paying respect or representing a lost life but rather serve as a “veiled warning;” an instrument in perpetuating racist oppression and a spectacle for white eyes; a “secret relish.” Lorde’s speaker mentions both “newspapers protest posters magazines.” The newspapers and magazines are clearly connected to a mainstream or dominant discourse, but the fact that protest posters are also mentioned signals that it is the way Till is made into a symbol, a ‘metaphor’ that can serve different narratives or causes, that is at play here. The potential distortion and the lack of recognition of the actual *life* of Till, as more than a symbol, are the crucial connecting factors between the role of the image in this poem and Lorde’s use of ‘metaphor’ in “Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot.”

Yet, as I have argued, Lorde’s poetic engagement with the racism of the present status quo is far from an expression of a general resistance towards collective representation, mourning, and recognition of deaths such as Till’s. My point is, rather, that Lorde emphasizes how collective representations can have widely different, and often problematic, effects. In an essay from 2015, written just after nine Black people were killed by a white supremacist terrorist in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, the author Claudia Rankine discusses similar issues of visibility, mourning, and collectivity in the face of such a racist attack. Rankine considers these issues in the more contemporary context of 2015 but draws parallels to past events, such as Till’s murder (Rankine 2015). I mention this article because Rankine makes a similar distinction to the one, I am trying to make. Rankine argues that the “spectacle” of racist attacks like these in a way can mask how pervasive such racism and racist violence is. Rankine remarks that “[w]e live in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings. Dead blacks are a part of normal life here” (Rankine 2015, unpaginated). This resonates with Lorde’s description of the more problematic effects of the image in “Afterimages.”

In “Afterimages,” the speaker’s need to turn away from the public representation of images of Till is rooted in a recognition of the incongruity between how a death such as Till’s becomes a big public spectacle while the pervasiveness of racism and racial violence is, largely, unrecognized in the present context. This awareness also informs my understanding of the lines “and wherever I looked that summer / I learned to be at home with children’s blood” (Lorde 2000, 341). I understand these lines as a comment on the speaker recognizing the pervasiveness of racism not merely as a sensational news item seen on street corners, but as something which is built into daily life within the present social logic. The mentioning of

children's blood echoes the lines "there is no metaphor for blood / flowing from children" (Lorde 2000, 338). Here, I think it is important to notice that the speaker of "Afterimages" does not say 'at home with *images of* children's blood.' Rather, as I read it, she learns to be at home with – or recognize the presence of – the blood, violence, and death that characterize the structure of the present.

I believe "Afterimages" tries to grapple poetically with how the image of a murdered boy in the public on one level can become a hollow spectacle, yet on another level can be a crucial part of collectively mourning and genuinely recognizing the loss and value of this life. I have so far been describing the first, problematic level, but I will now turn to the second and discuss how it is hard, maybe impossible, to draw a distinction between the two definitively. Thus, while Lorde describes turning away ("eyes averted") from the public images of Till's dead body, I don't argue that the poem is criticizing visuality or the use of images in itself. This is similar to how I don't understand "Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot" to suggest that the metaphor as a poetic device is a 'problem.' I believe Lorde recognizes, and poetically works from, the acute *need* to address, vocalize, write about, or visualize such a loss of life. The very existence of a poem like "Afterimages" attests to this; Lorde as a poet is also responsible for creating poetic images based on Till's death. The poem is interested in *how* this can be done and the complexities of doing it.

I suggest that the matter of relationality, and particularly the relationality of parenting, is important in the discussion of the role the image can play in recognizing a death like Till's collectively. Mamie Till-Mobley, Emmett Till's mother, had a profound impact on the way images of Emmett Till were circulated publicly, which is important in this context. She had to fight to be able to decide how her son should be buried and mourned. She had to demand that Emmett's body was transported from Mississippi to Chicago, his home, rather than being buried in Mississippi. Once she had accomplished this, she had to advocate for having an open coffin at the funeral. Finally, and remarkably, she allowed photographs to be taken at the funeral, including photographs of Emmet's body, which became the images that later circulated publicly (Rankine 2015, unpaginated). At the funeral, however, Emmet's Till's body was also accompanied by photographs of him alive (Edwin 2014, 715).

In her essay, Rankine argues that Mamie Till-Mobley – by taking control of the way the funeral and the images of her dead son should be made visible to the public – "disidentified" with how the body of a lynched person has traditionally been left out in the open "as a

warning to the black community,” causing a disruption of this tradition (Rankine 2015). The crucial point, as I see it, is that Rankine emphasizes the importance of the image being in Mamie Till-Mobley’s hands, in her care; “The spectacle of the black body, *in her hands*, publicized the injustice mapped onto her son’s corpse” (Rankine 2015, unpaginated, emphasis mine). Mamie Till-Mobley’s handling of Emmet’s image is an act of love, care, and parenting. It also has to do with the need for a collective recognition, remembering, and actual mourning of his life. Her insistence on making visible the injustice and attempting to confront the public not just with her son’s body as a spectacle but as a lost life marks the decisive difference between the ways of using such images that are at play in “Afterimages.”

I believe this perspective is important within “Afterimages,” even though the poem demonstrates that the images of Emmett Till, once in the public sphere, do not stay in Mamie Till-Mobley’s hands. The distinction between whether the image serves in a context of genuine mourning or whether it becomes a spectacle is crucial. It is also a distinction that can never be made decisively but depends on the context of how it is shown and on the reaction of the spectator. How, then, to understand the position of the poem and its speaker? As discussed earlier, the speaker of “Afterimages” is cast as a spectator of the public images of Till with her “eyes averted,” yet she is haunted by the images (Lorde 2000, 340). At the same time, the poem itself responds to and creates – not visual but verbal – images of Till and his “mutilated body.”

I suggested above that relationality is crucial here. As I understand “Afterimages,” the poem attempts to create a situation that, unlike the public circulation of the pictures of Till which makes a symbol out of him, can recognize and relate to Till’s life and death and to all that which cannot be captured, represented, or redeemed in any image. Here, I draw on Edwin’s reading of how Lorde’s speaker looks away from the public images of Till. He writes that in averting her eyes, Lorde’s speaker is “protecting herself” as well as showing respect, thus recognizing “the image’s connection, *and her connection*, to the child, Emmett Till” (Edwin 2014, 717 – 718, emphasis mine). Edwin also calls this way of poetically relating to Till an “act of kinship” (Edwin 2014, 718). This poetic connection is what I understand as the relationality of parenting within this poem. In the poem, a very clear parental relationship is established within the poetic situation *through* the poetic voice. In the poem’s third part, while describing the circumstances of Till’s murder, the speaker proclaims “and he was baptized my son forever / in the midnight waters of the Pearl” (Lorde 2000, 340). The mother-son

relationship is forged both as a consequence of Till's murder and of the utterance of the speaker. This is another example of how parenting in Lorde's poetry is a kind of relationality that can be created as a queer, poetic act. In the following section, I will continue this discussion of how the relationality of queer, Black parenting impacts the way Lorde's poetry relates to the present. In this discussion, I will include the poem "Power," which formulates quite central aspects of Lorde's poetics within the poem itself.

3.3 Poetry or rhetoric?

In my discussion of "Afterimages," I have focused on the quite general question of how to write about, visualize, or represent a present characterized by a destructive logic in which the lives of Black children are particularly precarious. What I have wanted to emphasize is the way in which Lorde, within the poem, reflects on different ways of engaging with the reality of deaths such as Emmet Till's. In this section, I will turn more specifically towards the question of Lorde's poetics and the relationality of parenting by including the poem "Power" in this discussion. In relation to "Afterimages," I especially want to draw attention to the first lines of "Power." In the earlier version of the poem, which was published in *Between Our Selves* (1976), these lines read

The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.

(Lorde 2000, 215).

At first glance, there is both a clear parental relationality at stake in this distinction and a question of life and death; "being ready to kill" stands as a full, central phrase here, and there seems to be two clear choices, either killing yourself or your children. The two versions of the poems are, overall, very similar, but there is one interesting variation in these first lines. In the later version, which is the primary version for my analysis, the lines are split differently.

The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being
ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.

(Lorde 2000, 319).

Here is another example of Lorde's use of *apo koinou*; when a word or phrase is "shared" between two different "syntactic units," occupying a different syntactic function in each (Avi-Ram 1986, 193). Here the line "is being" can be read differently according to what surrounding lines the reader connects it too, which sparks more potential interpretations than the lines in the earlier version. The first potential interpretation is to read "being" as the "difference" between poetry and rhetoric. As Lexi Rudnitsky points out in her reading of the poem, this suggests that "poetry is associated with existence and rhetoric with nonexistence" (Rudnitsky 2003, 479). My understand of the lines is that the nonexistence associated with rhetoric points to the destructive logic of the present status quo, which inscribes the lives of marginalized, racialized people and children with nonexistence, with a structural precarity.

The effect of *apo koinou*, however, adds a further layer of potential meaning. The association of "being" or existence with poetry is destabilized by the next lines "ready to kill / yourself," something which Rudnitsky describes as transforming an "affirmation" of existence into a "denial," ultimately causing nonexistence and existence to "coexist in a productive tension" (Rudnitsky 2003, 479). I agree that this ambiguity comes to characterize poetry as it is described in these lines; whereas rhetoric is quite firmly associated with nonexistence, poetry creates an ambiguous, potential possibility for being, for existing. The crucial point about these lines as I read them though, is not so much the tension between existence and nonexistence but the fact that these lines imply that poetry opens the possibility for "your children" to not be killed, something that doesn't seem to be a possibility at all within the realm of rhetoric. Poetry, as Lorde articulates it here, is fundamentally tied to the relationality of parenting. Poetry is relational in that it is not only tied to the existence of the 'I' but stretches out relationally, making the survival of one's children possible. I understand these lines as a meta-poetic comment on the role of poetry in relation to the present whose logic or rhetoric doesn't seem to allow children – especially of Black, queer parents – the opportunity to live without a constant threat of nonexistence.

I have already claimed that rhetoric, as it appears in these lines of "Power," is clearly associated with the destructiveness of the present. Here I will argue more thoroughly for that claim. The murder of Clifford Glover is central within "Power." Even though the poem doesn't mention him by name, details such as his age, the place of his murder, and the subsequent trial appear throughout the poem. Clifford Glover was shot at the age of 10 by

police officer Thomas Shea in 1973. Shea was put on trial but was acquitted by the jury (Gumbs 2014, 245). The role of documentation and proof in relation to Glover's murder plays a central role in the poem. This can shed light on what counts as a meaningful argument within the rhetorical logic of the present. Here, the trial of the police officer is described:

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

(Lorde 2000, 319).

This stanza is the part of the poem that most directly deals with Glover's murder. The line that strikes me the most is "there are tapes to prove that" and the repetition of that line with the added "too." To my ears, these lines carry all the exasperated weight of the awareness that such a fact should mean that the police officer in question would be held accountable, but the speaker is all too aware that this will not – and in fact did not – happen. My reading here draws on Alexis Pauline Gumbs' reading of the poem in which she argues that the rhetoric that Lorde points to in the poem can be understood as that which justifies Glover's death and makes Shea's statements legible. That which makes him able to "convincingly" argue that shooting an unarmed child was "justifiable" (Gumbs 2014, 247). According to Gumbs, "[t]he centuries of rhetoric produced and circulated about the danger of black people and the specific heightened discourse about the criminality of black people in post-civil rights New York City are also at play here" (Gumbs 2014, 247). The description of how Glover's death is seamlessly made comprehensible and justifiable in the courtroom demonstrates Lorde's understand of 'rhetoric' within this poem. As I read it, the word rhetoric points to the discursive logic that dominates and legitimizes the present status quo, in which Black children can justifiably be killed.

I see a clear connection between the destructive presents that "Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot," "Afterimages," and "Power" write through and against, given that they all engage with a present whose structural logic makes the deaths of racialized children a comprehensible,

redeemable part of their rhetoric (Gumbs 2014, 247). I understand the way Lorde interprets ‘metaphor’ in “Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot,” the way in which Till becomes such a visual ‘metaphor’ in “Afterimages,” and Lorde’s use of the term ‘rhetoric’ in “Power” as all being different but related mechanisms associated with the present discourse and status quo.

