



17th Floor: A pedagogical oracle from/with Audre Lorde

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Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind

ABSTRACT

In 1974, warrior poet mother Audre Lorde published the poem “Blackstudies,” a freeform dream villanelle about her complicated experience as a Black lesbian feminist English professor at the City University of New York during the dynamic period when students rose up in protest. The university granted open admissions, and cultural nationalists who taught at City University worked to create a Black Studies program. In the poem, she describes her vantage point at this particular historical and pedagogical moment from the seventeenth floor within a dreamscape where she navigates the stereotypes, silences, and urgencies that shaped her experience as an educator. *17th Floor* is a poetic oracle that contextualizes the ongoing work of “Blackstudies” (the poem and the practice), and for this reason, it should be activated as a resource for current Black and Brown lesbian educators and everyone who brings complexity and nuance to their teaching settings, their students, each other, and the world more broadly.

KEYWORDS

Audre Lorde; Blackstudies; teaching

Instructions

This is an abstract riff on the poem “Blackstudies” *and* a practical tool for contemporary lesbian educators of color to connect to part of the teaching legacy of Audre Lorde circa 1974. To operate this oracle, think about your own teaching, your own intersections, your own pedagogical situation, your own challenges, and choose a letter of the alphabet. For example, if the major challenge in your teaching right now is the homophobia of your colleagues, choose “h,” or if you are seeking guidance on how to bring more peace into your classroom, choose “p.” Start with that letter and explore at will, reflecting on how the information here about Audre Lorde’s life and the alphabetized excerpts from the poem offer insight to you as you face the struggles and opportunities of teaching as whoever you are. Or, you could just read this through in order, noticing whatever you notice. I also highly recommend reading the full poem “Blackstudies,” which can be found in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*.

A is for Audre

a and against as a am afraid a assault are across are and a an am am afraid am avoid am afraid

a as above and and am afraid ancient

Audre Lorde was the first Black professor in the English Department at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, formerly known as College of Police Science (COPS), part of the CUNY system. Some of her students were police officers in full uniform with loaded guns. She had dreams and nightmares about her teaching at John Jay, especially after a John Jay student, a police officer named Thomas Shea, shot 10-year-old Clifford Glover in the back, and was found not to be guilty of any crime. When she stepped into her classroom at John Jay to teach composition, and eventually the first courses on women's studies and institutionalized racism at that institution, there were layers of fear to face.

(am afraid am afraid am afraid)

The guns.

The pressure of being the first and only Black professor.

The dynamic changes within the college itself.

(After a long student struggle, CUNY adopted an open admissions policy. The classrooms at John Jay became shared space to White ethnic police legacies validating their jobs through training, and students of color who wanted to change the criminal justice system.)

(across)

And some of her fears were personal. How much should she disclose to her students about her personal identity?

(am am am am)

And some of her fears were ancient. How do you prepare young people to face the world?

How is your classroom more and less fraught than the classrooms Audre faced? How can the fact that you are not the first educator to face contradictions and transformations sustain you?

(am afraid am afraid am ancient)

a at and and and and although a and

Some of Audre Lorde's strategies for continuing to show up and be present in the teaching space included more and more honesty about her own politics and identity, which was affirmed and sustained by her first experience teaching as a poet in residence at Tougaloo College. She also collaborated with other faculty members at CUNY, like Blanche Cook, to teach courses like "Women in History" and "Literature in Black and White."

around A.B. a alone a as

*as at ate and all anguish ate at awkward an apologetic assault all and and
am and*

Ultimately, Audre Lorde's impact on her colleagues and students at Lehman College, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, and Hunter College (all within the CUNY system) was transformative and complicated. (*and and am and*) And the fact that she exceeded the categories that made her useful to the institution and found more and more ways to bring her whole self into her relationships with her colleagues and students made more possible.

