

Audre Lorde's Anti-Imperial Consciousness

Political Theory

2021, Vol. 49(2) 243–271

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0090591720959858

journals.sagepub.com/home/ptx



Jack Turner¹ 

Abstract

Providing the first extended analysis of Audre Lorde's critique of the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada, this essay argues that Lorde's critique models a form of anti-imperial consciousness that is still morally and politically instructive. Anti-imperial consciousness entails examining oneself for complicities with empire's ravages, on the one hand, and solidarities with empire's subjects, on the other. Lorde aims to generate in her readers (1) a sense of horror at the ways they may be morally implicated in U.S. imperial injustice and (2) a more intense identification with empire's non-U.S. victims. Lorde's goal is to free her audience from what she calls the "mistaken mirage of patriotism" and propel them to anti-imperial action. Illuminating Lorde's economic socialism and anti-imperialist internationalism—two subjects still overshadowed by her more famous work on anger, the erotic, and the master's tools—the essay contributes to the ongoing elaboration of the Afro-modern tradition of political thought.

Keywords

anti-imperialism, Black feminism, socialism, Grenada, self-determination, equal opportunity

On October 25, 1983, the United States launched its first major military operation since the Vietnam War—a predawn invasion of the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada. Over the course of a week, 6000 U.S. troops battled

¹University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Jack Turner, University of Washington, Gowen Hall, Box 353530, Seattle, WA 98195-3530, USA.

Email: jturner3@u.washington.edu

stiffer-than-expected resistance from Grenadian fighters and their Cuban allies. According to U.S. counts, 45 Grenadians died in combat and another 337 were wounded. After winning control of the island, the United States dismantled the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG)—an economically successful socialist regime that had ruled Grenada since 1979—and installed a pro-U.S. administration under British governor-general Sir Paul Scoon.¹

President Ronald Reagan argued that the invasion was necessary to protect 1000 American students at St. George's University School of Medicine from the fallout of the October 19 assassination of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop.² Reagan's critics deemed this justification pretextual and the invasion outrageous; many speculated that the real intent was to distract the public from the disastrous October 23 suicide bombing of a Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, killing 241 Americans.³

Grenadian-American essayist and poet, Audre Lorde, however, thought that the motivations were more far reaching: "The Pentagon has been spoiling for a fight it could win for a long time. . . . How better to wipe out the bitter memories of Vietnam defeats by Yellow people than with a restoration of power in the eyes of the American public—the image of American marines splashing through a little Black blood?"⁴ A U.S. victory over a socialist Black nation would deflect attention away from the humiliations of the Nixon, Ford, and Carter years, as well as the 1981–82 Reagan recession. The invasion, according to Lorde, was a window onto larger anxieties of American national identity; the centuries-old, weaponized racism of U.S. foreign policy; and the imperial spirit of a nation that refused to acknowledge itself as an empire.⁵

Providing the first extended analysis of Lorde's critique of the U.S. invasion of Grenada, this article argues that the critique models a form of *anti-imperial consciousness* that remains morally and politically instructive. Before explaining the argument, let me first provide background on Lorde's relationship to Grenada and an overview of her two main writings on the invasion.

Lorde's parents, Linda and Byron, emigrated from Grenada to the U.S. in 1924, ten years before Audre's birth in Harlem in 1934. Lorde visited the island for the first time in 1978, a trip she characterized as a return to "the country of my forebearing mothers." During the trip, Lorde absorbed the "lush & beautifully verdant" landscape, met for the first time her mother's older sister, "Sister Lou," and visited important sites in her family history.⁶ Lorde's 1978 visit made her televisual experience of the 1983 invasion from the safety of U.S. shores all the more searing.

The two works Lorde wrote in the six-month aftermath brim with outrage. The first was the essay, "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report," composed

shortly after Lorde made her second visit to the island in December 1983—the month U.S. troops withdrew—and first published in April 1984 in the Washington, D.C.-based women's news journal *Off Our Backs*.⁷ It appeared again later that year as the concluding essay to *Sister Outsider*. Including "Grenada Revisited" in *Sister Outsider* was not part of Lorde's original plan for the book; she had finished the manuscript before the Grenada invasion occurred. Writing the essay as "the rest of *Sister Outsider* was . . . being typeset," Lorde felt strongly enough about the importance of "Grenada Revisited" that she snuck it into the book just before publication.⁸

The second was the poem "Equal Opportunity."⁹ Finished in April 1984,¹⁰ the poem was published three times over the next five years—first in the May/June 1984 issue of *The Black Scholar* in a special section entitled "Grenada: The Poets Respond," second in Lorde's 1986 poetry collection *Our Dead Behind Us*, and third in the autumn 1988 issue of *Feminist Studies* in a special section entitled "Against Apartheid."¹¹ The central character of the poem is a Black, female Department of Defense official—the "american deputy assistant secretary of defense for Equal Opportunity and safety." The poem highlights how this "home girl" found a career ladder and a sense of professional pride in the military. But the poem asks: what was the price of this upward mobility? Detailing the character's participation in the conquest of Grenada, the poem conveys that the price of this professional success—of this respectable Black form of "equal opportunity"—is intrafamilial killing, even self-mutilation and suicide. The militarized boundaries of U.S. national identity sever not only the character's human identification with the subjects of the invasion, but also the political solidarity that Lorde thought women of color should extend each other across national lines. "Equal Opportunity" is a statement of transnational feminist solidarity, as well as a diagnosis of how the domestic U.S. Black and Latino politics of pursuing "equal opportunity" violates that solidarity by enlisting Black and Latino Americans in the U.S. imperial project. This transnationalism is feminist in the sense specified by Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier in the Combahee River Collective's "Black Feminist Statement" (1977): "If black women were free, it would mean everyone else is free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."¹² Lorde's transnational feminism gives priority to the emancipation of women of color everywhere as an entrée to truly universal emancipation.

The two works together constitute a literary performance of anti-imperial consciousness that aims to move U.S. readers—especially U.S. women (and men) of color—to examine themselves for *complicities* with empire's ravages, on the one hand, and *solidarities* with empire's non-U.S. victims, on the other. Lorde aims to generate in her readers (1) a sense of horror at the ways

they may be morally implicated in imperial injustice and (2) a more intense identification with empire's non-U.S. subjects. The goal is to free her audience from what Lorde calls the "mistaken mirage of patriotism" and propel them to anti-imperial action.¹³ Lorde's critique, in other words, stokes anti-imperial political motivation.

Lorde wrote in the heyday of feminist consciousness-raising, and in "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism" (1981) subjected White feminist consciousness-raising groups to critique. Such groups, Lorde argued, did not do enough "to articulate the genuine differences between women, such as those of race, color, age, class, and sexual identity. There was no apparent need . . . to examine the contradictions of self, woman as oppressor."¹⁴ Lorde encouraged White feminists to try more deliberately to confront their own complicity in racial oppression, not as an exercise in guilt or shame, but as a passage to more authentic forms of political responsibility and more honest and durable forms of interracial solidarity. Lorde, in this way, elevated the standards of U.S. feminist consciousness-raising.

Though Lorde never linked her critique of the U.S. invasion of Grenada to the specific subject of consciousness-raising, I argue that we should understand that critique as an exercise in elevating standards of political consciousness. Lorde asks U.S. citizens of color to examine "contradictions of self"—witting or unwitting complicity with empire. Though addressed primarily to U.S. citizens of color, the rhetorical force of Lorde's performance of anti-imperial consciousness is in no way limited to that audience. She hopes anyone struggling with questions of imperial complicity or imperial subjugation can benefit from her critique. "My audience is *every* single person who can use the work I do," Lorde remarked in a 1986 interview with Marion Kraft, "Anybody who can use what I do is who I'm writing for."¹⁵ It is therefore true to Lorde's spirit to uphold her critique as a compelling *general* model of anti-imperial consciousness.

