INHERITING THE POETRY OF SURVIVAL

Survival Is a Promise: The Eternal Life of Audre Lorde by Alexis Pauline Gumbs
reviewed by Caleb Ward

As Audre Lorde is increasingly celebrated as Black, as lesbian, as feminist, as socialist, as mother, as survivor, as fighter and activist, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that she names *poet* as her essential modus, her way of feeling, perceiving and moving through the world. Being a poet is what determines the "quality of light" by which she examines her life and the world around her, how she scrutinises her at-times chaotic feelings to figure out what information they might hold and what actions they demand. Poetry is also her method of connecting and communicating: her poetic practice is to take up her feelings and charge them into poetic images that can be shared with others, passed around and discussed, and, crucially, can elicit new feelings and felt perceptions in another person touched by the poem. Ultimately, that person must figure out what those feelings can mean and do in their own life.

Readers of Lorde will recognise these ideas from her famous 1977 essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury", and she elaborated on them throughout her life in comments to audiences at poetry readings and to her students in seminars. Teaching in Berlin in 1984, she tells students to recognise that a poem begins in a poet's feeling and therefore has a crucial connection to the poet's life. But she also cautions them not to make the mistake of thinking that a poetic image is particular only to the poet who produced it. A poetic image is something formed with care but ultimately released into the wild—like a child. She says, "A poem is a thing. It goes out. It's got work to do."

With *Survival Is a Promise: The Eternal Life of Audre Lorde*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs moves in both directions at once: upstream to the source and downstream to the sea, backwards to Lorde's ancestors and forwards to her descendants. Moving across each facet of Lorde's life, she zooms in to the cellular scale and outward to the scale of the universe.

The connection between a single life and the scale of the universe almost exceeds what we can think, and, true to the work of a poet, Gumbs has to invent a new, multilayered form to ask her questions. She scatters Lorde's life across 58 mostly-brief chapters—paralleling the 58 years of Lorde's biological life—and she gives each chapter the title of one of Lorde's poems. Although the events unfold mostly chronologically, Gumbs invites us to follow the chapters in any order

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and make the narrative as non-linear as we desire. She describes the book as both a "quantum biography" and a "cosmic biography": quantum because "life in full emerges in the field of relations in each particle," and cosmic because "the dynamics of the planet and the universe are never separate from the life of any being" (14). I recommend accepting Gumbs's invitation.

As she relates both minute details and overarching movements of Lorde's life, Gumbs anchors many parts of Lorde's narrative in poetic images: Lorde's relationships with Black German women are told through the diasporic movements of grey whales, which travel tens of thousands of miles in their lifetimes. Lorde's connection to the Caribbean diaspora is a question for bees, whose survival depends on the ability to find their way home. Lorde's time in Mexico, finding her voice as a poet, is for Gumbs a matter of lightning carrying nitrogen from the atmosphere to the soil. The stormy relations between Black women, which Lorde explores in her essential essay "Eye to Eye", are traced by Gumbs using images of obsidian and volcanic processes. Gumbs tells Lorde's story through images of hair and lungs, copper telephone wires, and typewriters. Sometimes she moves to the planetary scale: rivers, hurricanes, the sea floor. At her most expansive, Gumbs reaches to the moon, other stars, and the interstellar scale of black holes.

Measured in terms of its insight, *Survival Is a Promise* is invaluable already for the rich, underexamined sources of Lorde's thought identified in its first sections. Gumbs documents how the Lorde that we have come to know grew out of childhood battles and joys, fear of the dark, a complicated legacy from her parents, and the influence of poets like Edna St. Vincent Millay, who shaped Lorde's visions about time, change, and human life and death. Researchers will especially benefit from Gumbs's discussions of how Lorde's actual life differed from the events recounted in *Zami*, Lorde's 1982 "biomythography", which has sometimes been misread as a straightforward memoir of her youth. Reading Lorde's journals, Gumbs traces the origins of social critiques that only reached maturity many decades later. Gumbs invites us to take seriously Lorde's florid juvenile poetry and science-fiction imaginings, which show how "in high school [Lorde] already understood life as a tension between geological time and human mortality" (91). Moving forward to Lorde's late 20s—still well before her arrival on the public stage—Gumbs resurrects and reprints a 1962 artist statement, which is already charged with the commitments that made Lorde's work from 15 years later, now famous and familiar, land with such impact.

