

Poetics: Queer Recesses of the Heart and the Spirit of Intimacy within the Africana Household

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¹SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

Audre Lorde is a household name within Black queer communities and has almost exclusively been associated with scholarship on gender and sexuality. Her early political involvement in Africa's liberation in the context of *Négritude*, a pan-African movement of self-affirmation, has largely gone unnoticed, inadvertently giving credence to the unfounded but popular idea that queer folks are not interested in Africa's political priorities. This essay is written with the view that Africa and her Diaspora need preeminent queer actors influencing the present and future trajectories and strategies to be considered in defence of a Black dignified presence in the world and against global racism. It is further submitted that the personal is not just political – it is primarily spiritual. Hence the triad, personal, spiritual, and political has implications for our appraisal of meanings within the Africana household. The exploration of poetry as a spiritual practice of the queered self in this essay blurs the boundaries between religion and politics in order to offer an integral account of gender diversity within the Africana household. We need to collectively learn from the experiences that not just resist racial oppression but also from those that simultaneously free the heart. From this vantage point, Audre Lorde's poetics is read as internal recommendations for building up the Africana dwelling by calling out what remains dormant or imperfectly considered within the realm of spiritual and political imagination: queer recesses of the heart.

KEYWORDS

Négritude; queer presence; Africana household; spirituality

I stumbled upon the two poems by Audre Lorde, quoted below, quite accidentally in the course of conducting research on the *Négritude* movement. Well-known in francophone Africa, the *Négritude* movement started in the 1930s as a literary and political critique, aimed at raising Black consciousness and affirming Black presence in Africa, the Diaspora, and the world. Central to this critical approach to French colonialism was the (re)valorisation of the African cultural heritage and pride. In 1947, key figures of the *Négritude* movement founded *Présence Africaine* (henceforth African Presence), a literary magazine that became very influential in the pan-Africanist anticolonial struggle for decolonisation.

Lending his pen to the anti-colonisation movement, André Gide, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1947, laid out the vision of the magazine in the preface:

It goes without saying that this magazine must remain open and it is intended to do more: to challenge dormant energies that sometimes only need to be called out to awaken...In the meantime, African Presence is embarking on a vast program: to welcome every aspect of black life and every black voice that needs to be heard.¹

André Gide was not an armchair critic. He travelled throughout central Africa to document the economic and human exploitation through concessional colonial contracts in the Congo. It is also a well-known fact that he was quite open about his homosexuality. That he penned the preface to a major publication that shaped generations of thinkers within the Francophone Afro-Diaspora world, is something that needs to be highlighted in the history of queer liberation in Africa. This essay, however, is not about the man, but about a lesbian woman.² In 1966, just a few years after André Gide's preface and after most African colonies gained independence from European colonial powers, Audre Lorde published two poems in African Presence no. 57, *And fall shall sit in judgement*³ and *Pirouette*.⁴ Issue 57 was a monumental celebration of Black poetry in 557 pages. Although pan-African and diasporic, the first issue of African Presence in 1947 only had two female poets (Gwendolyn Brooks and Madeleine Gauthier) out of 34 entries. By 1966, Audre Lorde's poems were being featured alongside works by Annette Mbaye d'Erneville, Abiola Irene, and Ama Ata Aidoo.

There was something beautiful and sad about my inadvertent encounter with Audre Lorde in the pages of African Presence issue 57. Beautiful

¹ André Gide, "Avant-propos," *Présence Africaine* 1 (1947): 6 (my translation).

² A note of caution is in order. Reference to Audre Lorde's sexuality should not be taken as fixation on sexuality as an end in itself. Such a narrow stance is inimical to Lorde's vast political programme aimed at freeing wholeness in individuals and communities. Concomitantly, it is important not to undermine her non-normative sexuality for the sake of political fitness in African Studies.

³ Audre Lorde, "And Fall Shall Sit in Judgment," *Présence Africaine* (Nouvelle Série) 57 (1966): 363.

⁴ Audre Lorde, "Pirouette," *Présence Africaine* (Nouvelle Série) 57 (1966): 363-4.

indeed was the realisation that there was a time when African Presence meant that there could be a queer presence in all political and racialised struggles without further ado. However, sad also because, although global racism against Africa and its Diaspora is not abating, queer presence in Africana's influential spaces remains footnoted. Some of the influential poets who co-shared with Audre Lorde an effective presence in the imagination of Afro-diasporic resistance against colonialism and racism in the 1960s, have emerged as defenders of a parsimonious humanity and dignity as a political weapon against Black queer Africana bodies. Today, queer Africana presence is mostly minoritised and "vulnerable," and where the framework of human rights has made inroads, thinking is still skewed toward protection, not yet toward pre-eminence or influence.