In addition to contributing to the history of anti-imperial political thought,¹⁶ the essay also contributes to the ongoing elaboration of the history of Afro-modern political thought. In his landmark argument concerning the existence and coherence of the Afro-modern tradition, Robert Gooding-Williams challenged scholars to sharpen their focus on the historical and theoretical particularity and complexity of Black political thinkers, to treat their writings "as complicated, nuanced, and argued statements of political thought demanding just the sort of attentive reading and probing analysis that we have been accustomed to give works like Aristotle's *Politics*, Locke's *Second Treatise*, and Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*."¹⁷ This task is especially pressing in the case of Lorde. Though there has been increasing work on Lorde's political thought, the volume of such scholarship still pales in comparison to that

existing on such figures as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Furthermore, much of the scholarship that does exist shows a recurring tendency to treat Lorde as but one member of an ensemble cast of feminist luminaries—Adrienne Rich, June Jordan, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks—depriving her (and them) of the individualized treatment original minds deserve.¹⁸ This article bucks that trend by diving deeply into two of Lorde’s works—one essay and one poem—and illustrating the rewards to be won from a more granular approach.¹⁹ One of these rewards is a more thorough illumination of Lorde’s economic socialism and anti-imperialist internationalism—two subjects still overshadowed by Lorde’s more famous work on anger, the erotic, and the master’s tools.²⁰

Let us turn first to a close analysis of “Grenada Revisited,” where Lorde mourns the invasion as an imperial disruption of Black socialist national development. This analysis will reveal Lorde’s commitment to economic socialism, her conceptions of self-determination and revolution, her understanding of the transnational power of White capitalist supremacy, and her resistance to the devaluation of Black life.

Socialist Worldmaking and Its Destruction

Lorde’s “Grenada Revisited” is a defense of the People’s Revolutionary Government (PRG) under Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, an exposé of the U.S. invasion, an analysis of imperial racism, and an exhortation to a transnational response. On the first count, Lorde is determined to show that—contra U.S. propaganda—the PRG dramatically improved the Grenadian people’s quality of life in the four years since Bishop’s New Jewel Movement overthrew the “wasteful, corrupt, and United States sanctioned” regime of Sir Eric Gairy.²¹ She details specific achievements of the PRG:

In 1978 there was only one paved road in Grenada. During the People’s Revolutionary Government, all roads were widened and reworked, and a functioning bus service was established that did more than ferry tourists back and forth to the cruise ships. . . . The PRG brought free medical care to Grenada, and no more school fees. Most estate workers and peasants in small villages saw a dentist for the first time in their lives.²²

Lorde emphasizes neither formal rights nor juridical standing; rather, she emphasizes material conditions that concretely improve life and enable both personal and collective self-determination.

Lorde’s defense of the PRG illustrates her critical sympathy for Marxism. In “Notes from a Trip to Russia,” she stressed how addressing “the bread problem” is preliminary to addressing all other social problems:

I have no reason to believe Russia is a free society. I have no reason to believe Russia is a classless society. Russia does not even appear to be a strictly egalitarian society. But bread does cost a few kopecs a loaf and everybody I saw seemed to have enough. . . . That fact, in a world where most people—certainly most Black people—are on a breadconcern level, seems to me to be quite a lot. If you conquer the bread problem, that gives you at least a chance to look around at the others.²³

Lorde's poetic conjoining of the words "bread" and "concern" expresses her view that freedom is all but impossible in conditions of economic misery; when finding enough to eat consumes all your energy, you don't have time to live deliberately. When bread, in other words, is an *all-consuming* concern—such that bread and the state of being concerned become one—reflection on the higher ends of life for oneself, one's family, and one's society becomes impracticable.

The PRG's prioritization of "breadconcern," in Lorde's eyes, signaled their effectiveness as a vehicle for Grenadian self-determination. Such self-determination made the Grenada Revolution truly revolutionary. Adom Getachew has recently identified a discourse of self-determination spanning the anticolonial thought of Nnamdi Azikiwe, W.E.B. Du Bois, Michael Manley, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, George Padmore, and Eric Williams that figures it as a form of *worldmaking*. These thinkers, Getachew argues, "reinvented self-determination, reaching beyond its association with the nation to insist that the achievement of this ideal required juridical, political, and economic institutions in the international realm that would secure non-domination." The end goal was "a domination-free and egalitarian international order."²⁴ Lorde's portrait of Grenadian self-determination does not—strictly speaking—match Getachew's conceptualization of anticolonial worldmaking, for Lorde focuses most of her attention on Grenadian *national* development. Yet Lorde's portrait of Grenadian self-determination is still in a deep sense one of worldmaking, for it centers on the "world-making activity"—the free and equal cooperation that enlarges the setting for freedom's exercise—that Getachew's subjects thought internationalist institutionalism would enable.²⁵

Consider Lorde's provocative summary of the Grenada Revolution, which functions also as her general conceptualization of revolution as an event:

Revolution. A nation decides for itself what it needs. How best to get it. Food. Dentists. Doctors. Roads. When I first visited Grenada in 1978, one-third of the farmable land in the country lay idle, owned by absentee landlords who did not work it. The PRG required that plans be filed either for farming that land, turning it over to those who would, or deeding it to the state. Small banana collectives started. Fishing cooperatives. Beginning agro-industry.²⁶

As a result of these measures, she notes, Grenadian unemployment dropped from 40 to 14 percent.²⁷ What is striking about the passage is not simply Lorde's recitation of the concrete improvements in quality of life that the PRG produced, but the images she chooses to represent that improvement. "Food," "dentists," and "doctors" all evoke the immediate needs of human health—human health that under racial capitalism can be secured only through a combination of (a) privileged birth and (b) power within a marketplace that commodifies what's needed for good health.²⁸ Yet under socialism, Lorde suggests, such needs are the first-order priorities of the people's collective power. Collective power exists to address human needs directly, not to ground a market system that promises eventually to address human needs, but that only does so to the extent that subjects conform to that system's norms (and sometimes not even then). Lorde's image of "roads" evokes geographic mobility, ease of travel, and potential for a wider network of cooperation. "Farmable land" suggests earthly abundance; "banana collectives" and "fishing cooperatives" convey egalitarian cooperation. The images accumulate to form a political-economic portrait of natality sharply at odds with Hannah Arendt's anti-economic conceptualization, converging in a phrase that encapsulates Lorde's association of economic self-determination with natality's promise: "Beginning agro-industry." Lorde continues:

So what did Revolution in Grenada mean? It meant the inauguration of an agro-industry which for the first time in the island's history processed the island's own fruit, its own coffee, under its own brand, Spice Isle Foods. . . . It meant almost doubling the number of doctors from twenty-three to forty, a health center set up in every parish for the first time. . . . It meant twelve-year-old Lyndon Adams of L'Estere, Carriacou, teaching a seventy-three-year-old woman how to read and write as part of the each-one-teach-one program against functional illiteracy . . .²⁹

Lorde strikes the chord of beginning again in the word choice "inauguration." She emphasizes collective self-possession in the formulation "the island's own fruit, its own coffee, under its own brand," reiterating the theme of economic self-determination, of collective economic autonomy. Shrewd is Lorde's selection of "Spice Isle Foods" as an emblem of this self-determination; it sounds like a brand name out of a tropical utopia. Her use of the scene of twelve-year-old Lyndon Adams teaching a seventy-three-year-old woman how to read and write is also powerful. It is an image of new beginnings—for Adams, of a life of social connectedness and political service; for his elder, of new intellectual powers unlocked by literacy. The prevalence and intensity of these images of natality warrant the conclusion that "Grenada Revisited" takes part in the anticolonial discourse of self-determination as worldmaking

identified by Getachew. They also warrant the conclusion that that discourse sometimes has nationalist variants, contrasting with the internationalist variants emphasized by Getachew.³⁰

