ESSAY

Audre Lorde, Sound Theorist: Register, Silence, Vibrato, Timbre

ALEX ULLMAN

> And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation . . .
>
> —Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (1984)

> And of course I am afraid—you can hear it in my voice, or not—because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation . . .
>
> —Audre Lorde, MLA Annual Convention Recording, 1977

On 28 December 1977, just one month after she had undergone exploratory breast cancer surgery, Audre Lorde delivered her now famous speech entitled "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" at the Modern Language Association convention in Chicago. As Alexis De Veaux notes, the speech contained a host of "truisms" that soon became "Lorde-isms" for the feminist movement at large (193). Refrains like "your silence will not protect you" have since echoed beyond the feminist movement, across the generations, and onto the streets. Those echoes were heard at least as recently as summer 2020, when "silence is violence" became an anthem for Black Lives Matter activists in the wake of the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.

What is less known is that the publication history of Lorde's speech silences some of her own words. I do not mean to suggest an insidiousness of the publication process: Lorde herself may have made cuts and edits. Nor do I want to argue for fidelity, for the primacy of recorded speech over a textual copy.[1] Lorde was known to extemporize—to change, add, or delete—words from the

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page on the fly, suggesting that each performance of her work was not just an interpretation but also another draft.[2] Instead, to notice a difference between the recording and a printed version of this essay is to create space for both the medium and the message of the speech: Audre Lorde's voice. What did it sound like? How did her speaking voice differ from the voice with which she read her poetry aloud? In what ways did the public performance of her poetry shape its meaning? And how did her voice bear the mark of her own personal experience and larger social and aesthetic histories?

During and after her lifetime, critics and friends lauded Lorde for the pluralism of her written poetic voice. In a 1992 tribute, the *Boston Globe* writer Renee Graham highlighted the musicality of Lorde's writing: she could "weep like Billie Holiday, chuckle like Dizzy Gillespie, or bark bad like John Coltrane" (33). In a posthumous dedication, Lorde's longtime friend Adrienne Rich portrayed her written voice in visual terms: "She had throughout her life, a certain kind of—almost you would say—prophetic voice—visionary voice, some-times looking at the whole landscape and describing what she sees. And then there would be this very intimate voice of speaking to a person, an individual person—lots and lots of poetry like that" (qtd. in Joseph). Academic criticism has followed suit in describing the symbolic registers of Lorde's voice as "heteroglossic" (Henderson 350) and indicative of a "multi-generic" soul aesthetic (Lordi 60). But what all these descriptions of the polyphony of Lorde's work have in common is that they tend to overlook the relationship between her poetry and her embodied speaking voice. Lorde is hardly an understudied figure, so—as Ashon T. Crawley asks in reference to scholarship on James Baldwin—"what of the blue note, the flatted fifth? . . . [W]hat of the materiality of sound . . . ?" (16).[3]

Part of this critical silence stems from what Meta DuEwa Jones calls the "script-centered focus of the conventional archival record" (4): though many are now available online, most recordings of Lorde's poetic performances are in the Audre Lorde Papers collection at Spelman College.[4] Lorde is also a famously difficult poet to categorize in almost every context, a "both/and/neither" figure, as Linda Garber puts it: she was deeply imbricated within both white and black lesbian circles, American and diasporic geographies, institutional and communal learning spaces (99). Because she eludes normative genealogies of black performance, there has been no analysis of the breadth or the "breath"—the "synaesthetic interaction of text, voice, and body"—of Lorde's poetry readings (Grobe 224).

But the critical silence around Lorde's vocal praxis also stems from an implicit methodological debate about how to represent black sound—one that I would like to make explicit. Situated in one corner of the ever-growing, interdisciplinary field of sound studies, poetry performance studies has moved beyond the legatees of white modernism that cohere around theories like those of Robert Frost's "oversound" and Charles Olson's "projective verse." In doing this work, some scholars have embraced digital humanistic methods. Marit J. MacArthur, Georgia Zellou, and Lee M. Miller, for instance, choose one or two recordings each from over a hundred poets' oeuvres and use software to track and compare differences in vocal production. MacArthur and her coauthors' stated aim is not comprehensiveness but precision; they seek to do away with "strings of adjectives" that are "of limited value in explaining how poets use their voices in distinct ways from one another when they read a poem" ("Beyond Poet Voice" 9). They instead offer a series of "prosodic measures" such as "speaking rate" and "average pause length," often graphing pitch patterns and rhythmic data. This approach has led to fascinating cross-cultural claims: in the "poet voice" of academic readings, for instance, MacArthur hears the haunting of the academy "by the expressivist style of the beat and black arts movement" (60). But this turn toward the quantitative has itself been haunted by the field of black sound studies, which, at least since Fred Moten's *In the Break* (2003), remains skeptical of the logics of capture that anchor formalist methods. The tendency to reduce black sonic practices to graphic visualization, for Maurice O. Wallace, recalls modernist scientific experiments that aimed to make black sound “a property of the photograph” (214). Theorizing the “fugitive voice” of black sound is indeed personal work for Anthony Reed, who says that he undertook “intense study of music theory and performance,” only to realize that analyzing black experimental sound production “according to the terms of Western musicology . . . obscures more than it reveals” (7).[5] As scholars continue to dismantle and refigure the historically ocularcentric house of the senses, there remains significant disagreement over the tools by which to do it, especially when it comes to black sound.

These two methods—what Nina Sun Eidsheim has dubbed the “measurable” and the “symbolic” approaches to studies of sound—are not the same (16). Beyond the politics of fugitivity, there is the difference in scale between distant and close listening. To some extent mirroring the methodological debate in literary studies, the former uses computers to help critics “correct for [their] critical subjectivity” and “find features that [recordings] have in common in ways that our brains alone cannot” (Best and Marcus 17), while the latter seeks out the luminous “details” that function as “portals” into unheard histories and possible futures (Vazquez 21).[6] And though there is a shared interest in the “materiality” of sound, the two methods have different conceptions of that term’s meaning. Discussing his recent collaboration with MacArthur on “101 Black Women Poets in Mainly White and Mainly Black Rooms,” for instance, Howard Rambsy II describes the need to “control for and consider” different “contextual factors” in analyzing the vocal performances of black women poets: “For Jayne Cortez . . . we only found one recording online without musical accompaniment,” which, “unfortunately, makes it nearly impossible to separately analyze the pitch and timing of a voice.” But noise and music—not just pitch and timing—are the very material of black sound studies, which calls attention to the archive, the bodies, and the contexts of a performance. These two methods do not necessarily need each other. But any study of Lorde’s sonic archive needs both—their differences, and the consequences of those differences, made clear. Perhaps unsurprisingly, what has remained buried underneath this implicit debate about methodology is a longitudinal history of black women’s poetic performance, one in which a poet like Lorde is not simply an object of analysis or a useful citation but a producer of sonic knowledge in her own right.

