

Mentorship and Interpersonal Advocacy

“BLACKstudies”: a Contemplatively Poetic Response to Alexis Pauline Gumbs (& Audre Lorde)

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Keywords: poetry, memoir, school, activism, students, family, story

“The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination.”

--Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” 1977

Prologue (or an artist’s statement)

I.

Although written six years ago, I recently read Alexis Pauline Gumbs’ (2017) “17th Floor” oracle essay wherein she contextualizes Audre Lorde’s teaching experiences as Lorde expresses them in her 1974 “Blackstudies” poem. According to Gumbs, Lorde’s “Blackstudies” should be “activated as a resource for current Black and Brown lesbian educators . . . who bring complexity

and nuance to their teaching setting” (375). Let me explain: When Lorde wrote her introspective “Blackstudies” poem, she was teaching composition in CUNY’s¹ CAPS² program wherein she navigated racism, sexism, and homophobia, while contending with such outside of her white cis-male dominated classroom. “High up on the seventeenth floor, Audre Lorde struggled to feel grounded,” says Gumbs, who then asks: “How could the work she was addressing in this classroom interact with the real world (literally) below?” (379).

Although Lorde was situated in a classroom with her “enemies”—armed white police officers and officers in training—when she composed “Blackstudies,” confessing: “I do not know whose words protected me / whose tales or tears prepared me / for this trial on the 17th floor” (155; part. 2, stanza II, lines 1-3), Lorde’s poem was inspired by the relationship she cultivated with the Black creative writing students she taught at Mississippi’s Tougaloo College in 1968. In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde explains it thusly:

The ways in which I was on the line in Tougaloo . . . I began to learn about courage, I began to learn to talk. This was a small group and we became very close. I learned so much from listening to people. The only thing I had was honesty and openness. And it was absolutely necessary for me to declare, as terrified as I was, as we were opening to each other, ‘The father of my children is white.’ And what that meant in Tougaloo to those young Black people then, to talk about myself openly and deal with their hostility, their sense of disillusionment, to come past that, was very hard. (“Interview,” *Sister Outsider* 90)

I quote Lorde at length here because the relationships that Black lesbian women foster with their students—if they are open and honest—most likely will be rife with hostility and disillusionment. These associations, built between Black (and/or white) students and their queer Black teachers, cultivated inside and juxtaposed against a white cis-male heteronormative America hell-bent on annihilating Black and brown folks, ain’t easy. “I am afraid / that the mouths I feed will turn against me,” writes Lorde (“Blackstudies” 154; pt 1. stz 5, ll., 1-2). Thus, Lorde’s poem is a study in being a queer Black teacher. As such, says Gumbs, today’s queer, Black teachers reading Lorde’s works (or psalms) should *turn on, energize, animate—put into praxis*—Lorde’s theories so they might find a balm in their own Gileadean environments.

Gumbs models such engagement by “activating” Lorde’s poem via an abecedarian oracle through which she (and Lorde, the holy ghost) instructs readers to think of a challenge they encounter in their teaching, such as *homophobia*, then to reflectively read the “H” section of her oracle (375). There, teacher-readers find inspirational thought—a prophecy, a foreshadowing—directing them on ways to counter that challenge and/or suggestions regarding how to protect their

1 City University of New York

2 College of Police Science

spirit as they confront such in and out of class oppressions. Gumbs employs each letter of the alphabet, excepting letters “X” and “Z,” and composes a divine message intended to support queer teachers drudging through the trenches as Lorde did.

My poem, therefore, titled after Lorde’s “Blackstudies,” is an honest, open, declaration of the barriers between me and my Black students that threaten to thwart my teacherly self and practice; it answers Gumbs’ call to exercise theory—to trust in the Lorde. However, instead of galvanizing Lorde’s work as Gumbs instructs, I activate Gumbs’ “17th Floor” essay. I employ her abecedarian approach, including letters “X” and “Z,” to stimulate and transcribe my own teacherly self-reflection, thereby composing a poem addressing the classroom challenges I have faced.

II.

I am a Black lesbian woman. I have been teaching composition to Black and brown students for over 20 years. I currently teach writing courses at a public HBCU where anti-Black racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and ageism are as present as they are in historically white institutions. However, the anti-Black, sexist, and homophobic attitudes and behaviors I encounter amongst my Black and brown students (and colleagues) dispirit me more than white folks’ oppressions—as evidenced in my poem’s first line. It answers Gumb’s question: *“How can the fact that you are not the first educator to face contradictions and transformations sustain you?”* (376) to which I respond, “it doesn’t,” and explicate my answer via a poem penned as fluidly as Kanye writes his *curses in cursive*³

I am a witness that poetry, says Audre Lorde, comes out of “an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling” (“Poetry,” *Sister Outsider* 37). It is only through poetry, therefore, I could best “respect [my] feelings and transpose them into a language so they can be shared” (37), and I certainly want, I need, to share my feelings about teaching Black and brown students—born and/or coming to age in a 21st century where colorblind racism, pinkwashing politics, and pseudo-decolonization so visually impairs them—they see me an impediment to their knowing selves.

How do I engage Black and brown students in a liberatory praxis when they recognize me as their enemy? How do I help them to write themselves into a liberatory existence when my writing curriculum doesn’t sit right with them? How do I talk about these barriers—many of which have been manufactured to fragment our togetherness—with Black and brown students who only hear white noise coming from my mouth?

My poem records these emotions and feelings, thus “address[ing] the barriers between us (me) and *that* future” [emphasis mine]—that future generation of Black and brown students drunk

3 phrase borrowed from verse four, line four of Kanye West’s “Otis,” a song he produced on his 2011 *Watch the Throne* album with rapper Jay-Z.

on a cis-male heteronormative capitalist patriarchy that renders me useless. And though I know I am not useless, I often feel worlds apart from my students—a distance exceeding the expected generational gaps and classroom hierarchies naturally separating us from one another. Our disconnections can seem so wide I feel depressed—as I imagine Lorde occasionally felt. But! as quiet as it's kept in (traditional) Blacks studies, *still we rise*⁴; thus, my poem acknowledges, too, the coalition of folks on whose shoulders I stand, whose spirited faith propels me to keep on keep-in on even when the fact that I am not the first educator to face contradictions and transformations doesn't (immediately) *feel* sustaining.

III.