B is for Black

bearers balance body bottom black blood behind bleached bent brave black by by became

After supporting student protesters throughout the City University system who fought for Black Studies and Puerto Rican Studies (including direct-action building takeovers), Audre Lorde was one of the faculty members involved in a system-wide process of defining and supporting Black Studies in the City University System. In the poem "Blackstudies," Lorde writes about the struggle to transform the burden of external stereotypes about Black people and the intra-community homophobia and sexism she experiences into new intergenerational possibilities of blackness.

before burst by bed blew but black

blank bearer beauty but bear bare bright

before before bones bathtubs but blinding beholders but black

But Blackness is not only racial identity in this poem. Black is also how the constant presence of the unknown haunts us as educators. Black is also mortality and death. For the speaker in the poem, the fact that her students will (hopefully) outlive her is a Black predicament. How can she prepare them for a future she can't see?

beating begging beyond

What is the Blackness of your challenge as an educator? What cannot be known? What must be transformed? In this poem, Black study becomes our attention to the deepest parts of ourselves. The middle of the night parts. The early morning nightmare parts. The unnamable anxiety right before class. The things that have no words. **Can you inhabit the Blackness of your teaching?**

C is for child

*chill carved choosing curse covering children come cold condemned colour covered
colour*

crawl can colours choosing children

In “Blackstudies,” Audre Lorde explores the impact of her childhood on her understanding of blackness. As a child, she was the darkest of the children in her family, which she associated with being dirty. She describes a memory of her mother scrubbing her hands, and scrubbing her skin until it hurts, while she insists that she has already washed her hands. When she tries to address her blackness, the blackness of her students, and the messages she passes on to her children and her students, she has to confront the lingering shame of her childhood associations with blackness as something to wash away.

closed child

What are the experiences that you had as a child, or as a student, that show up as challenges in your teaching? How can those memories guide you? Are you ready to actively choose what you bring forward from your past instead of just reacting to it when it comes up? What memories will the students you work with have to navigate later? Have you closed off the vulnerable and childlike parts of yourself? Have you projected too much of your childhood onto your students? What role do your memories have to play in the intergenerational work of learning to create a different world?

chill children cold

could children chitterlings crowded centuries

chill condemning clogging carve

D is for door

*dancers dolls dreaming door desires door debtless do deep defense distance dis-
card demon dust*

devils despise darkness do do demons deep dark

Audre Lorde was torn between her responsibilities to create a safe space in her classroom and to also prepare her students for a world shaped by intersecting oppressions. She engaged this battle even in her own nightmares about how demons of White supremacy wanted to steal her children, and the blackness of her hands. What must it have been like to teach students of color who were targeted by the very criminal (in)justice system John Jay College of Criminal exists to perpetuate?

destroyed desk

Lorde found that the desk was not enough of a barrier between herself and her students, and neither was the door. The students waited at the door before class and during office hours with questions she was afraid she could not answer.

How do you create safe space in your classroom? **How do you create space for yourself to process the challenges that come up in your process of teaching?** Where is the door?

For Lorde, poetry was an important technology for thinking through the challenges of the institutional spaces she navigated, but she also wrote poems about what it meant for her daughter to come home and find her writing with the door closed. She was unavailable for some of her daughter's adolescent questions. **How do you balance the emotional labor of your work as an educator and your availability in your personal relationships?** Do you wake up early? Do you carve out time at night?

*demon daylight dawn devour do denials dark
down door door*

E is for earth

*earth eating enjoyed earth ending even extracting
every evening each eyes*

High up on the seventeenth floor, Audre Lorde struggled to feel grounded. How could the work she was addressing in this classroom interact with the real world (literally) below? What would her work with students and language offer if the system collapsed? What could English classes offer against nuclear apocalypse? Even more urgently, how could her work with these students prepare them for the violence of the state or the recurring traumas they faced in their own families? The miracle and the struggle was that Audre Lorde had to create a space where people who the state might position as enemies (armed White police officers and officers in training and students of color looking for a path to change the system) had to relate to each other as classmates (*enough enemy*). And the persisting challenge was the fact that, at the end of the day, at the end of the semester, at the end of her life, she could not accompany the students into the real worlds they faced. Only her memory, the ways they felt or didn't feel in the classroom, and the questions she had raised would follow them home. How does your classroom interact with the rest of the world that your students must navigate during and after your time with them?