Against her background depiction of Grenada under the PRG, Lorde's condemnation of the U.S. invasion registers all the more sharply. She portrays it as an intentional, violent disruption of socialist national development:

On October 25, 1983 American Corsair missiles and naval shells and mortars pounded into the hills behind Grenville, St. Georges, Gouyave. American marines tore through homes and hotels searching for "Cubans." Now the Ministries are silent. The state farms are at a standstill. The cooperatives are suspended. . . . On the day after the invasion, unemployment was back up to 35 percent.³¹

Such disruption was necessary, in U.S. eyes., for at least two reasons. First, it was simply impermissible for an independent Black nation to flourish under socialism: "What a bad example, a dangerous precedent, an independent Grenada would be for the peoples of Color in the Caribbean, in Central America, for those of us here in the United States."³² If Grenadian economic success continued unabated, Caribbean and Central American countries—not to mention Black people in the United States—might start pushing for socialist alternatives to laissez-faire capitalism, thereby destabilizing U.S. hegemony.

Important to notice here is how directly Lorde amplifies points made by Maurice Bishop. In June 1983—four months before the invasion—Bishop visited the United States to promote a more positive image of the Grenada Revolution.³³ Though the State Department initially opposed granting him a visa, the Congressional Black Caucus intervened and secured one for him.³⁴ At a June 5 speech at Hunter College, City University of New York—a speech that Lorde, a tenured professor of English, attended—Bishop argued that the U.S. government was particularly worried that the Grenada Revolution was Anglophone.³⁵ He had come into possession of a secret U.S. intelligence report about the Grenada Revolution:

That secret report made this point: that the Grenada revolution is in one sense even worse . . . than the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions because the people of Grenada and the leadership of Grenada speak English, and therefore can communicate directly with the people of the United States. . . . [A]nd if we have 95 percent of predominantly African origin in our country, then we can have a dangerous appeal to 30 million Black people in the United States.³⁶

Lorde echoed these points not only in "Grenada Revisited," but also in a contemporaneous interview.³⁷ The bottom line, in the eyes of both Bishop

and Lorde, was that the United States had to destroy “the first Black english-speaking People’s Revolution in this hemisphere” to secure White capitalist supremacy.³⁸

A second reason why the United States had to destroy the Grenada Revolution was that a successful, socialist Grenada would rob the United States and its allies of a “cheap, acquiescent labor pool.”³⁹ One month after the invasion

the U.S. Agency for International Development visits Grenada. They report upon the role of the private sector in Grenada’s future, recommending the revision of tax codes to favor private enterprise (usually foreign), the development of a labor code that will ensure a compliant labor movement, and the selling off of public sector enterprises to private interests. How soon will it be Grenadian women who are going blind from assembling microcomputer chips at \$.80 an hour for international industrial corporations?⁴⁰

Whereas the PRG interrupted Western exploitation of Black bodies and denial of Black freedom, the U.S. invasion restored the status quo ante wherein Grenadian women could be paid one-third the U.S. minimum wage—without the benefit of Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) safeguards—for the enrichment of the microcomputer industry. The U.S. invasion, on this interpretation, is but one move within the West’s larger global effort to proletarianize as many Brown and Black bodies as possible.

The conduct of the invasion was as reckless as the motives were sordid. The bombing struck civilian targets: “homes . . . a hospital . . . a radio station.”⁴¹ As U.S. Marines stormed house to house in search of Cuban infiltrators, they repeatedly shot Grenadian civilians: “Hundreds of Grenadian bodies are buried in unmarked graves, relatives missing and unaccounted for. . . . No recognition and therefore no aid for the sisters, mothers, wives, children of the dead, families disrupted and lives vandalized by the conscious brutality of a planned, undeclared war.” Official accounts of the war fail to capture the true extent of the destruction: “Weeks after the invasion, Grenadians were still smelling out and burying bodies all over the island. The true casualty figures will never be known. No civilian body count is available.”⁴²

But though Lorde strains to convey the singularity and irreplaceability of the victims by telling the stories of a few by name, she also connects those stories to the larger transnational pattern of American devaluation of Black life:

The racism that coats the U.S. government lies about Grenada is the same racism that blinded american eyes to the Black faces of 131 Haitians washed

up on shore in Miami, drowned fleeing the [U.S. supported] Duvalier regime. It is the same racism that keeps american eyes turned aside from the corrosive apartheid eating like acid into the face of White South Africa and the Reagan government which shares her bed under the guise of “constructive engagement.”⁴³

This devaluation of Black life is transnational not only in extent but also in *operation*—so much so that the U.S. government intended its invasion of an independent Black country abroad to be an object lesson for Black U.S. citizens at home:

In addition to being a demonstration to the Caribbean community of what will happen to any country that dares to assume responsibility for its own destiny, the invasion of Grenada also serves as a naked warning to thirty million African-americans. Watch your step. We did it to them down there and we will not hesitate to do it to you. Internment camps. Interrogation booths. Isolation cells hastily built by U.S. occupation forces. . . . No strange gods before us.⁴⁴

Though she never uses the word “empire,”⁴⁵ Lorde clearly conceptualizes U.S. foreign policy as imperial. She understands the U.S. invasion of Grenada within the larger context of the “160-year-old course of action called the Monroe Doctrine. In its name america has invaded small Caribbean and Central American countries over and over again since 1823.”⁴⁶ Given the centrality of White supremacy to U.S. nationhood, American foreign policy automatically entails White supremacy’s militarization—in the selection of targets, in the greater readiness to accept the imposition of violence on non-White peoples: “The ready acceptance by the majority of americans of the Grenadian invasion and of the shady U.S. involvement in the events leading up to the assassination of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop both happen in an america whose moral and ethical fiber is weakened by racism as thoroughly as wood is weakened by dry rot.”⁴⁷ When racism weakens the “moral and ethical fiber” of a people, that people is more likely to elect officials eager to use force imperially. That people is also more likely to let racial and national chauvinism filter their interpretation of any given imperial event and bias their reception of testimony about that event. The more White supremacist the people are, the less resistance they will offer to a White empire’s conquest of a Black nation. The more White supremacist the people are, the less credence they will give Black testimony about imperial events and the more credence they will give official (White) sources.

Lorde is clear that even Black U.S. citizens can succumb to imperial forms of national identification, and in so doing, reinforce transnational racial subordination. If a Black U.S. citizen fails to feel a sense of linked fate with

Black subjects abroad,⁴⁸ the “mistaken mirage of patriotism” leads him to support White imperial aggression against non-U.S. Blacks and, without realizing it, prop up a racial empire that enforces White supremacy both abroad and at home.⁴⁹ Lorde insists that White imperial aggression always boomerangs back against Black U.S. subjects. Though she suggests this point in “Grenada Revisited,” she makes it even more forcefully in “Equal Opportunity.”

Contextualizing “Equal Opportunity”: Ronald Reagan, Donna M. Alvarado, and Equal Opportunity Discourse in the 1980s

Before analyzing “Equal Opportunity” in detail, let us first examine its precise historical origin. Centered on the poetic character “The American deputy assistant secretary of defense for Equal Opportunity and safety,” the poem was inspired by a chance encounter Lorde had with Reagan’s real-life deputy assistant secretary of defense for equal opportunity and safety policy, Donna M. Alvarado, in the spring of 1984 (see Figure 1). Nowhere in her published or unpublished work does Lorde mention Alvarado by name. But in a set of prefatory remarks she made at a public reading of “Equal Opportunity” in May 1985, Lorde explained that she wrote the poem “about a year ago” after she “had attended a meeting in Washington of women of color”: “I found it very interesting because, as I said before, when we do not recognize the ways in which we are connected, we take part in each other’s oppression.”⁵⁰ Alvarado was Reagan’s deputy assistant secretary of defense for equal opportunity and safety policy at the time of that meeting,⁵¹ and given that the central character of “Equal Opportunity” shares Alvarado’s official title, it stands to reason that Alvarado was one of the women Lorde met and that she made an impression on Lorde.