Lorde spoke about her own vocal praxis and how it changed over time. In the posthumously released 1995 film *A Litany for Survival*, for instance, Lorde describes the role her embodied voice played across the arc of her career and how cancer affected it: “I always counted on my voice, being able to breathe my poetry back, to hear it in a certain way, and the hearing would connect inside of me with the feeling, and that’s part of the structure and technique. And I don’t have that because I hear differently now” (1:21:00). Though she resisted the label of “theory” in feminist and literary contexts, Lorde here theorizes a feedback loop between vocalization, audition, and affect, suggesting that the bodily experience of hearing and speaking are interwoven and always changing. Following Daphne Brooks’s claim that “Black women have long been, themselves, fugitive thinkers, critics, and theorists of sound” (5), I argue that Lorde herself offers a framework for understanding the “structure and technique” of her embodied voice and was a prescient theorist of how sound, affect, and embodiment function in the context of poetic performance. Lorde developed a series of techniques for vocally communicating her work over a nearly twenty-year career of performing her poetry aloud: shifting vocal registers, demanding silence from her audience, singing with vibrato, and performing communally with a collective understanding of vocal timbre. But technique is not the only story here: a longitudinal study of Lorde’s performance praxis offers a window into the personal and structural forces that shaped the production and reception of her voice. In what follows, I employ a variety of methods—musical analysis, digital visualization, and prose description—to close listen through Lorde’s sonic archive, careful to call attention to the incalculable sonic “excess” that any single critical method risks foreclosing (Reed 31).

1970s: The Unadorned and the Incantatory Registers

Many of Lorde's early poems feature a singular speaker who hears multiple voices. Often these voices are those of her ancestors or of past lovers; just as often, however, multiple voices come from inside the self. In the poem "Bloodbirth," from her second volume, *Cables to Rage* (1970), the speaker hears a pained inner voice attempting to get out:

> That which is inside of me screaming
> beating about for exit or entry
> names the wind, wanting winds' voice
> wanting winds' power (Lorde, *Collected Poems* 35)

The poem from one vantage conveys the experience of writing a poem as inseparable from the experience of giving birth:

> and I am trying to tell this
> without art or embellishment
> with bits of me flying out in all directions
> screams memories old pieces of flesh

In these lines, Lorde at once defamiliarizes birth with warlike language and fashions a speaker in search of an unadorned voice to describe that experience.[7] But finding the vocal style in which to communicate the act of giving birth is difficult for this speaker because a single voice is always multiple and multigenerational:

> the beginning machinery of myself
> outlining recalling
> my father's business—what I must be
> about—my own business
> minding.

The poem closes by making the tensions between self and other a matter of language, where the splitting of the self is also a multiplicity of grammatical persons:

> . . . the true face of me
> lying exposed and together
> my children your children their children
> bent on our conjugating business.

These lines emphasize a long-standing theme of Lorde's work: that the "I" of a poem is a shared and polyvocal form of subjectivity, across generations and conjugations, across "my" and "your" and "their children."

When Lorde reads "Bloodbirth" on the 1972 WGBH radio program *The Poet Speaks*, the host, Herbert Kenney, notes that she is always "very conscious" of her own children in her poetry (Lorde, Selected poems 50:00). Lorde responds that "all poems, I think . . . are about the poet. We write out of our experience." This conversational framing of the poetic recitation reveals not just biographical details but a sense of her vocal technique—how her embodied poetic voice compares to her everyday speaking voice. There are some similarities: the variability of pitch substitutes for punctuation, making the poetry sound at times like expressive, conversational speech. But *conversational* is not quite the right term. Though it may be the overarching aesthetic of black women's poetic performance during the late sixties—from the "conversational gesture[s]" of (post-1967) Gwendolyn Brooks (Allison 102) to the conversational framing of Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni's readings (Hoffman 184)—Lorde does not sound like these other poets at the levels of diction and speed. Though her work is layered with "vernacular textures" (Gates and Smith 554), she almost never reads her poetry in African American Vernacular English, and her pace is much slower when she recites than when she frames the poem.[8] In distancing herself from any Hurstonian "will to adorn" (Hurston 299), one might be tempted to hear her using "white voice." Lorde did read primarily to majority white audiences throughout the 1970s, and her nonvernacular, slow style may have reflected this general addressee. But in reading in this unadorned style while directly—even militantly—asserting her blackness in the framing and content of her poetry, Lorde was also confounding socially constructed categories of experience by exposing how, as Eidsheim writes, "a culturally derived system of race renders a given vibrational field . . . 'in tune' with expected correlations between skin color and vocal timbre" (4). Though she was deeply influenced, and even published, by figures like Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, Lorde's unremitting use of this unadorned register refused the legacies of both Hughes's "non-expressive, monotone recital" (Jones 40) and Brooks's "slurs, scoops, and 'wanh-wanhs'" (Larry Applebaum, qtd. in Jones 18). In doing so, she opened new sonic space for what a black, woman poet could sound like in the early 1970s.

By the mid-1970s, Lorde regularly employed another distinct register: the incantatory. An early use of it occurs at a 1974 reading at San Francisco State University (SFSU), when Lorde shared the stage with Etheridge Knight. It is the earliest audio and video recording of "Blackstudies," a long poem that concludes her then recent *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974). As many scholars have noted, this poem grew out of Lorde's now open lesbianism and her staunch support for a black studies department at John Jay College.[9] The poem also attests to what Sheila Hassell Hughes calls Lorde's "prophetically double-edged" voice: how, as a public poet and professor, Lorde spoke from an institutional context but also against it (141). This immanent critique comes to a head at the 1974 reading: though SFSU was the first college in the country to have a black studies department, Lorde looks out among the crowd before reading the poem and says, "I wish there were more black people here to hear it" ("Audre Lorde" 8:25). The very sound of Lorde's voice also does this double work. In one moment of the poem, Lorde conveys her fear of rejection in a scene in which students wait outside her office door while she sits inside contemplating her next move. As in "Bloodbirth," the elision of the inner and outer realms provokes a meditation on the question of voice:

While I sit choosing the voice
in which my children hear my prayers
above the wind
they will follow the black roads out of my hands
(Lorde, *Collected Poems* 154)

In connecting voice to skin, Lorde introduces another long-standing theory of voice in her work: because of its embodied enunciation and its embeddedness in the social world, a voice is always already racialized. Angela Bowen has described the mythologically charged poetic voice in these lines of the poem as "persuasively incantatory," but the recording of the SFSU performance reveals how the term *incantatory* also indexes her developing vocal technique (122). Lorde begins reading the first two lines of this stanza in her typical unadorned style, the affect matter-of-fact, the pitches and the pauses irregular. But as she moves into the third line of this stanza, a new pattern emerges: a gradual descending pitch across the entire line ("Audre Lorde" 11:47). MacArthur calls this "monotonous incantation," or the typical "poet voice" of the latter half of the twentieth century (44). She suggests that the sustained use of the register is a way that poets "avoid affective development," and that when hearing it, "we feel that we are listening to any poem, not just this one" (45, 48). But Lorde's reading of this line is anything but monotonous, the affect definitively not flat. It is as if Lorde, with her shift in vocal register, infused into this line an affective intensity that sonically communicates the visual image of her students following the "black roads out" of her hands, the erotic energy of providing spiritual guidance for them. The voice of the lyric *I*, as in "Bloodbirth," is one among many. Yet here the speaker can change her voice depending on the addressee and the effect she wishes to produce. Lorde dips into this "incantatory" register to perform the act of choosing a voice that her poem describes.

Lorde experimented with mixing unadorned and incantatory registers throughout the 1970s, with varying effects. Most often, as in the 1974 reading of "Blackstudies," she would begin reading a poem in the unadorned register and then dip into the incantatory in moments of heightened emotion or eroticism, usually around the pronoun *I*. For instance, when reading her poem "Meet" on *A Sign / I Was Not Alone*, an album that she recorded with Adrienne Rich, Joan Larkin, and Honor Moore in November 1977, Lorde reads primarily in her unadorned register, only invoking the incantatory to emphasize overtly erotic lines like “I will be black light as you lie against me / I will be heavy as August over your hair” (Moore et al. 6:13). In her reading of the persona poem “Hanging Fire,” however, Lorde deviates from her normal practice and reads the entire poem in the incantatory register. The poem lists off the worries of a young black woman, most likely Lorde’s daughter, to whom she dedicates the poem. After repeatedly listening to its musicality, I sat down at the piano and played along with the recording to transcribe the first five lines, separated by syllable (fig. 1).

The transcription risks what Reed calls, following Nathaniel Mackey, “herding” and “hearding” (3, 13) Lorde’s voice into Western musical structures, eliding its intonation and rhythm. But as a document of my own embodied listening, it made me notice how nonmelismatic her reading was: each syllable gets its own pitch, again distinguishing her from other Black Arts poets and soul singers who use multiple pitches on a single syllable. The evenly patterned rhythm of her reading (here indicated by quarter notes), the tritone jumps between the syllables, and the chromatically decreasing pitch at the end of each line (from B♭ to A♮ to A♭ to G and then to both F♯ and F♮ in the last line) together reflect the constant shifting of the young speaker’s blaming, complaining, and conditional thinking (Moore et al. 3:35). Yet the use of a sustained incantatory register here reflects not just the speaker’s tone of voice but also the performer’s—the mother’s—ironic detachment from the speaker. Thus, the incantatory is used in both ironic and sincere orientations toward the poetic word, a vocal technique for representing not just the multiple layers of herself but also the experience of listening to another, multilayered person.

If, as Emily Lordi has suggested, Lorde’s poetry resonates thematically with the soul aesthetic of Aretha Franklin and Nina Simone in its generic polyphony (59), thinking of her embodied voice as similarly multiple is another way to understand her connection to—and her departure from—these contemporaries. What made Lorde’s performance praxis distinct was not the fact that she switched and at times sustained different registers but the very sound of those registers. The distinction between the slow, unadorned style and the chromatic rise and fall of the incantatory distinguishes her from the white lesbian poets she performed with often during the 1970s as well as from many of her black women contemporaries. What made her a prescient theorist of sound, however, was how she merged this aesthetic of switching registers with her philosophy of difference—the idea that a self composed of many overlapping identity markers has an acoustic analog in the multiple, overlapping registers of the voice. But the polyvocal use of pitch was not Lorde’s only tool for performing this philosophy of difference.

1980s: Filled Air and the Sound of Diaspora

The word *silence* in the context of Lorde’s written work often means the opposite of speaking, the covering over of self-knowledge, or an intolerance of difference. Yet in the context of Lorde’s performance praxis of the 1980s, it takes on a more positive connotation. For instance, when Lorde appeared on Judy Simmons’s radio show *On the Real Side* in 1979, the silence that follows the reading of her poem “From the House of Yemanja” is an intentionally crafted space:

> Simmons: I’m not rushing to fill in the silent space which reverberates after all, after you finish each poem. In radio there is this cardinal rule that there must be no dead air.
> Lorde: Oh no.
> Simmons: . . . but the pause between what you read and the next words spoken is not dead air.
> Lorde: It’s not dead, it’s filled.
> (Lorde and Simmons 47:05)

Whether she “shifted subjectivities” (Olson, “Anger” 296) or played the “feminist kill joy” (Ahmed, “Happy Objects” 38–39), Lorde had numerous ways of rhetorically manipulating an audience’s perception of what they were hearing during readings. Demanding “filled” air from her audiences—a technique that may stem from her