So, what role does poetry play in relation to this present context? Simply put, as the first lines of “Power” suggest, poetry offers a possibility to counter this rhetoric and logic of the present. These lines suggest that the poetic situation offers a potential for your children not to be killed, a potential to create a different logic within the present of the poem. I believe Black, queer parenting as a resistant and creative relationality plays a crucial role in creating this poetic situation. This interpretation again owes to Gumbs’ reading of Lorde. She emphasizes how Lorde “identifies Glover as part of a collective of black children toward which she feels accountability and kinship” (Gumbs 2014, 247). In relation to “Afterimages,” I suggested that the poem attempts to create a relational poetical space that, regarding Till, acknowledges or recognizes that which cannot be expressed or contained through any simplified ‘symbol’ of him. In “Power,” poetry similarly seems to be that which can express possibilities that go against what’s possible, comprehensible, or justifiable in the rhetoric of the present. Where the relationality of parenting and the potential lives of your children stand central. Thus, in both cases poetry is associated with something not quite graspable, or something that falls out of what can readily be visualized or verbalized, at least within the rhetoric of the present.

In “Afterimages,” Lorde’s speaker creates a parental relation to Till, particularly in the lines “and he was baptized my son forever / in the midnight waters of the Pearl” (Lorde 2000, 340). I understand the fact that this relationship is established within the poetic situation, through the speaker’s poetic voice, as significant for the relationality of parenting. Something very similar happens in “Power.” The descriptions relating more directly to Glover’s murder and the subsequent trial are intertwined with images that have a hallucinatory or nightmarish quality. Especially in the second stanza, in which the speaker describes how “I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds / and a dead child dragging his shattered black / face off the edge of my sleep” (Lorde 2000, 319). In the beginning of the stanza the speaker refers to “a dead child,” but towards the end of the stanza the ‘I’ is described as “trying to heal my dying son with kisses” (Lorde 2000, 319). The poem does not clarify whether those two lines are referring to the same child, or several children, and the details surrounding Glover’s murder are not presented before the following stanza. The speaker is, again, creating a parental

relationality between her and the ambiguous manifestations of dead or dying children in the poem, children who might or might not be Glover. This is, I believe, what Gumbs refers to as “a collective of black children” (Gumbs 2014, 247) that the poetic speaker relates to (see also Betts 2012, 77).

The parental relations that are established within both “Afterimages” and “Power” point to crucial aspects of how I understand the relationality of parenting in Lorde’s poetry. These relationships come into being through the poetic situation and voice. I understand them as queer in that the relationships are established without reference to either a framework of biology, to social norms of family and parenting, or to a ‘reality’ outside the poem. I suggested before that the way in which Lorde envisions the potentials of poetry within “Power” has to do with something not quite understandable or graspable within the rhetoric of the present. I believe this is another aspect of the queerness of poetry as Lorde envisions it; the way in which something that falls outside the realm of what is comprehensible in the rhetoric of the present can exist and be articulated within poetry. This also emphasizes the intimate connection between poetry and the relationality of Black, queer parenting in the context of the present. It is telling that in both “Afterimages” and “Power,” the speaker forges a parental relation with children who are dead or dying, children whose lives are precarious, to say the least, in the present status quo. The relationality of queer, Black parenting that can be manifested within poetry, as Lorde envisions it, is not only precarious but also critical and defiant in its insistence of the value of the lives of Black, queer parents and children. It is queer in manifesting a way of relating within the present of the poem that doesn’t adhere to the logic and rhetoric of the surrounding world.¹⁷

3.4 “Outside of symbol”

I have so far been focusing on poems that deal with, and center, the violence and destruction of the present, especially manifested as racially motivated murders of children. Poems which ask both general questions about how to mourn, talk about, or visualize such deaths collectively and more specific questions about what role poetry plays in relation to such a present. The relationality of parenting that appears in these poems stands in contrast to the logic of the status quo and suggests an alternative way of relating and existing in the present. I

¹⁷ As I pointed out in chapter one, this reading is generally inspired by, or resonates with, Gumbs’ reading of Black mothering in Lorde’s work (see Gumbs 2010).

will turn to discuss a poem in which this queer, Black relationality of parenting, particularly its joyful or mundane everyday aspects, is in focus. Something that is important in this context is that, for Lorde, centering this relationality does not imply turning away from or ignoring the reality and horror of the present social logic. Rather, it implies working through this present while creating something different, something that cannot quite exist or be understood within the framework, logic, and rhetoric of the present structure. The poem “Outlines” clearly centers the everyday present and lives of an interracial, lesbian couple raising Black children. The queer potential, joy, and relationality that this entails are central, yet the existing, destructive structure of the present is also always present.

We rise to dogshit dumped on our front porch
the brass windchimes from Sundance stolen
despair offerings of the 8 A.M. News
reminding us we are still at war
and not with each other
“give us 22 minutes and we will give you the world...”
and still we dare
to say we are committed
sometimes without relish.

Ten blocks down the street
a cross is burning
we are a Black woman and a white woman
with two Black children

(Lorde 2000, 364).

In a way very characteristic to Lorde, the poem centers the differences between the two women and the difficulties and possibilities that come with these differences: “we cannot alter history / by ignoring it / nor the contradictions / who we are” (Lorde 2000, 362). The awareness of difference and the refusal to gloss it over also work in tandem with the attitude towards the incessant horrors of the present. Lorde continually insists on not ignoring these difficulties and horrors. The ‘we’ of the poem tries to chart a different course, but still the world, including the ku klux klan and its burning crosses, is undeniably *there*.

“Outlines” is one of Lorde’s longer poems. The poem’s form and its slow, calm progression mimics the roll, the hum, and the stretching out of the everyday. The poem occasionally delves into particularly clear bursts of images detailing intimate and sensory moments of a lived life. For example, in lines such as “[i]n the next room a canvas chair / whispers beneath your weight,” or “the children arrogant as mirrors / our pillows’ mingled scent” (Lorde 2000, 365). The title, “Outlines,” gives a fitting characterization of this poetic situation. The poem seems to be sketching a loose outline or silhouette of this present, daily life. When read in relation to the poems that deal with the overshadowing horrors of the present, the focus on the small details of life that run through “Outlines” manifests the possibility of living and relating in a way that is different to the status quo of the present. The position that this relationality occupies in relation to the dominant structure of the present is interesting.

our first winter
we made a home outside of symbol
learned to drain the expansion tank together
to look beyond the agreed-upon disguises
not to cry each other’s tears.

How many Februarys
shall I lime this acid soil
inch by inch
reclaimed through our gathered waste?
from the wild onion shoots of April
to mulch in the August sun
squash blossoms a cement driveway
kale and tomatoes

(Lorde 2000, 363).

I have suggested that the relationality of parenting that unfolds in Lorde’s poetry also involves relating to the environment and in doing so recognizing its agency and importance. This is at play, for example, in the way in which the Pearl River in “Afterimages” speaks its “muddy judgment” (Lorde 2000, 341). In “Outlines,” the daily life that is described also includes relating to the earth and working with the soil. This relationship with the earth is also characterized by an awareness of the impact of the destructive present structures and a wish to relate to the earth in a different way. The stanza above describes how the “acid soil” is slowly,

“inch by inch / reclaimed through our gathered waste,” which is interesting because it describes how the soil, as I understand it, has become acid because of human waste, yet how ‘we’ are growing things, working with and through this polluted environment. The line “squash blossoms a cement driveway” is interesting since it both marks the disjunction between and coexistence of the cement and the squash.¹⁸ ‘We’ are working with the world as it is, yet trying to, literally, grow and cultivate both vegetables and a relationship that doesn’t continue the same destruction. Whereas the present social structure exploits earthly resources, the relationality that appears in “Outlines” entails understanding the earth as part of a network of kinship relations. Crucially, enacting a relationality of kinship to one’s ecological surroundings doesn’t entail searching for anything like a “clean slate,” but is rather about working with the surroundings as they are.

The home referred to in the line “we made a home outside of symbol” refers to the mode of living and relationality described in this poem. The choice of the word “symbol” is what interests me here. As I read it, “symbol” refers to the realm of what is comprehensible, established, or legitimate within the present status quo. The same realm that the term ‘metaphor’ in “Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot” and ‘rhetoric’ in “Power” refer to. Earlier, I suggested that there is something about how Lorde envisions poetry and the relationality of parenting which falls outside the realm of what is graspable or understandable within the logic of the present. In “Outlines,” the awareness of being related to, and working with, the present world is central. Yet, as the title also suggests, the poem is marked by a sense of openness, it is an outline of something that cannot be articulated within the ‘symbol’ of this present.

3.4.1 *Everyday glimpses*

In the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Lorde’s essay “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” in which she writes the words “we were never meant to survive” and urges the importance of speaking (Lorde 2007, 42). In her doctoral dissertation, Gumbs writes that Lorde’s phrase “we were never meant to survive” “is another way of saying the *meaning* of survival does not signify in the context of Black life. *Meaning*, we literally have no way to understand, or even to see this survival. The survival of Black people [...] is not something that has a language” (Gumbs 2010, 165). The way the life that unfolds in “Outlines” is

¹⁸ In the next chapter, I will discuss Lorde’s use of this kind of typographical gap within a line and its formal significance.

“outside of symbol” can, I believe, be understood in light of this thought. Because the present context marks queerness and Blackness as marginal and precarious, the practice of this living is outside this present’s ‘symbol,’ outside its rhetoric in which, as Lorde and Gumbs emphasize, “we were never meant to survive” (Lorde 2007, 42; Gumbs 2010, 165).

I understand the relationality of Black, queer parenting as something that affects and is affected by the temporality that is created within Lorde’s poems. I suggest that poetry as Lorde envisions it in “Power,” and the way in which the relationality of queer, Black parenting affects how Lorde’s poetry relates to the present, occupy positions “outside of symbol.” The title of “Outlines” also marks this poetic position. There is something unfinished, not quite graspable about the relationality that appears in the poem. Or rather, something which is not quite graspable *within* the realm of the rhetoric and symbols of the present. But poetry, as Lorde articulates it in the poems I have discussed, is a form, a mode of expression, that might make it possible to articulate a different way of relating to the world.

I’ve been focusing on how the details of living and relating in the present in “Outlines” manifest an alternative to the status quo. In the next chapter, I will discuss how Lorde’s poetry relates to the future. Before leaving this chapter and “Outlines” behind, I want to briefly discuss how this poem intertwines the present and the future through the relationality of queer, Black parenting. The daily life described in the poem points clearly towards potential futures that may arise from this relationality.

we secure the tender perennials
against an early frost
reconstructing a future we fuel
from our living different precisions

(Lorde 2000, 364).

The future that appears in the poem is not a promised future but an open possibility. Here, again, the poem’s title is relevant. I have connected this title to the way in which both poetry and the relationality of queer, Black parenting stand outside the realm of what is comprehensible or can exist in the present logic of things. In his book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), José Esteban Muñoz argues that a queer, utopian critique of the present and its status quo does not entail turning one’s face away from the everyday. Rather, “the utopian is an impulse that we see in everyday life” (Muñoz 2009, 22).

Muñoz identifies what he calls a “forward-dawning futurity that is queerness” as an “excess” that can be glimpsed in the present (Muñoz 2009, 23). As I read Muñoz, this excess can be glimpsed specifically through queer relationalities and practices in the present (Muñoz 2009, 49). What I have described as not quite graspable in the living and relationality that appears in “Outlines,” might be understood as such an excess that makes an unknown future possible.

we have chosen each other
and the edge of each other’s battles
the war is the same
if we lose
someday women’s blood will congeal
upon a dead planet
if we win
there is no telling.

(Lorde 2000, 365 – 366).

These final lines of the poem clearly demonstrate how the poem understands the destruction of the current status quo and the open, uncertain potential of the queer, Black relationality that the poem describes. If “we lose,” that is, if the present structure continues as it, the speaker predicts death, extinction, and destruction. But “if we win / there is no telling.” Just like poetry, as envisioned in “Power,” carries an uncertain potential for creating a form of expression in which one’s children might not be killed, the relationality that the ‘we’ are carving out in “Outlines” carries such an uncertain potential. “There is no telling,” no guaranteed future. Just an open potential.

In this chapter, I have focused on how Lorde poetically relates to the pervasive destruction of the present, especially in the form of racially motivated violence towards children. Further, I have attempted to ‘outline’ how the relationality of queer, Black parenting in Lorde’s poetry can appear in relation to, but slightly outside, the realm of what is comprehensible in that present. I want to reiterate that I believe that the idea of working with and through the now with all its destruction and horror – rather than turning away from it – is a crucial foundation for Lorde’s poetic attempt to envision and create an alternative relationality within the present of her poems. However, Lorde is also poetically invested in envisioning a different future. This potential future is what I will turn to in the next chapter.