enough enemy

even excuses earth

exit

F is for floor*for food floor floor feel fable fall for flesh feed follow fallen**flesh fruit fearing fall for floor furies fell forbidden fists**for fear floor**father four fetish flutter fall for follow**from for for from floor for for for food*

The fear that Audre Lorde expresses in this poem is the fear of falling. The fear of not having enough weapons to survive the seventeenth floor of this particular ivory tower and the fear of what she will face when she and the students finally head groundward at the end of the poem. All of the experiences that can knock her off the pedestal called “teacher” (abuse, defamation of character, health challenges) are there swirling in the wind among the gargoyles. Is teaching what happens when she reaches bottom? Or is teaching what she does instead of reaching bottom? **Does your fear before class feel like a fear of falling or a fear of not being able to climb the mountain of work ahead of you?** Are you more afraid of your students or your supervisors? Are you afraid for your students when your students are with you? Are you more afraid for them when you are not around? Sometimes, to get grounded, I just physically sit on the floor. I go back to a quotation from Audre Lorde: “I am who I am doing what I came to do” usually works. Sometimes, I sit on my hands and do a breathing exercise. **What are the practices that ground you?**

G is for garbled gods*ground gods great give gods gods**god growing*

In “Blackstudies,” Audre Lorde uses the same words in different configurations throughout the poem to talk about the problem of language. She has nightmares about how the supremacy of standard English threatens her ability to even engage in Black studies. She has critiques of the ways of being Black enforced by her nationalist colleagues that cause her to be vague about pronouns when she talks about her personal life. During this same period of time, she writes “Love Poem,” and her editor, Dudley Randall at Broadside Press, claims not to understand her use of the pronoun “she” in this poem about erotic love for a woman. How can she teach about institutionalized racism in a language rife with racist implications? How can she teach composition to police officers who will compose eloquent narratives about how the Black and Brown children they kill were a threat to them even while being 10 years old and running away unarmed? Are there standards and philosophies you hold up in your teaching that also bring you face to face with

major contradictions? **What are the gods of your classroom?** How do you honor them? How do they tell you who they are? What do you do when you can't hear them?

*garbled grin glistens
garbled groundward grow*

H is for hands head heart

high head hands have heart have husk hear hands hungers

had heart hidden

How often does what we feel in our hearts make sense in our heads? How often does what we imagine in our minds translate into a hands-on experience we can share with other people? As educators, we are balancing all of this. And as Black and Latino lesbian educators, we have to also reckon with the ways our hands are tied by stereotypes and oppression. Our heads are constantly engaged in the labor of intersectional survival and our hearts are healing from multiple wounds. One of Audre Lorde's great gifts was her ability to mobilize her emotional exploration into shareable lessons in the classroom and community.

Bow your head and place your hands on your heart. Remove your hands from your heart and place them on your head. Deep breath. You will find enough moments of alignment to ease your mind, to hearten your heart, and you will actualize those moments, even if your hands are shaking.

high hard heard has hard has hope

he hands he hands his him his holidays have hands

high hear

I is for I

*I in image in in I in it inside I is II into into idle III in III in it I instead
into in I I I I*

One of the challenges in Audre Lorde's classroom was that she identified with her students and she felt an ethical imperative to be her full self in the classroom and at all times. How does your subjectivity (*I in image in in I*) impact your teaching? Do you find yourself taking the journey of each student personally? Do you find yourself more or less effective with the students you identify with the most? **Do you find yourself compelled to pretend you know who you are when the act of teaching actually changes you every day?** For Audre Lorde, the self, and the infinite labyrinth of emotional

contradictions to be found there, became a major resource for teaching. How deep are you willing to go in?