Audre Lorde is a household name within Black queer communities and has almost exclusively been associated with scholarship on gender and sexuality. Her early political involvement in Africa's liberation in the context of *Négritude*, a pan-African movement of self-affirmation, has largely gone unnoticed, inadvertently giving credence to the unfounded but popular idea that queer folks are not interested in Africa's political priorities. This essay is written with the view that Africa and its Diaspora need preeminent queer actors influencing the present and future trajectories, and strategies to be considered in defence of a Black dignified presence in the world and against global racism. It is further submitted that the personal is not just political – it is primarily spiritual. Hence the triad, personal, spiritual, and political has implications for our appraisal of meanings within the Africana household. The exploration of poetry as a spiritual practice of the queered self in this essay blurs the boundaries between religion and politics, in order to offer an integral account of gender diversity within the Africana household. The term "household" is mobilised as a metaphor, interchangeably with the term "Africana" to mean Africa and its Diaspora. The image of a house takes us back to an ordinary use of language and signs that convey closure and intimacy within the larger network of people, cultures, and communities that claim descentance from Africa. The primary interest here is on Black heritage in the world.

As Mitsamai Molefe recognises, the concept of a person in African philosophy is ambiguous and encompasses metaphysical as well as

normative positions. However, zooming in on metaphysical conceptualisations pertaining to personal identity, Molefe is helpful when asserting that “the idea of personhood embodies a moral-political theory that takes duties to achieve the common good to be primary...The idea of personhood imagines a good society on its own terms rather than by invoking the idea and discourse of rights.”⁵ From this perspective, it follows that to say “the personal is spiritual,” is to bypass (albeit provisionally) normative forms of obligations and duties based on a contractual model with an abstract state that in theory is sovereign (that is to say, is unbounded by the experiences of the people who constitute it).

My use of the term “queer/ness” is consistent with earlier articulations, as the “‘rawness’ of Africa’s humanity and materiality; a point of departure from non-binary theorising from the South.”⁶ The term “spirituality” here refers to “the deepest values and meanings which people seek to live. In other words, ‘spirituality’ implies some kind of vision of the human spirit and of what will assist it to achieve full potential.”⁷ As a cauldron of augmented relationality, spirituality here is further understood as that which comments on the original, understood as duty-laden “person/al,” whose full potential is brought about, not by invocation, but by permutation of experiences with others: the giver is simultaneously the taker and the one who waits for yet another “Other.” Similarly, s/he who queries at some point is the same who answers at another point and the same who waits in silence at yet another turn. Thus, judgement (discernment), inclinations (give and take), and silence (meditations) all correspond to spiritual exercises. In this sense, spirituality is considered a living praxis, poetically articulated by people whose “spoken words [are] intended to become spoken again...Rather than aiming at the acquisition of a purely abstract knowledge, *these exercises [are] aimed at realizing a transformation of one’s vision of the world and the metamorphosis of*

⁵ Mitsamai Molefe, *An African Philosophy of Personhood, Morality, and Politics* (Cham: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2019), 6.

⁶ S.N. Nyeck, “Heretical Falsification and the Challenge of Theorizing LGBT Politics from the South,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics*, eds. Michael Bosia, Sandra M. McVoy, and Momim Rahman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 265; S.N. Nyeck, “Queer Fragility and Christian Social Ethics: A Political Interpolation of the Catholic Church in Cameroon,” in *Christian Controversies over Homosexuality in Contemporary Africa*, eds. Ezra Chitando and Adriaan van Klinken (New York: Routledge, 2016), 100-24.