4 Future

“looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children’s mouths”
(Lorde 2000, 255).¹⁹

“The children remain
like blades of grass over the earth and
all the children are singing
louder than mourning”
(Lorde 2000, 98).²⁰

The relationality of parenting that emerges in Lorde’s poetry, and that I have been discussing throughout this thesis, is a kind of relationality that differs and stands in critical contrast to white, heterosexual traditions and family norms as well as to dominant logics and structures of the status quo of Lorde’s contemporary context. This queer, Black relationality of parenting is a precarious relationality. It is marked by the pervasive violence towards racialized and queer people, especially children and young Black people, who, as Lorde puts it in the essay “Apartheid U.S.A.,” are “hopeless and distrustful” of their ability to “connect with any meaningful future” within the oppressive structures of that present (Lorde 2009, 70).

In the end of the last chapter, I discussed how the relationality of queer, Black parenting in the poem “Outlines” is, in a sense, “outside of symbol” in the present. How, despite the destructive present context, this relationality appears as an insistent, joyful practice and way of living in the present. This relationality or way of living also sets the poem in motion toward a future that is different from the present and its destruction. A future that is open, unpredictable, and full of potential; “if we win / there is no telling” (Lorde 2000, 366). As Lorde states in her essay on lesbian parenting, “Turning the Beat Around,” raising children is, for her, part of creating social change, creating a future different from the present. In this chapter, I turn to look at this potential for a future that is not merely a continued reproduction

¹⁹ From the poem “A Litany for Survival,” *The Black Unicorn* (1978).

²⁰ From the poem “Prologue,” *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973).

of the present and its social logic; a future that might be glimpsed in poetry through the practice and relationality of Black, queer parenting.

If such a different future is necessarily open, uncertain, and unpredictable, in what ways is it possible to manifest or make that future present within the poem? Can it appear as anything else than an empty space? Thus, a central question in this chapter is whether, and how, Lorde's poems are able to make such an open, potential future manifest, or present, *within* the poetic situation and how this engagement with the future affects the poems in question. I will also discuss how the relationality of queer, Black parenting is crucial to understanding how Lorde's poetry manifests such an open future, and how this connection, again, emphasizes the relational nature of Lorde's poetics. These questions build on my earlier discussion of how poetry and the relationality of queer, Black parenting already appear as "outside of symbol" in the present context that Lorde's poems relate to. The intertwining of, or fluctuation between, what is material and what is immaterial, between what can be expressed in language and what remains ungraspable, are important issues that I will discuss throughout this chapter. I believe they can shed light on how the future appears in Lorde's poems and on some of the most central formulations of Lorde's poetics. As I will argue in this chapter, I believe the direction towards a different future is apparent within Lorde's poetry in the sense that writing itself can be understood as a potentiality.

In relation to this chapter, José Esteban Muñoz's thoughts on the connection between queerness and the future are relevant. Muñoz asserts that "[q]ueerness is not yet here," and he also describes queerness as "a horizon imbued with potentiality" (Muñoz 2009, 1). This formulation creates the foundation for his understanding of queerness as a utopian impulse. Crucially, this potential is tied to praxis or action. In Muñoz's words, queerness is a "performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (Muñoz 2009, 1). I have argued that Lorde's poetry, and the way in which the relationality of parenting appears in Lorde's poems, is fundamentally *not* interested in creating a clean rupture or break with the world as it is. Rather, Lorde's poetry is interested in being related, connected to and emmeshed *in* the world and in working through it to change it. As I have suggested throughout the thesis, it is fundamentally concerned with relationality. Even though Muñoz's initial formulations seem to suggest a need for a rupture with, or a "rejection" of, the present that might sound quite far

from how I read Lorde's poetics, he also emphasizes how the utopian impulse can be found in queer "gestures" in the present (Muñoz 2009, 91). Further, Muñoz actually argues for a kind of utopian thinking that engages the present critically, building on Ernst Bloch and his thoughts on utopia. As Muñoz writes, his utopian thinking "is a critical discourse – which is to say that it does not avert or turn away from the present" (Muñoz 2009, 21 – 22). To Muñoz, queerness, understood as a utopian impulse, enacts a critique of or an intervention into this present and can thus direct us toward a different "horizon." I will be drawing on Muñoz in this chapter to discuss how the poems I discuss fluctuate or are extended between the material present and the immaterial, potential future.

I will primarily be discussing two poems in this chapter. First "The Winds of Orisha," a poem from the earlier half of Lorde's career, from the collection *From A Land Where Other People Live* (1973). As the title suggests, the *orishas*; the deities of the Yoruban peoples of Southwestern Nigeria (Brandon 2009a), play a central part in this poem. I will focus on how the poem creates a network of queer, Black relations that include the poem's speaker and the *orishas*. Further, I will discuss how this relationality disrupts both the present logic and order, the conception of time as linear, and how it propels the poem in motion towards an open future. Drawing on Muñoz's thoughts on queerness and utopia, I will discuss how the future becomes present in the situation of the poem as a potentiality that makes the poem balance between the present and future. I will argue that writing itself appears as what manifests this potentiality. Then, I will discuss the poem "On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge," which was published in *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986). Here, I will focus on how specific images within the poem can suggest how poetry itself, and the poem as a material thing, can manifest and extend towards an immaterial future. I will also discuss how the poem explores the question of how it might be possible to move towards a future that is different from the present. Relationality, and particularly the relationality of parenting, is crucial in this discussion. These analyses of how the future appears in Lorde's poetry will lead me to a final discussion of Lorde's poetics. Here, I will focus on how the relationality of queer, Black parenting and the ability of poetic writing to make an uncertain, open future appear within the poem as a potentiality are both factors that are central to characterizing Lorde's poetics and understanding the "vital necessity" that poetry has to her (Lorde 2007, 37).

4.1 Impatient legends and future potentials

“The Winds of Orisha” is a poem that centers relationality, specifically a queer, Black relationality tied to kinship and parenting. Generally, the poem’s relationship to time is interesting and, as I will argue, doesn’t move along a linear line. More specifically, the poem’s relationship to a future which is different from the present offers an example of how poetry might be able to make such a future appear in the poem, how writing in itself carries this potential. “The Winds of Orisha” is divided into three parts marked by roman numbers I, II, and III. The poem begins with a line that is clearly tied to and embedded in the present while also directed towards a different future: “This land will not always be foreign” (Lorde 2000, 90). The poem does not explicitly articulate which country this “land” refers to, but later in the poem there is a clear suggestion that it refers to a capitalist, Western context: “The heart of this country’s tradition is its wheat men / dying for money / dying for water for markets for power / over all people’s children” (Lorde 2000, 91). I will come back to these lines later and just note here that “this land” appears as a restrictive, perhaps oppressive, context throughout the poem. The poem is grounded in this land, this present world, yet the first line simultaneously propels the poem towards a *different* future, a future in which this land will not be foreign. The following lines also describe the present as constricting or oppressive, asking “[h]ow many of its women ache to bear their stories” and describing “hands fluttering traces of resistance” (Lorde 2000, 90). As I will discuss, Muñoz’s formulations of queerness as a utopian impulse or potentiality which emerges through a critical engagement with the present are relevant to how this poem relates to the future.

After the first stanza of “The Winds of Orisha,” several interesting temporal things happen. The short second stanza interestingly jumps far back in time to the blind prophet Tiresias of Greek mythology: “Tiresias took 500 years they say to progress into woman /growing smaller and darker and more powerful / until nut-like, she went to sleep in a bottle” (Lorde 2000, 90). In this stanza, the temporal span of the poem stretches elastically. A mythological past is brought into the poem to shed light on how change might occur in the present, something that is clear in the end of the stanza: “Tiresias took 500 years to grow into woman / so do not despair of your sons” (Lorde 2000, 90). These lines seem to be oriented towards a future, or towards change, yet time does not appear along a linear line of progression. As D.E. St. John formulates it, Lorde “refigures time into a process that does not proceed to a determined end or goal, but something that shrinks, grows darker, and extends” (St. John 2019, 1026). I am

not commenting on this stanza to turn my focus away from how the future appears in the poem but to emphasize the way in which time in this poem is not linear and has no predetermined or fixed vision of the future. As I have suggested, the direction towards a different future that becomes possible through the relationality of queer, Black parenting in Lorde's poetry necessarily figures this future as a radically open possibility. As I will argue in the following, this potentiality is tied to the poetic situation; it is in writing that this potentiality can appear. It is also striking that the reach for a mythological past is crucial to the poem and, as I will discuss, to the way in which the poem relates to the future.

The next stanza, which begins the poem's second part, opens with the lines: "Impatient legends speak through my flesh / changing this earths formation" (Lorde 2000, 90). In this stanza, relationality is especially central. What I understand as a queer, Black network of kinship relations unfolds in this stanza and has a crucial impact on the temporality of the poem. The "legends" mentioned in the first lines of this stanza are some of the Yoruban *orishas*, and they are a central part of the network of relations that appears in the poem. Here, I quote to whole stanza to show the way in which this relationality unfolds.

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

(Lorde 2000, 90 – 91).

A whole network of kinship relations between the 'I' and the *orishas* appears throughout this stanza. Yemonja "the giver of life" begins the 'I's "labour" and the 'I' lies down with Oshun, a river goddess "associated with water, purity, fertility, love, and sensuality" (Canson 2009; Jeffries 2009). Shango will be her brother, and Oya is her sister and her daughter. Shango is an *orisha* associated with thunder, lightning, and "represents divine justice" (Valdés 2014, 28; Brandon 2009b). Oya is represented by tornadoes and is the guardian "of the gates of death," (T.K. Wright 2009). She does not, however, symbolize death but "transformation" (Valdés 2014, 28). Finally, Eshu "the divine messenger, trickster god of chance" (Euba 2009) steps in and "turns up the neat sleeping sand." Interestingly, as Valdés comments in her reading of the poem, Eshu is also "the personification of possibility, he embodies all that could be," which suggests the potentiality at play in these lines (Valdés 2014, 28). As I will elaborate in the following, the characteristics of the *orishas* and their appearance in these lines carry a decisive agency.

I understand the relations that are formed in this stanza as queer. The relation between Oshun and the 'I' is queer simply in that it appears as a lesbian relation, but the kinship relations that are formed are also queer in the sense that they are not based on biologic kinship or tied to a heterosexual family but are generated between human and gods *within* the poetic situation in a way that disturbs a linear conception of lineage and time. Oya is, for example, simultaneously the sister and daughter of the 'I.' I also understand these relations as decidedly Black, both because the *orishas* are associated with West African and Black diasporic spirituality and because the poem works with a lot of imagery suggesting the Blackness of these figures and the relations between them, for example in the line "earth shakes our darkness swelling into each other."

As in other of Lorde's poems I have discussed, the imagery surrounding color here does not strictly or solely signify to racial identity and does not suggest a dichotomous division between Black and white. These two words are not even mentioned, and a direct interpretation of the imagery in the poem as referring racial identity and categories would misunderstand and simplify the significance of the imagery, I believe. The words that are used throughout are words such as "dark" or "bland." Thus, the "dark raucous many-shaped characters" that are "leaping back and forth across bland pages" suggest Blackness, but crucially, this is Blackness understood as a creative and disruptive energy and relationality.

The “dark raucous” characters are moving on a “bland” background. They are turning up the “neat sand” of this land, this context, which will “not always be foreign,” but at present is.

It is interesting that the kinship relations and their ability to engage with and change the surrounding world also involve relating to the earth in a way that disrupts the order of the surroundings. Eshu’s laughter turns up the “neat sleeping sand,” for example. This line is interesting because it presupposes that the sand *could* be awake; that it has an existence or agency that is, perhaps, being ignored in the present order of things, in this “land.” I understand the earth as part of the web of kinship relations that appears in this poem.

Similarly, D.E. St. John writes in an ecocritical reading of the poem that the poem engages in a “dialogue with the landscape” (St. John 2019, 1026). From the first line of the poem in which “[t]his land will not always be foreign” to the end of this stanza where “Eshu’s black laughter turns of the neat sleeping sand,” I believe the poem solidifies a poetic situation in which the relations between speaker, the *orishas*, and the earth are at the center. I argue that it is this relationality that carries the potential to disrupt the “formation” of this earth, the land that is still foreign, and its “neat sleeping sand” and that it is the formation of this relationality that points the poem towards a potential, different future.