But it is, isn't it? I would not be able to enter the classroom day after day, semester after semester if I were not entering with a coalition of folks allied toward a united action. Thus, my poem, directly in “part three: M” and indirectly throughout, names family members, mentors, teachers, and literary figures—some of whom are ancestors—who have (and are) *my burst of light*.⁵ I carry their wisdom and their prayers with me; wherever I am, so, too, are they. I name my coalition via citation practices forwarded by Katherine McKittrick who invites Black writers to use citation practices as spaces wherein they (we) narrate “what we do with books and ideas . . . how we arrange and effectuate the ideas that make ideas” (15). According to McKittrick, whose (2021) *Dear Science: and Other Stories* also centers Black studies, traditional citation practices “acknowledge the shared and collaborative intellectual praxis that makes our research what it is” (15-16). However, as marginalized text, she explains, while citations showcase and centralize the knowledge Black scholars have mastered, they fail to reveal “how we came to know imperfect and sometimes intelligible but always hopeful and practical ways to live this world as black” (17).

“What if citations offer advice?” asks McKittrick (19). “What if citations are suggestions for living differently? What if some citations counsel how to refuse what they think we are?” (19). The copious notes⁶ ending my poem, therefore, answer McKittrick's call to reveal the lessons that cannot be contained within my poem, to share the *other* stories, the “how I got ovuh” stories, the *whose* I am stories. They also detail my relationship with and/or admiration for particular people and their practices—some of them academic, others secular and spiritual. Traditionally, my endnotes also provide context for my poem and include the questions Gumbs poses in her “17th Floor” oracle essay my poem answers.

4 *And Still I Rise* is the title of Maya Angelou's third collection of poems, which includes a poem of the same name, published in 1978—a year before I was born. “Still I Rise” as well as “Phenomenal Woman,” also included in that collection, is two of Angelou's most popular poems.

5 *A Burst of Light* is the title of Audre Lorde's 1988 collection of essays, which includes the most inspired “I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing across Sexualities.” Considering these current times, wherein cis-gendered Black women are fighting against transgendered Black women, Lorde's essay ought to be required reading—a national book read (if the conservatives would stop banning books and closing libraries)—that might unite Black women under one coalition fighting against the other who oppresses them (us) as one.

6 My poem submission originally included footnotes, which I believe would be more accessible to readers like me who prefer to read notes on the same page as the main text accompanying them. However, because the footnotes distracted from the poem's structure, I conceded to rearranging them as endnotes.

Moreover, while McKittrick's work proposes alternative knowledge by way of citation narratives as "alternative stories" through which Black writers write against the empire (18), my poem acknowledges alternative epistemologies via counterhegemonic composing styles I borrow from Black feminist, Black Arts Movement writers like Ntozake Shange⁷, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez who have written against English language standards. As a matter of fact, I borrow Sanchez's Blackening, if you will, of the Japanese tanka and haiku; instead of these 7th and 17th century poetic forms being about seasons and nature, their subjects are of the Black experience and are composed in a Black English inclusive of the grammatical structures that make it a language.

With all that said, I neither can write nor teach, neither address nor dismantle the barriers between us (me) and *that* future without a coalition of folks who inspire my activism, which is why I position the Latin "et al." (and others) after my name as author, for my poem "BLACKstudies" is *our* poem; it is a collaborative project I am empowered to compose (and ultimately publish) because of the genius and courage of our ancestor/grandparent writers, teachers, thinkers, and activists. I am because they are. It really does take a village—a united state, despite america's splintering spirit.

part one: A-E⁸

the fact I am not the first educator to face contradictions & transformations does not sustain me⁹;

for the fact of my **Blackness**¹⁰ challenges me to show up for & be present to

Black¹¹ students who don't see the Lorde in me

- 7 Shange's respelling of words like "enuf" instead of "enough" in works like her 1976 choreopoem, *for colored girls who considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*, have so influenced my writerly self—inviting me to rewrite myself via alternative spellings, abbreviations, and punctuation marks that allow me to boldly Blacken white pages. Her works, predating text messaging shorthand, is a study in Black English, in Black Arts, in Black being; it is a study in Black voice significant to Black narrative.
- 8 This section of my poem responds to Gumbs' questions: "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?" (376); "What is the Blackness of your challenge as an educator? What cannot be known? What must be transformed? Can you inhabit the Blackness of your teaching?" (377); "What are the experiences that you had as a child, or as a student, that show up as challenges in your teaching?" (378); "How do you create safe space in your classroom?"; and "How does your classroom interact with the rest of the world that your students must navigate during and after your time with them?" (379).
- 9 Gumbs' question: "How can the fact that you are not the first educator to face contradictions and transformations sustain you?" (376) garnered an "It doesn't" response from me. At that very moment, I knew I had written the first line of this poem, for I have been barely managing my feelings re: the current corporate classroom situation and its 21st century consumerist learner in whom I continue to deposit, but from whom I rarely receive a return beyond loose regurgitations of course material and lecture. (And when I use the term "deposit," I don't mean like Paulo Freire's (1970) banking concept of education but deposit as in "pouring my energy into"—until my well is dry.) While being able to see myself in others and knowing upon whose shoulders I stand have often comforted me as a Black American lesbian woman, I don't find sustenance in Lorde's classroom experiences—at least not in her "Blackstudies" poem. I feel, instead, fatigued.
- 10 Here, I am referencing Frantz Fanon's (1952) "The Fact of Blackness." Like Fanon, who contemplates his Black personhood against a world of white dehumanization, I think about my Blackness in relationship to my Black students, many of whom have drank the Kool-Aid and prescribe to a whiteness politick that mummies and mules me.
- 11 I initially hesitated to boldface the term "Black," which I also capitalize throughout the poem, because I didn't want the boldface type to distract readers. However, after many conversations w/a graduate student re: the term

but find their savior in the white man department chair
who'd rather manufacture peace
than hold students accountable to their higher power;¹²
& tho I try to have mercy on my traitorous students—
to give them grace
to pardon their sins
to forgive them for not knowing what they do—
cause I know their childhood aint been my childhood:
supported by middle class luxuries¹³
privileging home libraries,
club affiliations,

“Black” and the language debates re: capitalizing it and using the term at all, I opted to boldface “Black” because I want readers to hear “**Black**” as though a Xhosa-speaking south African woman clicked the term out her throat.

