

Also by Audre Lorde

The First Cities

Cables To Rage

From A Land Where Other People Live

New York Head Shop And Museum

Coal

Between Our Selves

The Black Unicorn

The Cancer Journals

Zami: A New Spelling Of My Name

Chosen Poems: Old And New

Sister Outsider

Our Dead Behind Us

A BURST OF LIGHT

essays
by **AUDRE
LORDE**



**Firebrand
Books**

Ithaca, New York

"Apartheid U.S.A." and "I Am Your Sister" were published in pamphlet form by Kitchen Table: Women Of Color Press (P.O. Box 908, Latham, New York 12110).

"Sodomasochism: Not About Condemnation" appears in a slightly different version in *Against Sodomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* edited by Robin Ruth Linden, Darlene R. Pagano, Diana E.H. Russell, and Susan Leigh Star published by Frog In The Well (P.O. Box 170052, San Francisco, California 94117).

"Turning The Beat Around" appears in *Politics Of The Heart, A Lesbian Parenting Anthology* edited by Sandra Pollack and Jeanne Vaughn published by Firebrand Books.

Copyright © 1988 by Audre Lorde
All rights reserved.

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part, except in the case of reviews, without permission from Firebrand Books, 141 The Commons, Ithaca, New York 14850.

Book and cover design by Mary A. Scott
Cover photo by Audre Lorde
Typesetting by Bets Ltd.

Printed on acid-free paper in the United States by McNaughton & Gunn

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lorde, Audre.

A burst of light.

1. Lorde, Audre—Biography.
2. Poets, American—20th century—Biography.
3. Feminists—United States—Biography.
4. Breast—Cancer—Patients—United States—Biography.
5. Afro-American lesbians—Social conditions.

I. Title.

PS3562.075Z463 1988

814'.54

88-3924

ISBN 0-932379-40-0

ISBN 0-932379-39-7 (pbk.)

To that piece of each of us which refuses to be silent.

are yours to solve, not mine, and they are a terrible and wasteful barrier to our working together. I am not your enemy. We do not have to become each other's unique experiences and insights in order to share what we have learned through our particular battles for survival as Black women. . . .

There was a poster in the 1960s that was very popular: HE'S NOT BLACK, HE'S MY BROTHER! It used to infuriate me because it implied that the two were mutually exclusive—he couldn't be both brother and Black. Well, I do not want to be tolerated, nor misnamed. I want to be recognized.

I am a Black Lesbian, and I *am* your sister.

Apartheid U.S.A.

New York City, 1985. The high sign that rules this summer is increasing fragmentation. I am filled with a sense of urgency and dread: dread at the apparently random waves of assaults against people and institutions closest to me; urgency to unearth the connections between these assaults. Those connections lurk beneath the newspaper reports of teargassed funeral processions in Tembi-sa and the charred remains of Baldwin Hills, California, a flourishing Black neighborhood leveled by arson.

I sit before the typewriter for days and nothing comes. It feels as if underlining these assaults, lining them up one after the other and looking at them squarely might give them an unbearable power. Yet I know exactly the opposite is true—no matter how difficult it may be to look at the realities of our lives, it is there that we

will find the strength to change them. And to suppress any truth is to give it power beyond endurance.

As I write these words I am listening to the United Nations Special Session considering the "state of emergency" in South Africa, their euphemism for the suspension of human rights for Blacks, which is the response of the Pretoria regime to the increasingly spontaneous eruptions in Black townships across that country. These outbursts against apartheid have greatly increased in the last eleven months since a new South African constitution further solidified the exclusion of the twenty-two million Black majority from the South African political process. These outbreaks, however severely curtailed by the South African police and military, are beginning to accomplish what Oliver Tambo, head of the African National Congress, hoped for in his call to make South Africa under apartheid "ungovernable."

So much Black blood has been shed upon that land, I thought, and so much more will fall. But blood will tell, and now the blood is speaking. Has it finally started? What some of us prayed and worked and believed would—must—happen, wondering when, because so few of us here in America even seemed to know what was going on in South Africa, nor cared to hear. 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.