As I read this stanza, the queer, Black relations of kinship between mothers, sisters, brothers, lovers, and the earth are brought into existence *within* the poetic situation in a very specific way. What is crucial is that the relations, their interactions, and their agency, which I understand as central in the poem, all seem to come into existence in and through poetic writing. Something which the poem draws attention to through its imagery. The ‘I’ and the *orishas* mutually bring each other into being or existence through the poetic situation, and I understand the ‘I’ and the *orishas* as being equally central and dependent on each other. On the one hand, the “[i]mpatient legends speak *through my flesh*” (my emphasis), centering the ‘I’ and how the legends, or *orishas*, are part of the ‘I.’ On the other hand, it is clearly the agency of the *orishas* that propels the poem forward, “changing this earths formation,” even causing the ‘I’ to “become myself / an incantation.” This formulation is interesting since it figures this self *as* an incantation. Throughout this stanza, writing and voice appear as central to the relations that are formed. The ‘I’ is an “incantation,” the image of the “dark raucous many-shaped characters” that leap across “bland pages” can also be read as letters on a page, and through the intimate encounter between the ‘I’ and Oshun the “voice” of the ‘I’ “comes stronger.” This engagement with imagery of voice, writing, and words, I believe, magnifies

how the existence and relationality of the ‘I’ and the *orishas* stem from the poem’s voice and situation. Their existence is made possible within and through the poem. This is a poetic situation filled with relational agency and potentiality; an agency and potentiality that is clearly associated with and created through writing itself.

4.1.1 “When the winds of Orisha blow”

Here, I want to turn to how the strong sense of agency that appears in this stanza through the web of kinship relations is important to my understanding of how the potential for a different future appears in this poem. The “legends,” the *orishas*, are clearly acting in and upon the world. They are “changing this earths formations,” Oya “destroys the crust of the tidy beaches” and “Eshu’s black laughter turns up the neat sleeping sand.” I understand the *orishas* in this poem as clearly being part of and acting in the present of the poem. However, they are presented as legends and appear right after the stanza centering Tiresias who also belongs to, if not a realm of the gods, then a mythological past. As I discussed in chapter two, West African cultural and spiritual influences are associated with a sense of heritage and ancestry for Lorde. Therefore, I find it significant that the *orishas* are so decidedly *present* in the now of the poem, they have a clear sense of agency that carries a future potentiality. As I read it, they are as present as the ‘I’ of the poem since both the ‘I’ and the *orishas* come into being through the relational situation of the poem.

To shed light on how and why these connections are important to understanding the way in which the future appears in the poem, I again turn to Muñoz’s thoughts on queerness and the future. Muñoz thinks of queerness “as a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity” (Muñoz 2009, 16). This formulation seems, to me, to be a fitting description of the way in which the *orishas* are clearly active and very present in the now of the poem, “changing this earths formation.” Yet, alongside Tiresias, they are drawn from a past or mythological realm which provides a “field of possibility” that can disrupt and act critically within the present. Crucially, it is the network of queer, Black relationality generated within the poem that can act upon and disrupt the present and open the very potential of an unpredictable future that might be different to the present.

On this note, I arrive at what I believe is the most crucial and interesting aspect of the way in which the future does, in a sense, appear and materialize *in* this poem. I argue that writing,

and the poem itself, can be understood as a potentiality which sets the situation of the poem in motion towards an open future. The network of relations that appears in the second part of the poem does, as I have described, act disruptively in and upon the present world as it is. Yet, the stanza is also balanced or suspended between the present and a potential future; everything in the poem seems to be in motion. From the second part of the poem and onwards, the verbs describing the actions of the 'I' and the *orishas* fluctuate between present and future verb tenses, something that emphasizes how the poem is in motion towards *something*. Most verbs are in present tense; legends "speak," they are "changing" or "leaping," but these present tenses are intertwined with future tense formulations. These three consecutive lines are characteristic for this fluctuation: "Shango *will be* my brother roaring out of the sea / earth *shakes* our darkness *swelling* into each other / warning winds *will announce* us living" (Lorde 2000, 90, my emphases). This fluctuation emphasizes how the general situation of the poem is positioned in a relational field of potentiality moving, or leaping, into an open, uncertain future different from the present. This reading resonates with Muñoz's formulation of queer futurity as undetermined; "not an end but an opening or horizon" (Muñoz 2009, 91). Crucially, the potential future appears exactly as a drive, a movement filled with potentiality within the poem, not as a set vision of what that different future would look like.

The third and last part of the poem further demonstrates how the network of relations disrupts the present and brings an unpredictable future into play. This part begins with the lines I quoted earlier: "The heart of this country's tradition is its wheat men / dying for money / dying for water for markets for power / over all people's children" (Lorde 2000, 91). These lines signify, I believe, the capitalist order, tradition, or way of thinking in "this country." The "wheat men" seem to represent this order, but they are both portrayed as being at the heart, perhaps in charge, of this tradition but also somehow trapped within it (see also Valdés 2014, 30). They are, after all, "dying" for the power "over all people's children." As the stanza continues, they are also described as sitting "in their chains on their dry earth," an image that recalls slavery. The "wheat men," as I understand them, do not clearly refer to a specific group but signify the capitalist order of "this country's tradition," just like the web of relations between the 'I' and the *orishas* signifies a disruption of the same order. Further on in the stanza, these figures and their queer, Black relationality reappear, directly affecting the "wheat men."

but as Oya my sister moves out of the mouths
of their sons and daughters against them
I will swell up from the pages of their daily heralds
leaping out of the almanacs
instead of an answer to their search for rain
 they will read me
the dark cloud
meaning something entire
and different.

(Lorde 2000, 91).

Here, Oya, as one of the *orishas* and part of the network of relations I have been describing, moves “against them,” (the “wheat men”), disrupting the present ways of things. It is significant that she is described as moving out of the mouths “of their sons and daughters,” as if in alliance with the future generation. Again, present and future tenses intertwine. As Oya moves, “I will swell up from the pages of their daily heralds / leaping out of the almanacs.” The presence and agency of the ‘I’ is associated with writing; she is swelling up and leaping out of pages and books. This once again presents writing as carrying an agency and future potentiality. The ‘I’ quite literally disrupts a rhythm, or a way of predicting and planning time, since an almanac is an annual publication listing, for example, meteorological information. The ‘I’ as a “dark cloud” seems to disrupt the wheat men’s attempt to foresee the weather in order to cultivate the land. They are searching for rain, but instead the ‘I’ leaps out “meaning something entire / and different.” This brings an openness and uncertainty of the future into a context in which humans try to predict or control time and natural forces.

The potential future that appears as an opening in this poem is tied to – might even be understood *as* – the network of queer, Black relationality itself. This focus on relationality also characterizes Muñoz’s description of the open horizon of queer futurity: “The queerness of queer futurity [...] is a relational and collective modality of endurance and support” (Muñoz 2009, 91). As I understand it, the very appearance of the relations in the poem is what makes the potential future possible within the poem, what makes the future appear as a potentiality embedded in these relational ties and their agency. I have argued that the poem shows how the existence of the ‘I,’ the *orishas*, and the relationality that is created between them are made possible through the poetic voice and the writing of the poem. These

connections suggest how poetry, relationality, and the potential for a different future are tied together for Lorde.

By tying the relationality in the poem and the potential for a different future so closely together, I also want to emphasize how this direction towards a future is both grounded in a concrete, critical engagement with the present and at the same time is radically open since the future *is* a potential, a “horizon” (Muñoz 2009, 1). In the very last, short stanza of the poem, the *orishas* and the wind are connected, and their movement seems to set the surrounding world into motion: “When the winds of Orisha blow / even the roots of grass / quicken” (Lorde 2000, 91). Again, the present clearly points to, or is in motion towards, a future. The formulation “[w]hen the winds of Orisha blow” can both suggest the regular appearance of this wind, but the word “when,” as I read it, also carries a sense of reaching out, of implicitly activating a movement into an unknown future. This poem makes the potential for an unpredictable, different future visible within the poem as a movement or a potentiality, something which is forged through writing, through the existence of the poem, and the relations that become possible within it. In this poem, writing itself appears as a potentiality, and this potentiality is tied to the queer, Black relations of kinship forged in the poetic situation.

4.2 A map of the mapless uncertain, a rudder for my children

In this section, I will further explore the connection between the relationality of Black, queer parenting, the potential for a different future, and what role poetry plays in this. The poem I will discuss is “On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge” which, like “Outlines,” was published in *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986). My readings of these two poems are quite closely connected. The connection I see between this poem and “Outlines” largely relies on the similar fundamental scenario of the two poems. Like “Outlines,” “On My Way Out” is situated within the frame of an everyday in which the practice of building a life and a home is central. Yet, this everyday unfolds simultaneously, and in opposition to, the ever-present and growing pollution, inequality, and general destruction of the surrounding status quo. In the end of last chapter, I touched upon how “Outlines” does engage with the future, especially in the last lines of the poems stating that “if we win / there is no telling” (Lorde 2000, 366). These lines end the poem on a note of openness and uncertain potential. However,

“On My Way Out” even more clearly engages with the future, as I will discuss in the following.

The first stanza of the poem ends “in the nape of the bay / our house slips under these wings / shuttle between nightmare and the possible” (Lorde 2000, 403). This position, shuttling between “nightmare and the possible” already shows how the horror or nightmare of the present and a possible alternative are both at play in the poem. The second stanza describes the setting of the poem and hints at what might be understood as the “nightmare” of the surrounding present, versus the “possible,” that I understand as tied to the relationality and way of living associated with the home that appears in the poem.

The broad water drew us, and the space
growing enough green to feed ourselves over two seasons
now sulfur fuels burn in New Jersey
and when I wash my hands at the garden hose
the earth runs off bright yellow
the bridge disappears
only a lowering sky
in transit.

(Lorde 2000, 403).

As is apparent already, movement is central in the poem. Even the title, “On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge,” is in motion. Both movement, direction, and navigational imagery play interesting roles throughout the poem. I believe these elements are important to consider in relation to how the poem – and poetry more generally – stands in relation to an open, uncertain future. In the end of last chapter, I discussed how the relationality of Black, queer parenting in “Outlines” is articulated and appears as “outside of symbol” in the poem; as something that is outside the realm of what is comprehensible, or “legible” in the language of the current status quo. In relation to “On My Way Out” and the way in which, I believe, the poem is in motion towards an unpredictable, uncertain future, a similar characterization is relevant.

Here, again, I draw on Muñoz’s discussion of queerness and utopia when he writes that queerness can be understood as “being filled with the intention to be lost. Queerness is illegible and therefore lost in relation to the straight minds’ mapping of space” (Muñoz 2009, 72). The potential future, which is related to the relationality of Black, queer parenting in

Lorde's poetry is, as I argued in relation to "The Winds of Orisha," an open, uncertain, and undetermined future. The social logic of the present, as both Muñoz and Edelman point out in their different ways, has a hold upon the future in the sense that it keeps reproducing itself (Edelman 2004, 11; Muñoz 2009, 22). The potential for a different future must, in a sense, be completely open, uncertain, in order to attempt to move away from the assumed reproduction of the present social logic. That entails getting "lost," standing "outside of symbol," to use more spatial formulations.

This sense of getting lost as a crucial part of moving towards a future that is different from the present, is what I find interesting in relation to the poem's use of navigational imagery, specifically in the form of images of rudders and maps.²¹ I will argue that these images can help discuss and articulate how the poem is suspended between the present and a potential, open future. How, in a way, the poem can be understood as materializing something that doesn't yet exist. Images of maps and the 'mapless' appear twice in the poem, and both these passages point to interesting things regarding the connection between the poem, the relationality of parenting, and the future. First, around the middle of the poem, the speaker states:

I am writing these words as a route map
an artifact for survival
a chronicle of buried treasure
a mourning
for this place we are about to be leaving
a rudder for my children your children
our lovers our hopes braided

(Lorde 2000, 404).