it is is it is is II in

III in in I in II indirect II itch I

is I in into I

J is for justice vs. judgment

judgements

just juice

just judgement

Audre Lorde's teaching setting at John Jay, like most teaching settings, had a direct relationship to the criminal justice system. More and more schools on elementary, secondary, and even college and university levels are entangled with the process of policing and criminalizing students. Some students are shuttled along the school to the prison pipeline and other students are trained to police themselves in order to achieve higher and higher levels of access. Judgment itself plays a major role in the classroom. Are you judging yourself? Are you judgmental of the students? Do you fear the students are judging you? Are colleagues and supervisors judging you and/or the students unfairly? **How can your classroom become a place where justice is possible and judgment is suspended long enough for transformation (justice?) to occur?**

K is for know

knits keeps kernel

know know

In the face of transformation, so much must be unlearned. You knit your brow. You knit sweaters to keep your mind from wandering too far. You feel like someone is stirring your brain with knitting needles. Whatever it is, there is a kernel of knowledge somewhere that you keep. That you fight for. Audre Lorde knows that the black lines in her hands lead somewhere. She knows that she wants her students to survive. Those forms of knowing help her face the huge unknowns of teaching and learning. There are many things you don't know. There are many things that you don't even know you don't know. But the kernel is there. You know what you know.

L is for learned language

labour longer like legend living leave lie loved lies like lips legends language

light legends lips like little like

love

Audre Lorde learned the language of her blackness, the legendary meaning of blackness, and the linguistic codes for denying lesbianism and love, all at the same time. “Blackstudies” is one place where she uses language to parse the lessons she has learned from the lies that limit her and her students. In the classroom, Lorde and her students have to create an intergenerational language and forms of understanding that may not last long outside of that intentional space. A class on composition or narrative can use language to transform or it can depend on codes that enforce the killing implications of the existing languages of oppression. Or both. Audre Lorde knows that her students don’t need her, they need the questions she has to teach them or, more precisely, the methods she must pass on that enable them to question the realities they will face without her. She will become a legend or a lesson or a lie for them to unlearn later. **What do your students learn about how communication works when they are with you?** What are the forms of articulation they will leave with? What will they know how to say, imagine, challenge after and during their time with you?

learned learned language left legend leaders ladylike lateness limp left

listening least language leap

M is for mother (my my my)

mistaken my my my my mothers my my makers myth my my mouths my men mouths me me my

mixed my my my my my my make measuring my my most

me my mother me my me me mothers my melons my me morning my message made mine mouth

me my my mute my me meetings move make my Mommy marks my my mymy my mother memory

my

Mothers are all over the poem “Blackstudies.” Lorde’s students come to her door with bloody questions they have inherited from the traumas of their mothers. Lorde herself is pushed to examine the haunting presence of her own mother’s internalized racism. Then she frames herself as a metaphorical mother both to her

students and to the ideas she must transmit in the classroom. **How does mothering show up as a place of mythmaking, measurement, muting, and messages in your own teaching situation?** Are you forced to do unpaid mothering labor because of racial stereotypes? Are you choosing to be a social mother to your students in a balanced and rewarding way? Are you mothering yourself in the process? Are you haunted by what your parents or teachers taught you? Mothering is more than a notion. *My my my my my.*

N is for nightmare

new no need never nursing new noise not now nourishing

night no names not not

news not neon

noon now never nightmare never not nationalist not

now not need

All of “Blackstudies” could be described as a nightmare. All of Black Studies could be described as a nightmare too, from the perspective of capitalism. Audre Lorde kept track of her nightmares. Many of them turned into poems. Many of them were about teaching or mothering. (I write about this more in the essay “Daughter Dreams” in the book *Laboring Positions: Black Women and Mothering in the Academy*). Do you ever have nightmares about teaching? Are there aspects of your teaching situation that feel like a waking nightmare? Are you faced with the nightmare realities of fears of your students? My brother Seneca, who is 15 years younger than me, once told me that a nightmare is a wisdom you aren’t ready to have yet. Get ready for your wisdom and build a supportive structure to help you receive it.