But insight isn't the only measure for a book like this. Alexis Gumbs is fundamentally a poet, and her aim is to make readers *feel* the movement of her subject. For this reason, she immerses herself in what I think of as the *poetry of the particular* across Lorde's life, lifting up tiny details from across the archive with amazing sensitivity and deftness. Measured in terms of the feeling it can produce, *Survival Is a Promise* is an enigmatic wonder. The book begins with Gumbs's own human body and its senses: breathing in the scent, remembering with tongue and touch as she holds the physical artifacts of Audre Lorde's life. Looking for evidence of survival through the senses, this is her entry point to marvelling at the fragility of legacy, and the task that an untimely death lays out for future generations.

Gumbs moves intimately among Lorde's life artifacts—books, necklaces, letters, scraps of paper. She browses the shelves of the children's room at Lorde's public library, and she peers into the industrial quartz crystals that passed through Lorde's hands at a factory job. The reader has the feeling of sitting in the bedroom of someone who has moved away, surrounded by treasures of childhood still somehow imbued with magic.

In a harrowing series of chapters, Gumbs traces Lorde's relationship with her childhood friend Genevieve, whose death was for Lorde the first proof that, as Black girls reaching out toward one another in America, "we were never meant to survive". Gumbs unearths a poem where 14-year-old Lorde anticipates her friend's suicide using the image of standing in doorways, coming and going, which 30 years later would become central to the opening stanza of "A Litany for Survival", her most famous poem.

From most writers, this degree of scrutiny would feel like a violation—a trespass into the protective opacity of the archive. (Hortense Spillers, Amber Jamilla Musser, and others have written on how the problem of archival *in*visibility for Black women is accompanied by the problem of *hyper*-visibility: the vulnerability that academic researchers go back and lay bare Black

lives as spectacle or mere grist for the mill of scholarly production.) Yet, Gumbs's engagement with Lorde's life so clearly arises from living relationships with Lorde's family, with Lorde's former partners and friends, and with Lorde's students and younger colleagues who have today become the elders for new iterations of Black feminist survival work. The trust invested in Gumbs shines through especially in her discussion of Lorde's relationships with her children and her students, where Gumbs fleshes out how, she writes, "Audre's definition of community included a sacred contract between generations" (180). Lorde's daughter Elizabeth Lorde-Rollins opens to Gumbs the letters exchanged between herself and her mother, which show two women engaged in the frank and moving assessment of parental love, anger, and inheritance.

With Gumbs's care, we are continually drawn back to how Lorde stands, throughout her life, within a cross-generational mesh of Black women, poets, and queer survivors developing new directions for consciousness and action. Gumbs connects the children's librarian at Lorde's local Harlem library—a pivotal figure in Lorde's early childhood—to a generations-long project in which Lorde herself later participated, of reclaiming New York public libraries for the nurturance and empowerment of Black children. This is one of numerous inflection points in the history of Black feminist movement-building at which Lorde lent necessary impetus. Lorde is at the early Combahee River Collective retreats, and she's there, silent but feeling, at Barbara Smith's first lesbian intervention into the Black cultural nationalism establishment, where Smith famously asked a hostile audience at Howard University, "Is it possible to be a Black lesbian writer and live to tell about it?" A few years later, on a supportive phone call with Smith, Lorde lights the spark for seizing the means of intellectual production with her comment, off-hand but deadly serious: "You know, Barbara, we really need to do something about publishing". The offspring of this relationship, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, became a watershed institution for Black and women-of-colour feminism, beginning with its republication of the now-canonical volume, *This Bridge Called My Back*.

One of Gumbs's crucial contributions to Black feminist historiography is her dive into the wreck of the sisterhood between Lorde and fellow Black poet June Jordan. Gumbs offers for the historical record a detailed discussion of their shared activism and eventual falling out, which pivoted on whether and how Jordan's pro-Palestinian activism should remain sensitive to fragile coalitions between Jewish and Black women. For contemporary historians and activists, this story gives insight into real-time struggles over how to define racism, antisemitism, and complicity, and how to use those concepts to orient coalitional action. The philosophical undercurrents in the disagreement between Jordan and Lorde are also ripe for examination: What responsibilities do we carry for actions done in our names, with our money, or for our ostensible protection? How do we live our lives together given the necessity for struggle on so many fronts? How does the energy needed for political agency and change circulate among friends, colleagues, lovers? What are the politics of friendship, and what does repair entail?

HOW DOES THE ENERGY NEEDED FOR POLITICAL AGENCY AND CHANGE CIRCULATE AMONG FRIENDS, COLLEAGUES, LOVERS?