The lines stating that "I am writing these words as a route map / an artifact for survival" clearly indicate the relationship between the poem and a direction towards a future. The images of the poem as an artifact and a map have been pointed out as central to the poem in several readings (e.g. Hull 1989, 157; Dhairyam 1992, 251; Gumbs 2010, 171), but less attention has been paid to how "these words" are also described as a "rudder," as something

²¹ My attention to how the function of space in the poem is connected to an idea of the future is generally inspired by Alexis Pauline Gumbs' reading of the poem, as I will elaborate further in the following (Gumbs 2010, 171-182).

that can direct both mine and your children, lovers, and hopes. The vision of the poem as a map or rudder for one's children again emphasizes how Lorde's poetics and poetry are oriented towards a relational realm in which the relationality of parenting stands centrally. Here, the stanza also emphasizes something important regarding parenting and the future; that this particular relationality is unpredictable, uncertain. The relationality of parenting emphasizes a fundamental sense of connection as a precondition for any life, yet this is not a limitless connectivity. A focus on relationality does not mean a disregard for how subjects are also separate and not the same and how, as a parent, you cannot determine or predict a future for your children, you can only attempt to provide a route map or a rudder. As I will discuss further in this section, I find the image of the poem as a "rudder" particularly significant for characterizing how poetry extends itself relationally into the future. The rudder alone is only a tool; it can be used for steering, for charting a course, but someone needs to use the rudder to make the boat move.

Temporality and spatiality are already intertwined in this discussion, something Alexis Pauline Gumbs focuses on in her reading of the poem (Gumbs 2010, 171). Gumbs discusses Lorde's use of space and unfolds an interpretation of how Lorde uses typographical spaces within the lines throughout the poem. According to Gumbs, Lorde's use of space within the lines charges the reader "with either passing over or making a bridge" (Gumbs 2010, 171). In Gumbs' reading, the bridge becomes a guiding metaphor for the way in which the poem connects space, time, and relationality: "Lorde uses space to articulate the fragility and possibility of a threatened future" (Gumbs 2010, 171). My point above, concerning how the relationality of parenting both emphasizes connectedness and yet is inscribed with an awareness of the limits and unpredictability of this relation, is also inspired by Gumbs' reading of these typographical spaces. She emphasizes that these typographical spaces both signal the possibility for creating a bridge, yet the presence of the gaps emphasize how that gap cannot always be bridged, how relationality is often limited in various ways (Gumbs 2010, 174, 177).

Thus, the particular lines quoted above on one hand center the *possibility* of creating a connection between my children, your children, lovers, and hopes with "these words" acting as a "route map" or a "rudder" that might make it possible to steer towards an unknown future. On the other hand, as Gumbs notes, the gaps are not closed. Lorde "leaves the spaces open, and the bridge remains a question" (Gumbs 2010, 176). Through its use of space, and

through the imagery related to movement and navigation, this stanza illuminates what I understand as the perhaps most central aspect of this poem's relation to the future. How the poem, similarly to "The Winds of Orisha," is suspended between what is material and present and what is yet un-materialized, a potential, unpredictable future. This is, I believe, what the images of the "map" and the "rudder" entail. In the very last stanza, the poem returns to the image of the map in a way that highlights how the material present and the future immaterial intertwine within the situation of the poem.

And I dream of our coming together
encircled driven
not only by love
but by lust for a working tomorrow
the flights of this journey
mapless uncertain
and necessary as water.

(Lorde 2000, 406).

I understand the "route map" or "rudder" in the earlier quote as clearly related to the "mapless" here. Read together, the stanza which evokes the "route map" and this one in which the journey is described as mapless position the whole poetic situation as suspended, or fluctuating between, the material, and the not-yet materialized, between the present and a potential future. As I read it, the poem is providing a route map for something mapless, more specifically for the possibility of a "working tomorrow." Earlier I quoted Muñoz's description of how queerness is "lost in relation to the straight minds' mapping of space" (Muñoz 2009, 72) and connected it to how a direction towards a different future – through a queer, Black relationality – is open and uncertain, charting a different course than the dominant logic of the present. Yet, the poem – as the poem itself articulates – is envisioned as a map or a rudder that can help navigate or steer towards something; the "mapless" and uncertain possibility of a "working tomorrow."

Again, this characterization of the poem's relation to the future, as I understand it, is tied to the relationality in these stanzas, particularly to the relationality of parenting as it is generated in – and in turn generates – the poetic situation in this poem. I understand the relationality of parenting as especially central because this relationality emphasizes how one's relation to and entanglement in the surrounding world extends beyond one's own, individual lifetime into an

unknown future. In her reading, Gumbs emphasizes how this last stanza of the poem “offers an epistemological moment past the poem itself,” a vision that also “asks *us*” to participate (Gumbs 2010, 182). This inclusion of the reader, which, as Gumbs formulates it, calls for a kind of participation, emphasizes that poetry for Lorde is a relational pursuit that extends beyond the words on the page. I have often noted how both the relationality and temporality of parenting in Lorde’s poetry entail that the poetic situation reaches beyond the speaker or the ‘I’ of the poem. I believe this is the case both in the sense that Lorde’s poems reach into a relational field in which the ‘I’ is not always central and in the sense that the poems often reach beyond the temporal limits of the ‘I,’ either into the past or into the future.

Understanding Lorde’s poetics as fundamentally concerned with relationality also entails being aware of how the poem reaches into a relational field beyond itself, something Gumbs clearly emphasizes in her reading of the last stanza of the poem (Gumbs 2010, 182). The way in which the poem maps the mapless, balancing between the material present and an immaterial, potential future, reflects how the relationality of Black, queer parenting in Lorde’s poetry is both practiced and lived in and through the present and is also “outside of symbol” or “illegible” within this present, prompting a direction towards a different future. A poem like “On My Way Out” attempts to move away from the overarching destructive logic of the present and into a “mapless uncertain” potential for a different future.

4.2.1 “So do we”?

“On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge” expresses, and is itself an example of, how poetry can be understood as a map of the mapless, a rudder that might help steer future generations, and readers, towards a different future. The poem also specifically addresses the difference between poetry and other modes of representation, like other poems I’ve discussed. For example “Afterimages” and its exploration of the impact of an image circulated in public spheres especially through the news and “Power,” which very clearly juxtaposes rhetoric and poetry, pointing to how poetry carries the uncertain potential for one’s children to *not* be killed. In “On My Way Out,” Lorde poses poetry as a contrast to the language – or rhetoric – of the news in a similar way.

Wintry Poland survives
the bastardized prose of the *New York Times*
while Soweto is a quaint heat treatment
in some exotic but safely capitalized city

where the Hero Children's bones moulder unmarked
and the blood of my sister in exile Winnie Mandela
slows and her steps slow
in a banned and waterless living
her youngest daughter is becoming a poet.

(Lorde 2000, 404).

The “bastardized prose,” which, in Lorde’s terminology is a clear example of the rhetoric that dominates the present and Winnie Mandela’s exiled living are both examples of the restrictive realities of the present, but the last line; “her youngest daughter is becoming a poet” seems to offer a glimpse of possibility for something different. Gumbs also discusses this passage and argues that poetry becomes an “intervention in meaning [...] The potential of poetry in the daughter of the freedom fighter Winnie Mandela is a challenge to the hegemony represented and reproduced by the *New York Times*.”(Gumbs 2010, 179 – 180). Gumbs also points to other passages of the poem that express how Lorde sees poetry as a contrast to the rhetoric of the present. Passages which resonate with the vision of poetry that appears in “Power,” for example.

However, I want to turn to how the poem also explores more specific questions of *how* to actively create or move towards a different future and what role poetry plays in this context. As it appears in “On My Way Out,” the potential for a different future has everything to do with relationality, collective agency, and responsibility. Finally, as I will argue, the potential for a different future is tied to how Lorde’s understands the role of poetry in relation to the world around it. In the following, I will look at how open, uncertain, and precarious the possibility for such a future is. Lorde’s poetic engagement with the future is in no way guided by a naïve optimism, but by a fundamental awareness of the “fragility,” as Gumbs puts it (Gumbs 2010, 171), of the possibility for a different future or a “working tomorrow.”

Throughout my readings of the relationality of parenting in Lorde’s poetry and of how parenting is connected to the temporality of the poetic situation, I have emphasized how neither this relationality of parenting, nor my focus on it, attempt to idealize parenting or relationality as such. I find the relationality of queer, Black parenting in Lorde’s poetry interesting because it can shed light on how her poetry is informed by an understanding of poetry, life, and the world that is fundamentally relational. As I have discussed, Lorde’s poetic awareness of relationality is attuned to how complex relationality is, how it is often

limited and problematic, affected by power structures and oppression, and how any person and living being is in some way complicit in and accountable to the surrounding world. This awareness of complexity is also fundamental in Gumbs' reading of Lorde's use of space in "On My Way Out." Gumbs argues that the typographical gaps that Lorde uses in some cases show the "brokenness of the contemporary world" (Gumbs 2010, 174). Gumbs makes this point in relation to lines that specifically deal with global oppression in the form of forced labor.

the once-black now wasted old people
who built Pretoria
Philadelphia Atlanta San Francisco

(Lorde 2000, 404).

In line with my understand of Lorde's poetic engagement with a different future, Gumbs argues that this brokenness of the present is also what highlights the need for something different: "If a globalized racist relationship through capitalism is an inadequate and unacceptable bridge, then another relationship must be produced" (Gumbs 2010, 176). I include these perspectives here to emphasize how Lorde's poetic engagement with the future is built on a fundamental awareness of how the present world is destructive or "broken" and on an awareness of the complexities and limitations of the possibility of creating a new kind of relationality and future. As noted earlier, Gumbs emphasizes that Lorde's use of space shows how not all spaces can be bridged in the poem, that there are spaces "that the poem can only attempt to bridge" (Gumbs 2010, 177). The relationality that is at play in Lorde's poetry is not limitless, and even though poetry might act as a "route map" or a "rudder" steering toward a different future, this future is not given, and the route *is* "mapless" and uncertain. Here, I will turn to lines in which the uncertain character of the future is particularly central. Early in the poem, the speaker states that

we live on the edge
of manufacturing
tomorrow or the unthinkable
made common as plantain-weed
by our act of not thinking
of taking
only what is given.

(Lorde 2000, 403 – 404).

This stanza marks how the ‘we’ of the poem is situated on the edge of manufacturing, or creating, either “tomorrow” or “the unthinkable.” The “unthinkable” clearly suggests a kind of catastrophe but, crucially, a catastrophe that already exists in and as the present; the catastrophe of continuing the “unthinkable” status quo, “made common as plantain-weed.” The “unthinkable” is not some dystopian fiction here, it is the destructive logic of the present. I believe the word “tomorrow,” as a contrast to “the unthinkable,” refers specifically to the possibility of an open, uncertain future *different* from the present. Even though a continued “manufacturing” of the “unthinkable” would technically also create a future, a tomorrow, such a future would be a reproduction of the present and its logic, a continuation of the same. Given the destructive and oppressive logic of the present, such a tomorrow would, for Lorde, be no tomorrow at all.

Crucially, the catastrophe of potentially continuing the “unthinkable” logic of the present becomes a matter of the agency and actions of the ‘we’ mentioned here. This both emphasizes how the future is a collective and relational matter and how the future – whether in the form of the continued reproduction of the status quo or the unpredictable creation of something different – depends on and grows out of what happens and what is done in the present. Preceding the lines quoted above, the poem seems to ponder on what ‘we’ can do to move towards a tomorrow that is different than the present. The stanza begins with a question:

So do we blow the longest suspension bridge in the world
up from the middle
or will it be bombs at the Hylan Toll Plaza
mortars over Grymes Hill
flak shrieking through the streets of Rosebank
the home of the Staten Island ku klux klan
while sky-roaches napalm the Park Hill Projects
we live on the edge
of manufacturing
tomorrow or the unthinkable
made common as plantain-weed
by our act of not thinking
of taking
only what is given.

(Lorde 2000, 403 – 404).

The question that opens the stanza expresses a sense of urgency, a call for action, a need to figure out what to *do* about the destruction of the present moment. Yet, even though the suggestions to blow up bridges or throw bombs might express a genuine urge to be done with the horrors of the present, I don't understand these suggestions as genuine. To me, the lines have a sarcastic ring to them. As I read the stanza, these suggestions would – while constituting an attempt to break with the present and its logic by literally blowing it up – in fact continue the same destructive logic of the “unthinkable” present. Gumbs' reading of the poem points to the bridge as a metaphor both for relationality and for the possibility of moving towards a different future (Gumbs 2010, 175). Following her reading of these connections, I argue that the very suggestion of blowing up a literal bridge in this stanza represents a belief that it is possible to create a clean break from the present and its destructive logic. Such an approach would be quite contrary to Lorde's emphasis on relationality. As I have discussed earlier in this thesis, Lorde's poems, and my understanding of the relationality of parenting within these poems, again and again emphasize the need to work through the present world and its destructive logic towards creating something different, rather than attempting to blow up bridges and cut connections to this world.