⁷ Philip F. Sheldrake, *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology, and Social Practice* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), 4.

one's personality."⁸ It is worth noticing the double trajectory that spirituality, understood as exercises in socio-political metamorphoses, takes: the personal is spiritual, not because it unilaterally exerts power over its exterior, but precisely because it opens itself up to receiving power acted upon one's deepest being. Thus, "spiritual exercises involve all aspects of one's existence,"⁹ but for the sake of this contribution, attention is focused on queer poetics and the spirit of intimacy that it conjures up to emancipate Africana's holistic presence in the world. Given the transformative mandate of the "spiritual" to attend to the spirits of people, and provided that such reflexive metamorphosis is not a formal prerequisite in traditional political forms of activism, the political is given only secondary importance within the triune that unfolds Africana's presence in the world of queer poetics. This is not to say that politics does not matter. It is rather to further reflect on the importance of attending to spirit in conceptualising and enacting common good as "duty-ful" with the proviso that I am only referencing "duty" as reflexive metamorphosis of Africana's presence and people. The notion of "duty" here therefore eschews unidirectional injunctions of religious or intellectual proportions.

The social and collective experiences of queer folks enrich rather than diminish the spiritual and political exercises of Africana presence in the world. In her contribution to critical Africana presence, Audre Lorde poetically and prophetically provides us with the seeds for imagining new solidarities between Africa and its queer and diasporic outcasts, especially in this specific time of a global pandemic, and racialised violence against Black bodies everywhere. Audre Lorde speaks to us today about discernment in a context of global denigration of African bodies and emotions by the powers that be. In *And fall shall sit in judgement* and *Pirouette*, she is charting a path toward the judgement of the spirits, time, and perception, the discernment of the seasonal, and the perennial with their comparative emotional baggage. Winter is harsh, it sits in judgement but in fairness, for we judge not our shortcomings but our love, the love and multiform ways of being, that traverse the Africana world. For it is often in times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, that life's cold bites force us into corners which were previously unexplored.

⁸ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Malden: Blackwell, 1995), 19 (emphasis added).

⁹ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 23.

It is one thing to self-examine, based on the idea of judgement as a political game in which the apparent external quietude or solidarities only mask an unaddressed internal turmoil within the Africana household. To sit in judgement, this way is indeed to give love a false meaning, albeit new and utilitarian. After the winters of the 1950s, when the poems under consideration were written, the spring indeed came very fast and solidarities between Africa and its Diaspora weakened with the consolidation of the nation-state in Africa after the independences of the '60s onward. Love in all seasons is false, Audre Lorde writes. However, could it be that what makes love false is its overdetermination by the seasons? Yet, there is necessarily no need for a new imagination "out of cycle." What is needed is the transformation of every cycle so that the divisive impulses of alienation within the Africana household are named, rebuked where they should be, and healed where they must be. Such a vision of the Africana household as the matrix of spiritual presence renders imperative queer prophetic and duty-bound voices from within. Audre Lorde's poetry provides us with the understanding and patience which are needed for the cultivation of higher inclusive selves as building materials for an effective Africana presence in the world.

It is quite another thing to self-examine as a learning exercise, a search for a firmer foundation for the Africana household: love that frees the truth about all aspects of Black life and that includes its queer multivariate experiences. So often colonialism, slavery, White supremacy, and neoliberalism have brought us together for political resistance, but such mobilisations need not solely depend on the external attacks on Africana's effective presence in the world. That is to say, we need to collectively learn from the experiences that not just resist racial oppression, but also from those that simultaneously free the heart. From this vantage point, Audre Lorde's two poems highlighted above, can be read as internal recommendations for building up the Africana dwelling by calling out what remains dormant or imperfectly considered within the realm of spiritual and political imagination: queer recesses of the heart.

Thus, to the extent that spiritual language becomes a necessary metaphor for queer communication, it is only a "vehicle of collective experience and it is meaningful only when it speaks of experience and addresses itself to experience."¹⁰ Consequently, it is not religious or

¹⁰ Dorothee Sölle, *The Inward Road and the Way Back* (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1975), 31.

theological propositions that Audre Lorde advances, but the neglect of enfleshing freedom as a need to be whole and bear meaning within the Africana household. A more lasting basis for solidarity within the Africana household will consider emancipatory values that reveal truth in the wholeness of being, and people “whose presence reorients notions of personhood and praxis...personhood...understood to flow from formative living in community rather than individualism, from the embrace of difference and interdependence rather than their exclusion.”¹¹ Thus, delineating where and how the “ideological and institutional architectures of current queer activism and scholarship in Africa fall in the spectrum of capitulation-resistance to a neoliberal order”¹² and its religious fundamentalisms, remain crucial to the discernment of the spirits of our time and for an inclusive decolonial project.

