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**RE-CALLING THE PAST: POETRY AS PRESERVATION OF BLACK FEMALE
HISTORIES**

by

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I.

Audre Lorde and Natasha Trethewey use their poetry as a call. A shout, a cry, or a song—their poems are their voices, written on the page and sent out into the world. The call tells their readers who they are and what they stand for. The call is constant, and every one of their poems is a call for someone to listen to, as well as a call to action. The very word ‘call’ is the title of one of Lorde’s poems, and from this poem grew my idea of calling in all of her poems, as well as Trethewey’s. Whether it’s the word ‘call’ on a textual level, the subject called by people in their poems, or the call the poets themselves want us to hear, calling is what runs through the two women. Calling does not always have to be the sound of a call, but it can be, which is evident in most of Lorde’s work. Her calls are based in oral tradition, and her poems have a vocal quality that beg to be read aloud. Trethewey’s call is visual, sight-based, and looks at photographs or eye contact as often as it draws from speech. It also often relies on another element of the call: re-call. Both remembering (recall) and calling again (re-call), re-call can appear as looking back to her predecessors, like Lorde. When Trethewey recalls Lorde, it is subtle. But that shows that Lorde’s call has worked. She has created a literary form and herstory—the word for history “emphasizing the role of women or told from a woman’s point of view” (*Oxford English Dictionary*) — that endures after her death. It is her call that newer poets following down the line saw and picked up, understood as a call from the past, and brought into the present. Of course each poet re-works what she is given from her poetic ancestors, changing elements of form and content—but each maintains the building blocks of a poetics based in identity as a black female poet. This is re-call.

‘Re-call’ as a term grows and is redefined through Trethewey’s oeuvre, and we can look back at Lorde and see she was re-calling all along too. Both poets are working with

forgotten histories and thinking about them after time has passed. Trethewey's book *Native Guard* brings back to life black soldiers who fought in the Civil War. *Domestic Work* is comprised of stories of Southern, black, low-wage workers. Lorde's *The Black Unicorn* is a many-voiced documentation of the injustices and histories that have faced all women of African heritage. Both poets are calling into the past and the future, or re-calling the past to call into the present and future. Time, then, is central to the calling—these calls are not only out into a particular place, but through time. Lorde, indeed, finds working within a certain place too constricting. She draws from many nationalities and time periods, combining them into her own retelling of history, one that is more herstory—with goddesses and strong women creating change. Trethewey, meanwhile, looks specifically into the past of the United States, combining her own childhood with other stories of the Deep South.

Both, then, deal in biography. Neither writes poetry that could be seen as confessional—although both write about deep emotions, pain, trauma, and identity. Audre Lorde identified as a “black lesbian mother warrior poet,” and these words are always felt under the surface of each of her poems. Over the course of her career, Lorde wrote classic, rhythmic love poems. She wrote the kind of rage-filled prose poems that could be read as essays; and she wrote essays in the most poetic manner. Her method of taking simple words and complicating them marks her as someone with a unique voice, a unique call. She is not a poet of the oppositional ‘either/or,’ but a poet who needs to be seen as ‘both/and.’

Natasha Trethewey is a southern, biracial poet, who writes about blackness but also about having to grapple with white parentage, and the marginalization she felt from both groups. Her poetry also occasionally draws from more traditional rhyme schemes and forms, while also rejecting any sort of subjectivity these canonical poems would have. She stands

alone, as Lorde does, and gathers to her what she wants to, picking up photographs and re-calling the voices of people who have been completely anonymous. Both women build themselves by themselves, calling their own names over and over, re-calling to their readers who they are.

Identity is at once everything and nothing for both poets. Laurie Ann Guerrero writes about reading Lorde and seeing herself represented both as a woman of color and poet. It was hard, she says, “to burn through the layers of cultural and societal traditions that too often have become internalized by women who were brought up in low-income, underserved communities” (“Birthing the Warrior,” 310). The politics of identity has always been fraught, and the idea of separating yourself from the calls thrown at you and those you choose to call yourself is something Lorde and Trethewey are working out. To divide their poetry from its context of identity is something that all critics are unable to do—such apolitical writing could appear in the future, but not now. In their respective present times, both women focused on the past, seeing the choice to align oneself with whatever one chooses as a freedom to fight for. Audre Lorde could have lived in a world where her “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” moniker was irrelevant and she could exist and write what she did and have it be taken for itself—ahistorical, decontextualized, form-centered. But that world would not have produced Audre Lorde, or Natasha Trethewey thirty years later, or any of the black female poets still defining themselves through their writing. That is what these poets are doing that is so radical: they are choosing what to call themselves. What to call out. What to re-call to their minds and ours. Their poems, at first just words on a page, are the tangible forms of the calls they would make if they spoke to our faces.

Their poetry is open-ended and brilliantly complex. The complexity is daunting for any critic to examine, and it is this resistance to categorization that makes this project a fraught one. Like many who have written about Audre Lorde, I struggle with keeping her whole and not breaking her down, while also needing to think about her individual parts to see what the whole consists of. Like some who have considered Natasha Trethewey, my biracial identity involves the same inherently oppositional histories, our ancestors both the oppressor and the oppressed. I, like others who have written about Lorde and Trethewey, am trying to draw out the multiplicity of their identities while prioritizing race and femaleness above all in my readings. Reading Lorde as just a black female poet seems to fly in the face of what she herself believed. To ignore the fact that she was a black female poet, though, would also be a mistake. I hope to bridge this gap by acknowledging that Lorde is more than her ethnicity or gender, but that those identities do need to be examined so they are given the importance they deserve.

Those concepts which unite Lorde and Trethewey despite their poetic differences—history, genealogy, elusiveness, citation—all involve the act of calling and re-calling in their poetry. To look at Trethewey is to look back at Lorde, and understand where the call and recall begins.

II.

Audre Lorde can be seen as a monolith: a poet who stands alone and is so different from others that to compare them would be impossible. Certainly, the “black lesbian mother warrior poet” name is a completely singular one she invented to call herself. In his article “‘Which Me Will Survive’: Rethinking Identity, Reclaiming Audre Lorde,” Keith D.

Leonard examines her uniqueness. She cannot be called any one thing—she herself would be the first to say that. Black poet. Lyric poet. Lesbian poet. Female poet. Intersectional poet. These are labels that do not confine her. To put her into conversation with others, then, is to choose an aspect of her identity, often to the exclusion of others. But she has a voice and speaks out against this, calling herself what she chooses and giving voice to others so they can call out for themselves.

