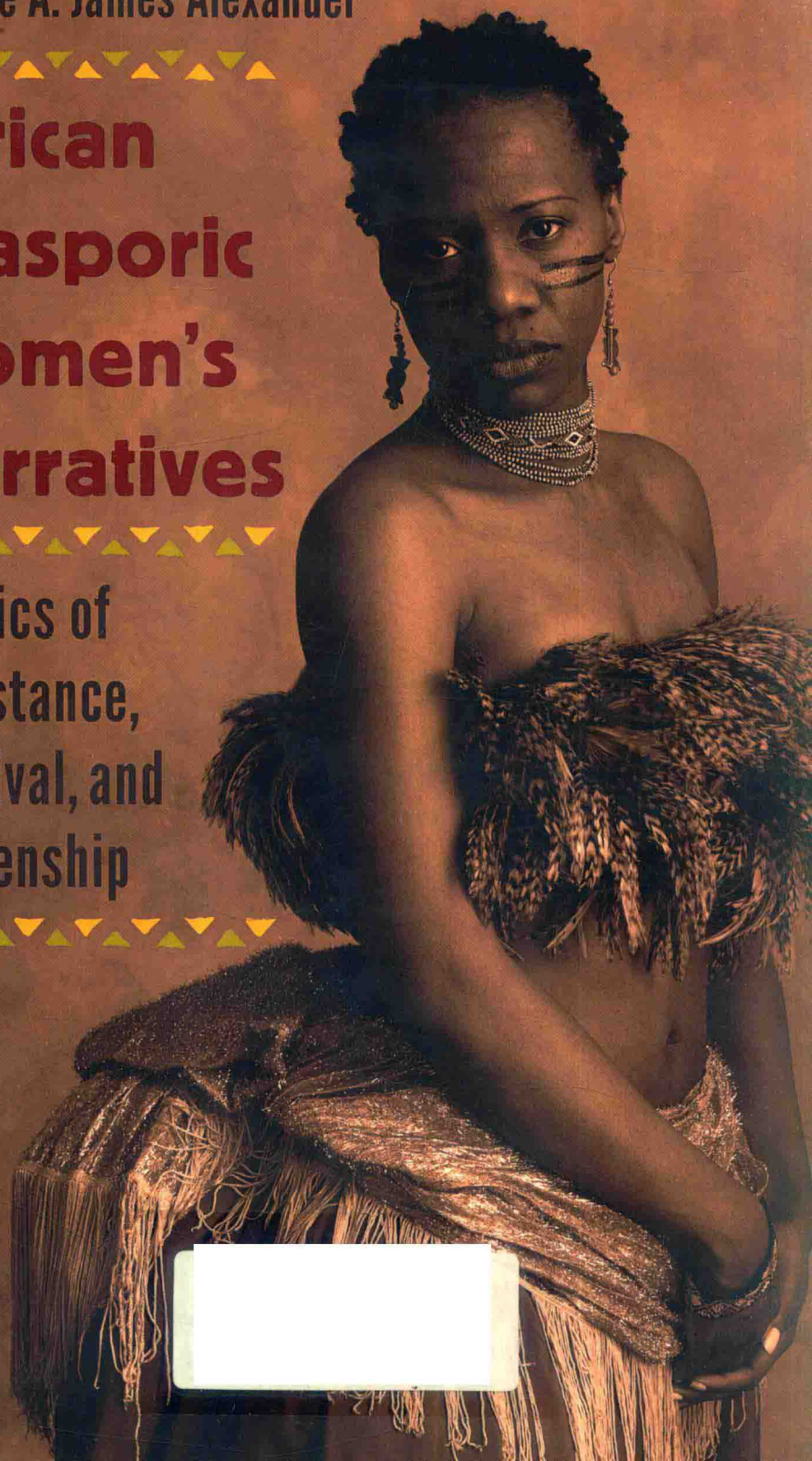


Simone A. James Alexander

# African Diasporic Women's Narratives

Politics of  
Resistance,  
Survival, and  
Citizenship



AFRICAN  
DIASPORIC  
WOMEN'S  
NARRATIVES

*Politics of Resistance,  
Survival, and Citizenship*

Simone A. James Alexander

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## African Diasporic Women's Narratives