Part of Alvarado’s job was to liaise with women professionals and promote the Department of Defense as a site of “equal opportunity.” In August 1984, she told a military and civilian audience in Darmstadt, Germany: “We should be very proud to be a part of the Department of Defense not only because of the national security mission, which we all share, but because this department has led the nation, and perhaps the world, in the opportunities we have been able to make available to qualified women and minorities.”⁵² Alvarado frames the very same Department of Defense that executed the Grenada invasion as a ladder of upward mobility for “qualified women and minorities,” the very same “qualified women and minorities” Lorde thinks fail to recognize their fellows across national lines.



Figure I. Donna M. Alvarado, c. 1983, U.S. National Archives.

Lorde takes poetic liberties with Alvarado's identity. Whereas Alvarado was a civilian, the "american deputy assistant secretary of defense for Equal Opportunity and safety" is a uniformed officer. Whereas Alvarado identified as Mexican American,⁵³ Lorde's character is Black. There are nevertheless striking parallels between Alvarado's professional and political positioning and the character Lorde constructs.

Before analyzing the poem, we must also put the language of "equal opportunity" into context. "Equal opportunity" was a staple of civil rights discourse in the early 1980s. The phrase shows up repeatedly in the National Urban League's "State of Black America" reports for 1981, 1982, and 1983—always as an aspirational term denoting society's obligation to ensure every individual an equal chance at economic success.⁵⁴ The Right, however, increasingly used the language of "equal opportunity" during this period. Whereas for U.S. liberals, equal opportunity signified the equalization of access to educational and employment opportunities through compensatory social welfare and affirmative action, for U.S. conservatives equal opportunity meant the right to compete in the free market with minimal government interference.⁵⁵ The competitive capitalist connotations of Reaganite equal opportunity comes through in the headline to the *Stars and Stripes* article

covering Alvarado's August 1984 speech at Darmstadt: "Women don't need charity in workplace."⁵⁶

Reagan's presidential speeches vividly illustrate right-wing cooptation of equal opportunity rhetoric to serve "colorblind" laissez-faire capitalism. Reagan used that rhetoric to advocate lower taxes and the devolution of federal authority in an address to a joint-session of the Alabama state legislature in Montgomery in March 1982:

Would you not agree that we have strayed much too far from that noble beginning and that the whole idea of our Revolution—personal freedom, equality of opportunity, and keeping government close to the people—is threatened by a Federal spending machine that takes too much money from the people, too much authority from the States, and yes, too much liberty with our Constitution?⁵⁷

Reagan's decision to deliver this address in Montgomery, Alabama—the "Cradle of the Confederacy"—foretold the ways he later used his revamped ideal of equal opportunity to attack affirmative action and oppose the 1987 Civil Rights Restoration Act, a bill designed to shore up civil rights enforcement:

My Administration remains committed to enforcing our civil rights laws. We must not be diverted from our pursuit of justice because of government policies that treat individuals differently based on their race or ethnic background, even when those policies are well-intentioned. My Administration will oppose legislation that provides government preferences based on race or other special categories, and not to all Americans. The American ideal is to allow equal opportunity for all, not to enforce equality of results or outcomes.⁵⁸

Especially interesting is Reagan's use of equal opportunity rhetoric to oppose divestment from apartheid South Africa. The U.S. divestment movement reached its crescendo in 1986 when Congress passed the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act over Reagan's veto.⁵⁹ In the lead-up to the veto, Reagan argued:

Western nations have poured billions in foreign aid and investment loans into southern Africa. Does it make sense to aid these countries with one hand and with the other to smash the industrial engine upon which their future depends? Wherever blacks seek equal opportunity, higher wages, better working conditions, their strongest allies are the American, British, French, German, and Dutch businessmen who bring to South Africa ideas of social justice formed in their own countries.⁶⁰

Reagan's argument for "constructive engagement" was striking in its historical innocence—portraying the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the Netherlands as beacons of "social justice" without any reference to their prior imperialism. Reagan used the ideal of "equal opportunity" to argue for free-flowing trade and investment with the apartheid regime. Such trade and investment, he argued, would enhance equal opportunity for Black South Africans: "Our own history teaches us that capitalism is the natural enemy of such feudal institutions as apartheid."⁶¹ Reagan here reiterated a libertarian trope characterizing slavery and racial apartheid as feudal institutions, subject to inevitable destruction by capitalist dynamism.⁶² This both exonerated capitalism of its own role in modern racialization and justified inaction in the face of apartheid.

It was in this fluid discursive context that Lorde's "Equal Opportunity" appeared. In May/June 1984—when the poem was first published—the title undoubtedly still evoked for some audiences the Urban League's racially liberal uses of the term, but the shifting political landscape toward Reagan's American vision gave the term an increasingly racially conservative bent. Either way, "equal opportunity" signified hope, though in two different ideological registers. Yet Lorde's poem asks, is equal opportunity—within the terms of America's capitalist consensus—a worthy object of hope? When examined from outside that consensus, what does the ideal mean?

Analyzing "Equal Opportunity"

"Equal Opportunity" opens with the lines:

The american deputy assistant secretary of defense
for Equal Opportunity
and safety
is a home girl
Blindness slashes our tapestry to shreds.⁶³

These lines, first, identify the poem's central character, and second, establish a division between the narrator and that character. The character is a member of the American military hierarchy, a functionary within that hierarchy. She is also a "home girl"—a Brown or Black woman like the narrator.⁶⁴ The modifying "deputy assistant" preceding "secretary of defense" registers the character's peripheral, subordinate status. Yet in Reagan's America, where de facto White supremacy and male domination are accepted even as de jure White supremacy and male domination are condemned (and, crucially, remembered as things of the past), the character's peripheral, subordinate

presence inoculates the military hierarchy against charges of racism and sexism. It permits Caspar Weinberger (secretary of defense, 1981–1987) and John W. Vessey (chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, 1982–1985) to say, “Look at this fine woman of color that we have in this important office.” Her presence justifies the military hierarchy within the terms of the post–Civil Rights gender and racial order. Lorde emphasizes this justifying function later in the poem when the character says, “as you can see the Department has / a very good record / of equal opportunity for our women.”⁶⁵ The character physically represents “the very good record” the Department seeks to project and she expressly validates it through her testimony.

Yet immediately after identifying the “american deputy assistant secretary of defense” as a “home girl,” Lorde inserts a cutting image of division: “Blindness slashes our tapestry to shreds.” What is “our tapestry” and how does “blindness” slash it? As we will see, the “tapestry” is the transnational political unity of Brown and Black women. This unity is not institutional, but rather situational—a unity born of shared subjugation to Western racism and sexism, of the systematic devaluation of Black and female bodies. But rather than resist this subjugation and devaluation, the “american deputy secretary of defense” becomes a party to it. The next stanza reveals how:

The moss-green military tailoring sets off her color
 beautifully
 she says “when I stand up to speak in uniform
 you can believe everyone takes notice!”
 Superimposed skull-like across her trim square shoulders
 dioxin-smear
 the stench of napalm upon growing cabbage
 the chug and thud of Corsairs in the foreground
 advance like a blush across her cheeks
 up the unpaved road outside Grenville, Grenada⁶⁶

The stanza juxtaposes two visual images: on the one hand, the officer in uniform whose “moss-green military tailoring sets off her color beautifully” and whose general appearance conveys strength and authority, and on the other hand, the destructive instruments of late-twentieth-century American warfare—dioxins, napalm, and Corsair attack aircraft—bombarding the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada.⁶⁷ The juxtaposition indicates how the price of the character’s professional authority and upward mobility is participation in lethal forms of American militarism.