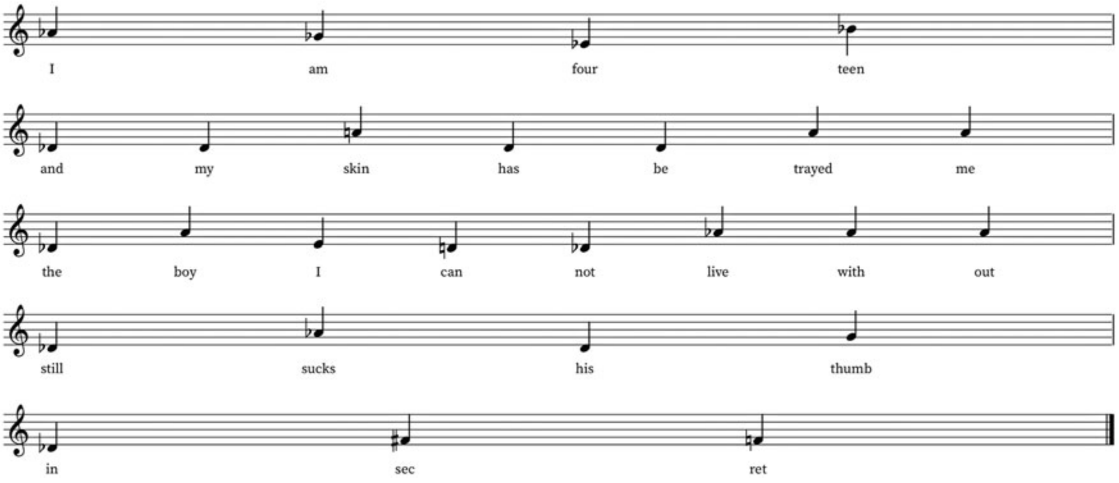

Fig. 1. Transcription of the last lines of Lorde's reading of "Hanging Fire."

experience on the radio but that she develops most keenly in her live poetry readings—became a critical move in Lorde's mediation of the personal and the political onstage in the 1980s.[10]

The request for and the effect of "filled" air first become perceptible in the recording of Lorde's December 1981 reading at Hunter College at a benefit for the Astraea Foundation. The reading—given jointly with Adrienne Rich—was billed as "Poets in Conversation," and it was radically unlike the other readings that week in New York City ("Goings On"). Rich and Lorde do not only explore their differences through the form of the public conversation but also perform them through different reading styles. For instance, after reading "A Litany for Survival"—a poem that became an anthem for women of all identities in the feminist movement—Lorde speaks directly to the audience:

> Now . . . may I ask you, and I hope you agree, Adrienne, to hold the applause, there is something going on here, and it really, it feels not a part of it, it feels not part of our conversation or the kind of thread that I'm trying to follow through, or that we're trying to follow through between us.
>
> (Lorde and Rich, "Conversation," side 1, 26:06)

Controlling the applause became, in the early 1980s, a way for Lorde not only to interrupt the rituals of the poetry reading but also to mediate—not unlike the radio itself—the distance between spoken word and a listening audience. It was a counterintuitive move in that Lorde was engaging the audience precisely by asking them not to clap, but it called attention to the role of an audience member's body in what was happening affectively onstage between, and even within, these two poets. In reviewing the Astraea event, the black feminist writer and then WBAI radio host Donna Allegra described how the poets, in a room "filled largely by women from the feminist community . . . didn't hold to the stand-and-read format, where the audience applauds and stays seated in place. These poets explored with us." By the end of the decade, Lorde would more forcefully articulate her request to the audience, as she does in a recording from the 1988 National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) conference:

> I want to talk to you a little bit about why I say don't clap. You know, that gesture, the touching of palm upon palm. It's a way of getting it off, a way of getting it out. And what I want you to do is to hold it inside until it moves you inexorably out of this room toward the work you've got to do.
>
> (Lorde and Rich, "Reading," side 2, 23:34)

The affective power of poetry, for Lorde, lies in its capacity to create a space in which the feeling evoked by the poet can be transduced to the audience, and then stored, like potential energy, for future use. In that sense, the demand for her audience not to clap is also a political challenge to what Erica Edwards has called the "charismatic scenario" of African American cultural production (ix). While her presence represents a radical departure from the heteronormative masculinity that typically defines charismatic black leadership, the "filled" air is not a "passive silence" but a "radical silence" that repudiates the idea that political power lies solely within her hands (117).

Lorde also began to experiment with vocal vibrato in the 1980s. This can be heard at the 1981 Astraea event in her reading of "Sequalae," a poem she describes—with the Du Boisian language of "double consciousness"—as exploring the psychological effects of whiteness on her self-construction (Lorde and Rich, "Conversation," side 1, 26:44). Critics have advanced numerous compelling readings of the lesbian eroticism and unconventional syntax of the poem, but the recorded performance of "Sequelae" in 1981 offers different insights—both emotional and acoustic—into how her poetics is inseparable from her virtuosic use of register and vibrato. Lorde begins reading the first, prophetic lines of "Sequelae" in the unadorned register:

Because a burning sword notches both of my doorposts
because I am standing between
my burned hands in the ashprint of two different houses
midnight finds weave a filigree of disorder
(Lord and Rich, "Conversation," side 1, 28:30–28:46;
see also Lorde, *Collected Poems* 249)

Once she arrives at the word "I" in the second line, she raises her pitch dramatically, plateaus and draws out the vowel, falls on "am," then rises again to "standing"—invoking the chromatic, incantatory register. Across her recorded performance history after the mid-1970s, the word *I*—especially in erotic contexts—will provoke the use of this register, but here it is only a fleeting indication, an acoustic pointing analogous to the bidirectional pointing of the apo koinou of the word "between."[11] The first stanza of "Sequelae" follows an increasingly small and surreal set of domestic images, as if a camera were moving rapidly from "doorposts" to "keyholes," and the initial use of the unadorned register in these first lines again makes the nightmare of racism *sound* like what it is: an everyday experience. It is only as the imagery becomes more sonic that the register shifts: at the line break of "voiceless morning / voiceless kitchens," the incantatory register becomes dominant, as if to counter the voicelessness described in the poem with her embodied voice. At its climax, when the synesthetic imagery becomes a full-on "carnival of memories," Lorde's voice begins to quaver. The tape quality becomes noisy at this moment in the recording, and then it cuts out before the end of the poem. Unsure of my ears, I used MacArthur's collaboratively made software *Drift 4* to see what Lorde's voice would look like (fig. 2). My perception of a subtle vibrato was confirmed by the rapid fluctuations in pitch in the diagram. But Lorde's vibrato was much more than just pitches on a graph. This performance of "Sequelae" exhibits Lorde's virtuosic shifting between the unadorned and incantatory registers—a way of acoustically dramatizing the two Du Boisian "warring" selves (Du Bois 8)—but also marks the development of that incantatory register into a vibrato that will acoustically define her affiliation with queer, diasporic blackness by the end of the 1980s.