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## INTRODUCTION

### Dis-Embodied Subjects Writing Fire

They're treating my resistance to their diagnosis as a personal affront. But it's my body and my life and the goddess knows I'm paying enough for all this, I ought to have a say. I am going to write fire until it comes out of my ears, my eyes, my noseholes—everywhere. Until it's every breath I breathe. I'm going to go out like a fucking meteor!

—Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light*

I am even more certain that to create dangerously is also to create fearlessly, boldly embracing the public and private terrors that would silence us, then bravely moving forward even when it feels as though we are chasing or being chased by ghosts.

—Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously*

A few years ago at a seminar on “Health and Bodies,” I had the good fortune of sharing my work on Audre Lorde with fellow participants. By all accounts, the seminar was successful; the seminarians offered meaningful suggestions and feedback on ways to improve the work. One woman colleague or participant asked, “Who is the intended audience, and how will this project be accepted?” She further constructed “the audience as a class for black feminist theory in which case a discussion of Lorde’s work would be appropriate.” Other participants remarked, “Since you are using black bodies to speak about all bodies, the project fits within a canon of black, feminist political activists/authors.” “If you had someone from another ethnic class, it would be quite different.” “Use different authors

so it doesn't appear as though they are coming from one community." Another concern raised was Lorde's relevance today having written her memoir so long ago.<sup>1</sup>

Even while alive, Lorde was extremely controversial, particularly among white feminists, whom she accused of perpetuating racism.<sup>2</sup> So it should be no surprise that even after her death, her work continues to evoke such emotional responses. These responses arguably stemmed from a sense of dissonance with the representation, occasioned by the choice of theorists and, by default, the theoretical framework.<sup>3</sup> Hortense Spillers remarks: "The charges leveled against Black Studies and Women's Studies, especially the former, in the initial period of their instauration—that the subject(s) were 'unresearched,' among other indictments—were blind to a material fact of discursive production—discourses do not spontaneously appear, but as writing, as an intellectual technology, they will follow the path and tide of generation" (*Black, White* x). She concludes, "An investigator will not 'find' what he or she is looking for, but will have to partially 'create' the differentiation against the stubbornness of tradition" (x). Furthermore, Lorde's personal embodied experiences did not fit, nor did she strive to fit, into the framework of the larger theoretical discourse. Rather, she unequivocally and unapologetically challenged the dominant mainstream discourse. Spillers ascertains that this perceived effortless challenge was occasioned because "the intransigent (and arbitrary) borders of the canonical were fragile to start with, predicated, as they were, on the reified properties of 'race' and 'gender'" (x).

Along these lines, one can safely argue that Lorde's success, or more-over her relevance, is manifested in her ability to "create dangerously." Concurring that "creating dangerously" is a corollary to "reading dangerously," Danticat surmises that this concept captures the essence of a writer: "Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I've always thought it meant to be a writer" (*Create Dangerously* 10).<sup>4</sup> Spillers concretizes this concept, arguing that "Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a rebel idea, both for her creator and for Morrison's audience" (*Black, White* 93). In other words, "in bringing to light dark impulses no longer contraband in black American women's cultural address, the novel inscribes a new dimension of being, moving at last in contradistinction to the tide of virtue and pathos that tends to overwhelm black female characterization in a monolith of terms and possibilities" (93).