O is for of

on old of on on on own old old old outside our old other over of out of out own own of

of on of over of

of our our own of on

of of of our of on of of only on only over

outside only or oh only open

Audre Lorde consistently brought the outside inside, or illuminated the depth of how difference was all up in our community relationships and our psyches. There are a lot of prepositions in this poem, challenging us to examine our relationships to our teaching, our students, our colleagues, our material. Are we over, outside,

on? How often are we the only one? As lesbian educators of color in the legacy of Audre Lorde and many others (known and unknown), maybe it is our responsibility to transform our outsider status into something that opens up new possibilities for our students, our fields, and the planet. That doesn't mean we should sell our identity difference for tokenistic institutional pretenses of diversity. It means we should practice being as transformative as our lives, our love, and our multiple positionalities require us to be. (*outside only or oh only open*)

P is for place

*places pinned perpetual promise palms poem pretended protecting pain prayers
purpose*

punished prayers protected prepared palms

You are in a particular place for a reason. In this poem, Audre Lorde is perpetually pinned to her desk on the seventeenth floor. **Where are you?** The conditions in which you are teaching are connected with the teaching situations of everyone else reading this. The conditions of your teaching are connected to Audre Lorde's legacy. And the conditions of your teaching are specific in place and in time and are shaped by the particular places you come from philosophically, geographically, and physically. There is certain teaching destined to come through your body while you are here. It matters where you place your hands. So much comes through them. Look at your palms. Deep breath. You are here.

places poet people

palms problems pronouns pay palms

places

Q is for question

questions

questionmarks

questions

At the end of "Blackstudies," Audre Lorde imagines her students saying "speak to us quickly mother/for soon we will not need you/only your memory/teaching us questions." **What are the questions your students are learning to ask themselves? What questions can you ask of yourself to ground and center you in your teaching?** How are those questions different from the questions that are asked of you on forms and in interviews? The final questions that Audre Lorde asks herself about her students are: "What will they carve for weapons?" And "What will they grow for food?" What

questions will you craft to protect and honor your spirit? What questions will you invoke to nurture your ongoing growth?

R is for road

room room rags running reject refuse roads remembered remembered ruler

rode rose roads

rode real roads

In “Blackstudies,” Audre Lorde describes black roads in her hands that she has to protect from the nightmare demon that tries to take them and from her mother who tries to wash all the blackness out of her hands. For Lorde, what is at stake in her teaching is a long trajectory. What will her students encounter after they leave her? Who will and won’t be included in the emergent field of Black studies? What will future generations know to ask? What is at stake in your teaching journey? Who are the remembered warriors who walked this road before you? **What will you be remembered for?**

S is for speak

sweeps shoulders scramble same searching 17th spirit speaking 17th sits stiff secrets satisfactions

so signed sworn speak story secret sentence swallow silence seed stains sit sorrows sorrows

shape

Audre Lorde’s predicament at the beginning of “Blackstudies” is that she doesn’t know what to say to her students. They come to her with rags stiff with the secrets of their families. She comes to them concerned about whether she can come out as a lesbian and still be included in the field of Black Studies. There are many reasons to swallow her words, but ultimately her students want and need her to speak her truth. **What do you need to say as an educator?** Has fear kept you silent about something important to you? Who do you need to speak your truth to? Do it now.

sun strange sending 17th somehow sleeping seeds sown sprouted

swirl says survive 17th swept

sun strangle study smile shunning skin scouring shriek speak shredding springs

students searching sworn 17th speak soon stepping self shall shall

T is for they

*the the the their they the the the truth the table their their their they they that
they the them*

*through to to this that truth to though through to to their to this the that the they
their the the the*

they the the the they their the their they the

*trampling that to the to tales tears this trial through they through the the
throughout*

these the time the to the the

*their tongue touch the to the the to through that the twinkles them the they the
that the*

the the to tell them they the the their to teaching they they

Speak this alphabetized excerpt aloud. What is your tongue telling your teeth? Are they on the same team? What is the “they”? Is there a “they” you feel separate from in your work as an educator? What causes the separation? Is the separation strategic? Does it serve you? Does it serve the students? (*they the trampling*) Is there something in your teaching setting that seems large enough to destroy you? Audre Lorde sometimes felt that her teaching setting was designed as “them vs. me.” Have you ever felt that way? Her strategy was to deepen her relationship to the “we” that mattered most to her and to take responsibility for her role relative to the future, her ancestors, and her own ethical imperative.