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One way Audre Lorde's work is deeply philosophical is that she believes revolutionary transformation requires changed concepts and changes to the frameworks we use to understand our lives and the social world. In 1977, in remarks addressing the Combahee River Collective (included in the collection, *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings*), she calls for activism to be supported by "an ongoing vision, and the theory following upon that vision, of why we struggle—of the *shape and taste and philosophy* of what we wish to see". She is a poet first and foremost because of where she believes this change comes from, and because of her fundamental pessimism about the possibilities of ideas alone to make people free. On my reading of "Poetry Is Not a Luxury", Lorde writes that "there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us" because we cannot put all our hopes in the arrival of a theory that will turn the tides against injustice and let us transform

the world. It is not a matter of coming up with the right definition of freedom or democracy or human rights or intersectionality. Instead, we have to give name to those nameless feelings that we already experience, but which do not fit within the horizons of thought available to us. Lorde closes that essay with the statement, "There are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt" in the particulars of our lives. Elsewhere, she calls this process "hyphenating" ideas through our living to see how we can make new structures in this ailing world.

What I'm calling Gumbs's *poetry of the particular* has the power to introduce new figures of living, drawn from Lorde's life and work, that might lead us to that shape and taste and philosophy that Lorde called for. One such live philosophical perspective that emerges through this book is a perspective on *energy*, bundling together ideas of power, agency, and possibility for change. In an interview forthcoming in the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia*, Gumbs told me that she considers Lorde to be a "theorist of energy—a person who was theorising energy in a way that is even more expansive than what we have terminology for now, let alone what she had terminology for then". To examine Lorde in this light is to focus on how she thought about human power and possibility: Where does our energy come from? Where does it need to go? How do we mobilise our power in the face of the enervating forces of fear, silence, pain, or despair? Gumbs emphasises that the language of philosophy—or of any other discipline—is not well suited for capturing Lorde's innovation here. And she's right, in the sense that contemporary philosophical work on agency or motivation often focuses on psychological questions rather than on the question of structures and relationships that might energise people to invent new avenues for surviving an exhausting, oppressive world. In my interview with her, Gumbs pulls the line taut between herself and the core insight in "Poetry Is Not a Luxury": "I'm also a poet, so I have to imagine that there's energy we can move, beyond the terminology we have".

In her attention to the archival record, Gumbs shows how Lorde lived out a theory of energy, but Gumbs doesn't unpack that theory in conceptual detail. She references Lorde's concept of a "fund of energy" that is shared and circulates in a community, but she lets a footnote direct the reader to an interview with Lorde, where this topic is discussed further (391). But through Gumbs's telling, we see Lorde living as a cancer survivor, operating with the knowledge that her energy is finite and it must constantly be applied toward the things that matter for survival on cross-generational scale. Further, multiplication of energy—more than mere transfer or consolidation—is necessary if this cross-generation work is to be successful in transforming the world to serve human and more-than-human life. For Lorde, this multiplication of energy happens through performance, poetry, working together, bringing people face to face and raising feelings among them. (She sees it unlocked as well in the work she describes as erotic.) Gumbs shows Lorde putting this multiplication of energy into action. Addressing a conference audience of nearly a thousand gathered in her honour, Lorde raises her fist and shouts in support of the South African anti-apartheid struggle. Then she says to the audience, "Take this energy… remember, what you're feeling doesn't belong to me. It's you. It's yours. You are making it. You are generating it, and you're going to carry it out of this room. And you can do whatever you want with it" (360). Energy multiplied must go out into the wild, like a child. It's got work to do.

A related philosophical vision running throughout the book is a claim about scale: that there is a connection and continuity between the very small and the very large. The story of a seed, a drop of water, or a fat cell is bound up with the whole Earth and beyond. The insight here is not merely about the unseen effects of butterflies flapping their wings. The point is that these connections can be steered: commitments can be scaled up so that actions reverberate across space and time. Lorde clearly thought this way, as she saw her personal struggle with cancer to be part of a global struggle against racism and environmental destruction. (Gumbs tells us that Lorde's immunotherapy included a meditation practice, in which she "imagined the cancer cells as white South African police officers… [and] imagined her T-cells as a sea of Black faces stomping apartheid into dust" [394].) For Lorde's struggle in particular—but really for any struggle—she identified necessary steps: transforming silence into language, seizing the means of intellectual production to multiply that voice, focusing her dwindling energies on what action was available to her. Then, through particular action, she made the connection real: her cancer became a springboard to galvanise political action through publishing, speaking, and organising.