I am not suggesting that Lorde is generally criticizing attempts to actively act, to *do* something about the present logic of destruction, but the suggestions in the stanza above appear as attempts to break with the present in a way that nevertheless unthinkingly reproduces the same logic. The lines describing how “the unthinkable” is “made common as plantain-weed / by our act of not thinking / of taking / only what is given” both criticize a passive complacency towards the destruction of the present and also criticize active attempts to break with the present which use similarly destructive mechanisms. In this context, I again want to characterize Lorde's poetics as relational because the vision for a different future that appears in this poem emphasizes the need for an awareness of one's relational ties to and position within the world as it is. I argue that this simultaneous need to recognize one's relationship and connection to the existing world and the need to ‘manufacture’ a tomorrow that is different are both encapsulated in what I understand as the poem's fluctuation between the material present and the immaterial, potential future.

This intertwining of the material present and the immaterial future is at play in both the poems I have discussed in this chapter. In light of my readings of both “The Winds of Orisha” and

“On My Way Out,” I suggest that poetry offers a possibility for making both the material reality of the present, and the immaterial, possible future appear, even meet, within the poem. The imaginative potentials and the fundamental relationality of poetic writing can create a poetic situation which fluctuates between the material and the immaterial. The poem, then, is both entangled in and related to the present reality and sets itself in motion towards a potential future that is different from the present.

4.3 Parenting, poetry, and a relational future

I believe that “On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge” shows how poetry in Lorde’s view is crucial to envisioning, pursuing, and creating a future that doesn’t merely stick to the logic of the “unthinkable” present. The stanza which begins with the line “So do we blow the longest suspension bridge in the world / up from the middle” and which states that “we live on the edge / of manufacturing / tomorrow or the unthinkable” (Lorde 2000, 403) especially emphasizes that blowing up bridges is not enough to create a different future. Further, in relation to this role of poetry, it is interesting how the stanza uses the word “manufacturing.” This word points to the need for creating something different, rather than merely destroying what exists. In the stanza, the potential for “manufacturing” a tomorrow that is not “unthinkable” comes down to the agency and actions of the ‘we.’ I see a clear connection between how Lorde envisions the role of poetry, the question of creating a different future, and the importance of relationality to these matters.

In the essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” Lorde draws a distinction between “temporary action” and “true alteration,” the latter of which is connected to the potentials Lorde sees in poetry. She calls for a need to ask the question

[a]m I altering your aura, your ideas, your dreams, or am I merely moving you to temporary and reactive action? And even though the latter is no mean task, it is one that must be seen within the context of a need for true alteration of the very foundations of our lives.

(Lorde 2007, 38).

It is crucial to note that Lorde is not neglecting the usefulness of “reactionary action” here. As she notes further down on the same page, “action in the now is also necessary, always. Our children cannot dream unless they live, they cannot live unless they are nourished, and who

else will feed them the real food without which their dreams will be no different from ours?” (Lorde 2007, 38). Lorde’s use of this example again suggests that parenting is crucial both to her poetry and to how she understands the role of poetry in a larger context. When Lorde writes that “temporary action” must be seen as a smaller part of the larger, more visionary, project of creating a “true alteration of the very foundations of our lives,” such an alteration implies creating a world in which “our children” can dream (Lorde 2007, 38). It is here that poetry, as Lorde envisions it, is crucial.

The essay’s central argument that “poetry is not a luxury” emphasizes how poetry is not merely entertainment but “a vital necessity for our existence” (Lorde 2007, 37). Lorde writes further that “[i]n the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real” (Lorde 2007, 39). As Lorde formulates it here, the possibility for a future that doesn’t adhere to the logics of the present is not a given. The sentence doesn’t speak about ‘a’ or ‘the’ possibility, but simply points to “possibility” and to how, ultimately, such possibility can only be glimpsed through poetry. It is very clear that, for Lorde, poetry is a form of expression that creates a unique opportunity for imagining, reaching for, and articulating a different future. Seen as such, poetry itself is, in a sense, suspended temporally, making visible hints or glimpses of what *might* be possible. This resonates with how I characterize “The Winds of Orisha” and “On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge” as fluctuation between the material and the immaterial. In “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” Lorde writes that poetry can “name” what is “nameless and formless” (Lorde 2007, 36). In relation to the question of poetry and the future, I believe this formulation emphasizes how poetry, in a very particular way, can bring the “nameless and formless” into material being – through and within poetic writing and language.

I argue that in Lorde’s poetry, the possibility of “manufacturing” a different future is grounded in an awareness of the relational or collective character of such a pursuit. This awareness is tied to parenting since parenting involves a temporal awareness that stretches beyond the individual and into the future. The question of “manufacturing” a future different from the now is an especially pressing question when it comes to Black, queer parenting given the violence towards and marginalization of Black, queer lives in the present Lorde writes in and through. In relation to the poems “Outlines” and “On My Way Out,” I have been discussing how there is something illegible, “outside of symbol,” about the relationality of Black, queer parenting exactly because this kind of relationality is marginalized and

precarious in the present and carves out an alternative to mainstream or dominant models of relationality and parenting. I believe this is where the character of queer, Black relationality, and Lorde's characterization of poetry as being able to name "the nameless" most clearly meet and affect each other. For Lorde, poetry can give language to and create a situation in which it is possible to imagine and manifest a kind of relationality that exceeds the norms for relationality in the present. This relationality is a crucial part of how Lorde's poetry can create glimpses of a different future.

Just like I have argued throughout this thesis that the relationality of parenting in Lorde's poetry is not necessarily tied to specific subject positions, the possibility for creating a different future within "On My Way Out" is not necessarily tied to specific subject positions either. The lines "we live on the edge / of manufacturing / tomorrow or the unthinkable" (Lorde 2000, 403) emphasize that it is a matter of what the 'we' do, rather than who the 'we' are, which will impact the future. Here, I believe that understanding the relationality of queer, Black parenting as a specific kind or way of relating to the world and the future is particularly important. This relationality, in Lorde's poetry, is characterized by an awareness of being fundamentally related to or intertwined with the surrounding world, and it builds on an awareness of one's own accountability towards this world. It also entails acknowledging how one is 'related' to the future. As "On My Way Out" demonstrates, the need to actively work towards "manufacturing" a tomorrow that works is grounded in the awareness of, as Gumbs puts it, the "brokenness of the contemporary world" (Gumbs 2010, 174) which is based on oppressive systems in which Black and queer lives and relationalities are especially precarious. This awareness and the following need to create a different future become especially clear when considered in the context of the relationality of queer, Black parenting.

In this chapter, I have been discussing how poetry, to Lorde, is able to both show the need for a future that is different to the present and how this mode of expression is able to imagine and manifest the potential for such a future in a very specific way. I have argued, in relation to the poem "The Winds of Orisha," that Lorde sees poetic writing itself as a potentiality. Within the poem, the immaterial future can be materialized as a drive, movement, or potential. This potentiality is also specifically tied to the queer, Black network of kinship relations that appears within the poem. In my reading of "On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge," I have emphasized how I understand the image of the poem as a rudder as important for understanding the connection between the relationality of parenting, the poetic

situation, and the future in Lorde's poetry. This image of the rudder is connected to the images of the poem as a "route map" to something "mapless" and uncertain. However, the image of the rudder especially emphasizes the poem as a material object that not only shows a direction but is instrumental to the act of steering. Significantly, the poem emphasizes that the rudder is "a rudder for my children your children / our lovers our hopes braided" (Lorde 2000, 404). Here, the poem is envisioned as decidedly relational. The image of the rudder itself emphasizes relationality and interaction in that *someone* must interact with it to move forward. The poetic potential for imagining, and moving towards, a different future is a matter of interaction and relationality.

5 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have been exploring the connection between the relationality of queer, Black parenting and the way in which time appears and functions in a selection of Audre Lorde's poems. This inquiry has been fueled by an interest in focusing on Lorde's poetry, discussing her poetics, and considering what role relationality plays in her poems. Specific figures of parents and children are not scarce throughout Lorde's body of work. Taking my starting point in the centrality of this motif in Lorde's poetry, I have been more interested in approaching parenting as a kind of relationality that is not necessarily tied to specific positions, subjects, or figures of parents and children within her poems. In many of the poems I have discussed, the relationality of parenting is clearly forged by the power of the poetic voice, particularly within the poetic situation of the poem. Thus, I have argued that the relationality of queer, Black parenting is a kind of relationality that spreads through and affects the poetic situation and voice of the poems I have discussed. I believe that this relationality of parenting highlights how Lorde's poetry is generally and fundamentally concerned with relationality.

The relationality of queer, Black parenting in Lorde's poetry draws attention to how one is always entangled in, related to, and accountable towards the surrounding world. The reason I focus on the queer and Black aspects of this relationality is because these aspects mark how the relationality of parenting in Lorde's poetry stands in a marginalized position in relation to dominant modes of parenting and family in the Western, American context Lorde lives and writes in for most of her life. For Lorde, queer, Black parenting puts central aspects of one's position and potential agency in the world into sharp relief. As she remarks in the text "Turning the Beat Around – Lesbian Parenting 1986," parenting as a racial and sexual minority in a majority white, heteronormative society "is worthy of close and unsentimental scrutiny" (Lorde 2009, 73).

In Lorde's poetry, the relationality of parenting is clearly attached to the specific position of Black, queer parenting which is both marginalized within a white, racist, and heteronormative context and confronts such norms critically and creatively. However, the specificity of the relationality of Black, queer parenting in Lorde's poetry is not just a matter of racial and sexual identity – just as I don't understand this relationality as being tied only to specific subject positions. Rather, the relationality of Black, queer parenting also functions as a

disruptive and creative potential that runs through her poetry. By emphasizing this relationality as something that is not tied to specific subject positions within Lorde's poetry, I am not trying to detach it from its queer, Black starting point. Rather, my point is that this starting point creates a specific kind of relationality that both affects and is affected by the poetic voice and situation. A relationality that spreads through Lorde's poems and poetics as a *way* of relating to the world and to time.

A basic assumption in this thesis is that the relationality of parenting prompts questions of temporality and of how one is affected by, and in turn affects, the past, the present, and the future. I have structured the thesis around enquiries into how the relationality of Black, queer parenting informs the way in which Lorde's poems relate to the past, the present, and the future respectively. Something that characterizes most of the poems I have discussed, is that the poetic voice and the poetic situation are closely tied to the possibilities and complexities of creating relational kinship ties across time.

In the poems I discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, Lorde's poetic 'I' creates a sense of queer, Black ancestry through reaching out for an often fragmented, problematic, and complicated past within the situation of the poem and through her poetic voice. What is especially interesting about this poetic reach to connect with the past is that it both affirms the creative, queer potential of the poetic voice to traverse time, however, the connections that are created are also inscribed with the sense of loss, fragmentation, and complexity that the past can entail. Questions of ancestry and heritage are particularly complicated seen from a queer, Black perspective given the historical and contemporary realities of colonialism, oppression, and marginalization of modes of queer and Black relationality. I write 'particular' complications because this characteristic of queer, Black parenting is tied to a context of more dominant notions of ancestry as something which belongs to the realm of the heteronormative family and to biological and patrilinear bloodlines. In the poems I discussed in this chapter, Lorde both draws poetic energy from the sense of kinship and connection with the past that is created within the poems and shows how the past with its problems, complexities, and – often restrictive – traditions and norms can affect the present reality. This acknowledgement of one's inevitable entanglement with the past forms an important foundation for how I understand the relationality of Black, queer parenting in Lorde's poetry. Lorde's poetry doesn't imagine a break with the elements of the past that are restrictive but rather emphasizes

the need to acknowledge that the past has, both positively and negatively, made the present possible.

In the third chapter of the thesis, I focused on Lorde's poetic engagement with the present seen through the relationality of queer, Black parenting. Her poetry makes it very clear that the lives of marginalized people are persistently and structurally threatened and precarious within the present and the social logic that dominates it. Through engaging poetically with racially motivated violence against and murders of especially Black children, Lorde emphasizes the urgent need to speak about, address, and represent these horrors yet also makes it clear how public representations can often make such deaths into hollow spectacles. Through forging parental ties to children who are victims of racist violence within the poetic situation, Lorde draws attention to how poetry carries potentials for imagining and representing relationality in a way that diverts from the logic and rhetoric of the present in which the lives of these children are especially precarious. Through relating to dead or dying children and creating queer, Black parental relationships within the poetic situation, Lorde both exhibits the precarity inscribed upon Black children's lives in the present and opens a poetic space for relating in a way that doesn't adhere to the logic of the present.