Around the turn of the decade Lorde was already writing about the relationship between sound and diaspora, especially in the opening chapters of *Zami, a New Spelling of My Name* (1982): "Once *home* was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother's mouth" (13). A later chapter entitled "How I Became a Poet" develops this connection between what the ear hears and what the heart knows:

> But out of my mother's mouth a world of comment came cascading when she felt at ease or in her element, full of picaresque constructions and surreal scenes.
>
> We were never dressed too lightly but rather "in next kin to nothing." *Neck skin to nothing?*

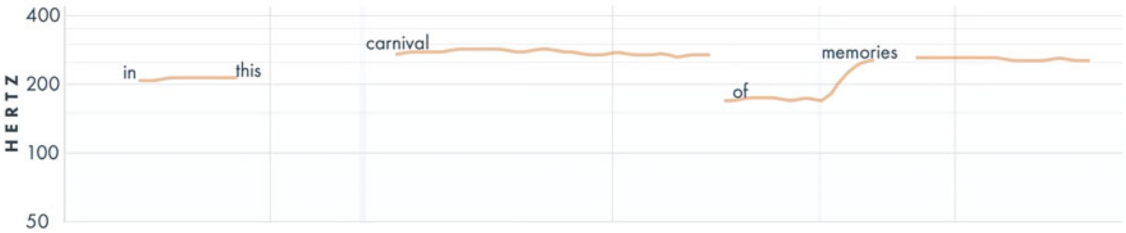

FIG. 2. Fluctuations in pitch in Lorde's reading of "Sequelae."

> Impassable and impossible distances were measured by the distance "from Hog to Kick 'em Jenny." *Hog? Kick 'em Jenny*? Who knew until I was sane and grown a poet with a mouthful of stars, that these were two little reefs in the Grenadines, between Grenada and Carriacou. (32)

One of the central themes of Lorde's "biomythography" is the desire to craft a sense of home that derives not just from the misunderstandings of her "mother's mouth" but from an embodied connection to other women. It is in Lorde's poetry readings that she attempts to perform what an erotic connection to this diasporic, embodied sense of home sounds like. While only a fleeting ornament in "Sequelae," the vibrato is sustained longer when Lorde reads the erotic poem "Meet," again at the Astraea event, especially in its penultimate stanza:

Taste my milk in the ditches of Chile and Ouagadougou
in Tema's bright port while the priestess of Larteh
protects us
in the high meat stalls of Palmyra and Abomey-Calavi
now you are my child and my mother
we have always been sisters in pain.
(Lorde and Rich, "Conversation," side 2, 26:36–27:03;
see also Lorde, *Collected Poems* 258)

Like the references to African mythology across *The Black Unicorn*, the references to African locales in "Meet" frame Lorde's personal and political struggle within the "larger context of an ancient past with a continuing vibrant culture" (Garber 114). But it is not just the intertextuality that does this diasporic work: in these lines, the poem's title, "Meet," is homophonic with the first word of the "meat stalls" she locates in Levantine and African geographies. And in contrast to her 1977 reading of "Meet" on *A Sign / I Was Not Alone*, the vibrato she uses acoustically enacts the vibrant, diasporic eroticism of the poem. If vibrato is "a vocal stylistic trait that is closely associated with genre and the individual singer" (Eidsheim 170), Lorde's use of it again signifies both her attachment to and her departure from a black vocal tradition. Though the vibrato is similarly "economical and intentional" (Daubney qtd. in Eidsheim 170), it does not sound like Billie Holiday's quiet power, and it is also not the "silky vibrato" of Sarah Vaughn (D. Brooks 419). There is an aching resonance to Lorde's voice in these moments, something akin to Nina Simone's fast "deep thrumming under [a] cracked surface" (Dobie 232). And when used in the context of her erotic poetry, it not only carries on the queer tradition of Ma Rainey's "Prove It on Me Blues" but signifies on Rainey's signature vibrato to lift that queer tradition into a diasporic context (Davis 39–40). While the homophonic nature of language—the distance between what she heard and what her mother intended—caused her confusion and a sense of diasporic dislocation as a child, Lorde uses vibrato to vocally emphasize the connection between past and present, the local and the global.

By the end of the decade, Lorde always combined the demand for "filled" air with the performance of entire lines with a sustained vibrato, effectively singing them. This near flight into song had a preacherly tenor: Lorde was haunted for years by the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., and she claimed at a reading at Harvard in 1982 that "the ghost of Malcolm [X]'s voice spoke through her mouth to . . . a new generation of Black people" (De Veaux 306). But it is in her 1988 NWSA performance of "Call," the last poem of *Our Dead behind Us* (1986), that the sound of this poetics of possession can be heard. Lorde began "Call," she says, as a meditation on the "Holy Ghost," that silenced and feminized member of the trinity Crawley describes as central to "Blackpentacostal" glossolalia (207). In reading the final stanza of "Call," however, Lorde merges the theme of speaking in tongues with a sustained vibrato, acoustically dramatizing how the "Holy Ghost" is overtaken by "Aido Hwedo," the androgynous Yoruban rainbow serpent:

> We are learning by heart
> what has never been taught
> you are my given fire-tongued
> Oya Seboulisa Mawu Afrekete
> and now we are mourning our sisters
> lost to the false hush of sorrow
> to hardness and hatchets and childbirth
> and we are shouting
> Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer
> Assata Shakur and Yaa Asantewa
> my mother and Winnie Mandela are singing
> in my throat
> the holy ghosts' linguist
> one iron silence broken
> Aido Hwedo is calling
>
> calling
> your daughters are named
> and conceiving
> Mother loosen my tongue
> or adorn me
> with a lighter burden
> Aido Hwedo is coming.
>
> Aido Hwedo is coming.
>
> Aido Hwedo is coming.
> (Lorde and Rich, "Reading," side 2, 54:33–56:20;
> see also Lorde, *Collected Poems* 418–19)

The title of the poem invokes Gwendolyn Brooks's oft-cited claim "to write poems that will somehow successfully 'call' . . . all black people" (183). And in this final stanza, Lorde is invoking the West African tradition of *nommo*—of "conjuring through naming" (Davis 128). It is an attempt to bring supernatural beings like the rainbow serpent Aido Hwedo into the material world but also an attempt—through her vibrato-laden reading—to conjure a spiritual collective and lift her living "sisters in arms" into a new world. For Wallace, King's vibrato arguably channeled the fugitive voice of the enslaved (217), but Lorde's vibrato aimed to bind past and present beyond a Christian-American context, to color the poetics of possession with a definitively woman-centered and diasporic valence. By performing with an incantatory vibrato and urging the audience to be conscious of their bodily responses to her words, Lorde created a kind of "sonic atmosphere," an acoustic space in which the voice is turned into a "social force" because of the intermingling of affect and acoustic vibration (Eisenlohr 116). In the "filled" air after her performance, she again urges the audience to go out and *use* the emotional energy that her voice may have conjured within them.