- 12 At the historically Black university where I teach, the department chair is a well-meaning enuf white man. However, in his desire to help Black students, his efforts often undermine the Black women teachers who hold students accountable for following the course syllabus, class procedures, and departmental mandates. Often, Black students, both graduate and undergraduate, have complained to the chair re: my academic standards—which they read and agreed upon as evidenced on the syllabus forms I require they sign and return to me at the semester’s start. Instead of encouraging students “to rise to the occasion,” as I often tell them, our white man department chair has gone as far as to supporting student withdrawal from a course and offering that course again during an off semester under him as a directed study. What happens to Black studies when white folks direct and manage HBCU programs and departments? What leg do I have to stand on when my Black and brown students see in me a roadblock and see a savior in the white department chair—and in other white teachers who pass our students through systems because they either pity them or are afraid of them? I struggle w/this: w/holding Black and brown students to a particular standard while they participate in and navigate through an academy whose curriculum duplicates racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, ableist ways of being. How do I support my Black and brown students w/out giving them handouts? Or should I give them handouts? *Here! You get an A! You get an A! It’s freedom time; this is reparation.*
- 13 My first post doctorate teaching gig was at Florida A&M University [FAMU], where I graduated w/my bachelor’s and master’s degrees. It was 2012, and four years prior, iPhone had just recently become smart; everyone had it (or the Android), including students. Such material possession, at least to me, was a symbol of financial ability—like Air Jordans in the mid-80s. Unfortunately, I had not yet been introduced to bell hooks (outside of her scholarly contributions to composition theory) nor had I read any Karl Marx or Antonio Gramsci. And although Kanye West’s 2004 “All falls down” had put it in my face: “It seem we livin’ the American Dream / But the people highest up got the lowest self-esteem / The prettiest people do the ugliest things / For the road to riches and diamond rings / We shine because they hate us, / floss ‘cause they degrade us / We tryna buy back our 40 acres / And for that paper, look how low we’ll stoop / Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe” (verse 4, lines 9-16), I still didn’t comprehend nor had compassion for my Black students who entered the classroom ill-prepared: no textbook, no paper, no sense (or very little) re: college readiness. It wasn’t until a student brought to my attention her need for a book voucher that would enable her to buy her textbooks that I realized from what my middle-class privileges shielded me: Although Black students were attending this four-year university, most of them did not have parents who were footing the bill. As a matter of fact, during one of my personal narrative writing activities, one student revealed her houselessness at the semester’s start. I had no idea. As a college student my students’ age, I had no concept re: student loans, textbook vouchers, or Federal Pell Grants. As a result, I did not initially understand nor have compassion for my Black students. That was my first lesson re: class differences in the Black college classroom; we are not a monolithic people.

paid college tuition, & summer vacations

inside a two-parent household showing me

Black is beautiful

practicing **Black** love

relying on **Black** ways of knowing

because they believed in **Black** genius,

Black family tradition, & kinship

to raise children to be young, gifted, & **Black**

w/souls intact¹⁴

to turn the other cheek

to think before we speak

to be mindful of our planting

cause what we sow is what we reap—

the devil has been busy stealing our children

their consciousness, their **Blackness**,

out of my hands¹⁵

convincing them they exist in a post racial America¹⁶

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- 14 The original line of Weldon Irvine's (1969): "When you're young, gifted, and Black, your soul's intact" was sang by Nina Simone. It was inspired by Black playwright, Lorraine Hansberry whose 1969 autobiographical play is titled *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*. A college girlfriend of mine introduced me to Nina Simone via a homemade mixed CD of what she considered Simone's greatest works. "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" was included, and although I knew very little of Simone's biography and civil rights activism then, in her voice, I felt the struggle—both her own and of the Black children of the 1960s for whom she sang. In another verse, Simone sang, "There's a world waiting for you," which is the world for which I endeavor to prepare my students who cannot (yet) envision the world as I see it and have seen it. When I taught English Language Arts at a predominantly Haitian high school in Miami, Florida, prior to being a university professor, I played Nina Simone on a loop, so much so, my students would enter the classroom asking to hear "Mississippi Goddam" (1964). As a college professor, although I don't have the classroom space nor extended time to play Nina Simone as I had, I do integrate Simone's music into my instruction by way of my Martin Luther King unit, during which time students listen to and analyze her (1968) "Why? The King of Love is Dead." If I don't share Nina in my composition classroom, I don't know if my students will ever know her, and Black students should know Nina Simone.
- 15 According to Gumbs, Audre Lorde was challenged to create safe classroom spaces for her students while preparing them for an unsafe world of intersecting oppressions (378). "She engaged in this battle even in her own nightmares about how demons of White supremacy wanted to steal her children, and the blackness of her hands," says Gumbs (378). I feel this so regularly—but my Black students claim a wokeness that resembles sleep deprivation more than it does critical consciousness. White supremacy is so covert it's slicker than oil, outwitting Black students whose elders and ancestors are noted tricksters.
- 16 As a first-year composition professor at FAMU during the semester when Trayvon Martin was murdered and the #blacklivesmatter hashtag was evolving into a national movement, I situated my first-year writing curriculum with-

where my layered **Blackness** meeting **Black** across **Black**

isn't a rainbow¹⁷

but a stain upon their white-washed dream.

I've grown too tired of trying to uplift them

they squander the gifts their ancestors gifted them

the systems between us keeps me from reaching them

& creating safe spaces aint gone protect them¹⁸—a brave composition is needed.

part two: F-I¹⁹

in Martin Luther King's rhetorical genius, inviting students to read and think beyond King's popular 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech. Alas, because Barack Obama was serving as the U.S. President, more of my Black students than not attached themselves to the notion that we were living in a post racial America. As a result, my students were not interested in studying the civil rights movement—and told me so. These born-in-1994-18-year-old students' concept of relative American history dated as far back as 2001, when Al-Qaeda terrorists supposedly attacked the United States. I was at my wits end, but more than that, and perhaps hyperbolically so, I felt heart broken. *How could these Black students who were witnessing a modern Emmett Till lynching be so blasé about civil rights?* While I understood their apparent apathy re: a Martin Luther King they felt was overstudied, students told me they were uninterested in civil rights all together because those movements happened so long ago. My students' expressed disdain for studying King's rhetoric in relationship to current happenings felt like a personal affront. Admittedly, after teaching that class of students, I posted Matthew 7:6 on my office door.