In Lorde's poetry, the relationality of Black, queer parenting is marginalized in and marks a different trajectory than the status quo that dominates the present. For Lorde, this position also makes the issue of attempting to imagine and create a different future very urgent. I understand Lorde's poetic engagement with the future as being prompted by the need to create a poetic situation and a wider reality in which alternative, marginalized subjects, ways of living, and ways of relating can exist without the oppression and marginalization that face them in the present. In the fourth chapter of this thesis I focused on how Lorde's poetry engages with and envisions the potential of creating a future that isn't just a continuation or reproduction of the present as it is. Such a future appears as an uncertain, open potential in Lorde's poetry rather than as an articulated or determined idea. Given that this future is open and undetermined, the question of how to express it through language, within the poem, is particularly interesting. I have argued that such a different future is expressed in Lorde's poetry as a potentiality within poetic writing itself. Consequently, I characterized the poems I discussed in this chapter as suspended, fluctuating between the material reality of the present and an immaterial, uncertain future that appears as a potential or a movement within the poetic situation. This expression of a potential future within the poem is something that is

especially closely connected to Lorde's poetics and to her understanding of poetry. For Lorde, poetry can name "the nameless" (Lorde 2007, 36), and it carries a clear potential for imagining and moving towards a different future and for affecting the world around it.

In the beginning of the thesis I quoted these words from Lorde's text "Poetry Makes Something Happen:" "Poetry makes something happen, indeed. It makes you happen. It makes your living happen. [...] I cannot separate my life and my poetry. I write my living, and I live my work" (Lorde 2009, 184). I want to bring these words back into focus because they highlight exactly why I believe that understanding Lorde's poetry as fundamentally relational is a fruitful way to approach her poetics and her understanding of the connection between life and poetry. Understanding Lorde's poetry as relational also entails considering the relation between her poetry and the world around it. As Lorde suggests in the quote above, life and the surrounding world affects poetry – "I write my living" – but, crucially, writing and poetry also affect life and the surrounding world – "I live my work." The ability of poetry to express things that were somehow "nameless" or unexpressed does not only point to the future but also emphasizes Lorde's belief in how poetry can affect those who hear or read it. As Lorde also writes in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," "there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real" (Lorde 2007, 39).

In the previous chapter, I commented on how the poem "On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge" reaches out to its readers based on Gumbs' reading of the poem's last stanza (Gumbs 2010, 182). The relationality that I understand as fundamental to Lorde's poetry most certainly extends to the reader, to the world around the poem. Lorde writes that "poetry makes something happen." I would add that the poem itself exists or "happens" in the relational field between poet, poem, and reader. Lorde's poetry reaches out past itself. On an internal level, her poetic speaker reaches for connections and relations of kinship across time. On an external level, her poems reach for, and tries to connect with, readers and the surrounding world. Poetry is indeed a necessity for Lorde. It is relational, deeply entangled in the world around it, and plays a crucial role in the way we relate to and affect that world.

I have argued that the relationality of parenting in Lorde's poetry is not always tied to specific subjects but exists as a *kind* of relationality that runs through her poems. The relationality of parenting in Lorde's poetry is often created through the poetic voice and spreads through the whole poetic situation and its temporality. This characterization is important to my central argument that the relationality of parenting is closely and crucially connected to Lorde's

poetic voice and poetics. The way in which Lorde's poems can create relations of kinship and parenting further shows how poetry, to Lorde, is not only affected by the world outside but can create relations by virtue of the poetic voice and its enunciation that can affect the world outside the poem.

The fact that these parental relations are often decidedly queer and Black is interesting in relation to how poetry can give name to the "nameless" (Lorde 2007, 36), and to how this can have an impact on the world around the poem. Lorde's thoughts on poetry – both expressed in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" and "Poetry Makes Something Happen" – emphasize how poetry can be a way of expressing and exploring feeling. She writes in "Poetry Makes Something Happen" that

[t]he experience of poetry is intimate, and it is crucial. For that reason, of course, it is often resented or resisted. The pursuit of one's own poetry is basically a subversive activity, because the pursuit of one's feelings colors one's total existence, and we are paid well for refusing to feel ourselves.

(Lorde 2009, 184).

To Lorde, this pursuit or recognition of emotion is an essential part of the importance of poetry, and this characterization of poetry is once again closely connected to relationality. Lorde writes further that it is easier to not feel and that "[i]t is hard to accept the tragedy of children shot in the streets of Soweto *as our tragedy*. [...] We are not separate from that horror" (Lorde 2009, 185, emphasis mine). This quote seems to me to encapsulate how poetry to Lorde is fundamentally relational and to emphasize the impact poetry can have on our way of relating to the world. The relationality of parenting – which for Lorde is not tied only to biological relations between parents and their own children – highlights how one is always connected to the world and emphasizes the need to hold oneself accountable to these connections.

6 Literature

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7 Appendix

Here, I have collected the poems I quote and discuss in the thesis. I have also included the poem “Vigil,” although I only mention that poem very briefly in chapter three.

7.1 Poems discussed in chapter two

“Between Ourselves” – *The Black Unicorn* (1978)

Once when I walked into a room
my eyes would seek out the one or two black faces
for contact or reassurance or a sign
I was not alone
now walking into rooms full of black faces
that would destroy me for any difference
where shall my eyes look?
Once it was easy to know
who were my people.

If we were stripped to our strength
of all pretense
and our flesh was cut away
the sun would bleach all our bones as white
as the face of my black mother
was bleached white by gold
or Orishala
and how
does that measure me?

I do not believe
our wants have made all our lies
holy.

Under the sun on the shores of Elmina

a black man sold the woman who carried
my grandmother in her belly
he was paid with bright yellow coin
that shone in the evening sun
and in the faces of her sons and daughters.

When I see that brother behind my eyes
his irises are bloodless and without color
his tongue clicks like yellow coins
tossed up on this shore
where we share the same corner
of an alien and corrupted heaven
and whenever I try to eat
the words
of easy blackness as salvation
I taste the color
of my grandmother's first betrayal.

I do not believe
our wants
have made all our lies
holy.

But I do not whistle his name at the shrine of Shopona
I do not bring down the rosy juices of death upon him
nor forget Orishala
is called the god of whiteness
who works in the dark wombs of night
forming the shapes we all wear
so that even cripples and dwarfs and albinos
are scared worshipers
when the boiled corn is offered.

Humility lies

in the face of history
I have forgiven myself
for him
for the white meat
we all consumed in secret
before we were born
we shared the same meal.
When you impale me
upon your lances of narrow blackness
before you hear my heart speak
mourn your own borrowed blood
your own borrowed visions
Do not mistake my flesh for the enemy
do not write my name in the dust
before the shrine of the god of smallpox
for we are all children of Eshu
god of chance and the unpredictable
and we each wear many changes
inside of our skin.

Armed with scars
healed
in many different colors
I look in my own faces
as Eshu's daughter crying
if we do not stop killing
the other
in ourselves
the self that we hate
in others
soon we shall all lie
in the same direction
and Eshidale's priests will be very busy

they who alone can bury
all those who seek their own death
by jumping up from the ground
and landing upon their heads.

(Lorde 2000, 323 – 325).

“Prologue” – *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973)

Haunted by poems beginning with I
seek out those whom I love who are deaf
to whatever does not destroy
or curse the old ways that did not serve us
while history falters and our poets are dying
choked into silence by icy distinction
their death rattles blind curses
and I hear even my own voice becoming
a pale strident whisper
At night sleep locks me into an echoless coffin
sometimes at noon I dream
there is nothing to fear
now standing up in the light of my father sun
without shadow
I speak without concern for the accusations
that I am too much or too little woman
that I am too black or too white
or too much myself
and through my lips come the voices
of the ghosts of our ancestors
living and moving among us
Hear my heart’s voice as it darkens
pulling old rhythms out of the earth
that will receive this piece of me

and a piece of each one of you
when our part in history quickens again
and is over:

Hear

the old ways are going away
and coming back pretending change
masked as denunciation and lament
masked as a choice
between eager mirrors that blur and distort
us in easy definitions
until our image
shatters along its fault
while the other half of that choice
speaks to our hidden fears with a promise
that our eyes need not seek any truer shape –
a face at high noon particular and unadorned –
for we have learned to fear
the light from clear water might destroy us
with reflected emptiness or a face without tongue
with no love or with terrible penalties
for any difference
and even as I speak remembered pain is moving
shadows over my face, my own voice fades and
my brothers and sisters are leaving;

Yet when I was a child
whatever my mother thought would mean survival
made her try to beat me whiter every day
and even now the colour of her bleached ambition
still forks throughout my words
but I survived
and didn't I survive confirmed

to teach my children where her errors lay
etched across their faces between the kisses
that she pinned me with asleep
and my mother beating me
as white as snow melts in the sunlight
loving me into her bloods black bone –

the home of all her secret hopes and fears
and my dead father whose great hands
weakened in my judgement
whose image broke inside of me
beneath the weight of failure
helps me to know who I am not
weak or mistaken
my father loved me alive
to grow and hate him
and now his grave voice joins hers
within my words rising and falling
are my sisters and brothers listening?

The children remain
like blades of grass over the earth and
all the children are singing
louder than mourning
all their different voices sound like a raucous question
but they do not fear the blank and empty mirrors
they have seen their faces defined in a hydrants puddle
before the rainbow of oil obscured them.
The time of lamentation and curses is passing.

My mother survives now
through more than chance or token.
Although she will read what I write with embarrassment

or anger
and a small understanding
my children do not need to relive my past
in strength nor in confusion
nor care that their holy fires
may destroy
more than my failures

Somewhere in the landscape past noon
I shall leave a dark print
of the me that I am
and who I am not
etched in a shadow of angry and remembered loving
and their ghosts will move
whispering through them
with me none the wiser
for they will have buried me
either in shame
or in peace.

And the grasses will still be
Singing.

(Lorde 2000, 96 – 98).

“125th Street and Abomey” – *The Black Unicorn* (1978)

Head bent, walking through snow
I see you Seboulista
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.

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.

(Lorde 2000, 241).

7.2 Poems discussed in chapter three

“Vigil” – *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986)

Seven holes in my heart where flames live
in the shape of a tree
upside down
bodies hang in the branches
Bernadine selling coconut candy
on the war-rutted road to St. Georges
my son’s bullet proof vest
dark children
dripping off the globe
like burned cheese.

Pale early girls spread themselves
handkerchiefs in the grass
near willow
a synchronize throb of air
swan’s wings are beating
strong enough to break a man’s leg
all the signs say
do not touch.

Large solid women
walk the parapets beside me
mythic hunted
knowing
what we cannot remember
hungry hungry
windfall
songs at midnight

prepare me for morning.
(Lorde 2000, 374).

“Za Ki Tan Ke Parlay Lot*” – *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (1982)

Oh za ki tan ke parlay lot
you who hear tell the others
there is no metaphor for blood
flowing from children
these are your deaths
or your judgments
za ki tan ke parlay lot
you who hear tell the others
this is not some other cities' trial
your locks are no protection
hate chips at your front doors like flint
flames creep beneath them
my children are resting in question
and your tomorrows flicker
a face without eyes
without future
za ki tan ke parlay lot
whose visions lie dead in the alleys
dreams bagged like old leaves
anger shorn of promise
you are drowning in my children's blood
without metaphor
oh you who hear tell the others
za ki tan ke parlay lot.

*Called in the streets of Carriacou, West Indies, before a funeral or burial.

(Lorde 2000, 338).

“Afterimages” – *Chosen Poems: Old and New* (1982)

I

However the image enters
its force remains within
my eyes
rockstrewn caves where dragonfish evolve
wild for life, relentless and acquisitive
learning to survive
where there is no food
my eyes are always hungry
and remembering
however the image enters
its force remains.

A white woman stands bereft and empty
a black boy hacked into a murderous lesson
recalled in me forever
like a lurch of earth on the edge of sleep
etched into my visions
food for dragonfish that learn
to live upon whatever they must eat
fused images beneath my pain.

II

The Pearl River floods through the streets of Jackson
A Mississippi summer televised.
Trapped houses kneel like sinners in the rain
a white woman climbs from her roof to a passing boat
her fingers tarry for a moment on the chimney
now awash
tearless and no longer young, she holds
a tattered baby’s blanket in her arms.
In a flickering afterimage of the nightmare rain

a microphone

thrust up against her flat bewildered words

“we jest come from the bank yestiddy

borrowing money to pay the income tax

now everything’s gone. I never knew

it could be so hard.”