U is for us

up unanswered understand unencumbered use

until until up

upon upon

unused unbelieved use unbetrayed uncovered up

us

us

What is the collective you feel accountable to as an educator? The students? Your fellow educators? Your institutions? The community you come from? Lorde continues to uncover a collective that includes her throughout the poem “Blackstudies.” At the beginning of the poem, it is her students who come with “mommy issues,” but by the end of the poem she realizes that she is part of a collective with

much to gain from examining the legacies of oppression carried by our mothers. At the beginning of the poem, she is on the other side of the door, and by the end she is joining her students. What are the meaningful collectives that you invoke in your work as an educator? What are the important commonalities in your classroom that frame your explorations of difference? (*unbetrayed uncovered up us us*)

V is for voice

voice

victory

visions

voice

Audre Lorde advocated for voice. In her poem “A Litany for Survival,” she says, “it is better to speak/Remembering/we were never meant to survive.” She also worked with her poetry students on the specificity of voice, learning to unclutter one’s voice, learning to distinguish one’s voice from the voice of the news or the dominant narrative or even the teacher. **What are the visions you want to express and how must they be expressed for the victory?** Value your voice.

W is for wind

wind watch weapons who watermelon while with with with with waiting with when who will

words wind without while whose wants want women who who will will warning will walnut with

while which wind weight weight will will where

In her 1991 essay “Hugo Letter: On Generators and Survival,” Audre Lorde talks about the transformative power of wind from the perspective of an abandoned hurricane survivor on a Black island colony of the United States. She notes that humans build structures as if they will last forever, “but wind is our teacher.” When she talks about wind and change (the essay “Hugo Letter” was first published by *Winds of Change Press*, which was founded by Lorde and her partner Gloria Joseph), she thinks about it in relationship to the Yoruba goddess Oya, materialized in the storm, representing change and a connection to ancestors. Years earlier, in “Blackstudies,” Lorde is creating a whirlwind of words to mark the transformative moment when what we know as Black Studies was created. She is using the breath in her words to offer a prayer that can transform her relationship to herself and her fears and the students’ relationship to the future. **What needs to change in your approach to your work as an educator?** What has the power to

change it? Your words? Your presence? Your ability to destroy or deconstruct something that should be removed?

woke would when whose words whose whose were waiting

winds when when written women with winds

words worry with what wants washed words wherever wait

wind wait what what want we will wondering what what weapons

X

Y is for young

young young you your

In relationship to Audre Lorde, we are young. Not only because she would be in her eighties if she was alive, but also because, as an ancestor, she belongs to a time that we have lived past. If I am triggered by students who check their phones during class activities, I remember Audre Lorde and think “at least they are not wearing holsters with loaded guns.” More importantly, I think of Audre Lorde as a teacher and draw strength from her experiences, her bravery, and her profound investigation of her own emotions and relationships. **Who are the ancestors, elders, and mentors that can put whatever you are facing as an educator into perspective?** What tools might you need to create to strengthen your connection to them?

Z

Notes on contributor

Alexis Pauline Gumbs was the first researcher to visit the Audre Lorde papers at Spelman College and is the founder of the School of our Lorde, a night school inspired by the Poetry, Publishing, Pedagogy, and Politics of Audre Lorde. She has published essays on Audre Lorde’s work in *Feminist Studies*, *Feminist Collections*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *The Imperial University*, *Laboring Positions*, *Mothering and Hip-Hop*, and the Feminist Wire’s forum on the life and legacy of Audre Lorde.

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