Late 1980s and 1990s: Communalism and Racial Timbre

Though many archival recordings document Lorde's performance praxis in interracial settings, it is important to remember that there was a "seismic shift in [Lorde's] primary audiences during the mid- to late 1980s," as she increasingly focused on issues within the black community and among women in the international black diaspora (Olson, "Sisterhood" 109). While the use of a sustained vibrato parallels this shift, her poetry and her performance praxis continued to change in these contexts as well.

One poem that dramatizes this shift is *Need: A Chorale for Black Women Voices*. I use the word *dramatize* deliberately: the poem was drafted after a black actress named Patricia Cowan was murdered with a hammer by a male playwright who auditioned Cowan for his play entitled *Hammer* in May 1978 in Highland Park, Michigan. Lorde was struck by the terror and irony of this story:

she stapled a small article about the murder into her journal in May 1978 and began drafting lyrics in the voices of the perpetrator and the victim (Journal 16). In 1979, she included the voice of Bobbie Jean Graham, a victim of one of the twelve Roxbury murders. In rewriting scenes of violence from the perspective of the victims, Lorde used the "conversation poem" that was popular among lesbian poets like Joan Larkin and Pat Parker to address a pressing issue within the black community—intraracial violence against the bodies of black women.[12] Though Lorde had already experimented with including multiple speakers in her most political and violent poems, *Need* takes this form of polyvocality to an extreme: Lorde stages the voices of the victims as speaking from beyond the grave, where they ask questions of their murderers, ventriloquize the voice of a black male perpetrator, and eventually trade lines with an implied author ("Poet") as if the work were a chorale in the musical sense. In lining out the voices of victimized black women into speaking roles, Lorde transfigures the dramatic context of Cowan's murder into a dramatic form, where the stanzas can be read as speaking parts for collective readers. Lorde wrote in the preface to a 1990 reissue of *Need*, echoing contemporary performative gestures of lesbian feminist and Black Arts poetics, that the poem is made for public use to "open dialogue between and among Black women and Black men," but also that "alterations in the text since the poem was originally published are a result of hearing the poem read aloud several times by groups of women" (3). How are changes in the poem between 1978 and 1990 connected to the communal contexts of its performance?

Though there are no recordings of *Need* in which audience members participate directly in the reading of the poem, there are at least two audiovisual recordings from the late 1980s and early 1990s in the Spelman archive that exhibit how Lorde attempted to foster community through the public reading of a polyvocal poem. The first is a 1989 recording labeled "Women's Poetry Reading, Trinidad," where Lorde reads from an earlier version of *Need* published in *Chosen Poems* (1982). In a 19 May 1989 entry in her journal that year, Lorde writes that this Trinidad reading contributed to her "growing awareness of what being African-Caribbean-American means in a group context" (Journal 35). The 1990 republication of *Need* arguably reflects this "group context" in which she read the poem. In framing the poem in 1989, she reminds the audience that the issue of intraracial violence is anything but solved. And the very soundscape of the performance sonically supports this claim: sirens and car horns blare, accompanying the violence that the poetic language figures.[13] One crucial difference between the edition Lorde read in Trinidad in 1989 and the 1990 edition is the addition of wider spacing between certain words. Alexis Pauline Gumbs describes these spaces as Lorde's technique for making "the brokenness of the contemporary world visible" ("But We" 173), but the Trinidad reading makes this brokenness audible. Thus, one way to understand the caesuras added in the 1990 version of *Need* is as visual signifiers of all the other sounds that filled the performance spaces in which Lorde read this poem. She also makes several extemporal changes in wording when performing the poem in Trinidad—most notably in the fourth line of the first stanza, in which she substitutes the word "blood" for "death" ("Women's Poetry Reading" 10:47). Though perhaps improvised, it is not an insubstantial edit: she included it in the poem's 1990 republication a year later, and it also primes the audience's ears for how the word intensifies in meaning through repetition, signifying not just senseless bloodshed but also racial kinship and menstruation. With the increased spacing in the 1990 edition, the word "blood" literally falls down the edges of the opening stanza of part 2, offering some of the most violent images in all of Lorde's oeuvre:

Dead Black women haunt the black maled streets
Paying out cities' secret and familiar tithe of blood
burn blood   beat blood   cut blood
seven-year-old child rape-victim   blood
of a sodomized grandmother   blood
on the hands of my brother

as women were meant to bleed
but not this useless blood
each month a memorial
to my unspoken sisters fallen
red drops upon asphalt. (Lorde, *Need* 9)

When Lorde reads this poem out loud in Trinidad in 1989, she uses the incantatory register consistent with moments of thematic intensity, but she also reads what will become the pauses within and between the lines in the 1990 republication, her body convulsing on every "blood." With sweat pouring down her forehead, signifying the labor necessary to perform in this register for an extended period, Lorde's embodied vocalization mediates not just between the ancestors and the poet but between the voices of the dead women and the audience, pleading with them directly to attend to this senseless violence. This aesthetic is, crucially, not confessional: it is not (just) a conjuring of the "breath pattern" of a previous personal emotion (Grobe 224) but an enactment of the gasping for breath of the victims (Jones 110). From this impassioned 1989 performance, the idea of filled air takes on new meaning: the increased spacing in the 1990 republication signifies not just the noisy soundscape of the reading but also the pause-filled plea in which Lorde read this poem in front of a live, primarily black audience.

In another audiovisual recording dated 12 February 1992 and labeled "Reading and Workshop on Black Domestic Violence," Lorde holds the newer, 1990 publication of *Need* in what looks like a greeting card store or bookstore. Though Lorde would hold another workshop on domestic violence at Columbia University a few months later, this February reading was a more intimate and intraracially diverse setting: women and men across the generations participate and numerous accents sound. "This is not a performance," she tells them at the beginning of the reading, encouraging the audience to hear *Need* as a call to address violence within their own communities (Lorde et al., "Reading" 8:20). But of course, this reading *is* a performance, just one in which she wishes the political power of her words to derive not only from her own polyvocal voice but also from letting other people speak. The increased polyvocality of the 1990 edition—especially in the fourth section, where the "Poet" and the victims ("All") trade lines—reflects the workshop context: following her reading, Lorde cedes the floor to the audience, demonstrating her skill as a public facilitator. Lorde was integrating into her poetry readings the theatrical practice of the postshow dialogue that Charlotte Canning has described as part and parcel of feminist theatrical culture, encouraging audience members—especially men—to take what they heard at the reading and use it (176–77). The poem *Need*, then, served as a kind of rehearsal tool, demonstrating ways that black women and men *could* speak to each other, one that then plays out in the conversation after the reading and, Lorde hoped, in their lives. Lorde may have also ceded airtime because of the changing nature of her own voice. *Need* testifies, especially when the voice of Bobby Jean Graham speaks, to how the marks of violence are preserved on the body as memory:

Yet I still died
of a lacerated liver
and a man's heelprint
upon my chest. (9)

While Graham's body bears the mark of male violence as traumatic memory, Lorde's own voice was becoming an audible marker of her illness.