The narrator’s identification of the character as a “home girl” in the first stanza, furthermore, casts an air of betrayal over the second stanza: betrayal

of home girls whom she fails to identify as home girls—the women of Grenada—not to mention betrayal of herself. In her introduction to *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), Barbara Smith reflects how the term “home girl” evokes the ways Black feminism is “organic to black experience”.⁶⁸

In the fall of 1981, before most of this book was compiled, I was searching for a title. . . . One day while doing something else entirely, and playing with words in my head, “home girls” came to me. The girls from the neighborhood and from the block, the girls we grew up with. I knew I was onto something, particularly when I considered that so many Black people who are threatened by feminism have argued that by being a Black feminist (particularly if you are also a Lesbian) you have left the race, are no longer part of the black community, in short no longer have a home. I suspect that most of the contributors to *Home Girls* learned their varied politics and their shared commitment to Black women from the same source I did.⁶⁹

Later in the introduction, Smith clarifies that her vision of Black feminism—and of the identity of “home girls”—is transnational. She sees “Black and other Third World Women” as subjected to common oppressions and highlights Black and Third World women political collaborations.⁷⁰ “Home girls” lock arms across national borders. Insofar as Lorde uses “home girl” in a sense similar to Smith—and Lorde herself appeared in Smith’s anthology and was cited by Smith in the introduction—the force of Lorde’s line “Blindness slashes our tapestry to shreds” comes more clearly into view. The “american deputy assistant secretary of defense” is blind to the identity of her home girls, perhaps even to her own identity as a home girl.

The next two stanzas catalog images of the invasion’s destruction: “An M-16 bayonet,” “armed men in moss-green jumpsuits” turning out a family’s “shack,” “mashed-up nutmeg trees,” “trampled cocoa pods,” “graceless broken stalks of almost ripe banana,” a “baby’s father buried without his legs,” “burned bones in piles along the road,” “singed tree-ferns” that “curl and jerk in the mortar rhythms,” “the sweetish smell of unseen rotting flesh.”⁷¹ The images move from the destruction of home and crops to the mutilation of bodies and landscape. They evoke the U.S. Marines’ reckless disregard for Grenadian homes, livelihoods, and lives. Part of the third stanza, in fact, stresses the destruction of home and livelihood more than the destruction of life. A Grenadian character, “Granny Lou,” reflects:

*If it was only kill
they’d wanted to kill we
many more would have died*

*look at Lebanon
 so as wars go this was an easy one
 But for we here
 who never woke up before
 to see plane shitting fire into chimney
 it was a damn awful lot!*⁷²

The word “*shitting*” is a double entendre: on the one hand, a transliteration of Grenadian English creole for “shooting,” and on the other hand, a reference to imperial defecation. “Granny Lou” is philosophical about the limited extent of the invasion’s destruction of life; it pales in comparison, she points out, to the 1982 Lebanon War. (If Lorde’s own estimates are correct, the destruction of life in the Grenada invasion was in the hundreds; 18,000 Lebanese, in contrast, died in the Lebanon War). Yet she registers amazement at the spectacle of a superpower attacking her “*chimney*”—a metonym for hearth and home.

The fourth stanza, however, turns away from Granny Lou’s philosophical stoicism and emphasizes how destruction of home, livelihood, and life are all of a piece. It centers on the point of view of the young mother “Imelda.” The first half reads:

For a while there was almost enough
 water enough rice enough quinine
 the child tugs at her waistband
 but she does not move quickly
 she has heard how nervous these green men are
 with their grenades and sweaty helmets
 who offer cigarettes and chocolate but no bread
 free batteries and herpes but no doctors
 no free buses to the St. Georges market
 no reading lessons in the brilliant afternoons⁷³

Set in the invasion’s immediate aftermath, the portion emphasizes the mother’s fear for her own and her child’s lives amid the ostensibly friendly Marines, who in a manner reminiscent of the U.S. occupation of Japan after World War II distribute candy and cigarettes as a gesture of good will, but without any sustaining social services previously provided by the PRG. The stanza then moves to the destruction of life itself:

bodies strewn along Telescope Beach
 these soldiers say are foreigners

but she has seen the charred bits of familiar cloth
 and knows what to say to any invader
 with an M-16 rifle held ready
 while searching her cooking shed
 overturning the empty pots with his apologetic grin
 Imelda steps forward
 the child pressing against her knees
 “no guns, man, no guns here. we glad you come. you carry
 water?”⁷⁴

Imelda knows that the Marines have killed her countrymen, notwithstanding their insistence that the bodies are of Cubans and Soviets. Yet the threat of the M-16 extorts her compliance. She says what the Marines want to hear: “no guns here. we glad you come.” She recognizes that the Marines are “invaders,” that they are political enemies. But she pretends political friendship to ensure her own and her child’s survival. Imelda’s dissimulation is a sign of subjection and the price of survival. She is now an American imperial subject, and that conditions all of her behavior.

Lorde concludes “Equal Opportunity” with the “american deputy assistant secretary of defense for equal opportunity and safety” praising her department’s “very good record / of equal opportunity for our women.”⁷⁵ The “our” here denotes U.S. Black women, or maybe just those who are “respectable.” The national circumscription of the “our” is a fatal form of blindness, Lorde suggests. This “our” is too closely identified with the American national project, which is itself a source of Black women’s oppression both inside and outside U.S. borders. This “our” divides her from her home girls Imelda and Granny Lou, who are more a part of her than Reagan, Weinberger, or Vessey ever will be. While the military’s career ladder offers the appearance of “safety,” the price of that safety is self-destruction as a free Black woman. While Lorde would insist that there are an immense variety of ways to be a free Black woman, the suggestion here is that free Black womanhood automatically entails rejection of imperial identification and embrace of Black people’s struggles for freedom and dignity everywhere, irrespective of national borders. When Black women buy into the allure of imperial identification, they “swim toward safety / through a lake of [their] own blood.”⁷⁶

Equal Opportunity and Empire

When Brown and Black women (and men) take advantage of equal opportunity within the American professional establishment—especially the

military-industrial establishment—they participate in the oppression and killing of Brown and Black women (and men) both abroad and at home. This is the startling political implication of “Equal Opportunity.” Its central character has found a place for herself within the military-industrial hierarchy and achieved respectability. The price, however, is political self-instrumentalization on behalf of global White supremacy. The price also is blindness to her sisterhood with the Black women of Grenada, her familial ties with the Black men and children of Grenada. Professional identity was supposed to enlarge the character’s sense of worth, but instead it has cut her off from those with whom she could fight for freedom in transnational struggle. Whatever sense of worth she has achieved is illusory, for it is on terms that she will never be permitted to help set—the terms of White imperial patriarchy.

Lorde indicates the corrupt nature of the bargain as soon as she reveals the character’s professional title: “american deputy assistant secretary of defense for Equal Opportunity and safety.” The title itself diminishes the character in at least three ways. First, in embracing the national identity of “american” she gives up whatever other forms of geographic identity gave her life shape. Her position, presumably, does not permit her to identify herself as Dominican American, or Haitian American, or Grenadian American. The assimilationist terms of the American establishment require her not to name her Caribbean or African diasporic identity. Military discipline will not permit her to be transnational.