Considering the vast scope of decolonisation in the 1950s, Audre Lorde prophetically and poetically warned against models of liberation that are not soul dance. They promise the rain but mute all lovers. They rally around “my people,” “Blackness,” and “African values” just to ask their shadows: “Where are you from? Why are you weeping?” We certainly cannot return to, nor should we condone, Africana solidarities that do not effectively rescue our ability to love and love transformatively from the cyclical perversions of global racism and internalised homophobia. In the twenty-first century, Audre Lorde is calling us to search for a solid foundation for communion and reunion between Africana people, i.e. queer affects and soul imagination. bell hooks helps us to understand the critical role that our collective interiority plays beyond identity claims in opening us up to a greater, more inclusive and freeing life experience when she writes:

[I]ntimacy lays the groundwork for two individuals to become soul mates – partners who are willing to do the work of love. When we do this work well, true *love becomes* a reality. It transforms life...Out of love for another person, *we become* more willing to let

¹¹ Shawn M. Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 89.

¹² S.N. Nyeck, “Africa and Neoliberalism,” in *Global Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, eds. Howard Chiang, Anjali Arondekar, Marc Epprecht, Jennifer Evans, Ross Forman, Hanadi al-Samman, Emily Skidmore, and Zeb Tortorici (New York: Cengage Learning, 2018), 1134.

our identities wither and fall away and enter a dark night of the soul, so that we may stand naked once more in the presence of the great mystery that lies at the core of our being. Courage comes to us through experience.¹³

This love is not sentimentalism: it is courage enfleshed; it is (un)conscious,¹⁴ critical, and spiritual.

It is yet one thing to work and another to work well. Not every winter births love, not every spring's wild greening is true in meaning (or lasting over time), and some rainbows are covenants of pain and tears, Audre Lorde warns. But, when we work well, true love *becomes*, and we *become* willing partners who are freed from the curse of cyclical determinations, and all identities wither away as we begin to realise that we are sufficient for each other in our nakedness – we reach the Omega point at the core of our being. To enter the dark night of the soul, one must be contented with the significance and sufficiency of one's presence for its own sake. Queering African Presence and Africanising Queer Presence today beyond the cycles of contention, bring us to the gates of interiority to explore liberating freedom and communion with resilient selves at the heart of an Africana humanism. The good news is that no one needs to go anywhere else but where one already is (in the heart) to work well with queer recesses in Africana imagination.

Pirouette alerts us to the whirling and spinning within the Africana household as a result of unaddressed domestic and spiritualised violence.

Your hands on my lips like blind needles/Blunted/From sewing up stone

For the same hands that defiantly raised their fists against the colonisers, the hands that have thrown rocks at imperial policing and profiling of Black bodies, have also been so traumatised by their own pain, that they have forgotten to lay the arms down when entering their own dwelling places. Consequently, many revolutionary fists have become

¹³ bell hooks, *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 242-3 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

“blind needles” sewing up the lips of queer presence in Africana imagination. Still, domestic violence is not just a moral failure, it is a spiritual crisis of imagination. If indeed, as it has been proposed here, spirituality is supposed to bring dutiful people to the realisation of common good, some blunted fists would rather ensure that the highest elevation of queer presence within the Africana household stays beneath someone else’s feet. Less trampled down, Africana Presence as Queer Presence is still believed to lead to uncertain paths that only a few are willing and ready to explore.

*Your hands reading over my lips for/Some road through uncertain
night/For your feet to examine home*

Perhaps more telling is the puzzlement of those who inflict spiritual and physical violence on queer bodies and spirit within the Africana household. They repeatedly ask, “Where are you from?” Angry fists have forgotten their own truth that the personhood flows from formative community living in both its seen and unseen dimensions. Hence, intriguing as the genealogy question is, rarely does it lead to queries about the qualitative meaning of queer presence in the moment. Instead, a spiritualised violence denies the Africana personhood’s wholeness by dissecting its being into body parts that are then turned into weapons of queer destruction. However, Audre Lorde is not satisfied with a descriptive account of a state of being. The answers which are not provided further, show how the poetics of queerness operate as a spiritual practice.¹⁵ Thus, to the question, “Where are you from?” Audre Lorde answers with silence. We do not know where the victims of domestic violence are from, except that they belong to the Africana household. Here the poet pre-empts the temptation to provide answers through an “elements of speech” (activity) in order to elevate the exercise of silence as an “element of quiet” (contemplation). Rembert Herbert’s analysis of Gregorian chant posits that

elements of quiet are found both within the music itself and in the pauses the music requires regularly...For singers who have been trained to be sensitive to this process, there is no mistaking these two different directions. The contemplative direction is clearly one