Leonard begins with the framework offered him by Aldon Nielsen and Lauri Ramey, authors of *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans*. They follow a tradition of not separating the identity politics of blackness from more 'radical' poetic experiments. Nielsen and Ramey claim that their anthology is a solution to the silencing of the "more adventurous of black lyric" (xix) and hope it can be a space for experimental poets. Leonard takes this framework and expands their views on the separation of race-identity and lyric poet-identity. These two are often considered disparate, and that racialized poetry must by definition be non-innovative, relying on standard forms. Nielsen and Ramey see this separation as unnecessary, saying that when you are writing about or from a racialized position you can also be formally experimental or "adventurous." Their anthology features those who unite multiple identities into one. So Leonard finds Lorde to be a perfect example of this and wishes she would have been included. The article is his way of mulling over how Lorde fits into this new tradition of combining personal identity and the poetic self. Leonard's larger claim is not "that Lorde is an experimental poet [...] but rather that her work calls for a more capacious conception of poetic innovation, one broad enough to encompass a trajectory of innovative African American lyric practice that she exemplifies" (759). In other words, Leonard wants her to be placed into conversation with the poets these

editors included in their anthology, and to expand the literary world's understanding of Lorde's poetics.

Leonard's article expresses interest in their exclusion of Audre Lorde from the anthology before looking more in depth at the ways in which he believes she possesses many of the qualities they uphold. The movement of Lorde's work alongside black male predecessors and peers is what Leonard relies on. He introduces a critical theorist or poetic movement, holds Lorde up to it, and places her in conversation with it. He acts as Lorde does, bringing together many different voices and calling them his own, re-calling what each says and then using them for his own means.

He focuses on Lorde's selfhood and her lyric "I" that are seen in poems like "Call" and "Coal." He wants to defend "the simple observation that Audre Lorde is an innovative lyric poet" (761). The observation, of course, is not defended simply. He looks at historical parts of her self-titled "black lesbian mother warrior poet" identity (Black Arts movement, intersections of being a black woman, etc.). He calls on many other critical authors, and ends with a close reading of her poem "Who Said It Was Simple," from which he got his title and epigraph: "which me will survive / all these liberations" (Lorde, 1973). Putting this one poem in conversation, he introduces one of his local claims about the lyric "I" and different aspects of the self, merged into one pronoun that is unified but contains a multitude of selves. The lyric "I" appears in many of her poems, including "Coal." Again, he brings in his notion of community created by uniting various aspects of the self, becoming a poetics that is both innovative and deeply ingrained with personal identity politics.

Leonard is constantly working with the idea of Lorde's poetry being both a combination of many varied traditions (he even references her drawing from African

religions) into a distilled 'one', and also a 'one' standing for itself as it stands for everything else. An example of this is that Lorde herself will write "I" and that will mean herself, but also every black lesbian cancer survivor aspect of herself that she claims, as well as standing for millions of others' experiences. This, he argues, is how Lorde is a "poet of [...] multiplicity" (775,) and why she is incredibly complex to talk about because her poems involve the acceptance of opposites as one. This, in Leonard's mind, is how Lorde's lyric is so innovative, because it manages to be contrasting and many-minded even in a few simple words.

As much as I agree with Leonard's arguments on the separation of form vs. content, it's not necessarily the most productive approach. I would like to argue that her form and content need to go hand-in-hand in order to appreciate her. She writes as a black poet about black political ideas; and her form and style should be comparable to any innovative and experimental poet. She is more than the sum of her parts. It is better to think of her as I do—a poet who manages to re-call history into the present through learning the convention and then ignoring, or building, or (rarely) accepting it. She re-called herself to herself and others, constantly, throughout her entire life.

Born Audrey Geraldine Lorde in 1934 Harlem, New York City, at age four she dropped the 'y' in her name, because she liked the symmetry of writing Audre Lorde. Her parents were immigrants from Grenada; her mother a light-skinned woman who often used her ability to 'pass' as white to obtain jobs, and her father a real estate broker during the Great Depression. "As a writer, [she] detailed a childhood a childhood at the hands of a Roman Catholic, emotionally distant mother by whom she was both intimidated and erotically fascinated. She depicted her father as a hardworking, silent, and shadowy figure"

(De Veaux, 14). These larger-than-life extreme characterizations are typical of Lorde. As Alexis De Veaux notes in *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*: “What is known about Audre’s childhood comes chiefly from Audre herself. Filtered through a highly stylized, literary imagination, certain ‘facts’ and ‘events’ are played, replayed, and edited in the corpus of her work, published interviews, and literary memory” (13). Her obsession with carving her own identity made for differing accounts of what happened in her childhood. Often, what she said and what those around her said were conflicting. She wrote her own narrative, telling herself what she wanted to hear. No matter who tells it, though, from the beginning of her life Lorde was obsessed with having control over herself and her identity—later this extended to myriad relationships and was constantly written about in her journal and poetry. De Veaux says,

Her memories of her childhood became almost mythic constructions of an ugly duckling who was legally blind before age five, clumsy, inarticulate, born left-handed, a stutterer...fat and black. Recalling the abuses encumbered by fate, and reinventing them, she rendered her childhood as literature. (14)

She felt out of place in a strict household and rebelled constantly. Working against her controlling mother (who herself felt isolated in a new country); her father, whose history she only knew in bits and pieces; and her sisters, who resented her being given preferential treatment as the baby of the family; Lorde learned to reject those people and systems which rejected her and create a place for her identity to be fully embraced. Later, this served a greater purpose in her poetry. She wrote what had not been told, what was forgotten or twisted by mainstream white American histories. Anything that was the opposite of her

identity had ‘othered’ her, and she wanted to remember and be remembered by poetic acts of calling and re-calling from the past.

It is telling that De Veaux begins by calling her an “American icon of womanhood, poetry, black arts, and survival” (*Warrior Poet* jacket). She is an American icon first, woman second, poet third. And yet, as Lorde herself would be the first to say, the separation of these identities into priority is difficult to parse. De Veaux writes about the difficulties faced the task of recalling Lorde to life:

How to overcome the struggle between justice to Audre Lorde and justice to the historical record. And how to write of an Audre Lorde who was brilliant, intimidating, visionary: a woman who was creatively ambitious [...] and at once intensely public and intensely private. How to write of her rage and oftentimes violent temper; to present her as real rather than as monstrous. How to walk the bridges of her life, to become—and not become—her. (xiii)

De Veaux struggles with the contrast between the public Lorde that appears on the page and who she actually was—someone who was often incredibly hard to get along with. These contradictions are both impossible to completely navigate and impossible to ignore. To extend this struggle, I think these contradictions are replicated in her poetry. She herself wrote the monstrous, but turned it into the real. And becoming/not becoming Lorde seems like fantasy or fiction. Yet she asks her readers to become her every time they understand her work. Reading Lorde means taking on the identities she has claimed, to claim them as your own. It is the only way to begin to enter into her world. To not become her is to see this single woman as a multitude of separable parts, but not to separate them; to see the paradox of Lorde’s existence, of her poetry that is often insurmountably complex.