Second, two of her objects of concern—defense and safety—are antithetical to freedom. Here Lorde agrees with James Baldwin, who argued that freedom requires the surrender of safety, as well as the relinquishment of our (defensive) tendencies to “guard and keep” instead of give.⁷⁷ Lorde does not argue this point as directly as Baldwin, yet the central character of “Equal Opportunity” is a figure for social imprisonment and spiritual immobility, even though ironically she is also a figure for the upward social mobility pointed toward by equal opportunity. Here we get even closer to the poem’s meaning: upward social mobility all too often entails social imprisonment and spiritual immobility. The character’s choice to climb the military career ladder imprisons her within the strict rules and externally chosen aims of the U.S. military. The price of upward mobility is following orders. And a lifetime of following orders habituates the self to repress the spiritual movement characteristic of freedom.

Third, her job is to uphold and represent “Equal Opportunity.” The phrase is capitalized at its first mention—as if it is the name of a god. The character is “assistant deputy secretary of defense” for this god, as well as for safety. Her job is to ensure that this god’s dictates are met within the Department of

Defense, though—ironically—her position as “assistant deputy secretary” gives her little independent power to do so. Her job is also to embody this god within the profane realm and assure everyone of its existence. In this sense, the character is an oracle, a medium for divine agency. But is “Equal Opportunity” the real agent, or is it the military-industrial establishment that names the god and specifies what counts as evidence of its existence? That establishment points to the character—the “home girl”—as evidence of the god’s existence. She then validates their testimony.

But given her subordinate role and subordinated social position, we cannot be confident that she acts freely. She is, after all, under military command. So when she says, “as you can see the Department has / a very good record / of equal opportunity for our women,” we cannot credit her testimony as that of a free witness. At the same time, the poem suggests that the character is complicit in her own unfreedom. When it concludes with the image of the assistant deputy secretary swimming toward safety “through a lake of her own blood,” Lorde uses the active verb “swims”—implying active participation. The character’s pursuit of “equal opportunity” is an abandonment of real freedom—of freedom, that is, not parasitic on others’ subordination. Freedom, Lorde suggests, is more than choosing from options offered by White imperial patriarchy. Freedom is abolition of White imperial patriarchy.

“Equal Opportunity” thus emerges—alongside “Grenada Revisited”—as a call to Black U.S. women (and men) to lock arms with colonized women (and men) of color in a struggle against U.S. empire. This will require Black U.S. citizens to refuse the opportunities offered by that empire—such as the economic livelihood and professional distinction offered by military service. The rewards of such refusal, however, are keener political self-recognition and greater moral integrity. Black U.S. citizens have politically more in common with U.S. imperial subjects than they do with U.S. imperial masters. Both Black U.S. citizens and U.S. imperial subjects live largely at the mercy of White racism, whose overt expression waxes and wanes according to the ruling class’s convenience. The promise of real freedom and opportunity lies only in the contestation of that racism in both domestic and foreign policy. “Equal Opportunity” seeks to connect the “domestic” and the “foreign” in the minds of its Black U.S. readers. What Lorde wrote of African American politics in relation to South Africa applies equally to Grenada and to Black struggles across the globe: “The connections have not been made, and they must be if African-Americans are to articulate our power in the struggle against a worldwide escalation of forces aligned against people of Color the world over: institutionalized racism grown more and more aggressive in the service of shrinking profit-oriented economies.”⁷⁸

“We Have a Fascist Foreign Policy”: Anti-Imperial Consciousness, Political Responsibility, and Transnational Solidarity

If the connections had not been (sufficiently) made between racial domination at home and racial domination abroad, then Lorde’s self-appointed role was to help her audiences make them. “Grenada Revisited” did so primarily in a didactic mode—making factual claims about the nature of the invasion and reflecting upon their significance. “Equal Opportunity” made the connections in a poetic mode—provoking identifications between the “american deputy assistant secretary of defense” and an audience made up primarily (though not exclusively) of Brown and Black women. In that poetic character, Lorde’s audience could see themselves, could see their own longings for upward mobility, as well as the costs such longings entail. This in turn forced them to ask themselves whether they suffered the same “blindness” as the “american deputy assistant secretary of defense,” whether they felt greater solidarity with the women of Grenada, or with U.S. troops, and if the latter, why? “Equal Opportunity” draws the reader into what Lorde calls the “circular happening” of poetry—the dialogical movement between reader and text wherein the text touches the reader, causing her to put more questions to the text, starting the circle over.⁷⁹ By setting readers up to be emotionally affected by a representation of imperial events beyond U.S. borders, Lorde sought to loosen patriotism’s hold and cultivate anti-imperial consciousness.

Lorde’s anti-imperial consciousness had two main components. The first was her acknowledgment of her own formal civic complicity in U.S. empire and her acceptance of political responsibility. As she wrote in “Apartheid U.S.A.” (1985), “We are Black Lesbians and Gays, fighting many battles for survival. We are also citizens of the most powerful country in the world, a country which stands upon the wrong side of every liberation struggle on earth.”⁸⁰ Neither blackness nor lesbianism absolved her of the burdens of U.S. citizenship, including co-responsibility for U.S. empire. This is *not* to say that Lorde saw herself as *co-equally* responsible with those who voted for Reagan and cheered the invasion. Viewed in its entirety, her critique suggests that the more political power one has, the more answerable one is for U.S. imperialism. At the same time, Lorde did not think the diminished civic power she suffered as a result of Black lesbian marginalization was equivalent to nonexistent civic power; consequently, she held herself politically accountable. “[W]e have a fascist foreign policy,” Lorde wrote in the margin of one of her drafts of “Grenada Revisited,” registering her own complicity in the national “we.”⁸¹

The second component of Lorde's anti-imperial consciousness is transnational solidarity with women (and men) of color everywhere. We see this not only in the expressed content of "Grenada Revisited" and "Equal Opportunity," but also in the way these pieces were set within a period of Lorde's life when she protested South African apartheid and worked to make the "international community of people of Color" conscious of itself as a public.⁸² One year after "Equal Opportunity" first appeared in the May/June 1984 issue of *The Black Scholar*, Lorde publicly read the poem at an event sponsored by Sisters in Solidarity against Apartheid at the University of California, Berkeley. Taking place on May 14, 1985—one day after the Philadelphia police bombed the headquarters of the Black liberation group MOVE, killing eleven, including five children—the event honored the unique struggles and sufferings of South African women and rallied support for U.S. divestment. Before reading the poem, Lorde reflected on the ways anti-Black racism similarly fueled the Grenada invasion, South African apartheid, and the MOVE bombing: "We need to know always that we cannot deal with one oppression. We cannot deal with one horror in isolation. A house was bombed in Philadelphia. Men, women, and children killed. Sixty houses burned to the ground. Three hundred people, black, displaced in Philadelphia. Soweto, U.S.A."⁸³ Lorde moves fluidly between recounting the MOVE casualties, analogizing Philadelphia to Soweto, and reading a poem on African American complicity in the Grenada invasion. She models a connection-making consciousness she hopes her audience will emulate. This consciousness brings into sharp relief the common problems faced by Black people in Philadelphia, Soweto, and Grenville, while challenging our modern tendency to give national identity ethically disproportionate weight. Lorde brings into view the question of whether Black U.S. fates are more linked to those of Black Grenadians and Black South Africans than they are to White Americans. While she does not hazard a definite answer, she provocatively suggests that the question is open.

The two sides of Lorde's anti-imperial consciousness are in undeniable tension—forthright acceptance of political responsibility for the U.S. imperial regime, on the one hand, and solidarity with victims of Euro-American imperialism, on the other. Yet Lorde's quest was to resolve this tension by helping cultivate a U.S. anti-imperial constituency that could challenge the empire from within. Such a constituency would accept the power they hold within U.S. political life and put it in the service of transnational solidarities that everyone should feel (even White citizens who—though they cannot identify racially with most victims of imperialism—should nevertheless feel basic human solidarity with them). Anti-imperial responsibility becomes the task of putting national membership into reflective and practical equilibrium with transnational solidarity. Achieving such equilibrium is inordinately

difficult, requiring far-reaching political inquiry, broad moral imagination, discriminating judgment, and the willingness to engage in collective action. Modeling these qualities of mind, Lorde's critique of the Grenada invasion powerfully exemplifies anti-imperial intellectual work—bequeathed to us as a resource for struggle in our own time.

Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the University of California, Los Angeles; Rutgers University; the 2018 meeting of the American Political Science Association; and the 2019 Western Political Science Association. Thank you to Lawrie Balfour, Madeline Cronin, Douglas A. Jones, Jr., Ainsley LeSure, Jeanne Morefield, Melvin Rogers, and two anonymous reviewers for incisive comments. I am also grateful to my colleagues in the 2017-18 University of Washington Sawyer Seminar on Capitalism and Comparative Racialization—especially Megan Francis—for all they taught me. Deepest thanks to Holly A. Smith and Kassandra Ware of the Spelman College Archives for assisting my research in the Audre Lorde Collection.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Jack Turner  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3849-2667>

Notes

1. Michael Rubner, "The Reagan Administration, the 1973 War Powers Act, and the Invasion of Grenada," *Political Science Quarterly* 100, no. 4 (1985–86): 627–28; Sally-Ann Treharne, *Reagan and Thatcher's Special Relationship: Latin America and Anglo-American Relations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 118.
2. Rubner, "The Reagan Administration and the Invasion of Grenada," 627.
3. Treharne, *Reagan and Thatcher's Special Relationship*, 119, 100.
4. Lorde, "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, [1984] 2007), 180. Lorde uses the lowercase "a" to protest against the "pretenses of america." Joan Wylie Hall, "Introduction," in *Conversations with Audre Lorde* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), xi.

5. Lorde would agree with Jeanne Morefield that America “is an Empire that cannot say its name.” *Empires Without Imperialism: Anglo-American Decline and the Politics of Deflection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.
6. Alexis de Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 7, 9–10, 13, 207–11.
7. See “Off Our Backs: Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report,” April 1984, Audre Lorde Papers, Box 50, Folder 613, Spelman College Archives. (Cited hereafter as ALP).
8. Lorde, “Grenada Revisited,” 176. De Veaux provides a brief analysis of “Grenada Revisited” in *Warrior Poet*, 335–37, as does Nora Hanagan in *Democratic Responsibility: The Politics of Many Hands in America* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 126, 145–46. But neither note the essay’s initial publication in *Off Our Backs*, nor do they analyze the connected poem, “Equal Opportunity.”
9. Carole Boyce Davies briefly analyzes “Equal Opportunity” in “Con-Di-Fi-Cation: Transnationalism, Diaspora, and the Limits of Domestic Racial or Feminist Discourses,” *JENDA: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 9 (2006): 1–39. But she does not provide a full-length historical contextualization and textual analysis, nor does she connect it to “Grenada Revisited.”
10. See “Equal Opportunity (several revisions),” April 1984, ALP, Box 31, Folder 304, and “First Line of Untitled Poem The American Deputy Secretary of Defense” ALP, Box 35, Folder 706.
11. Lorde, “Equal Opportunity,” *The Black Scholar* 15, no. 3 (May/June 1984): 16–17; Lorde, “Equal Opportunity,” in *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986), in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 369–71; Lorde, “Equal Opportunity,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 440–42.
12. The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement” (1977), in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: New Press, 1995), 237.
13. Lorde, “Grenada Revisited,” 184.
14. Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” (1981), in *Sister Outsider*, 130. For an excellent historical contextualization of this address, see Lester C. Olson, “Anger Among Allies: Audre Lorde’s 1981 Keynote Admonishing the National Women’s Studies Association,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 3 (2011): 283–308.
15. “The Creative Use of Difference,” in *Conversations*, 152.
16. See, for example, M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Jennifer Pitts, “Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010): 211–35; Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); and Cedric G. Johnson, “Huey P. Newton and the Last Days of the Black Colony,” in *African American Political*

- Thought: A Collected History*, ed. Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 631–59.
17. Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 6–7.
 18. See, for example, Susan Bickford, “Anti-Anti-Identity Politics: Feminism, Democracy, and the Complexities of Citizenship,” *Hypatia* 12, no. 4 (1997): 125–26; Denise James, “In Support of the Girls from ‘Round Here’: Black Feminist Reflections on the Utility of Rage for Building Communities of Support,” in *Communities of Peace: Confronting Injustice and Creating Justice* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2012), 57–59, 61; Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 238–39; Lida Maxwell, *Insurgent Truth: Chelsea Manning and the Politics of Outsider Truth-Telling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), chap. 2.
 19. This is not to say that I am the first or only interpreter to focus on Lorde as an individual mind. In addition to the works by Hanagan and Olson cited above, the work of Christopher Lebron, Laura Grattan, and—most important—Rudolph P. Byrd all engage Lorde individually in a sustained manner. Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), chap. 3; Laura Grattan, “Audre Lorde and the Poetics of Love: In the Movement for Black Lives,” in *American Political Thought: An Alternative Reader*, ed. Jonathan Keller and Alex Zamalin (New York: Routledge, 2017), 42–54; Rudolph P. Byrd, “Create Your Own Fire: Audre Lorde and the Tradition of Black Radical Thought,” introduction to *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*, eds. Rudolph P. Byrd, Johnetta Betsch Cole, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3–36. See also Jack Turner, “Audre Lorde’s Politics of Difference,” in *African American Political Thought*, 563–92. It is also crucial to note that Denise James is writing a monograph on Lorde’s philosophy. Notwithstanding these counter-examples, the broader tendency of the scholarship is more to invoke Lorde as a representative figure of larger theoretical movements than to study her as an individual mind.
 20. Lorde’s anti-imperialist internationalism is especially understudied. For example, in Keisha N. Blain and Tiffany M. Gill’s recent anthology, *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019), Lorde makes only a brief appearance as a formative influence on Afro-German author and activist May Ayim. Lorde’s contribution to the emergence of Afro-German consciousness is undoubtedly significant, but Lorde’s criticisms of U.S. foreign policy in the 1980s are equally significant, making their absence striking. This omission is symptomatic of larger neglect of Lorde’s anti-imperialism within histories of Black internationalism—partly due to the fact that these histories often culminate in the exciting period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, giving short shrift to equally exciting (1) Black critiques of Reagan-Bush interventionism in the Caribbean and Latin America and (2) 1980s Black activism against South African Apartheid. Even

- in Alexander and Mohanty's more self-consciously "anti-colonialist" anthology, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, Lorde makes only a passing appearance—and in her capacity as a Black lesbian writer, not an anti-imperialist one. See Tiffany N. Florvil, "'Distant Ties': May Ayim's Transnational Solidarity and Activism," in *To Turn the Whole World Over 75*, 80–81; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), chap. 3; Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Evelyn M. Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality," in *Feminist Genealogies*, 180–81. But for a brief yet important exception to this general tendency, see Gloria I. Joseph, "Audre Lorde's Relationship and Connections with South African Women," in *Audre Lorde's Transnational Legacies*, eds. Stella Bolaki and Sabine Broeck (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 102–6.
21. Lorde, "Grenada Revisited," 177.
 22. *Ibid.*, 177–78. Other observers, however, have more mixed assessments of Grenada's socioeconomic development under the PRG. See, for example, Brian Meeks, *Caribbean Revolutions and Revolutionary Theory: An Assessment of Cuba, Nicaragua and Grenada* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 1993), chap. 4.
 23. Lorde, "Notes from a Trip to Russia (1976/1984), in *Sister Outsider*, 34.
 24. Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 2.
 25. On "world-making activity," see Adom Getachew, "Universalism after the Post-Colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution," *Political Theory* 44, no. 6 (2016): 829. Arendtian conceptions of worldmaking and natality lie in the background of Getachew's conception of anticolonial worldmaking. Though buried deep beneath the surface of *Worldmaking after Empire*, they are closer to the surface in "Universalism after the Post-Colonial Turn."
 26. Lorde, "Grenada Revisited," 179.
 27. *Ibid.*
 28. On racial capitalism, see Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, new ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, [1983] 2000), and Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2015): 76–85.
 29. Lorde, "Grenada Revisited," 186.
 30. At the same time, within Black internationalism, the distinction between the national and the international should not be overdrawn. See, among other works, Singh, *Black is a Country*.
 31. Lorde, "Grenada Revisited," 181.
 32. *Ibid.*, 179.
 33. Bernard Coard, *The Grenada Revolution: What Really Happened?* (Kingston, Jamaica: McDermott Publishing, 2017), chap. 21.
 34. "Maurice Bishop Speaks to U.S. Working People, June 5, 1983," in *Maurice Bishop Speaks: The Grenada Revolution and its Overthrow* (New York: Pathfinder, [1983] 2018), 488–89.