¹⁵ Robert McDowell, *Poetry as Spiritual Practice: Reading, Writing, and Using Poetry in your Daily Rituals, Aspirations, and Intentions* (New York: Free Press, 2008).

of gathering in toward oneself...The active direction, the recitation of the text with enough lightness and freedom to be responsive to its meaning, is clearly outward.¹⁶

Silence in this case, offers an empty space that allows movement further inward, the only movement that meets the prompt to justify one's existence on the basis of historical invocation. Silence allows a descent into the depths of queer being, or what this essay identifies as the "heart," to calibrate the responses to the intransigent summons of domestic violence. In the deep heart, the unsayable is said, and silence does not become an absence of speech, but the presence and saying of the unsayable. Silence as contemplation is very much embedded in the poetics of queer articulations of being and becoming human, a person. Indeed, it is the nature of poetry to guide us through the rainbows that adorn Africana's bodies and interiority. "The body," poet Donald Hall asserts, "is poetry's door; the sounds of words – throbbing in legs and arms, rich in the mouth – lets us into the house."¹⁷ Letting us into the house of what Unoma Azuah has also poetically casted as "marked bodies,"¹⁸ marked by crosses, Audre Lorde enters the Africana household anew to gaze at what Alexis Teyie calls the prophets and messengers in one's breast.¹⁹ Still, saying the unsayable and speaking the unspeakable need not be restricted to a discourse of pain. It is a practice of resilience that retrieves the diversity of contemplative practices and the possibilities which they evoke for present and future Africana households.

Barbara Holmes does well by reminding us that those who have been traumatised by a cyclical oppression, may be apprehensive of the idea of contemplation. She has nevertheless found that African indigenous spirituality remains the invisible institution that has effectively empowered the Africana household to survive its most tragic crises. The question thus is whether or not this generation will appreciate the historical

¹⁶ Rembert Herbert, "Singer, Text, and Song," in *The Inner Journey: Views from the Christian Tradition*, ed. Lorraine Kisly (Sandpoint: Morning Light Press, 2006), 225.

¹⁷ Donald Hall, *The Unsayable Said* (Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 1993), 2.

¹⁸ Unoma Azuah, "Marked Bodies," in *Routledge Handbook of Queer African Studies*, ed. S.N. Nyeck (New York: Routledge, 2019), 104.

¹⁹ Alexis Teyie, "Plum Leaves," in *Routledge Handbook of Queer African Studies*, ed. S.N. Nyeck (New York: Routledge, 2019), 13.

legacy, diversity, and complexity of an African indigenous spirituality which, as Holmes underscores, does

not divide the world into rigid categories; instead, religion is deemed to be holistic and grounded in everyday life. [Furthermore,] African indigenous religions tend to make few distinctions between sacred and secular, life and death, cathartic and contemplative. Instead, visitations from the spirit world are hosted, feted, or exorcized as the moment requires.²⁰

It therefore follows that, to dismiss affirmative indigenous spiritual loci of gender in conversations about queer presence within the Africana household, can only sustain domestic traumas and spiritualised violence.

*...your hands/On my lips like thunder promising rain/A land where all
lovers are mute/Your hands on my doorway like rainbows*

The deniers of queer presence within the Africana household have no specific name and neither do they identify their victims by name. The deniers are “hands” and “feet” pitted against queer lips. Body parts that alienate body parts. They are simulacra of rainbows with no covenantal promise on their horizons. They are countless drops of rain (tears), weaponised into crossbows for domestic use; they are the thunders (rage) that terrorise queer doorways; they are phobia-overladen visitations in our deep psyche that need to be exorcised. The deniers manifest as diffused melancholy that haunts the Africana household because wholeness has been rejected for the sake of parsimonious reasoning.

Why are you weeping? / I cannot return

In meditative silence then, Audre Lorde invites us in general, and the queer subjects in particular, to rediscover the legacy of the hallowed ancient spirit of intimacy within the Africana household. Silence leads to the deepening of the personal that becomes spiritual and political by birthing new communities and intimacies. As documented elsewhere in the study of African oral epics, “the obstructor of conscience, the voice that gives potency to the poetics of sexuality [is often ambiguous and]

²⁰ Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, Second edition (New York: Fortress Press, 2017), xxv.

conventional with unconventional queries punctuated by gaps of silence.”²¹ Hence, the poet does not chart a systematised way of exorcising the deep and everyday mis-encounters within the Africana household.