In the early pages of the book, Gumbs writes that "the

scale of the life of the poet is the scale of the universe" (13). This is to say that something as insubstantial as a poetic image, if it touches on some truth or real feeling, can launch transformations. In an essential interview with poet Adrienne Rich (included in *Sister Outsider*), Lorde describes change not as "a one-generational shot or a single investment" but as "a whole signature which you try to set in motion." She dedicated her work at many stages of her life to setting this signature in motion, and Gumbs shows us how that signature spun off into the world and lives on—like any poem out there, with work to do.

Perhaps Lorde's central concept hyphenated across her living is *survival*. Gumbs is full of insight when she writes that "the whole truth of Audre's philosophy of survival was evident in the possibility and struggle of Afro-German women." She leaves open to her philosophically inclined readers the further task of exploring Lorde's philosophy of survival in conceptual terms. Lorde often reminds her audience that "survival is not an academic skill," but that does not mean survival should be omitted from our theorising. We need to reflect on, talk about, and examine survival with whatever tools are at our disposal. Taking up the invitation to think Lorde's philosophy of survival would require asking further questions: What is the conceptual space between survival and just staying alive, which Lorde describes explicitly to her students in Berlin: "When I speak of survival, I mean living intact, living with focus, not merely existing"? What does it mean to say, as Lorde does again and again, that "to survive and to teach are the same work"? What about the relationship between surviving across her many selves (see her poem "Sequelae") and the survival of a community across time? In a fabulous long-form poem, "On My Way Out I Passed Over You and the Verrazano Bridge", Lorde writes:

I am writing these words as a route map

an artifact for survival

[…]

a rudder for my children your children

our lovers our hopes braided

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Some readers less invested in Lorde's life will no doubt feel that Gumbs provides too much detail or attributes too much magic to the traces of life she relates. Some will likely feel impatient with the form or chafe at not knowing why a given poem title was chosen for a chapter, or why certain individuals appear as strangers without explicit introduction. While this book is a treasure for those of us immersed in Black feminism, in Lorde's work, and in the world of possibilities it created, those looking for her thought and legacy to be unpacked in the terms of feminist theory or philosophy will have to wait. But *Survival Is a Promise* raises many topics that any future philosophical discussion of Lorde will need to address, and even after 400 pages, it feels like a loss when Gumbs's focus shifts to celebrations, documentary films, and memorials that marked the end of Lorde's life. Isn't there more to say about Lorde and poetry? How would Lorde's theory of pedagogy and education connect to decolonial practices? What exactly did it mean when Lorde said that all struggles are connected, or that "there is no hierarchy of oppression?"

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If it feels like the story enters an extended coda too early, it's because this was true of Lorde's life. And Gumbs's principled commitment to the poetry of the particular keeps her focus on the movement of care and energy within Lorde's personal relationships rather than the more abstract concerns of how Lorde's concepts circulated and were refined. Gumbs closes with a series of sketches of Lorde's relationships with several of the Black queer luminaries of the next generation: Joe Beam, Essex Hemphill, Dionne Brand. The reader can sense Gumbs's love of these great poets as they move into the spotlight, and I'm left with the feeling that many other possible books hide inside this

one. Lorde's relationships with Beam and Hemphill are especially important, since those two became pivotal ancestors for Black queer studies and Black gay male movements, and they provided an early blueprint as men who aligned themselves with Lorde's feminist visions of change.

One of Gumbs's talents as a storyteller is that she knows just where to reemerge in her author's voice and reinhabit her own body, physically standing in the archive, to share stories from the journey of writing this book. This brings the reader back to the fact that Gumbs herself is a crucial agent in Audre Lorde's "eternal life", and Gumbs's presence, along with the work she does, performatively answers many questions of legacy that the book doesn't resolve explicitly. Gumbs's life *multiplies the energy* Lorde brought into the world, and Gumbs's writing *scales up* the impact of the particular minutiae of Lorde's material life, which otherwise would have remained silent and, perhaps, one day forgotten. However, the point about Lorde's survival and legacy is not simply that Lorde made it possible for there to be an Alexis Gumbs standing here, doing her work. Lorde transformed the *here* where Alexis Gumbs and so many others stand. Like the scientists she describes delving into the early history of Earth's atmosphere, Gumbs illuminates the ultimate question of inheritance and survival: "what happened to make this a place where I can breathe?" (370)