35. *Ibid.*, 489–90. Lorde confirms her attendance at Bishop’s June 5 speech in a November 25, 1983, interview with Blanche Wiesen Cooke, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=8SbKW-qTO8c&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR21bxUb9EGA6ewXEuTVfNKi2Nwxqh45EMXjV8kDd5vAKOIlumFccDv34WA>, 11:30–11:38, 48:52–49:03 (accessed July 10, 2019). For the dating of the interview, see the Pacifica Radio Archives, <https://www.pacifi-caradioarchives.org/recording/iz134911> (accessed July 10, 2019).
36. “Bishop Speaks, June 5, 1983,” 504.
37. Lorde, “Grenada Revisited,” 184–85, 189; Lorde interview with Cooke, 11:05–11:30, 11:49–12:00.
38. Lorde, “Grenada Revisited,” 189.
39. *Ibid.*, 181.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, 185–86.
42. *Ibid.*, 185.
43. *Ibid.*, 180. A late draft of “Grenada Revisited” observed: “When else would such an act as the annexation of this island be condoned except as it takes place against the traditional victims of dehumanization, Black people?” See “Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report,” c. 1983–84, ALP, Box 21, Folder 45. For discussion of Lorde’s rage against the “white world’s devaluation of blackness,” see Margaret Kissam Morris, “Audre Lorde: Textual Authority and the Embodied Self,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 23, no. 1 (2002): 169.
44. Lorde, “Grenada Revisited,” 184. An early, handwritten draft of “Grenada Revisited” contains raw speculations about the role of White rage in fueling support for the invasion. The Reagan administration, said Lorde, encouraged “white workers . . . to vent their real growing dissatisfaction not upon their oppressors but upon blacks & women until white rage with no place to go sees those Black faces under white marine guns and he may not be able to kill the niggers but by god we can beat the shit out of them over there.” “Notes/Drafts Related to Interim Report on the Military Massacre in Grenada,” ALP, Box 23, Folder 85.
45. But see “Grenada Revisited,” 186, where she refers to the Grenadian “country-side calling for an end to yankee imperialism.”
46. *Ibid.*, 181.
47. *Ibid.*, 179–80.
48. On linked fate, see Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).
49. Lorde, “Grenada Revisited,” 184.
50. Lorde, “Equal Opportunity,” *Feminist Studies*, 440.
51. Department of Defense, Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Equal Opportunity and Safety Policy, *Black Americans in Defense of Our Nation*, Washington, D.C., 1983, 2; Diana Valdez, “Women Don’t Need Charity in Workplace, Official Says,” *Stars and Stripes*, August 31, 1984, 9.
52. *Ibid.*

53. "Nomination of Donna M. Alvarado to Be Director of ACTION," January 31, 1985, Reagan Papers, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/13185b>.
54. *The State of Black America 1981, 1982, and 1983*, 3 vols. (Washington, D.C.: National Urban League, 1981, 1982, and 1983).
55. Dennis Florig, "The Concept of Equal Opportunity in the Analysis of Social Welfare Policy," *Polity* 18, no. 3 (1986): 392–407.
56. Valdez, "Women Don't Need Charity in Workplace," 9.
57. "Address Before a Joint Session of the Alabama State Legislature in Montgomery, March 15, 1982," Reagan Papers, accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/31582b>.
58. "Message to Congress on 'A Quest for Excellence,' January 27, 1987," Reagan Papers, accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/012787b>.
59. Alvin B. Tillery Jr., *Between Homeland and Motherland: Africa, U.S. Foreign Policy, and Black Leadership in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), chap. 5.
60. "Remarks to Members of the World Affairs Council and the Foreign Policy Association, July 22, 1986," Reagan Papers, accessed July 10, 2019, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/072286e>.
61. *Ibid.*
62. For a recent example of this trope, see Luis Pablo de la Horra, "The Southern Slave Economy Was Anti-Capitalistic," Foundation for Economic Education, July 15, 2017, accessed August 3, 2020, <https://fee.org/articles/the-southern-slave-economy-was-anti-capitalistic/>.
63. Lorde, "Equal Opportunity," 369.
64. An early, handwritten draft of "Equal Opportunity" designates the character a "woman of color." Only in later drafts did Lorde change the wording to "home girl." See "Notes/Drafts Related to Interim Report on the Military Massacre in Grenada" and "Equal Opportunity (several revisions)," ALP. Over the course of the poem, it becomes increasingly clear that Lorde means "home girl" in a specifically Black sense, though the "home girl" represents political dilemmas faced by non-White U.S. women (and men) generally.
65. Lorde, "Equal Opportunity," 371.
66. *Ibid.*, 369.
67. Though dioxins and napalm were used in Vietnam, they were not used in Grenada. Email correspondence with Brian Meeks, April 14, 2017 (copy in possession of the author). The poetic conflation of Grenada and Vietnam indicates that some of the poem's figures are synecdochical for U.S. militarism across time.
68. *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, [1983] 2000), xxv.
69. *Ibid.*, xxiv.
70. *Ibid.*, xxxvii.

71. Lorde, "Equal Opportunity," 369–70.
72. Ibid. "Granny Lou" is probably based on Lorde's aunt, "Sister Lou," whom Lorde visited in Grenada in 1978. De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 8, 208, 211.
73. Lorde, "Equal Opportunity," 370.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid., 370–71.
76. Ibid., 371.
77. James Baldwin, "Faulkner and Desegregation" (1961) and "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind" (1963) in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 209, 336.
78. Lorde, "Apartheid U.S.A.," in *A Burst of Light* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988), 28.
79. Dagmar Schultz, *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years, 1984-1992* (New York: Third World Newsreel, 2012), DVD, 34:43–34:59.
80. Lorde, "Apartheid U.S.A.," 30. Cf. Hanagan, *Democratic Responsibility*, 146.
81. "Notes/Drafts Related to Interim Report on the Military Massacre in Grenada," ALP. Cf. Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 5: "Lorde demands that . . . [we] all take into account our own complicities with power over and against others."
82. Lorde, "Apartheid U.S.A.," 30.
83. Lorde, "Equal Opportunity," *Feminist Studies*, 440.

Author Biography

Jack Turner is associate professor of political science at the University of Washington. He is the author of *Awakening to Race: Individualism and Social Consciousness in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2012). With Melvin L. Rogers, he coedited *African American Political Thought: A Collected History* (University of Chicago Press, 2020). In addition to the coauthored introduction, his contribution to that volume is chapter 25, "Audre Lorde's Politics of Difference." His articles have appeared in a wide variety of journals, including *Political Theory*, *Raritan*, *Modern Intellectual History*, and *Polity*.