It is, as Sobonfu Somé would put it, the work of spirit. “What is important,” Somé insists, “is to look at our understanding of intimacy primarily as a practice ordered by the spirit, or authorized by spirit, and executed by someone who recognizes that [s/he] cannot, by herself [/himself], make happen what [s/he] has been invited toward.”²² What is this practice ordered by the spirit? It is the practice of transformational duty leading to the metamorphoses of the self and the community. In terms of gender, Somé uses the example of her people, the Dagara of Burkina Faso, to further expatiate: “Intimacy, the natural attraction of two human beings to each other, is something that the elders say is actually prompted by spirit, and spirit brings people together in order to give them the opportunity to grow together.”²³ This growth is letting the spirit blow where it may. Thus, among the Dagara, women and men learn about how to nurture their masculine and feminine energies through both conventional and nonconformist gender ritualised performances. Men and women learn through initiation the discernment of spirits and the need for balance. During the initiation ritual,

all women dress like men throughout the duration of the ritual. Some women wear beards and mustaches. Usually the *purè*, the “female father,” is there and she ensures that the masculine energy is being built. If you did not know her beforehand, you would think that she was a man...One by one, the women go to her. First there is a foot-to-foot connection, then a head-to-head connection. This helps seal the experience.²⁴

Worth noticing is the complete reversal of a dominant relationship in a sacred Africana space. Connection and understanding do not happen

²¹ S.N. Nyeck, “African Religions, the Parapolitics of Discretion and Sexual Ambiguity in African Oral Epics,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 155 (July 2016, Special Issue): 88-103.

²² Sobonfu Somé, *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships* (New York: Harper Collings, 1999), xiii.

²³ Somé, *The Spirit of Intimacy*, 33.

²⁴ Somé, *The Spirit of Intimacy*, 39.

because women or men flip gender; they happen because of encounters with same-sex personhood as endowed with the virtue of mutuality, reciprocity, and equality. The foot meets the foot that meets the head and heart in a dance of sacred beings, thus rendering any attempt to footnote or dismember categories heretical. Reason and intuition are fully integrated. Nobody is intergenerationally cursed or commanded to trample on someone else's head as spiritual imagination of gender conflict resolution or integration.²⁵ Among the Dagara, queerness in its metaphorical and spiritual enactments is a counter practice of domination and domestic violence. Nobody's neck needs to be threatened by somebody's foot when everybody is held in spirit, in the heart and in the ways the spirit moves about. More importantly, gender metamorphoses within sacred spaces spill over society and everyday life without disturbance. Thus, "[w]hen we go back home," Somé continues, "there is a small welcoming ritual. We are all received into our homes in such a way that *we don't* start to build upon our renewed masculine energy and become *completely* masculine, nor do we go back to being completely in the feminine."²⁶ It is a sign of humility to recognise the relational spirit seeded in the personal and communal and in freeing an Africana personhood from oscillations between poles of gender and identity spectrum. We go out, but always come back home to our spiritual dwelling. Metamorphoses in the interiority prepare and invite us to envision a social future possible, and possibilities of a holistic future. Accordingly, the completeness of gender is a fallacy that indigenous sacred Africana spaces refute. The female and male (and trans as it were) are not exhaustive and definitive gender categories, but overtures in ways of relating to one another, keeping in mind (heart and foot) the most sacred duty, which is a mutual affirmation and embodiment of spirited intimacy within the Africana household. So, grounded in relational possibilities, the intellect, the heart, and the movements that they inspire, partake in the same entanglement of non-binary, non-dualistic wholeness of intimacy. Audre Lorde's poetics indeed turns the spiritual fundamentally into the social and political, provided courage is secured

²⁵ "So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, 'Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel'" (Gen 3:14-15). This version of gender relations is indeed antithetical to the Dagara's spiritual understanding and social practices.

²⁶ Somé, *The Spirit of Intimacy*, 38.

to empty from the Africana household self-sabotage and excesses of bile.