She helps her readers by using histories that we may already know, words that we think we understand—simple ones like “I” and “black.” Then she twists and morphs these, calling them by names we see as unrelated and recasting them in a new light. This is part of the act of re-calling: taking ideas that are given, and turning them into something she deems worth receiving. Her poems “Call” and “Coal” are two of the most anthologized, and “Call” especially is the poem from which my ideas of calling, recalling, and re-calling were born—called forth.

Written in 1986, “Call”¹ has a simple title, but like most of Lorde’s poems, the simple title precedes a complex poem. This is a poem that brings the mythic and historic allusions that are typical of Lorde’s works, from the first lines, where she invokes the “Holy ghost woman...Rainbow Serpent” (417.1-3). Later we learn that the Rainbow Serpent’s name is also Aido Hwedo; this initial naming is central to the themes of orality and speaking present throughout. The persona’s address is in second person, and the call of the title is the call that Lorde’s speaker makes, first to her mother and then to many more women.

The name Aido Hwedo is repeated in each stanza, all ending with variations of “Aido Hwedo is coming.” Not only does this repetition serve as another call, in the oral tradition, but also the name itself is assonant in sound. From the title, Lorde gives us various iterations of the word ‘call’ and the act of ‘calling’. Many different voices call and are called, but all share a commonality that transcends place and time. “Call” is a poem that is itself a call. It contains the calls of women—young, old, mothers, goddesses, and fighters—who are calling for someone (Aido Hwedo) or something (which the coming of Aido Hwedo will bring). The calls are both about the act of calling, of opening their mouths and being vocal, and about what is being said, the content of those calls. The pairing of form—the women callers—and

content—the distinct things each woman calls—makes this larger collective of female voices. The tightness of the group of called/callers means that this poem is meant specifically to reach for black women. They are the audience, and, once they have read and understood the poem, they can become callers too. This poem creates community and unity. In hearing the call, you can pass it on. If you are a caller, like Lorde, then you are someone who already knows the importance of community. “Call” spreads like fire, both on a textual level and for those who receive the poem. Those participating in the poem know Aido Hwedo is coming and expect a change; we read the poem and know that Lorde is the one who hopes to effect this change. She takes the call off the page and passes it along to each woman who reads her, and women like Trethewey who write after Lorde add their own voices.

With the second stanza she moves from the spiritual to the everyday domestic; something which women are expected to navigate and spheres which are associated with femininity both now and throughout herstory:

On worn kitchen stools and tables
 we are piecing our weapons together
 scraps of different histories
 do not let us shatter
 any altar
 she who scrubs the capitol toilets, listening
 is your sister’s youngest daughter
 gnarled Harriet’s anointed
 you have not been without honor
 even the young guerrilla has chosen
 yells as she fires into the thicket
 Aido Hwedo is coming. (417.8-19)

“On worn kitchen stools and tables/ we are piecing our weapons together” brings an immediacy to what is happening; it establishes a setting from which this call is made. The use of “we are” means it is now, and past forgotten faces converge with the “coming” of future Aido Hwedo. Everything comes together in the kitchens—poor women’s spaces—of those who remember the past and forge new histories. Yet she invokes weaponry, which is the bringing of something thought of as masculine into a feminine space. The weapons are necessary because just remembering “scraps of different histories” does not let them “shatter any altar.” The word altar is juxtaposed with the next line which mentions toilets, and there is an irony: the altars have been built to the exclusion of Aido Hwedo and forgotten females, while an unnamed, universal “she” (much like the ‘I’ of Lorde’s poem “Coal,” representing many black women) “scrubs the capitol toilets,” which serve to take the waste of those who have put themselves into power.

This second stanza includes a name “Harriet” and, given the context, the reader might assume the last name Tubman would make sense. Thus is established another mythology and legend, that of America’s ‘female Moses,’ as well as emphasizing that in this poem, everything is female: its author, subject, and audience are female. The “young guerrilla ...yells as she fires into the thicket” and in doing so reclaims guerrilla violence—not standard, militarized, government and patriarchal sanctioned war, but the subversive, scrappy fighting of the oppressed. She is calling loudly, and is one more female voice adding to the building of a song of women calling each other. In this case, she is calling to fight, and there are violent images scattered throughout “Call”: “weapons,” “shatter,” and “warring,” women who “brought fire back home in the snout of a mortar” (418.41), “fire-tongued” women, all breaking the “iron silence” that has been imposed on them for too long. The fire-tongued

women are burning as they call. These terms of violence are always also about speech, and calling. The combination of voice and action is powerful because as they call, they act and create change. The violence serves as something that gets the attention of the oppressors while allowing the oppressed to destroy the barriers to their humanity. Black women are often stereotyped or dismissed as “angry,” yet why would they not be? Audre Lorde answers the dismissal of physical action with a poem that calls—she uses words to enact, to incite. Her call is both safe, because it is on the page, and incredibly powerful in what it hopes to do. This stanza unifies through its images of speech as it does with violence. Equating the two means that she lets people know that their calls can be action; can be the violent, change-makers in and of themselves as they also call people to action.

In each stanza, she incorporates the coming of Aido Hwedo in a different way. In stanza two, the guerrilla yells the proclamation. In the third, “my children...say” it. In the fourth, it is whispered from a prison cell, while the speaker “a Black woman stripped down and praying” says it in stanza five. In six, her coming is shrieked. In the last stanza, we finally hear back from Aido Hwedo, who is “calling/ calling” (419.78-9). This is the moment where the title of the poem is actually heard in the body of the text. The poem ends with the repetition:

Aido Hwedo is coming.

Aido Hwedo is coming.

Aido Hwedo is coming. (419.84-6)

It is both the call, and the response to the call, and it shows the unity of the black female voices Lorde claims and speaks as. By positioning her persona as calling the same line three times, she herself is the caller. But she is also the called. She is writing as herself, a black woman who is the target audience and receivers of this call, while also speaking as the

unifying voice that does the calling. This unifying voice serves as protector of herstory and myth (both past and the new mythology she creates by uniting women across global traditions and eras). This unifying voice is that which repeats “Aido Hwedo,” and that which talks of an “us” that includes all her readers. This unifying voice repeats over and over what she wants everyone to hear and is a voice that is itself a representative of Lorde’s many-faceted self. This unifying voice is the call. The call is a call to battle, to rage, to change. It is a call to break the silence imposed by a tight tongue and a heavy burden. It is the call that, in Lorde’s mind, all black women must hear, for we are all the “Holy ghost woman” of the first line. We are all supposed to hear the call and respond, to act, to speak.