- 17 In Gumbs' (2020) *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, she wrote about the Melon-headed whale she describes as being layered in Blackness. Her exact words: "layered Blackness where Black meets Black across itself as Black" (133) are inspired by Toni Morrison, whose Pilate character from *Song of Solomon* (1977) describes such Blackness as a rainbow (133). I want my Black students to see in themselves a Blackness so beautiful, they "may as well be a rainbow" (Morrison as cited in Gumbs, 133).
- 18 I bought into traditional safe spaces until having read Zeus Leonardo and Ronald K. Porter's (2010) "Pedagogy of Fear: Toward a Fanonian Theory of 'Safety' in Race Dialogue." In their article, Leonardo and Porter claim creating safety around public race dialogue protects only white students while harming Black and brown ones. They advocate, therefore, for brave spaces where "risk discourse about race" acknowledges the "already here" presence of violence, thus moving students toward a more actively progressive discussion re: race (139). After having read Leonardo and Porter's essay, I moved beyond traditional safe spaces and informed my Black students of my intent to create brave spaces. Although Leonardo and Porter's essay is grounded in race dialogue, as a composition classroom in an HBCU, most of my class discussions about writing are race centered. Thus, I aim to cultivate a radical classroom environment where Black students feel a "safety" that enables a brave thinking and being that disrupts white male heteronormativity. Unfortunately, it seems many of my Black students, have a narrow concept of safe spaces believing them to be environs wherein I, the teacher, must manage their feelings re: teacher feedback, assessment, and instruction. Students' expectations for such "safety," align closely w/ coddling and/or entitlement that doesn't serve them—and sometimes, results in a classroom experience that isn't safe for me. Despite my efforts at constructivist teaching, supported by the buffering model of effective teacher feedback, some students lack the vulnerability and valor required to learn. As a result, I have experienced students' clap-back-callout-cancel behavior, which is a violence students often don't realize they've committed against me. If Black-on-Black crime were a real phenomenon, then I've experienced it most in the classroom, especially in the online classroom.
- 19 This section of my poem, made up of five tankas, a five-line, 31-syllable Japanese poem—which I learned to write Black after reading Sonia Sanchez's poetry—addresses the following questions (and one statement) Gumbs poses: "*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?*" (380); "*What are the gods of your classroom?*"; "*How often does what we feel in our*

I have no practice
grounding my teacherly work
in the sound of here—
in a sonic consciousness
enabling my presence²⁰

for the god in me
is an angry god of floods
promising rainbows
layered in **Black**, meeting **Black**
across **Black**²¹ toward **Black** love

but like sea lions
claiming their territories
I must claim tenure²²
& my hands aint strong enuf

*hearts make sense in our heads?"; Do you find yourself taking the journey of each student personally?" (381); "How can your classroom become a place where justice is possible and judgment is suspended long enough for transformation (justice) to occur?"; "In the face of transformation, so much must be unlearned" (382); and "What do students learn about how communication works when they are with you?" (383). While this section addresses these questions, the first three tankas are inspired by Gumbs' *Undrowned*.*

20 In her "be present" chapter (*Undrowned* 67-72), Gumbs discusses the presence of the Indus River dolphin who she says "live[s] in sound . . . echolocating day and night . . . ask[ing] where, again where, again where" (68). She then beautifully writes: "The poem of the Indus [R]iver dolphin is the ongoing sound of here, a sonic consciousness of what surrounds them, a form of reflective presence. Here" (68). However, in a previous chapter titled, "practice," Gumbs asks: "*What are your dorsal practices? What evolutionary repetitions have you cultivated to move through oceans? What are the ones you need to cultivate for the waves moving you now?*" (45). Those chapters considered together brought me back to my 2012 dissertation about a contemplative high school English curriculum grounded in mindfulness practice that I've since neglected, and I questioned myself: *Kendra, at what point will you, the teacher become the grasshopping student again? What happened to your practice? And how has neglecting your mindfulness practice contributed to the weariness you feel navigating the oppressive school environment?*

21 See endnote xvi

22 In her "learn from conflict" chapter (*Undrowned* 83-86), Gumbs describes how sea lions fight each other for territory, repeatedly threatening each other by way of "ritualized postures" also called "tenure" (84). I have thrice been on a tenure track, spanning over a 10-year period and have recently, July 2023, earned it; needless to say, I cringed when I read Gumbs' overt criticism of the academy and its players. Admittedly, and most likely because I had been holding that posture for so long, I have been a sea lion. However, I am not fighting other professors. I am fighting the system, which requires *both* my hands. As a result, sometimes my students become collateral damage because I don't have hands enuf to hold them *and* the things they carry.

to hold my students & me

my hands are tired

from juggling judgment & love

& presumed justice

wearing my whole body down

threatening transformation

if only they'd learn

to unknow what they've been taught

to believe my **Black**

will lead them back to their **Black**

into **Black** togetherness²³ —

might I be able to communicate a communion that frees them.

part three: M²⁴

- 23 Here, I am calling in the great poet Mari Evans, who asks, in her 1970 “Who Can Be Born Black” poem: “Who / can be born Black / and not / sing / the wonder of it / the joy / the / challenge / And /to come together / in a coming togetherness” (93). It is one of my favorite poems, one I occasionally recite to my Black students—who I believe should memorize poems; they should have at least one poem they carry w/them reminding them of their Black genius, and Evans’ poem is one of the ones. “Who Can Be Born Black” brings tears to my eyes as I read it and recall all the Black genius, Black spirit, Black audacity that enabled my existence. I want my Black students to feel all of that when I recite Evans’ poem to them. I learned of Evans when I was an 8th grader attending my first Maya Angelou lecture. According to Angelou, Mari Evans was one of her favorite poets; she became one of my favorites, too.
- 24 This verse of my poem responds to Gumbs’ section, “M is for mother (my my my)” wherein she asks: “*How does mothering show up as a place of mythmaking, measurement, muting, and messages in your own teaching situation?*” (384). According to Gumbs, Lorde is metaphorical mother to the students she teaches as evidenced “all over the poem ‘Blackstudies’” (383). I, too, often feel like Mother to my Black students—a result of the mothering I received from kin/folks who nurtured me w/what theologian civil rights activist Howard Thurman (1958) terms “mother love.” And so, this verse is a libation, if you will, to the kin/folk—grand/parents, aunts, teachers, and

Roll Call:

Choling Bryant²⁵

Donald Bryant²⁶

Rose McKenney Jones²⁷

Mary Bryant²⁸

Tywana Greene²⁹

Yasmin Greene³⁰

Anita Bryant³¹

mentors who inspired my humanity. This roll call verse also acknowledges “those who hold me accountable, who expect me to be who I need to become. . . . [who] ignore[e] the lies I tell myself about myself” (Gumbs, *Undrowned* 23). In her expressed gratitude for her teachers, which is also what “part three: M” is, Gumbs writes: “Even in my resistance I am grateful for you all. For the love you are teaching me, deep, Black, and full. For the nurturance, push, and example. What you learned by facing your own death. What you learned in your drowning is my breath” (23-24). *What you learned in your drowning is my breath*. Yes! I am because of these folks listed here—some elders, others ancestors. àṣẹ and praise God!