Despair weighs down her voice like Pearl River mud

caked around the edges

her pale eyes scanning the camera for help or explanation

unanswered

she shifts her search across the watered street, dry-eyed

“hard, but not this hard.”

Two tow-headed children hurl themselves against her

hanging upon her coat like mirrors

until a man with ham-like hands pulls her aside

snarling “She ain’t got nothing more to say!”

and that lie hangs in his mouth

like a shred of rotting meat.

III

I inherited Jackson, Mississippi.

For my majority it gave me Emmett Till

his 15 years puffed out like bruises

on plump boy-cheeks

his only Mississippi summer

whistling a 21 gun salute to Dixie

as a white girl passed him in the street

and he was baptized my son forever

in the midnight waters of the Pearl.

His broken body is the afterimage of my 21st year

when I walked through a northern summer

my eyes averted

from each corner's photographs
newspapers protest posters magazines
Police Story, Confidential, True
the avid insistence of detail
pretending insight or information
the length of gash across the dead boy's loins
his grieving mother's lamentation
the severed lips, how many burns
his gouged out eyes
sewed shut upon the screaming covers
louder than life
all over
the veiled warning, the secret relish
of a black child's mutilated body
fingered by street-corner eyes
bruise upon livid bruise
and wherever I looked that summer
I learned to be at home with children's blood
with savored violence
with pictures of black broken flesh
used, crumpled, and discarded
lying amid the sidewalk refuse
like a raped woman's face.

A black boy from Chicago
whistled on the streets of Jackson, Mississippi
testing what he'd been taught was a manly thing to do
his teachers
ripped his eyes out his sex his tongue
and flung him to the Pearl weighted with stone
in the name of white womanhood
they took their aroused honor
back to Jackson

and celebrated in a whorehouse
the double ritual of white manhood
confirmed.

IV

“If earth and air and water do not judge them who are
we to refuse a crust of bread?”

Emmett Till rides the crest of the Pearl, whistling
24 years his ghost lay like the shade of a raped woman
and a white girl has grown older in costly honor
(what did she pay to never know its price?)
now the Pearl River speaks its muddy judgment
and I can withhold my pity and my bread.

“Hard, but not this hard.”

Her face is flat with resignation and despair
with ancient and familiar sorrows
a woman surveying her crumpled future
as the white girl besmirched by Emmett’s whistle
never allowed her own tongue
without power or conclusion
unvoiced
she stands adrift in the ruins of her honor
and a man with an executioner’s face
pulls her away.

Within my eyes
the flickering afterimages of a nightmare rain
a woman wrings her hands
beneath the weight of agonies remembered
I wade through summer ghosts
betrayed by vision

hers and my own
becoming dragonfish to survive
the horrors we are living
with tortured lungs
adapting to breathe blood.

A woman measures her life's damage
my eyes are caves, chunks of etched rock
tied to the ghost of a black boy
whistling
crying and frightened
her tow-headed children cluster
like little mirrors of despair
their father's hands upon them
and soundlessly
a woman begins to weep.

(Lorde 2000, 339 – 342).

“Power” – *The Black Unicorn* (1978)

The difference between poetry and rhetoric
is being
ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.

I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds
and a dead child dragging his shattered black
face off the edge of my sleep
blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders
is the only liquid for miles and my stomach
churns at the imaged taste while

my mouth splits into dry lips
without loyalty or reason
thirsting for the wetness of his blood
as it sinks into the whiteness
of the desert where I am lost
without imagery or magic
trying to make power out of hatred and destruction
trying to heal my dying son with kisses
only the sun will bleach his bones quicker.

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

Today that 37-year-old white man with 13 years of police forcing
has been set free
by 11 white men who said they were satisfied
justice had been done
and one black woman who said
“They convinced me” meaning
they had dragged her 4’10” black woman’s frame
over the hot coals of four centuries of white male approval
until she let go the first real power she ever had
and lined her own womb with cement
to make a graveyard for our children.

I have not been able to touch the destruction within me.
But unless I learn to use

the difference between poetry and rhetoric
my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire
and one day I will take my teenaged plug
and connect it to the nearest socket
raping an 85-year-old white woman
who is somebody's mother
and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed
a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time
"Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are."
(Lorde 2000, 319 – 320).

"Outlines" – *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986)

I

What hue lies in the slit of anger
ample and pure as night
what color the channel
blood comes through?

A Black woman and a white woman
charter our courses close
in a sea of calculated distance
warned away by reefs of hidden anger
histories rallied against us
the friendly face of cheap alliance.

Jonquils through the Mississippi snow
you entered my vision
with the force of hurled rock
defended by distance and a warning smile
fossil tears pitched over the heart's wall

for protection
no other women
grown beyond safety
come back to tell us
whispering
past the turned shoulders
of our closest
we were not the first
Black woman white woman
altering course to fit our own journey.

In this treacherous sea
even the act of turning
is almost fatally difficult
coming around full face
into a driving storm
putting an end to running
before the wind.

On a helix of white
the letting of blood
the face of my love
and rage
coiled in my brown arms
an ache in the bone
we cannot alter history
by ignoring it
nor the contradictions
who we are.

II

A Black woman and a white woman
in the open fact of our loving

with not only our enemies' hands
raised against us
means a gradual sacrifice
of all that is simple
dreams
where you walk the mountain
still as a water-spirit
your arms lined with scalpels
and I hide the strength of my hungers
like a throwing knife in my hair.

Guilt wove through quarrels like barbed wire
fights in the half forgotten schoolyard
gob of spit in a childhood street
yet both our mothers once scrubbed kitchens
in houses where comfortable women
died a separate silence
our mothers' nightmares
trapped into familiar hatred
the convenience of others drilled into their lives
like studding into a wall
they taught us to understand
only the strangeness of men.

To give but not beyond what is wanted
to speak as well as to bear
the weight of hearing
Fragments of the word wrong
clung to my lashes like ice
confusing my vision with a crazed brilliance
your face distorted into grids
of magnified complaint
our first winter

we made a home outside of symbol
learned to drain the expansion tank together
to look beyond the agreed-upon disguises
not to cry each other's tears.

How many Februarys
shall I lime this acid soil
inch by inch
reclaimed through our gathered waste?
from the wild onion shoots of April
to mulch in the August sun
squash blossoms a cement driveway
kale and tomatoes
muscles etch the difference
between I need and forever.

When we first met
I had never been
for a walk in the woods

III

light catches two women on a trail
together embattled by choice
carving an agenda with tempered lightning
and no certainties
we mark tomorrow
examining every cell of the past
for what is useful stoked by furies
we were supposed to absorb by forty
still we grow more precise with each usage
like falling stars or torches
we print code names upon the scars
over each other's resolutions

our weaknesses no longer hateful.

When women make love
beyond the first exploration
we meet each other knowing
in a landscape
the rest of our lives
attempts to understand.

IV

Leaf-dappled the windows lighten
after a battle that leaves our night in tatters
and we two glad to be alive and tender
the outline of your ear pressed on my shoulder
keeps a broken dish from becoming always.

We rise to dogshit dumped on our front porch
the brass windchimes from Sundance stolen
despair offerings of the 8 A.M. News
reminding us we are still at war
and not with each other
“give us 22 minutes and we will give you the world ...”
and still we dare
to say we are committed
sometimes without relish.

Ten blocks down the street
a cross is burning
we are a Black woman and a white woman
with two Black children
you talk with our next-door neighbors
I register for a shotgun
we secure the tender perennials

against an early frost
reconstructing a future we fuel
from our living different precisions

In the next room a canvas chair
whispers beneath your weight
a breath of you between laundered towels
the flinty places that do not give.

V

Your face upon my shoulder
a crescent of freckle over bone
what we share illuminates what we do not
the rest is a burden of history
we challenge
bearing each bitter piece to the light
we hone ourselves upon each other's courage
loving
as we cross the mined bridge fury
turned like a Geiger counter

to the softest place.
One straight light hair on the washbasin's rim
difference
intimate as a borrowed scarf
the children arrogant as mirrors
our pillows' mingled scent
this grain of our particular days
keeps a fine sharp edge
to which I cling like a banner
in a choice of winds
seeking an emotional language
in which to abbreviate time.

I trace the curve of your jaw
with a lover's finger
knowing the hardest battle
is only the first
how to do what we need for our living
with honor and in love
we have chosen each other
and the edge of each other's battles
the war is the same
if we lose
someday women's blood will congeal
upon a dead planet
if we win
there is no telling.

(Lorde 2000, 361 – 366).

7.3 Poems discussed in chapter four

“The Winds of Orisha” – *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973)

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

so bodies venting into silence
can plan the next move?

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

II

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

III

The heart of this country's traditions is its wheat men
dying for money
dying for water for markets for power
over all people's children

they sit in their chains on their dry earth
before nightfall
telling tales as they wait for their time
of completion
hoping the young ones can hear them
earth-shaking fears wreath their blank weary faces
most of them have spent their lives and their wives
in labour
most of them have never seen beaches
but as Oya my sister moves out of the mouths
of their sons and daughters against them
I will swell up from the pages of their daily heralds
leaping out of the almanacs
instead of an answer to their search for rain
 they will read me
the dark cloud
meaning something entire
and different.

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

(Lorde 2000, 90 – 91).

“On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge” – *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986)

Leaving leaving
the bridged water
beneath
the red sands of South Beach
silhouette houses sliding off the horizon

oh love, if I become anger
feel me
holding you in my heart circling
the concrete particular
arcs of this journey
landscape of trials
not to be lost in choice nor decision
in the nape of the bay
our house slips under these wings
shuttle between nightmare and the possible.

The broad water drew us, and the space
growing enough green to feed ourselves over two seasons
now sulfur fuels burn in New Jersey
and when I wash my hands at the garden hose
the earth runs off bright yellow
the bridge disappears
only a lowering sky
in transit.

So do we blow the longest suspension bridge in the world
up from the middle
or will it be bombs at the Hylan Toll Plaza
mortars over Grymes Hill
flak shrieking through the streets of Rosebank
the home of the Staten Island ku klux klan
while sky-roaches napalm the Park Hill Projects
we live on the edge
of manufacturing
tomorrow or the unthinkable
made common as plantain-weed
by our act of not thinking
of taking

only what is given.

Wintry Poland survives
the bastardized prose of the *New York Times*
while Soweto is a quaint heat treatment
in some exotic but safely capitalized city
where the Hero Children's bones moulder unmarked
and the blood of my sister in exile Winnie Mandela
slows and her steps slow
in a banned and waterless living
her youngest daughter is becoming a poet.

I am writing these words as a route map
an artifact for survival
a chronicle of buried treasure
a mourning
for this place we are about to be leaving
a rudder for my children your children
our lovers our hopes braided
from the dull wharves of Tompkinsville
to Zimbabwe Chad Azania
oh Willie sweet little brother with the snap in your eyes
what walls are you covering now
with your visions of revolution
the precise needs of our mother earth
the cost of false bread
and have you learned to nourish your sisters at last
as well as to treasure them?

Past darkened windows of a Bay Street Women's Shelter
like ghosts through the streets of Marazan
the northeastern altars of El Salvador
move the belly-wise blonded children of starvation

the once-black now wasted old people
who built Pretoria
Philadelphia Atlanta San Francisco
and even ancient London – yes, I tell you
Italians owned Britain
and Hannibal blackened the earth from the Alps to the Adriatic
Roman blood sickles like the blood of an African people
so where is true history written
except in the poems?

I am inside the shadow dipped upon your horizon
scanning a borrowed *Newsweek* where american soldiers
train seven-year-old Chilean boys
to do their killing for them.

Picture small-boned dark women
gun-belts taut over dyed cloth
between the baby and a rifle
how many of these women
activated plastique near the oil refineries
outside Capetown
burned their houses behind them
left
the fine-painted ochre walls
the carved water gourds still drying
and the new yams not yet harvested
which one of these women
was driven out of Crossroads
perched on the corrugated walls of her uprooted life
strapped to a lorry
the cooking pot banging her ankles
which one
saw her two-year-old daughter's face

squashed like a melon
in the pre-dawn police raids upon Noxolo
which one writes poems
lies with other women
in the blood's affirmation?

History is not kind to us
we restitch it with living
past memory forward
into desire
into the panic articulation
of want without having
or even the promise of getting.

And I dream of our coming together
encircled driven
not only by love
but by lust for a working tomorrow
the flights of this journey
mapless uncertain
and necessary as water.

(Lorde 2000, 403 – 406).