Why are you weeping? / I cannot return

“Why are you weeping?” they ask, having forgotten or/and muted intimacy as a socially enflashed contemplative outreach. One might as well ask how is it that bodily trauma and pain within the Africana household elicit more voyeuristic impulses than self-examination? Unlike the silence that follows the question about the genealogy of the body in pain, the poet provides an answer to the meaning of not so much the tears *per se*, but of the immovability of presence: “I cannot return.” That the poet as a Caribbean lesbian ends the painful exchange between the domestically wounded body and the perpetrator with a statement of no return is revealing about the losses within the Africana household that cannot easily be recovered with time. Slavery has created distance and suspicion within the Africana household and one ought to recognise and honour where the lines are drawn in the process of surviving as Black bodies in a racialised world and as alienated Black bodies from the African continent. Still, it is submitted here that the refusal to return is indicative of a) a critique of an epistemology of longing as the frontier of queer presence in favour of a holistic belonging in the present; b) a refusal to mute as if meaningless, queer objections; and c) a transformative (spiritual) inner and relational work undertaken for the sake of Africana household’s renewal.

To object to a return to categorical meaninglessness implies discerning and transmuting pain into new horizons of significance and eschatological imagination. Freedom, as Amy Hill puts it, “require[s] us to think not only about how we see the world around us but also what we seek to put in front of our eyeballs.”²⁷ Queer immovability rigorously maintains us in contemplation of its sacredness and personhood within the Africana household because “seeing is the beginning of love [and] to bear the

²⁷ Amy L. Hill, *Laughing at the Devil: Seeing the World with Julian of Norwich* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 91.

reality of the other is among the hardest of all spiritual disciplines.”²⁸ Queer immovability is a high call to highest relational grounds.

It is not because the domestically wounded body weeps that it cannot return. There has been established no other place to return to than the present moment. The wounded body simply cannot return to the netherworld because it chooses not to. “Cannot” is not a statement of hopelessness, but rather of resistance to dismissiveness and the fixation of queer presence as a perpetual life on the spot within the Africana household. The “I” that cannot return to insignificance is bound to be present and that presence is anchored not so much in the discourse of rights (they have already been denied through the inflicted wounds) as much as in the practical duty to personhood as spirited wholeness. The “I” that cannot return is indeed nested in the Africana ways of “coming out” and communing; womanist ways that make a seat at the table for the proverbial guest whose visits cannot be planned or periodised.²⁹ The “coming out” of the “I” is not the absence of individualism, but integration of the movements of the spirit: movements that descend into the depths of being, to exorcise the effects of dualistic and vampirised discourses about the Africana’s self; and movements that re-member the household as neither this nor that, but as meaningful wholes.

Audre Lorde’s poetics does not “transcend” the body, but rather celebrate its effective presence (albeit a wounded presence) as a sign of that which is the most loving and hospitable. Discernment is negotiation with the spirit and the person, and this effusive “I” stubbornly maintains that “we will be human beings; that is what we are promised. But only with each other!”³⁰ One notes the invitatory posturing of the discursive queer “I,” rising from the ashes of pain and announcing a new relational day. The “I” as integral and incarnated queerness is the “wounded healer” whose presence and objections “look like playful expressions of feelings and ideas that need to be communicated and responded to, but

²⁸ James Moran and Myfanwy Moran, “The Battle for the Person in the Heart,” in *The Inner Journey: Views from the Christian Tradition*, ed. Lorraine Kisly (Sandpoint: Morning Light Press, 2006), 107.

²⁹ Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2017.

³⁰ Sölle, *The Inward Road and the Way Back*, 135.

which do not attempt to oblige anyone else.”³¹ To turn queer wounds into healing power for others, is not the concerns of political expediency, but stems from the practice of surrendering not to abstract discourse, but to the depth in spirit; yielding to the demand of the fullness of presence within the Africana household and in the world as a paradox.³²

If we have nowhere else to go but to the Africana household, we must find ways to continuously weed out the heretical falsification³³ of an Africana personhood from its non-dualistic and more holistic truths. However, as theologian Shawn Copeland rightly posits, “to live with and within such a paradox requires not only enormous psychological strength [but also] ‘a powerful religious imagination.’”³⁴ In this essay, confidence in the steering power of poetics has been demonstrated as one way to resist the resurgence of spiritualised violence that recycle old prejudices against Black people everywhere. A religion that does less than remember (gender) fragmentation within the Africana household, betrays the spirit of intimacy, a reliable foundation for political solidarity.

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³¹ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 16.

³² Melanie Judge, “Navigating Paradox: Towards a Conceptual Framework for Activism at the Intersection of Religion and Sexuality,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* (2020): 10 pages.

³³ Nyeck, “Heretical Falsification,” 365-80.

³⁴ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 123.

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