- 25 Mommy. My mother is my first master teacher whose mother love continues to support me way into my adulthood. In 1969, she integrated a predominantly white elementary school in Miami, Florida and retired from there after having taught majority 3rd grade classes. When I was in elementary school, Mommy gave me my first rhyming dictionary and thesaurus, and when I was in 7th grade, she took me to hear Maya Angelou lecture after I found in her my muse. My mother has been my biggest advocate and cheerleader, reminding me, still, to keep my eyes on the prize.
- 26 Daddy. My daddy was a social worker who predicted I'd be a career student and told me I was a revolutionary with no cause. I am living to prove the latter wrong. Nonetheless, his mother love regularly cooked dinner, nursed me in Mommy's absence, and insisted neither of us—my sisters nor I—be satisfied with C grades, for anyone can be satisfactory, he said. When I was in high school, Daddy attended a parent-teacher conference with Mommy and me wherein he defended (and demanded) my right to privacy after the white man school counselor attempted to suspend me for writing and passing a letter in class he read without my consent. By the time Daddy was through w/him, I knew that white man school counselor would think twice before threatening school suspension upon another Black girl. Daddy passed when I was 22 years old; he was 55. I've written an essay about his Black feminist spirit on my blog site: drknbryant.com.
- 27 Grandma Rose. My maternal grandmother absolutely belonged to herself as Alice Walker (2010) encourages readers to do in her poem “Lost.” Grandma Rose was born Pilate, but changed her name post high school. She was a single mother to four children, and, before becoming an x-ray technician, was a day's worker, paid \$7.50 + carfare per day. Grandma Rose collected elephants and tea pots, slept in a round bed, and decorated her house in Asian aesthetics. And at 60+ years old, she eloped while on a senior group bus trip to Las Vegas. Grandma Rose belonged to herself, indeed. I've written an essay about her, too, on my blog site: drknbryant.com.
- 28 Grandma Mary. My paternal grandma was the first entrepreneur I knew. She was, what we called then, a beautician, in Liberty City, Florida. Grandma seemed money rich: she owned several properties, drove a Lincoln, and traveled regularly; she and Granddaddy even went to Hawaii for one of their anniversaries when I was an elementary school student. Grandma's 12 siblings, who were from Tunis, TX, insisted on yearly family reunions where mother love flowed through great aunts and uncles and a host of nick-named cousins. Of the many things I remember about Grandma Mary, my clearest memory is of her pulling a pan out of the oven with her bare hands—a pan of dressing, I think (or maybe a poundcake). I swear Bill Withers (1971) wrote “Grandma's Hands” for her.
- 29 aka Cookie, my auntie, my mother's baby sister, who has also regularly cheered my success, just as much as Mommy has
- 30 aka Auntie Pump, my auntie, my mother's middle sister; she passed in 2015 at 59 years old.
- 31 aka Darlene, my auntie, my daddy's only sister. She took my twin sister and me to church, bible study, and vacation bible school, and regularly voluntold me for delivering the church welcome, reading the church announcements, and writing and reciting poems for various gatherings. She passed in 2022 at 68 years

Persephone Taylor³²

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Maria Krane³⁵

Patricia Moore³⁶

Vernetta Clenace³⁷

Eddy Rodgers³⁸

Vickie Frazier-Williams³⁹

Doris Hart⁴⁰

old.

- 32 Girl Scout Troop leader who treated (and still treats me) like her own.
- 33 fourth grade elementary school teacher who exposed me to poetry writing and assigned the first poem I wrote write, titled "Ants"; it won a blue ribbon at the Miami-Dade County Youth Fair & Exhibition.
- 34 my mother's colleague, who taught gifted students and was one of the first blue-Black women I can recall seeing who wore her hair natural and her lips fiery red. Whenever Ms. Bullard saw me sitting in my 5th grade class, she, an active member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., always told me how creative and smart I was. She's been rooting for me since I was in elementary school writing poems about ants.
- 35 my 7th grade journalism teacher—a Cuban woman who'd pass notes with me in class when I was too afraid to speak up. During Bill Clinton's Presidential Inauguration, which Mrs. Krane required my classmates and me to watch, I discovered Maya Angelou. Her reading of "On the Pulse of Morning" (1993) was mind-growing, so much so, Mrs. Krane gifted me Angelou's (1969) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. I've been Angelou's student ever since as well as Alice Walker's whose (1982) *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* Mrs. Krane gifted me for my 8th grade "graduation." Mrs. Krane and I still exchange letters, but now I gift her books.
- 36 a mother-friend w/whom I became acquainted while on a middle school Black history trip to Atlanta, GA. I watched Mrs. Moore practice a loving-kindness to her two children (who were also on the trip) that seemed to be reserved for Rudy and Claire Huxtable. As a very involved school parent, Mrs. Moore selflessly extended her kindness and mother love to me whenever she saw me in school. She has been my mother-friend since.
- 37 a towering Black queer woman high school counselor who wore her natural afro shaped like a crown. Although I was not a student assigned to Ms. Clenace's roster, she tended to me every time I showed up at her office door. Ms. Clenace, who I called "Sister Clenace," introduced me to J. California Cooper, gifting me her (1984) *A Piece of Mine*. Sister Clenace knew I was lesbian before I did, gifting me April Sinclair's (1994) *Coffee Will Make You Black*, whose main character Stevie is so much like I am.
- 38 Grandma Rose's friend who also worked as an instructor at the high school I attended; she looked out for my sister and me, and I regularly stowed away in Mrs. Rodgers office in between classes and after school fretting about this and that teacher and/or assignment. When I graduated high school, Mrs. Rodgers told me I was a diamond in the rough, which first offended me; however, I have since come to understand the process required in refining diamonds.
- 39 a mentor-friend who attended the same church as I. Vickie used to sponsor church talent shows I participated in, and she graciously read my rudimentary poems—which was like a famous person reading them since she was a news reporter for South Florida's Channel 10 WPLG local news station. Vickie, too, has been rooting for me ever since.
- 40 a "talent scout" who managed the Miami-Dade ACT-SO [Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympics] Competition in which I participated as a 11th and 12th grader. During ACT-SO rehearsals, Mrs. Hart required me and other competing students to perform in front of her and our peer audience, and she'd unapologetically tell us when, why, and how awful we might've performed. Mrs. Hart's brutal honesty about students' talents (or the lack thereof) was akin to Simon Cowell's; however, receiving such criticism as a high schooler inspired my ACT-SO peers and me to put in the kind of work that insisted on Mrs. Hart's rounds of applause. My expectations for my classroom students are undoubtedly informed by Mrs. Hart's expectations of my peers and me. Her honesty didn't embarrass; it ignited, and under her guidance, the Miami-Dade NAACP ACT-SO chapter often brought home medals from the national competition, including the third place one I earned in the original poetry category (1994).