Stanza six is especially dense in allusions to Lorde’s knowledge of cultural herstory as are those that follow:

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 Asantewaa
 my mother and Winnie Mandela are singing
 in my throat (418.66-74)

Oya is a goddess of storms and winds whose name means “she who tore” in Yoruba.

Seboulisa is a “mother goddess with one breast” (Lorde’s own notes). Mawu is a creator, sun and moon goddess, and Afrekete is an ocean goddess. All come from various African origins and religions. These goddesses are placed immediately before women who are actual powerful figures with African ancestry. Parks and Hamer are indisputable Civil Rights activists grouped together, the former for her quiet resistance and the latter for helping black

Americans vote. Next come Shakur, a hugely controversial figure in the militaristic Black Liberation Movement, and Asantewaa. Lorde extends her allusions beyond American women here with the last—Asantewaa was the queen of Ejisu in the Ashanti Empire, and Winnie Mandela was South African. The most interesting member of this group, perhaps, is the speaker's mother. She is placing her among the ranks of incredibly important, world-changing women. Furthermore, the speaker, by extension, must be important, as all these women are singing their call through her. Whether or not the speaker is known to her reader, Lorde makes clear that in the act of writing the poem, she herself is taking on the role of the persona (and rejecting it, because the poem is not 'about her' as other poets would write about themselves). These are allusions to women who have all affected her and their communities incredibly, and in placing them in the same lines Lorde is again making them mythic. She is the physical embodiment, the voice, for these women. Again, the idea of calling returns. The speaker calls *on* them and *to* them by invoking their names in this context. She also calls *as* them. To speak *as* and *by* these disparate, yet newly united voices, Lorde makes the reader see the black woman both as individual (Lorde's poet, real self) and also as representing the experience of anyone, and so she is part of the mythology. She is singular and multiple. When she says, "I am a Black woman" in line 30 for the first time, we realize that there are many voices saying this, calling it.

The repetition of "Aido Hwedo"; mentions of blackness; sisterhood and familial ties; and spiritual images all contribute to the voicing, oral tradition of the poem. The audience becomes another caller when we voice the poem, either by reading or speaking it. Further rhetorical devices that make the poem itself seem like a call are assonance and alliteration: "Aido Hwedo," "seductions self-slaughter" (417.32), and "safety of separations/ sung the

spirals” (418.46-7) as well as near rhymes like “power” and “flounders” in line 49. Her stanzas are fairly uniform in their form on the page, similar in length, which also make the poem seem like a song, as do the moments in which extra spacing is added, subtly, within a line to give the reader or speaker pause. The oral quality when this poem is read, with repetition and pauses for breath, is a way the reader can access the calling that is so present in her poem.

Voicing these calls is the main project of Lorde’s work. This is not to say that calling and voicing, re-calling and seeing, are always related or mutually exclusive. In all of her poetry, Lorde recalls by remembering her predecessors, and re-calls by re-writing these women into a new herstory, one that rewrites the past and reimagines the future. In her article “‘Artifacts for Survival’: Remapping the Contours of Poetry with Audre Lorde,” Sagri Dhairyam parses why Lorde needed to re-call a new history. Calling it a ‘remapping’ of poetry, she reflects on multiple levels of discrimination Lorde faced. At one level, her poetry was not analyzed or written about as much as her theoretical works. At another level, her poetry had to fight for a space— because of her many identities, where it fit with race it stood out in sexuality. Dhairyam named this the “double agenda of Black women,” saying, “They have not only to deal with their absence from cultural discourse at large, but they also have to refigure the images that make them present even within a mainstream feminism that claims to give them voice” (4). To use Lorde’s term, they had to re-call what was given to them and make it their own. She certainly does this, and goes beyond what Dhairyam sees as limited but which is actually just more complex than most of us can hope to understand. Neither Lorde’s self nor her poetry are easily dissected—for that would mean that what she re-called as truth could be changed or challenged.

Unlike the calling/called many-voiced plural women in “Call,” Lorde’s “Coal”² begins with an ambiguous, singular ‘I’:

I
 is the total black, being spoken
 from the earth's inside.
 There are many kinds of open
 how a diamond comes into a knot of flame
 how a sound comes into a word, coloured
 by who pays what for speaking. (6.1-7)

The reader begins unsure whether ‘I’ is the number one, indicating further sections to come, or whether it is the I of the persona of the speaker. The next line does not clarify this much, because it continues, “is the total black.” So we are left wondering whether the total black is the visual form of the letter I on the page, or whether it’s a grammatically different way of stating “I am,” perhaps one that draws its rules from African American Vernacular English (AAVE). This would make sense, as referencing blackness in both color and racial contexts comes later in the poem. Indeed, “Coal” is, at its core, a poem about subverting and breaking down the stereotype that blackness should be equated with animal savagery, evil, and violence.

Next, we see that the black is “being spoken/ from the earth’s inside.” The blackness (be it black people or just the general concept) coming from inside the earth takes on a mythic quality: something birthed from the earth now is being explained. Myths are told to explain where commonplace things we don’t understand come from. In this case, blackness is that which Lorde posits as misunderstood. So, in a way, “Coal” is a creation myth, showing first that black is something that needs further explanation, because she does not accept what a racist society tells her. Then, she gives her own story of what it is—as natural

as anything else of this earth, not alien, deserving of inferior treatment. Coming from the earth as a jewel does, black is inherent and intrinsic, not a mystery. Furthermore, Lorde's personification of the mysterious 'I' gives us more clues—perhaps it is not personification but an indication that the self is the 'I' that is speaking. In the second stanza, the 'I' is not used or mentioned, but the persona does speak in first person. The fourth line, “how a diamond comes into a knot of flame” introduces the concept of blackness becoming brightness or color. Lorde goes on to say that the flame is “coloured/ by who pays what for speaking” (6.6-7) and we see that color is not just the spectrum of light but is also politicized and racialized. Different people pay different prices because of the color of their skin, their socioeconomic class, (and, it must be added, their sexual identity—all combined).

The rhetorical devices used are abundant. There is repetition of “how” in the first stanza contributes to the informative tone: Lorde's persona is teaching her readers about the “many kinds of open” (6.3). This carries into the second stanza, where openness is again discussed through similes of images, some beautiful, most with a slight uncomfortable edge. There is sun, but it comes in a “passing crash.” A book is not read, but torn apart, and “the stub remains/ an ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge” (6.14). After all, some calls leave the mouth in pain and bleeding. Lorde lets us know that there is damage caused, and debt created, by speech. The words depend on “who pays what for speaking” and sometimes words that leave a nonblack person feeling fine will harm a black person. What seems familiar when heard suddenly turns against the speaker once called from a black woman's mouth. The entire poem operates within the unease of something falsely beautiful, uncannily acceptable.