Nowhere is the connection between Lorde's changing embodied voice and communalism more apparent than in her final reading. On 20 September 1992, Lorde read several recent poems from what would become *The Marvelous Arithmetics of Distance* in the living room of Dagmar Schultz and Ika Hügel-Marshall in Schöneberg, Berlin. She opens with "Echoes," a poem she began drafting in August 1982 but that bears the mark of the rich synesthesia and the variable spacing of her later work. Like "Bloodbirth," the poem formally enacts the experience it describes:

There is a timbre of voice
that comes from not being heard

and knowing   you are not being
heard   noticed only
by others   not heard
for the same reason.   (Lorde, *Collected Poems* 427)

The phrase "not being heard" echoes down the edge of the poem as if down a canyon wall, the line break sounding back "not being" in the following line and "not heard" in the fifth. Later in the poem, the experience of hearing an echo is again formalized into the oscillation of images across the line break. But what distinguishes "Echoes" is how it serves as a treatise on vocality. When Lorde reads this poem aloud in 1992, she describes how it expresses the larger theme of the collection—that our observations of things can be so dramatically affected by where we are standing (*Dream* 251). The opening stanza offers "timbre" as a vocal analogue to this kind of parallax. Lorde was far ahead of her time in suggesting that timbre is not purely volitional but socially constituted—in positing a notion of what Eidsheim calls "racial timbre": timbre is not simply "everything except pitch and loudness" but an embodied practice shaped by histories of listening and vocalization (6, 32). While in "Blackstudies" a racialized speaker must "choose the voice" in which they speak, here a shared oppression of "not being heard" is what constitutes a collective timbre. With this theory of timbre anchored at its top, the prophetic voice of the rest of this poem—which speaks in the first person and, characteristically, between the erotic and the murderous—echoes with a collective tenor.

In Lorde's performance of "Echoes" at her last poetry reading in September 1992, surrounded by friends, just weeks before her death from cancer, there is a bleak determinism to this understanding of the voice as socially constituted, because the society that does the constituting was deeply racist and profited from illness.[14] When Lorde reads the lines

. . . I am listening
in that fine space
between desire and always
the grave stillness
before choice
(Lorde, "Echoes" 2:14–2:30;
see also *Collected Poems* 427)

her voice sustains the word "I"—resonant and full of all the multiplicity often associated with her performance of the first-person speaker. But when it reaches for the word "grave," it goes up in pitch and lets out a treble, ghostly and haunting. Lorde's voice, stricken from cancer treatment and yet pushing against its limits, registers not only the communal struggle of the black women she speaks on behalf of but also the experience of someone suffering from disease. But Lorde's poetry—and its public performance—confronted that bleakness, that oppressive determinism, with the power of collectivity, of acknowledging shared suffering, and of mobilizing the multiple voices of the self. At the end of the reading Lorde apologizes to her protégé May Ayim for the performance:

> **Lorde:** I'm so really, really, pleased to be doing this. I am sorry my voice is not better today but I hope you could hear it, and I hope you could hear the love with which I share these.
> **Ayim:** It was wonderful, Audre.
> **Lorde:** I am sorry it didn't come across better.
> **Ayim:** It was fine. We know your voice and where it didn't carry the way you wanted, I hear.
> (*Dream* 263)

As this exchange makes clear—and this is perhaps especially true for Ayim, a poet who would tragically take her own life a few years later—Lorde's poetic exploration of voice was a felt experience for her audience. Ayim's assurance that her hearing somehow filled in where Lorde's voice did not fully register is a powerful statement of care, but it is also a way of enacting the vocal parallax that Lorde's poem explores: the idea that the timbre of voice is socially constituted and shared is staged in the dialogue between Lorde and Ayim. Poems like "Echoes" and the republication of *Need* were not just textual experiments for exploring individual biography or collective history but—in their live performance—interpersonal tactics for fostering community.

A New Genealogy

> What you hear in my voice is fury, not suffering. Anger, not moral authority. There is a difference.
>
> —Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (1984)

Dealing incisively with the "uses of anger," the uselessness of guilt, and the politics of self-care, Lorde's essays and written poetry are often cited in studies of affect.[15] In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* for instance, Sara Ahmed describes a powerful scene of racial formation from *Zami* in which the young narrator, Audre, encounters the hate of a white woman on a train. The narrator assumes it was a cockroach that made the white woman recoil, but then realizes it was not a roach but herself. For Ahmed, this scene typifies how emotion does not signify internal states but rather refigures social space. In this case, "the intensification of feeling" simultaneously "creates a border that is transformed into an object" (the roach) while also emphasizing the "apartness of the white body" (*Cultural Politics* 54). But the affective power of Lorde's writing figures not just spatially but also temporally. Lorde went beyond the "naming of various practices and experiences as racism" and into "imagining a different kind of world" (175).

I have tried to give an account of how Lorde's vocal praxis was its "own form of affective technology" (D. Brooks 17). The voice was both metaphor and material for Lorde: it was a poetic subject for exploration and an embodied means of imbuing her written poetry with meaning. Lorde's audiences changed over time and so did her voice, and she developed a series of increasingly communal techniques for performing her work aloud: the use of shifting registers to dramatize her multiple selves, the request for audience silence to disrupt the "charismatic scenario," a haunting vibrato to express her increasing affiliation with the pan-African diaspora, and collaboration with various black communities in the public performance of her work. But to listen through her archive is also to remember that Lorde was not just a technician but also a prescient theorist of sound who understood hearing and speaking as socially constructed, embodied experiences. This is why, I think, she had to insist repeatedly on what anger sounded like in her voice. A media history of Lorde's recorded performances suggests not that any phenomenological experience of emotion has any specific sound but that certain affects "stick" to certain sounds in a way that is historically conditioned, or that the meaning of sound and affect gets made over and over again (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 4). The "transformation of silence into language and action" was a theory of self-revelation for Lorde, but it was also an *act*—an embodied vocal praxis that sought to continually refigure social space and imagine worlds otherwise.