Patricia Daniels⁴¹

Tananarive Due⁴²

Genyne Boston⁴³

Margie Rauls⁴⁴

Gloria Taylor⁴⁵

Deborah Plant⁴⁶

Gurleen Grewal⁴⁷

part four: N-T⁴⁸

- 41 Miami-Dade ACT-SO coach who celebrated my poetry. Mrs. Daniels' house, not too far from my parents', looks like Miami Gardens' Black Museum inside. It is filled with Black cultural artifacts from Black Cabbage Patch Kid dolls to copies of *Negro Digest*, Mammy replicas and hot irons; Black figurines are shelved on every other wall. Walking into Mrs. Daniels house is like walking into the National Museum of African American History and Culture's level three community galleries.
- 42 Black speculative fiction writer who was assigned my high school writing coach during the Miami-Dade NAACP ACT-SO Competition for which I placed first locally in its original poetry category, and, after Tananarive's mentoring, placed third nationally (1994). ACT-SO provided me my first national stage with seasoned writers who judged and advised my original poem, "De Chu' ch," written in a dialect mimicking Paul Laurence Dunbar's writing style. Tananarive Due, who at the time of my mentoring had shelved her then unpublished first novel (1995) *The Between*, talked with me about rejection letters and how many she had received—was receiving. Unconsciously (or maybe hopefully), she was preparing me for a writing career—one at which I am still grasping.
- 43 my undergraduate English teacher at FAMU, who, like Mrs. Hart, told me the truth about my writing. I was not as excellent a writer as my white middle and high school English teachers would have me to believe as I composed college papers riddled with subject verb agreement and verb tense mistakes, comma splices, and fragments. Dr. Boston encouraged me to mindfully think about my writing, which is a lesson I attempt to pass onto my own writing students. Dr. Boston, too, illustrated the significance of Black students attending HBCUs where teachers are surrogate aunts and uncles, for when my father passed while I was a graduate student at FAMU, Dr. Boston mourned w/me—tears and all, she bowed on her knees before me, and she mourned. Dr. Boston and I still exchange handwritten letters, and she often gifts me journals and pens.
- 44 my advanced grammar teacher at FAMU who challenged my intellectual self more than any other teacher I had met before. Dr. Rauls was a straight up, no nonsense teacher who required students to go to the chalk board and diagram sentences. She became disillusioned about Black students and the significance of grammar instruction quite early—before the turn of the 21st century—often debating w/me and other English teachers the irrelevance of it all. Dr. Rauls and I exchanged handwritten letters and she made the occasional phone call until her passing in 2020.
- 45 my neighbor who lives down the street from my mother. Glo became my friend after she brought a pot of chicken souse to my daddy's wake in 2002. During every holiday visit home since then, Glo invites me over for a cocktail. We laugh a lot, reminisce about parties my parents threw, and thank God.
- 46 my graduate school professor who exposed me to Africana spirituality, mindfulness practice, and (more of) Zora Neale Hurston. Dr. Plant is the most intellectual person I know, who encouraged me to go deeper into myself than I knew was possible. She also invited me to write a chapter essay for her (2010) *"The Inside Light": New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*, which became my first published work before earning a doctorate degree. Dr. Plant, who also edited Hurston's (2018) *Barracoön*, is a cerebral giant whose insistence on serious scholarship and mindfulness writing inspire my own.
- 47 my graduate school professor who directed my dissertation and taught me everything I know about contemplative pedagogy and Toni Morrison. Dr. Grewal, an Indian woman, is a Toni Morrison scholar who expresses a loving-kindness and patience I am still growing to embody. I aim to apply her contemplative teaching practices to my own.
- 48 This section of my poem responds to Gumbs' questions: "*Are there aspects of your teaching situation that feel like a waking nightmare?*" (384); "*Are we over, outside, on?*" (384-385); "*Where are you?*" (385). According to

I am inside a nightmare of corporate education
where Black students aint required to master African-American literature
as long as they can afford tuition;
& does it really matter they can't recall a Black playwright?
have never read *The Color Purple*?
can't list three Toni Morrison novels?
& have no recollection of Sojourner Truth?⁴⁹
& I have ploughed thru public school's hidden curriculum
& planted Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Walker, & June Jordan
& gathered **Black** history from Ptah Hotep⁵⁰ to Patrisse Cullors
& still, I aint the teacher my Black students want.

Gumbs, where I am informs from *where, about what, and how*, I teach. “[T]he conditions of your teaching are specific in place and in time,” writes Gumbs, “and are shaped by the particular places you come from philosophically, geographically, and physically” (385). In other words, teaching is intimate and personal. Gumbs also asks: “*What questions will you craft to protect and honor your spirit?*”; “*What will you be remembered for?*”; “*What do you need to say as an educator?*” (386); “*Is there a ‘they’ you feel separate from in your work as an educator?*”; and “*Is there something in your teaching setting that seems large enough to destroy you?*” (387).