In keeping with this line of reasoning, Lorde (and fellow authors Grace

Nichols, Maryse Condé, and Danticat herself) did not fall short of “creating dangerously.” Underscoring what she deems as Albert Camus’s most viable interpretation of “creating dangerously,” Danticat construes it as “creating as a revolt against silence, creating when both the creation and the reception, the writing and the reading, are dangerous undertakings, disobedience to a directive” (*Create Dangerously* 11). Boldly engaging the “dangerous undertakings,” these women writers authenticate their experiences even as they refute the dominant discourse. The multiple physical and allegorical border crossings that the women and by default their protagonists undertake, in great part, constitute the “dangerous undertakings.” Along similar lines, Lorde’s strategic engendering of her varied lived experiences that underscore her transnational subjectivity become the legitimizing force in establishing her brand of theory (theorizing her illness) as a viable field of scholarship. Furthermore, the skewed question about her irrelevance finds resonance in the beautifully phrased Haitian proverb “Better that we are ugly, but we are here” (*Create Dangerously* 147).<sup>5</sup> Foregrounded in the phrase is conscious resistance and resilience.

In spite of having written her memoir more than three decades ago, both Lorde and her work continue to significantly impact women’s lives, serving as a blueprint for women, regardless of age, race, creed, or location, tackling both personal and political disease. Lorde’s influence is national, having inspired American feminists, lesbians, African Americans, and women of color during the 1970s and 1980s, but it also has international and transnational reach.<sup>6</sup> Thus Lorde explores the transnational through her own experiences. Underscoring the dynamism of transnationalism, Mary Friedman and Silvia Schultermandl reveal its crystallization of race and racial issues, establishing that it does “not obliterate the impact of ‘race’ as a shaping force on social power structures; on the contrary, [it] put[s] it into sharper focus” (9). Significantly, race matters to Lorde; subsequently, the racial subject occupies center stage in her discourse, a fact reiterated by Margaret Kissam Morris, who writes, “When Lorde names herself by identifying her multiple subject positions, she customarily begins with race; thus, she privileges the term that has been the source of her earliest experiences with prejudice” (169). Unequivocally, Lorde brought to the forefront breast cancer awareness, publicizing the disease, but more importantly, politicizing black women’s health concerns. As a result, public awareness and public discussion of women’s health increased greatly in the United States during the late twentieth

century. Furthermore, Lorde's influence proliferated, extending beyond the United States' frontier, transcending border and race politics. Both discursively and physically, Lorde engenders a detour, a migration from mainstream gender-biased discourse as she unearths this (predominantly) female disease once shrouded in silence and secrecy.

In an attempt to articulate this book's transnational agenda, its engagement (or disengagement) with other texts/authors, the conversation that renowned black feminist critic Barbara Christian had with her daughter, Najuma, comes to mind.<sup>7</sup> Najuma asked her, "Why is it that you write mostly about black women's books? You read lots of other books. Is it because you like what they say best?" Christian surmises that the question her daughter asked had been asked before: "What is a literary critic, a black woman critic, a black feminist literary critic, a black feminist social literary critic?" (*Black Feminist Criticism* x). Not only was this question asked before, but it also has been answered. Addressing the importance and the comforting presence of black women writers in her life, Mary Helen Washington confesses: "Only they know my story. It is absolutely necessary that they be permitted to discover and interpret the entire range or spectrum of the experience of black women and not be stymied by preconceived conclusions. Because of these writers, there are models of how it is possible for us to live, there are more choices for black women to make, and there is a larger space in the universe for us" (xxxii). Giving voice to the challenges, the "stymied preconceived conclusions," Spillers remarks on the racist and sexist hurdles one has to surmount in attempting to "lay down discourse on aspects of African-American life and thought that did not conform to and replicate certain deeply held convictions" (*Black, White* xii). Arguably, these obstacles surfaced at the aforementioned seminar, resulting in the disqualification of Lorde's body as text and her body of work.

Although one may write mostly about black women's books, one is undoubtedly informed by other writers. Furthermore, interrogating this notion of a preconceived, intended, monolithic, or fixed audience, Christian underscores the presumptuousness of the writer inventing "a theory of how we *ought* to read." Instead she says, "We need to read the works of our writers in our various ways and remain open to the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race, and gender in the literature. And it would help if we share our process, that is, our practice, as much as possible, since, finally, our work *is* a collective endeavor" ("Race for Theory")

42). Along these lines, Lorde's theorization is both far-reaching and all-encompassing, a fact that Alexis De Veaux underscores by ascertaining that Lorde's works were "firsts in . . . her literary career [in that they] established multiple dimensions of new terrain" (314).<sup>8</sup> "These multiple dimensions" lend themselves to Lorde's nonconformist stance, her embrace of multiple (flexible) identities. Even as Lorde discursively explores the manifold "dimensions of new terrains," her own body functioned as a terrain that disrupts and decenters the healthy, heterosexual body.