Lorde embraces, accepts, and makes positive these moments of discomfort, which normally would be taken as negative. There are two instances, however, of when words are not okay, and they both occur in moments of embodiment. First the speaker says, “Some words live in my throat/ breeding like adders” (6.15-6), then, later, “Some words/ bedevil me” (6.20-1). It is this last statement that is almost eerie. The two lines parallel each other, equal in length on the page and both with two words. Lorde never says which words do this to her persona, leaving the reader hanging after the previous buildup of sharp, unsettling images. This is very rhetorically effective, because we pause on the page and wonder what words could have such a strong effect. The use of “bedevil” is also a reference to the negativity she has worked with and reshaped into something for her own use, to be seen as positive. The fact that it is the devil, something that also comes from the ground, adds to her reclaiming the positivity of blackness. Unspoken, though, is the opposite: the “black is bad, white is good” binary is only evident in the lack of mention of whiteness. And why should she mention whiteness? The incredible power of this poem is that it does not even deign to mention the supposed opposite of black. It sets up for its readers the binary set by the oppressors without using the terms forced upon the oppressed to explain their condition. By just using blackness, she calls from inside (like the “earth’s inside”) the group. From within blackness, she explains blackness to those who understand it. She uses the “many kinds of open” to show how some words make sense as calls to black people—“open like a diamond”—, while others are harmful—“ill-pulled” teeth— and need to be paid for in pain. It is, again, her way of forming this mythology specific to black people, black women that by her estimation should exist outside of the histories of white people, just as the terms of

blackness should exist outside of any consideration of whiteness. It is her way of shifting power, forcefully, to blackness and giving it strength and beauty.

The last stanza, though still claiming power, shifts to a softer tone. “Love is a word, another kind of open” (6.23) is incredibly tender—we have seen harshness and the politics of color, but not love. The reader cannot imagine that love is a word that bedevils the speaker. The last three lines of “Coal” echo the first few, but to an optimistic, rather than negative, conclusion:

As the diamond comes into a knot of flame
I am Black because I come from the earth’s inside
now take my word for jewel in the open light. (6.24-6)

We finally see who the mysterious ‘I’ from the beginning is; we realize that ‘I’ is the speaker—“I am Black” parallels “I/ is the total black.” There is also a return to the reversal of blackness as a negative, as is usually seen in other (usually non-African American) poetic traditions. The reader is shown where the blackness comes from—the earth’s inside, like the coal of the title. But, like coal, when enough pressure is applied, a jewel emerges. The slant rhyme of “inside” and “light” make her meaning especially clear: we are to take her words, which she needs to speak because of the societal pressures put on her as a black person, and see them as valuable and beautiful. In using the rhyme there is slight conformity to what is historically seen as poetically pleasing, but in the refusal to make it an exact rhyme she writes her own history. As Dhairyam writes: “In unselfconsciously taking Lorde’s ‘word for jewel in the open light,’ we accede in the violations perpetrated upon the poet as both Black and woman. But the paradox here is that if we do not perform those necessary violations, we leave her unspeaking in the silent recesses of earth” (3). Although Dhairyam posits it as a paradox, Lorde would more likely see it as a truth. That the two interpretations exist in the

same plane of thought is merely her way of calling out her readers, reminding us to critically think and recognize what she says as truth: literally, the poem enacts on a textual level what it calls us to do in life. It is as if Lorde is giving us the origin story of every unnamed black ‘I’ who, under pressure and emerging from the earth, is black and also beautiful in who they are and what they say. At the same time, she is saying that this speech comes with a ‘price’; that just saying something does not make it true. Her analogy of the difficulty of turning coal into diamond is equated with that of turning speech into appreciation of blackness, creating a mythology for a new understanding of the importance of black voices.

This mythology—a new mythology, in that it did not come from a single source or reflect any single ideal—is crucial to understanding Lorde. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) is Lorde’s biomythography—biography plus mythology—and in it, she explicitly lays the ground for reinterpreting, re-calling an unsatisfying past and reworking it to reflect something more true for her life. (Brenda Carr, “A Woman Speaks...”) Lorde’s genealogy and lineage look radically different from those of others—other women, writers—but a new generation of poets like Natasha Trethewey draw from her established mythologies and accept them as history. Lorde is seen as a solitary figure but to place her in conversation with other poets is to indicate that her poetry is working and evolving within a literary lineage that she both reshapes and negates.

The difficulties Lorde presents are very different from those of Trethewey’s works. Lorde’s insistence on double-signifying, in addition to a collective consciousness, herstory, and memory (which Trethewey does draw on), means that often each of her words has multiple, and sometimes conflicting, meanings. Trethewey, meanwhile, uses a vocabulary familiar to those who are African American, live in the Deep South, or are readers of poetry.

Her work often relies more on shared regional histories rather than a double or multiple signifying vocabulary drawn from many cultures, regions, and languages. Hers is a call to Americans, but that does not mean she calls away from Lorde—she just narrows the call and re-calls from somewhere we all know. In a way, this makes her poetry simpler to read, because it does not involve as much knowledge of hidden histories outside of the U.S. By focusing on a specific region, though, she pays tribute to all black American women, including Lorde.

III.

Natasha Trethewey was born in Gulfport, Mississippi, on April 26, 1966. Her white father, Eric Trethewey, was a poet, professor, and Canadian immigrant. Her black mother, Gwendolyn Turnbough, was a social worker. Her parents were together in a time before interracial marriages were legal in the United States, and Trethewey experienced hate crimes before the age of six, when her parents divorced. Her experience as a biracial woman in the south, spending time in Atlanta and New Orleans, colored her poetry. When her mother died, Natasha was 19. In the absence of her closest black female role model, she had to search elsewhere for answers to the racial issues she struggled with. Her father encouraged her poetic career and Trethewey followed his footsteps in becoming a teacher and poet. She became very interested in the project of recalling history, memories that were both personal and those that pertained to a larger group of black southern people. In an interview with Jake Adam York, she says, “I’ve always had that kind of documentary impulse...to preserve” (*Southern Spaces*). She goes beyond simple preservation, though, acting as a historian who brings to the forefront people and events that have been ignored, or silenced. “The act of

writing the poem for me really was an act of being the author of the past in some ways...the past that I felt powerless in, I don't feel so powerless writing" (Trethewey, 2010). In this manner, Trethewey's history is the same as Lorde's, because she takes back power she has been denied all her life. She gives herself authority by re-calling and calling to the past, and in the process allows black people, especially black women, to call for themselves to the future and be seen in the present. Whereas with Lorde this might appear as a more mystical, legend-based re-call; Trethewey grounds hers in the direct herstory of herself and the place from which she comes.