49 In 2020, a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic, I was teaching a class of senior English students in a course called *Senior Seminar*. This course, designed as a survey course intended to assess students’ knowledge of the various literary time periods to which they had been exposed throughout their college tenure, was populated by about eight Black cisgendered female students and one cisgendered white male student; about half of the female students identified as queer. Because we are situated in an HBCU, I thought I’d quiz my predominantly Black student class on their Black literary history; after all, each of them had already taken the required African-American Literature course. This quiz, which ended up being my course diagnostic determining how and with what materials I’d instruct the course, included questions like: *Name one Black playwright and her or his title work. Name a novel centered on religious ideas. Name an author from the Harlem Renaissance.* Excepting the obvious Langston Hughes response to the Harlem Renaissance question and the Tyler Perry response to the Black playwright, my Black students could not recall Black for most of the questions I posed. Instead, they called on writers and books like William P. Young’s *The Shack* and C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*. And when I asked about a children’s author, one student named her favorite white-authored vampire series. To make matters worse, the one lone white male student in the class *did* recall Black for each of his responses, which did not make my Black students shamefully shrink; instead, they damn near dapped him up. When I expressed my disappointment with my Black students re: their Black negligence, they claimed to be so inundated with whiteness that even after attending an HBCU for four years and taking courses like *African-American Literature*, their first thoughts are still white-washed. They practically Kanye-shrugged it off and told me not to be mad at them; be mad at the system, they said. I am mad at both.

50 an Egyptian vizier—the highest official who serves the pharaoh. Ptah Hotep served in the Fifth Dynasty of Egypt and is credited for composing a literary manual, *The Teachings of Ptah Hotep*, instructing young men on behavior. This text, too, is considered by some scholars to be the oldest book in the world; for rhetoric and composition scholars, it provided the instruction for rhetoric that informed Greco-Roman ideas re: argumentation. I introduce Ptah Hotep and African rhetoric to my graduate students who take the *Practices in Contemporary Grammar & Rhetoric* course I teach. Although the course has been traditionally taught via a Greco-Roman lens, I begin with Africa, reminding my Black students that she is the cradle of civilization—the beginning of all intellectual genius.

┌—

unapologetically **Black**

lesbian

middle-class

& religious

like when Celie met Shug & found God *in everything that is or ever was or ever will be*⁵¹

& if only I can get my **Black** students to get the white man off their eyeball

to see thru their third eye thru which they transcend a myopic wokeness

& dive into a critical consciousness clarifying their **Black** genius

then, will they know I love them?

& don't they know I love them?

that my red pen bleeding on their page is my offering—

a blood covenant securing us in an I-thou relationship promising transparency, truth, & presence?

that my love inspirits them to compose compositions as fluid as hieroglyphs inside pyramid walls?

that my love insists they know words as intimately as they know themselves—in spirit & in flesh?

that my love begs them to read & write themselves into an existence they were never intended to realize?

No. my Socratic inquiries are not a questioning of ur intelligence⁵²

- 51 direct quote from Alice Walker's (1982) *The Color Purple* (167). Undoubtedly, Shug Avery's conversation with Celie re: spirituality informs my own walk with God. Before reading Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning work, I, too, was Celie, imagining God as a white man I was trying to get off my eyeballs; sometimes I'm still throwing rocks (168). Nonetheless, Shug Avery is my spiritual teacher who I think of every time I see a fallen or severed tree, feeling like I might be bleeding, too (167). But, as I explain in (2016) "'Heaven last all ways': Examining Celie's 'suchness' in Walker's *The Color Purple*" (122-132), ultimately, Celie's spirit—*her* Buddhist being—transforms herself and the novel's other characters. Thus, it is Celie's quiet compassion I strive to embody in and outside of the classroom. Each new year I teach, however, mustering compassion gets more difficult, which is probably why I reference Walker and *The Color Purple* throughout my instruction; they remind me to stay the course—to keep my eyes on the prize.
- 52 In the *Writing, Science and Technology* course I teach to STEM students, I invite them to compose a mid-term self-assessment letter wherein they specifically address their work ethic; they also compose questions to me re: their progress and my instruction. One student wrote to me in her assessment letter that she finds the questions I pose while commenting on her written assignments offensive. According to her, if she knew, for instance, that she should have written a long sentence as two shorter ones, then she would have, and so, my inquiries felt like a questioning of her intellect. To this student, and to many others who have referenced my commenting as "throwing shade," my questions about their writing are not Socratic inquiries inviting them to think more deeply about their writing as they entered the revision stages but were efforts at making them feel inferior; they neither felt safe nor brave in my classroom. As a result, during next class session, and thereafter in every class I have since taught, I explain to students my intentions around posing questions when offering them feedback for their

but an invitation to ur wondering inside the in between

*love is or it aint; thin love aint love at all*⁵³

& I wonder after they graduate & have children themselves to raise

will they know what I have known & truthfully admit I loved them?

part five: U-W⁵⁴

when I resigned one year short of earning tenure⁵⁵

my mother, a former elementary school teacher who suggested I major in education after I told her I wanted a creative writing degree, said:

Daughter,

Remember—80% of ur work goes to the students you teach.

They are ur priority; they're the ones you aim to reach

& Mommy being Mommy, practiced what she preached

& put her students first

she, a 3rd grade teacher integrating an all-white elementary school,

prioritized her predominantly white class, especially her **Black** students—

rarely there, but when present, holy visible

writing. While many of them expressed their “aha” moment re: my Socratic teaching methods, others, unfortunately, admitted to preferring I tell them exactly what to write over prompting their own thinking—to continue the banking system of education that got them thus far.

53 direct quote from Toni Morrison’s (1987) *Beloved* during a conversation Paul D is having with Sethe re: her murdering her daughter *Beloved* (164). This line is one of my favorites, for, in Toni Morrison fashion, it begs readers to theorize about love, particularly mother love, and to contemplate to what ends one might go to express love. This quote also invites readers—it invites me—to question how I love and to really consider love as love. despite to whom I am rendering it. “Love is or it ain’t,” says Sethe (164), which supports bell hooks’ ideas re: the fallacy in unconditional love she explicates in her (1999) *All about Love*.

54 This section of my poem responds to Gumbs’ questions: “*What is the collective you feel accountable to as an educator? The students? Your fellow educators? Your institution?*” (387); “*What are the visions you want to express and how must they be expressed for the victory?*”; and “*What needs to be changed in your approach to your work as an educator?*” (388) The last question is inspired by Gumbs’ exploration of Lorde’s (1989) essay, “Hugo Letter: On Generators and Survival.” In it, says Gumbs, Lorde discusses the transformative power of wind, having written, “but wind is our teacher” (388).