Aware that she is attempting to do something dangerous by normalizing the deviant body while simultaneously appropriating the literary canon, Lorde recuperates the female body from the male-dominated literary genres.<sup>9</sup> Similar to her embodied resistance to medical diagnosis, Lorde debunks the "discursive diagnosis" of a monolithic reader or writer. In keeping with this idea, she enacts Christian's statement that "theory is prescriptive [and] it ought to have some relationship to practice" ("Race for Theory" 42). Further illuminating the imperative of codependency between theory and practice, Christian remarks: "My fear is that when Theory is not rooted in practice, it becomes prescriptive, exclusive, elitist" (46). Consequently, she cautions that by succumbing to silence we run the risk of having our identities subsumed, allowing "Those who control the society [to] continue their cultural hegemony" (*Black Feminist Criticism* xiii).

Refusing to be silenced, Lorde, Danticat, Condé, and Nichols's body of work departs from "the western form of abstract logic," engaging instead "narrative forms, in the stories [they] create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to [their] liking" (Christian, "Race for Theory" 41). This departure from fixity correlates with the fluidity of identity. Expounding on Christian's argument, Barbara Smith points out that "The use of Black women's language and cultural experience in books by Black women about Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures" (7). Additionally, these women writers, advocates of transnational feminism, underscore the inextricability of the intersectional categories of sexual and racial politics in black women's writing. Specifically, Christian cautions about superimposing one's social history onto others without taking into consideration issues of race, class, and gender. Taking this argument a step further, Lorde stresses: "It is a particular academic

arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians" ("Master's Tools" 110). Essentially, Lorde advocates for a transnational feminist agenda that challenges stereotypes and cultural imperialism.

Anthropologist Ifi Amadiume cautions: "One of the dangers of having our feet stuck in western-produced literature is the tendency to use European terms and expressions uncritically when addressing non-European cultures and experiences. The history of European imperialism and racism means that the language which aided that project is loaded with generalized terms which . . . serve a particularistic interest" (*Reinventing Africa* 1). Similar sentiments are echoed in the title of Lorde's insightful essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." Subsequently, she cautions that there is little or no hope for change when "the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy" (110–11). Operating within this feminist transnational continuum, this book problematizes black women's writings, ascertaining that it is not confining or should not be confined to a specific era, genre, or audience. Hence one can safely argue that the women writers discussed in this project refuse to engage mimicry against which Amadiume cautions. In giving voice to their experiences, they have in turn given voice to the experiences of countless other black women across the globe; they have given women the courage and language to reject and resist being silenced, to look at their "own antecedents for the sophisticated arguments upon which [they] can build in order to change the tendency of any established western idea to become hegemonic" (Christian, "Race for Theory" 43–44).<sup>10</sup>

Whereas this book employs western (feminist) theory, it does not do so uncritically or at the expense of black and Third World women's histories. Rather, it engages a transnational feminist agenda that debunks existing stereotypes and cultural hegemony. Underscoring the importance of avoiding these pitfalls, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, quoting Fred Pfeil, address this oversight in feminist theories: "[E]ven among savvy and committed feminists, ahistorical relativism is in danger of replacing historical specificity as well as feminist solidarity. Feminist movements must be open to rethinking and self-reflexivity as an ongoing process if we are to avoid creating new orthodoxies that are exclusionary and reifying" (18). While this book is critical of white patriarchal structures, it reserves equal