Natasha Trethewey's poems, like Audre Lorde's, are constantly calling and re-calling. While Lorde uses the more verbal aspects of calling, focusing on voicing and sound, Trethewey uses recall more. Re-call is calling back, replying, and bringing stories into the future. Recall is remembering, something William M. Ramsey addresses, "If history is in continuous and fluid upheaval, the artist must contest official history, which serves power elites of the current moment, and look for opportunity to alter social space. As Trethewey argues, one also must re-inscribe history" (*Contemporary Black Chroniclers*). In language so inherent to Trethewey and Lorde, and with an added vocal and visual element, the re-inscription becomes a call. Both calling and re-calling are equally important to Trethewey, and she relies on the visual, what she sees and knows to be true when looking at a scene.

Her first volume of poetry, *Domestic Work* (2000) is her encompassing history of black workers. She weaves together portraits, scenes, and insights of everyday, working-class African Americans. The collection creates a photo album of people who are connected by their skin color, their jobs, and the ways they are perceived by society. In many poems, she is literally looking at images of people from long ago with whom she has no real-life

connection. Rather, she enters into their minds with the knowledge that comes from a collective consciousness. The commonalities of shared ethnicity, gender, and position in a world that is uncaring serve as Trethewey's access to their long-buried minds.

The poem "Three Photographs" is, as the title tells us quite clearly, about three photographs taken from the "American Highways and Byways" series by Clifton Johnson in 1902. Johnson wrote a series of books set in various American regions, with photos illustrating his text. He introduces his *Mississippi Valley* book by saying, "In both text and pictures I have tried to show actual life and nature as I saw them...the volumes in this series are often consulted by persons who are planning pleasure tours" (Johnson, 1906). It is especially significant that Trethewey has taken something that truly existed—these people, subject and chronicler, have died and she brings them back to life. She literally rewrites a history that already exists, the evidence of which is right at her fingertips as she composes these poems. She uses poetry to re-call these photographed but silenced voices: "In discussing several recent poems about racial murders from the South's past, Trethewey argues specifically for the musicality of poetry to convey the previously unspeakable" (Richard Russell, "The Black and Green Atlantic"). In this way, we see the importance of her poetry, and Lorde's, and every other black female poet who changes history with the beauty of their verse. Poetry is a medium that does not hold the tension of a 'real' photograph compared with the truth of the scene; poetry does not require evidence for it to be valid and true. Thus poetry is the perfect medium for herstory because it can express what it wants and tell us to take it as truth, and we listen.

Written in three parts, the first section of "Three Photographs" is entitled "1. Daybook, April 1901" and begins "What luck to find them here!" Written from Johnson's

perspective, this exclamation guides the tone of almost indecent pleasure. It is clear the persona of the poem is an outsider, as he has 'found' these men rather like the first European imperialists 'found' the Americas. The speaker continues:

Through my lens, I watch them
strain against motion, hold still

for my shutter to open and close—
two Negro men, clothes like church,
collecting flowers in a wood,

pine needles and ivy twisting round.
I think to call it Bouquets for Sweethearts,
a blessing though their faces

hold little emotion. And yet,
they make such good subjects.
Always easy to pose,

their childlike curiosity.
How well this arbor frames
my shot—an intimate setting,

the boughs nestling us
like brothers. How fortunate still
to have found them here

instead of farther along
by that old cemetery
too full with new graves

and no flowers. (6.2-22)

Constantly calling attention to the fact of his outsider status, he mentions his lens, shutter, framing, setting, and posing. Everything is an act, as he sees it, and molding these men to what he wants to present to his white audiences. It is interesting, then, that he presents it as truth when photographs are supposed to capture the reality of a scene. Instead, it is staged, and Trethewey allows us to see slips and moments where the screen is pulled aside without actual access into the subjects' interiority. Just as they don't speak to the narrating photographer, so they don't speak to us as readers. "Their faces hold little emotion" (6.9-10) he says, as they hold what he has termed "Bouquets for Sweethearts."

This whole section is ironic, because the persona sees one thing and the author and readers know another. The chance, 'lucky' finding of these men, dressed up, having collected flowers and outside a cemetery of new graves, with grim faces, tells us that they have people in their lives who have died recently. The unspeakable sadness of their situation permeates what their response to the photographer is—which is to ignore, to not respond, to simply allow him to do what he wants so as to not stir up any trouble or add more pain to their days. The photographer's failure to understand the situation shows the lack of understanding of the people he is photographing, as well as indicating an inability to empathize that speaks to a larger problem. This lack of empathy, and indeed apathy, towards these subjects reduces them to less than human, or infantile—he uses the language of toys: emotionless, "childlike" faces; they are "easy to pose": he has "found them." Seeing black bodies as less than human is a large facet of anti-black racism, and Trethewey's poem shows how the problem pervades. In her other works, she deals with bringing to light—re-calling—these harsh realities that continue to be ignored. Of her collection *Bellocq's Ophelia*, critic Sarah Kennedy writes that, "[the town in New Orleans in which it is set] is not the tale of Storyville

that American historians and popular culture have led us to see as its ‘truth,’ but that is much of Trethewey’s point” (162). Calling it by the same name but making it something that reflects a new truth is the project of much of Trethewey’s work. The new truth is what emerges when she silences the oppressors and calls attention to the silence of the oppressed. Trethewey is taking what has been called truth and re-calling the real truth—like using flash in a photograph, she highlights the actual truth. Unlike Clifton Johnson with his false, incomplete photography, though, she re-calls/re-takes the photos so they reflect the reality of their subjects.

The silence of these men is a different kind of call, one that is evident both in their textual silence but also in the fact that Trethewey has given them voice by writing about them. Or rather, their lack of an active call shows that silence can lead to misinterpretation, their black silence making way for white disrespect of the situation they are in. We do not know what exactly was on their minds, but Trethewey recognizes that there is a tension between life and death in the scene that Johnson completely can’t see. Though the men do not speak to the photographer, they do speak to Trethewey, who uses vision as a way of conveying meaning, rather than voice. They call with their demeanor, their situation, their silence—and they make Trethewey re-call them into the present in this section.

Trethewey calls attention to the fact that this poem is written from a voyeuristic perspective by the way it flows seamlessly into the second section, “2. Cabbage Vendor.” Beginning, “Natural, he say. / What he want from me?” (7.23-4) we see the shift in perspective, in diction, even as it incorporates similar images, the “natural” recalling the bouquets from the first section. The persona here becomes a cabbage vendor, speaking in the dropped ‘s’ and ‘g’ endings, double negatives, and variant grammatical forms of AAVE. This

is a distinguisher used by many poets, including Audre Lorde—marking language as black. Here, the subject of the photograph actually does speak, turning the tables and judging the photographer:

Nothing natural last
 forever.