55 In 2016, after spending four years at FAMU, one year before going up for tenured associate professor, I resigned from its English Department. I had gotten so wrapped up in the university and department’s politicking that I lost sight of my classroom responsibilities and the students for whom I was accountable. When I first began teaching, Mommy told me teaching is innate, and as a teacher, I am responsible to my students first; neither the institution, nor my colleagues—both about whom I care—are my priorities. “Keep your eyes on the prize,” Mommy reminded me. The struggle continues.

like the little **Black** girl for whom Mommy purchased a JC Penny brand white sweater
so she wouldn't have to keep coming to school in the dirty, disheveled one she wore;
& sometimes, before we can teach Black students to come to voice
thru arranged vocabulary & syntax
we must give them clean sweaters to wear—
warmth as secure as Maya Angelou's navy blue peacoat⁵⁶ absorbing wind on the pulse of morning⁵⁷
wind *is* our teacher
& Mommy's been the wind beneath my wings urging me to fly right
but not right like
right or wrong
nor right like
left or right
but right like
righteously
for the good of those who love the Lorde
will eventually know justice.

part six: X-Z⁵⁸

when my **Black** student shouted

Malcolm X led the Million Man March—

after his classmate claimed it was Martin Luther King—

I asked the Lorde to be a fence around me⁵⁹

56 Media mogul, Oprah Winfrey, gifted Angelou the navy-blue Chanel peacoat she wore during the 1993 Presidential Inauguration.

57 title of Angelou's 1993 presidential inaugural poem

58 This final section of my poem responds to Gumbs' questions, posed only in her "Y is for young" section. Here, I also include reflections on letters "X" and "Z" for which Gumbs writes no text: "*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?*" (389). In this final paragraph, Gumbs reminds readers that what might be "triggering" for today's classroom teachers pales in comparison, if you will, to Lorde's classroom experiences wherein her students wore loaded guns on their hips. Although I do not have gun-toting students enrolled in my classes, often, my students' white-washed conditioning, coupled with their consumerist behaviors, riddle me like bullets. All I have these days is hope, and barely that. I don't see how the ancestors, elders, and mentors who've brought me this far can go the rest of the way w/me. Seemingly, I, alone, must "rise to the occasion," and still I rise.

59 At my students' loud and wrong declarations, I sang, Fred Hammond's (2000) "Jesus, Be a Fence around Me," a gospel song I often hum to myself during long silent stretches of students' apparent lack of preparedness for

to give me the strength to enlighten generations Y & Z
who had no reverence for **Black** history
their flailing about felt like blasphemy
& the more I taught them, the more they denied me
my classroom space had morphed into calvary
& I was the thief begging for mercy
so that I might muster grace enuf for them—
my zillennial⁶⁰ students
who believed in a post racial america
because Barack Obama was the president
& I—a nigger crook purloining their american dream

the academy *is* fulfilling its purpose

ensuring our **Black** students swim only the surface
got em thinkin they'll drown
after deep submergence⁶¹
believin my lessons are a grave disservice
can't even save them w/biblical verses⁶²
the deeper I dive,
the wider the gap of convergence

class discussion.

60 the generation between Millennial and Gen Z, born between 1993 and 1998

61 Here, I am referencing Gumbs' *Undrowned* wherein she encourages readers, especially Black ones, to be like marine animals who learn to breathe under water despite daily threats to and attempts at their lives. Recalling our ancestors who survived the middle passage journey, Gumbs claims their breathing is not separate from their captured kinfolks' drowning and the ocean's breathing. She says their breathing contextualizes undrowning: "Breathing in unbreathable circumstances is what we do every day in the chokehold of racial gendered ableist capitalism," writes Gumbs, who suggests we take notes from marine mammals who "are amazing at not drown-ing" (2).

62 I don't profess an ability to save my students nor anyone thru Biblical verses (or w/#blackgirlmagic); however, after a class of homophobic Black students attempted to use Bible verses to support their anti-gay rhetoric, I countered their hate speech with specific Biblical verses re: love, all of which fell on deaf ears. I write about this classroom experience in (2016) "Gays are going to hell: A Lesbian Teacher Tries To Teach Compassion" (23-33).

as tho I prohibit their breathing

& I just don't know where to go from here

lately I don't feel the Lorde drawing me near

as I age thru teaching, so does my despair

my students, they take up so much of my air—

part seven: A-Z⁶³

but like a phoenix⁶⁴

rising out of the ashes

still I rise. I rise

into each new semester

a hope-filled Easter morning.

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63 I end my poem w/one tanka that marks the entire alphabet. While the alphabet song concludes w/the singer claiming knowledge of her ABCs and inviting listeners to join her in the next round of singing, this final stanza invites readers into my human teaching experience. Although I do not teach composition in a classroom populated by student police officers of whom I am afraid, like Lorde, I do have “layers of fear to face” (Gumbs, “17th Floor” 376). As a Black lesbian teacher instructing within a “particular historical and pedagogical moment” (375)—inside a global pandemic, post Presidents Barack Obama and Trump, during American race riots and Florida fascism, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, and the Russo-Ukrainian War, all while teaching at a historically Black university fixated on earning research one status, thus patterning itself after whiteness—I am afraid (and frustrated). I am afraid of two things: 1. many of my Black students are so whitewashed that they, claiming #woke while clad in natural hair and dashikis, are actually black faced minstrels; and 2. despite my instruction, I will not be able to awaken them. I am afraid for my students and frustrated by the systems reproducing a hegemony so normalized, my Black students treat me like a Juda. But still, I rise, calling on (the) Lorde—hoping such abrupt brevity lends itself to sounding as fervent and hopeful as Maya Angelou’s “Good morning” at the close of her (1993) “On the Pulse of Morning” poem.

64 For early Christians, the phoenix symbolized Christ’s resurrection. However, for Job, who said: “In my own nest I shall grow old; I shall multiply years like the phoenix” (Job 29:18), it also symbolized longevity. Having said that, Angelou’s mentioning of dinosaurs in the opening stanza of her (1993) “On the Pulse of Morning” poem brings me to birds, a few of which evolved from dinosaurs, according to some scientists. Although Angelou wrote, “Any broad alarm of their (mastodons and dinosaurs) hastening doom / Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages” [emphasis mine] (stanza 1, lines 7-8), I imagine the phoenix being as established as the crying rock, the singing river, and the speaking tree Angelou said are ours (stanza 9, line 18). Through them, these sentient (non-human) beings, Americans “[c]an give birth again / To the dream,” said Angelou (stanza 10, lines 3-4). If I am right/eous, then I, too, will have the longevity of Job to look upon each new day, to approach each new semester, as an opportunity to give birth again to the dream—a dream our Black and brown students can manifest if I remain brave enuf to share it and they woke enuf to receive it. The children are our future, sang Whitney Houston (1985). I’m hoping.

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