In his seminal *Soundworks* (2020), Reed offers a genealogy of black sound—through Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Zora Neale Hurston—that participated in these world-making poetics:

> Ideas about black sound tend to be proxies for thinking about black community, enabling the idea of a coherent, singular slave culture [Douglass]; a notion of centrality to the nation built on the exclusion and enslavement of blackness [Du Bois]; and a set of practices indexed to alternative social structures whose relationship to nation is uncertain [Hurston]. (39)

In extending this genealogy to figures like Amiri Baraka, Albert Ayler, and Matana Roberts, Reed also extends these theories of sound beyond notions of authenticity, nationhood, and technique and into a "media concept" (26). One might be tempted to immediately subsume Lorde's performance practice into this genealogy, but it is important to remember that Lorde's position in the history of black performance—and especially of the Black Arts movement—was always fraught because she questioned its default heterosexuality and worshipping of male mastery: you would never find a Coltrane poem in her oeuvre. Situating Lorde's sonic texts within and against this genealogy of black sound moves us into the media histories and performance cultures in late-twentieth-century feminisms, ones that challenged patriarchal and heteronormative communal structures through poetry readings, sound recordings, radio broadcasts, and public workshops. Unlike her predecessor Angelina Weld Grimké or even her distant mentor Langston Hughes, both of whom never revealed their sexuality, Lorde wanted everyone to hear the many shades of her voice: "We [Hughes, Grimké, and Lorde] were lost to each other. Well, I don't want that to happen. If there's anyone [to hear] the sound of my voice I want them to know who I am" (Abod 25:25). What Lorde offers this tradition of black soundwork is a poetics of queer embodiment: her performances made questions of gender, sexuality, and race inseparable from the question sound.

NOTES

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1. In some places Lorde's 1977 notes ("Transformation") in fact more closely resemble the version published in *Sister Outsider* (1984), edited by Nancy Bereano.

2. When asked about why she substituted words when reading aloud, Lorde attributed this extemporaneity both to her poor eyesight (she grew up nearly blind for the first five years of her life) and to the unique phenomenology of the vocalizing mouth: "It is different to read out of your mouth than it is to read with your eyes" (*Dream* 233).

3. In 2023, after this article was accepted for publication, Fonograf Editions released a 1970 recording of Audre Lorde reading at Fasset Studio in Boston, with liner notes by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Pamela Sneed, Fred Moten, Carl Philips, and Tongo Eisen-Martin. Before then, the most direct extant analysis of Lorde's speaking voice is Walker's 1995 piece "Audre's Voice," where it is described as "rich and firm and true" (240). Focusing on Lorde's pronunciation of the word *particular*, Gumbs suggests that Lorde's "accent was an amalgamation of her Grenadian and Bajan parents, her NYC community, and her elite education" (*Survival* 405).

4. This script-centered focus has been most recently challenged by Gumbs's biography *Survival Is a Promise*, which makes extensive use of Lorde's recording history.

5. Invoking Best's analysis of the "fugacity of voice" in nineteenth-century law (19), Feldman argues that "fugitive voice"—even blackness—occupies the critical space of negativity once held by modernism (12).

6. Recent formulations of "machine-aided close listening" (Mustazza) and "slow-listening" (MacArthur et al., "101 Black Women Poets") have attempted to bridge this gap.

7. Though Lorde was not yet speaking or writing openly about her lesbianism, her poetic descriptions of birth and voice echo across lesbian poetry anthologies in poems like Susan Griffin's "I Am a Woman Running" and Jan Clausen's "A Sense of Reality" (Bulkin and Larkin 18, 49).

8. MacArthur and her coauthors have described the average poetry reading rate as 134 words per minute ("Beyond Poet Voice" 29) and Lorde's recitation as slower than that of many of her African American women contemporaries (54). But the data used in their study is from a single recording: Lorde's final reading in 1992 (19).

9. See De Veaux's biography for comments on her sexuality (140) and Bowen's article for her support for black studies at John Jay (112).

10. What I am calling *filled air* Gumbs evocatively describes as Lorde's "theory of relativity" and "law of interdependent thermodynamics" (*Survival* 360).

11. Apo koinou occurs when a single word or phrase is shared by two syntactic units, as when "between" functions as a preposition to describe where the speaker is "standing," but also where "midnight finds" (the subject) "weave." Following the work of Amitai Ami-rav, Rudnitsky has persuasively argued that the "syntactic ambiguity here and elsewhere in the poem produces multiple semantic possibilities and thereby plays out Lorde's theory of difference" (482).

12. See Larkin's "Song (Poem for Female Voices)" (Bulkin and Larkin 53) and Parker's "Dialogue" (59) and "Movement in Black" (95).

13. At one point, Lorde stops speaking and says, "I hope [the sirens] are not going to another man or woman" ("Women's Poetry Reading" 8:55).

14. As De Veaux notes, Lorde experienced the impact of racism in pursuit of profit firsthand while working at Keystone Electronics in 1952 alongside other women of color. She was "constantly exposed" to carbon tetrachloride and X-ray machines, and in order "to increase her weekly bonuses, she began cheating on her count by hiding handfuls of crystal [carbon tetrachloride] in her socks, chewing them up and spitting them into the toilet" (40–41).

15. See Lorde's speech "The Uses of Anger" for her innovative thinking about anger and guilt. Citing Lorde's memoir *A Burst of Light*, Musser and Lin suggest that Lorde claimed "self-care not as an indulgence but as an act of political warfare" (11).

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Abstract: This article offers an analysis of the embodied speaking voice of Audre Lorde over the span of nearly two decades publicly performing her poems aloud. Drawing from interdisciplinary methodologies to analyze archival recordings from across Lorde's performance history, I argue that Lorde developed a series of vocal techniques—shifting vocal registers, demanding silence from her audience, singing with vibrato, and performing with a communal timbre—that distinguish her from her contemporaries in the Black Arts movement. Lorde's vocal practice was anchored in the aesthetics of the black church but also deeply fashioned by her queerness, a combination that challenged the default heterosexuality within normative genealogies of black sound. Though Lorde's essays are central to affect theory and her poetic voice is often described as polyvocal, I argue that the material aspects of Lorde's poetic performance practice situate her as a prescient theorist of sound and affect.