criticism and condemnation for patriarchal structures within black communities that espouse female oppression. These oversights have affected not only dialogue between black and white women but also representation. To counter these shortcomings, Grewal and Kaplan suggest “map[ping] these scattered hegemonies and link[ing] diverse local practices to formulate a transnational set of solidarities” (19). These “solidarities” facilitate diasporic consciousness and inclusion, engaging black women and their writings. Aware of the high cost of dismissing black women’s realities, renowned feminist Adrienne Rich in conversation with Lorde candidly acknowledges: “What I can’t afford is either to wipe out your perceptions or to pretend I understand you when I don’t. And then, if it’s a question of racism—and I don’t mean just the overt violence out there but also all the differences in *our ways of seeing*—there’s always the question: How do I use this? What do I do about it?” (Lorde, “Master’s Tools” 106, italics mine). Rich’s response directly addresses Barbara Smith’s concern that “when white women look at Black women’s works they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics” (3). Rich has not only responded to Barbara Smith’s challenge “to see in print white women’s acknowledgement of who and what are being left out of their research and writing,” (5) but she has also questioned “whether [white women’s] perspective on women’s reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group” (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 3). Furthermore, her questioning is indicative of awareness, the above-mentioned oversight “of the extent to which [white women’s] perspectives reflect race and class biases” (3).

Breaking away from the “academic practice of relying on disciplinary theories and conceptual debates originating in and dominated by the West” (Oyěwùmí, *Invention* ix), this work journeys away from established canonical structures and mainstream masculinist narratives, underscoring the importance of including the total sum—race, class, language, ethnicity—of the female subject. In other words, this work is informed by the theoretical reasoning of feminist scholars Amy Schulz and Leith Mullings, who insist on a holist approach in examining women’s lives. Strong proponents of “intersectionality theory,” Schulz and Mullings ascertain that “intersectionality theory was developed most prominently by Black feminist social scientists, emphasizing the simultaneous production of race, class, and gender inequality, such that in any given situation, the unique contribution of one factor might be difficult to measure” (5). Thus the mutual



interdependence of race, class, and gender is pivotal in the articulation of women's experiences. As such, "The issue of who counts as a feminist is much less important than creating coalitions based on the practices that different women use in various locations to counter scattered hegemonies that affect their lives" (Grewal and Kaplan 18). The women writers here-with (Lorde explicitly) reveal the limits of a feminist discourse that does not take into account specific locations that construct the cultures that women negotiate in their daily lives. Amadiume's question about who should write a people's social history—"Is it others who should be telling Africans what they are?" (*Reinventing Africa* 5)—is adequately and articulately answered by Lorde: "It's my body and my life. I'm paying enough for all of this and I ought to have a say" (*Burst of Light* 76). Having their say, "writing and breathing fire," in other words "creating dangerously," black women give voice to their embodied experiences that not only destabilize and disengage the monolithic language of imperialism and racism but also fiercely interrogate Eurocentrism, thus dismantling the master's house. The coinage "writing fire" that echoes the cliché "playing with fire" engenders both danger and resistance.

Making a concerted effort not to "have [my] feet stuck in Western-produced literature," this book engages the theories of migration and diaspora, namely, migration flows and transnational movements within a gendered framework. In quoting Puerto Rican cultural critic Juan Flores, Duany writes: "The concept of diaspora evokes a wide range of connotations, including movement, travel, displacement, dislocation, uprooting, resettlement, hybridity, and nomadism" (2). This proliferation of definitions parallels the multiple transnational exchanges, a fact that is underscored by Duany, who observes that diaspora "overlaps substantially with current definitions of transnationalism" (3). Mindful of these overlaps, this book proposes that transnational ties occasion the birth of diasporas, blurring the congruence of geographic space and social space. While diaspora is imagined as a concrete locale in terms of destination, host countries, and home countries, it is also an imaginative space evoked through "collective memories, myths, and rituals" (3). In other words, it overlaps with Benedict Anderson's "imagined community." As Anderson puts it, a nation "is imagined because the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (15). This definition resonates powerfully in black diasporic communities