 Growing cabbage and cook cabbage
 don't keep. Even dead
 don't keep same. But he will
 keep my picture,
 unnatural as hoodoo love.
 I should work a root of my own;
 I could turn that thing around,
 make him see himself
 like he been seeing me—
 distant and small—
 forever. (7.31-52)

The woman's strong voice makes this part particularly unique because it is preceded by a stanza from the perspective of Johnson, the photographer. The ties between the two stanzas are maintained, though, by small moments like mention of the dead that "don't keep same." She is unnamed, but speaks for herself, and essentially calls out the man for his complete lack of understanding. She repeats to the reader what he says, but translates it through her own vernacular. Since we have already heard the voice of the photographer we know he would not speak as she does in lines 3-6:

Say he gone look through that hole,
 watch me sell my cabbages
 to make a picture hold
 this moment, forever.

She omits a few words that would make this section more grammatically standard, or closer to the speech of the white photographer. In that way, she, and Trethewey, call attention to the fact that she is outside the (mis-)interpretation of the white photographer. The idea of calling and re-calling here is specifically based in photographing the ‘other’ that was excluded from history: black, working-class people. This poem lets these people answer the ‘call’ of the photographer—they speak back but with gazes, with Trethewey’s re-calling them from the present, and not in the way that allows Johnson to ignore them. Like his photographs, their voices are tangible now through Trethewey’s interpretation.

The idea of holding physical evidence of a moment is one that the cabbage vendor finds impossible. Because Trethewey focuses so much on sight and the visual, the idea of capturing it in a physical form is one that is both in opposition to her project and inherent to it. For *Domestic Work* to exist as a volume, Trethewey had to access photographs, which are proof of these people’s existence. It helps her recall what happened, but at the same time, a photo only shows a single second of time, and doesn’t necessarily reflect the truth. This problem is highlighted in this woman’s monologue: “Nothing natural last forever.” Yet Trethewey is able to make her last a little longer by re-calling her to the present and giving her a voice that calls to the photographer as well as to us.

When she talks about what lasts (“keep same”) Trethewey allows the lines to be read in two ways: “Even dead / don’t keep same. But he will / keep my picture, unnatural” (7.43-6). The unnatural, here, is in contrast to what the photographer sees as ‘natural’ poses (a contradiction, in this case). The idea of ‘unnatural’ is not just relevant to the content of this poem, furthermore. Ramsey writes, “Because her biracial identity links her to both the white and black groups, [Trethewey] has felt quite personally the unnatural, alienating exclusion of

the black narrative by the white” (2012). Her very existence was considered unnatural at the time of her birth. The silencing of an entire population of Americans based on skin color is unnatural. And in this poem, a white man keeping a photo of a black woman he knows nothing about is unnatural. To publish her photo without knowing her further perpetuates the silencing of black women, because he has captured her in a state that is unnatural for her, in that he exists in it and is asking her to change herself or accept him in her space. By calling attention to one idea of ‘unnatural,’ Trethewey calls attention to them all, through the voice of the woman.

The enjambment after “will” makes it seem like he’ll “keep same,” i.e. the man is the only exception to change. The understood implication is that this is a metaphor for racism, that the man will never capture the truth in his photographs but will continue his voyeuristic misconstructions for all time, even beyond death. When she finishes with turning the camera around, she reiterates that he will see a distortion of her, “distant and small—forever” (7.50). She has actively reversed the gaze here. Even though the photograph is static, Trethewey lets this woman speak. With the photographer’s opinions silenced, this woman is able to call. William Ramsey says, “She wrote her first book, *Domestic Work*...with an archaeologist's motive—to unearth and imaginatively restore the remains of a buried southern heritage, in particular that of black women” (“Contemporary Black Chroniclers”). Restoring, recalling—whatever it’s called, it is vital work, the writing of it as essential as the domestic work done by everyone in the book.

The third section of the poem, “Wash Women” shifts the gaze again, and this time it is Trethewey, or her poetic persona, who speaks:

The eyes of eight women
I don’t know

stare out from this man's photograph
saying *remember*.

.....

It's wash day:
red beans simmering on the stove,
a number three tin tub
on the floor, well-water ready
to boil. There's cook-starch
for ironing, and some
left over to eat. (8.53-69)

From the first lines, Trethewey looks to these women in the past, understanding them better than the photographer did. These anonymous women are never named or identified but she can connect with and place them in proper context. This is partially due to the idea of a collective cultural memory—that all black women can understand each other through time. She calls their faces “common.” This is to do with shared experiences, and understanding the call that a particular action, gaze, or voicing (in the case of Audre Lorde) makes. In line 56 she actually re-calls their call—“*remember*”—and does what she's told. These people call through history to Trethewey in all of “Three Photographs” and by the last stanza she finally lets her readers know them.

Using familiar imagery to a shared black, working community—the red beans, cook-starch, and washboard ribs—she is able to recall them within her own life and re-call them for a memory that she wants to belong to every black woman reading this:

I place them here
in memory,
their eyes telling me
there's more—faces
his camera couldn't see.

But I can imagine the laughter,
 three sisters talking—
 penny drinks, streetcars,
 the movie house. A woman
 like my grandmother rubs linens
 against the washboard ribs,
 hymns growing in her throat. (8.70-81)

Trethewey's narrator says, "I place them here." The 'here' of this poem is the space of the poem, because as Trethewey herself said, "the enduring rhythms of poetry give voice to the spaces that silence has inhabited and oblivion has ruled" ("Why I Write"). The spaces that silence has inhabited can be female black bodies, as she shows us here. That's why giving them a voice to call is so vital. The woman reminds her of her own history, which is also part of the herstory of black women in general. Trethewey brings her visual recall back to vocal calling with the hymns. Unlike in Lorde, though, where these songs would be voiced, for Trethewey the hymns are just growing in the old woman's throat, as yet unsung. Because they are still inside of the scene the man is photographing, she doesn't sing out loud. The white man would not understand her song anyway. "But I can imagine the laughter," Trethewey says. This shift, moving from his ignorance to her understanding, connects her to them, her imagination serving as reality. She enacts the kind of creative contextualization that Audre Lorde often brought in, creating these spaces of community between women and calling them her own.

The last stanza of part 3 has Trethewey pulling back from her interpretations. The photo here is a snapshot, but she has entered the scene and moved through it at her own pace, seeing different actions. Now she returns to the instant Johnson has captured:

But in his photograph

women do not smile,
 their lips a steady line
 connecting each quiet face. (9.91-4)

The poet does not say “the women” but just “women” as if in all of his photos (not just this one) women are not supposed to smile; it’s not what’s done. Like Lorde’s “I,” there is a collective singularity, showing how the visual speaks to Trethewey even from the beginning of the century. These women, all connected by the silent line of their lips, a line that then can be expanded into ‘lineage’ and ties in more black women. Interestingly, they do not smile in spite of what the man probably wants them to do. As shown in the previous sections, he wants posed artificiality and they give him just enough to satisfy him while also telling a completely different story to the black woman who writes their reality and gives voice to their silent gaze. She concludes:

...Shaded
 by their loads, they do not squint,
 their clear and steady gaze
 through him, to me
 straight ahead. (9.98-101)

Trethewey writes the connection from a gaze into a tangible, physical thing—a line from past to present that is the line that connects the women’s lips. The women see her just as she sees them. It could even mean that she is a descendant of theirs. As she re-calls to light the women who could be her grandmother, aunts, and cousins; she makes direct eye contact with them and shows that they hear her, as well as she them. The call has been answered. As she looks back, she sees and hears the call of all other black, silenced women, and those who wrote about them. Trethewey looks back at these women and sees not only her family, but Audre

Lorde, gathering similar women to her, calling out a story that exists throughout and outside of time.

IV.

Poetry is essential. It is, as Lorde says in her iconic essay, not a luxury. Part of the very bodies of black women, able to be called on at any time to understand themselves, poetry is written on the bones. She notes, “It is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless—about to be birthed, but already felt” (Lorde, 1985). For black female poets, like Lorde and Trethewey, there can be no separation of what is known in art and what is known in their everyday lives. For as long as black people have been oppressed in America (which is forever), black artists have seen how difficult it is to exist and be taken seriously as artists, and also how to both incorporate your experiences as a black person while not being reduced to them. Phyllis Wheatley saw it. Gwendolyn Brooks knew that. Maya Angelou did. Jessie Fauset, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Jayne Cortez, Wanda Coleman, Sonia Sanchez, Alice Walker, Lucille Clifton, Nikky Finney, June Jordan, Claudia Rankine, Rita Dove, Natasha Trethewey. All face, by similarity of skin and gender, what Julius Lester noted in his introduction to June Jordan’s 1970 collection *Some Changes*. He muses, “A black woman poet. That’s a devastating combination. To be black and to be a woman. To be a double outsider, to be twice-oppressed, to be more than invisible [...] Think about that. A black woman poet. That’s triple vision” (ix). Triply-sighted, twice-oppressed, singularly creative, down to their cores—yes. Invisible, no. All call, loudly, their realities, stories, and visions out into the world.

What Audre Lorde and Natasha Trethewey have in common, at the most basic level, is that they are not ready to accept a world in which they have to constantly fight just to be seen as people. This is the world that every black woman has had to live in. These poets show that we are not alone. Their poems, although varied in style and content, say: here is a lineage of poets who came before me who wrote their pain into optimism, courage, and hope. Stretching back as far as history goes, women like us can look to our predecessors, the trailblazers. We can call on and re-call what we know to be true instead of what has been told to us. For Lorde and Trethewey, poetry is the natural, the only, way to recall.

“Poetry is something I learned from my mother’s strangenesses and my father’s silences,” Lorde said in a 1984 interview. Trethewey must have had similar experiences of not being able to talk to the mother who was killed while her daughter was at college. Her father, though a poet, accessed a different world because he was white. Because they couldn’t call on their immediate families, they had to make them, to re-call other forms of black female kin, to help them make sense of the world. They both bring these uncertainties and desire for answers into their poetry. They wrote their own herstories because they had nobody to call to tell them the truth, nobody to help them recall family events or biographies.

So calling and re-calling exist even before and outside of poetry. Poetry, which is the most inherent expression, exists for Lorde and Trethewey to call through. It is the medium through which their calls need not be justified, or explained. Their calls and re-calls, as black female poets, embody the multiplicities of their identities at the same time same time they embody the singular—each is only one woman, after all. But their creation of herstories unites them in a lineage of calling back to those who, years before, called forward. Each

singular poet re-calls the collective. They talk about their particular experiences, making them universal but not clichéd or oversimplified.

In a way, my critical work is part of the call. By adding my voice, re-calling what Lorde and Trethewey have called, I know more of the herstories, and see the power of their works. By combining the aesthetics of their form and the politics of their identities, their poems show how powerful calling can be. Calling and re-calling are political, but the terms stem from my attention to the poems at a textual, formal level. Any black woman can add her voice; the important thing is to recall her predecessors and recognize Audre Lorde and Natasha Trethewey as important callers of the resilient past.

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Appendix

1. **Call** Audre Lorde, 1986

Holy ghost woman
 stolen out of your name
 Rainbow Serpent
 whose faces have been forgotten
 Mother loosen my tongue or adorn me
 with a lighter burden
 Aido Hwedo is coming.

On worn kitchen stools and tables
 we are piecing our weapons together
 scraps of different histories
 do not let us shatter
 any altar
 she who scrubs the capitol toilets, listening
 is your sister's youngest daughter
 gnarled Harriet's anointed
 you have not been without honor
 even the young guerrilla has chosen
 yells as she fires into the thicket
 Aido Hwedo is coming.

I have written your names on my cheekbone
 dreamed your eyes flesh my epiphany
 most ancient goddesses hear me
 enter
 I have not forgotten your worship
 nor my sisters
 nor the sons of my daughters
 my children watch for your print
 in their labors
 and they say Aido Hwedo is coming.

I am a Black woman turning
 mouthing your name as a password
 through seductions self-slaughter
 and I believe in the holy ghost
 mother
 in your flames beyond our vision
 blown light through the fingers of women
 enduring warring
 sometimes outside your name
 we do not choose all our rituals

Thandi Modise winged girl of Soweto
brought fire back home in the snout of a mortar
and passes the word from her prison cell whispering
Aido Hwedo is coming.

Rainbow Serpent who must not go
unspoken
I have ottered up the safety of separations
sung the spirals of power
and what fills the spaces
before power unfolds or flounders
in desirable nonessentials
I am a Black woman stripped down
and praying
my whole life has been an altar
worth its ending
and I say Aido Hwedo is coming.

I may be a weed in the garden
of women I have loved
who are still
trapped in their season
but even they shriek
as they rip burning gold from their skins
Aido Hwedo is coming.

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.

2. **Coal** Audre Lorde, 1976

I
is the total black, being spoken
from the earth's inside.
There are many kinds of open
how a diamond comes into a knot of flame
how a sound comes into a word, coloured
by who pays what for speaking.

Some words are open like a diamond
on glass windows
singing out within the crash of passing sun
Then there are words like stapled wagers
in a perforated book,—buy and sign and tear apart—
and come whatever wills all chances
the stub remains
an ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.
Some words live in my throat
breeding like adders. Others know sun
seeking like gypsies over my tongue
to explode through my lips
like young sparrows bursting from shell.
Some words
bedevil me.

Love is a word, another kind of open.
As the diamond comes into a knot of flame
I am Black because I come from the earth's inside
now take my word for jewel in the open light.