And who would have thought we'd live to see the day when Black South Africa took center stage on the world platform? As Ellen Kuzwayo, Black South African writer, would say, this is where we are right now in the world's story. . . . Perhaps this is how Europe felt in the fall of 1939, on the brink. I remember that Sunday of

December 7, 1941 and the chill certainty that some threat which hovered on my six-year-old horizon had finally been made real and frontal. August 6, 1945. Hiroshima. My father's tears—I had never seen him cry before and at first I thought it was sweat—a forty-six-year-old Black man in his vigor, yet only seven years away from death by overwork. He said, "Humanity can now destroy itself," and he wept. That's how it feels, except this time we know we're on the winning side. South Africa *will* be free, I thought, beneath the clatter of my waiting typewriter and the sonorous tones of the United Nations broadcast, the U.S. delegate, along with the one from Great Britain, talking their rot about what "we" have done for Black South Africa.

South Africa. Eighty-seven percent of the people, Black, occupy 13 percent of the land. Thirteen percent of the people, white, own 85 percent of the land. White South Africa has the highest standard of living of any nation in the world including the United States yet half the Black children born in South Africa die before they reach the age of five. Every thirty minutes, six Black children starve to death in South Africa. In response to questions about apartheid from a white U.S. reporter, a white South African reporter retorts, "You have solved the problem of your indigenous people—we are solving ours. You called them Indians, didn't you?" Apartheid—South Africa's Final Solution patterned after Nazi Germany's genocidal plan for European Jews.

Every year over 500 million american dollars flow into the white South African death machine. How many of those dollars do you control as you sit reading this? Where do you bank? Buy your gas? What pressure can you bring to bear upon companies doing business in South Africa? Five hundred million dollars a year. Divestment. The withdrawal of american financial support from South Africa. Those who counter that divestment would mean addition-

al suffering for Black South Africans are either cynical or misguided or unaware of the extent to which Black South Africans suffer every day of their lives. For any South African to even discuss divestment in South Africa is considered an act of treason against the state.

Do you even know which companies your money supports that do business in South Africa? You won't find that information in the *New York Times* or the *San Francisco Chronicle* or *GQ*. But you can obtain that information and more from the African National Congress Weekly News Briefings (\$15 a year) from ANC, 801 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017, or from the American Committee on Africa, 198 Broadway, New York, NY 10038.

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. African-Americans control 200 billion dollars in buying power annually. As African-Americans we must learn to use our power, to establish the connections instantly between consistent patterns of slaughter of Black children and youth in the roads of Sebokeng and Soweto in the name of law and order in Johannesburg, and white america's not-so-silent applause for the smiling white vigilante who coolly guns down four Black youths in the New York City subway. Or the white policemen guarding the store of a Middle Eastern shopkeeper who had killed three Black children in Brooklyn in a dispute over one can of Coca-Cola. The multicorporate financial connections are a matter of record; it is the emotional ones which must become inescapable for each of us. We are members of an international community of people of Color, and must see our struggles as connected within that light.

Made more arrogant daily by the connivance of the U.S. dollar and the encouragement of the U.S. policy of constructive engage-

ment, South African police jail and murder six-year-old children, kick twelve-year-old Johannes to death in front of his garden, leave nine-year-old Joyce bleeding to death on her granny's floor. Decades of these actions are finally escalating into the world's consciousness.

How long will it take to escalate into our consciousness as Black people that this is *us*, that it is only a matter of location and progression of time and intensity from the molotov cocktails that were hurled into the brush in Los Angeles, starting the conflagration that burned out well-to-do Black Baldwin Hills—fifty-three homes gone, three lives lost—to government sanctioned segregation and violence. In California, U.S.A., the Aryan Brotherhood, the Posse Comitatus, and other white racist and anti-Semitic survivalist groups flourish rampant and poisonous, fertilized by a secretly sympathetic law enforcement team.

Eleanor Bumpurs, sixty-six, Black grandmother, evicted from her Bronx Housing Authority apartment with two fatal shotgun blasts from New York City Housing police.

Allene Richardson, sixty-four, gunned down in her Detroit apartment house hallway by a policewoman after she was locked out of her apartment and a neighbor called the police to help her get back in.

It is ten years since a policeman shot ten-year-old Clifford Glover early one Saturday morning in front of his father in Queens, New York; eight years Thanksgiving Day since another white cop walked up to Randy Evans while he sat on his stoop talking with friends and blew his fifteen-year-old brains out. Temporary insanity, said the jury that acquitted that policeman.

Countless others since then—Seattle, New Orleans, Dallas. Yvonne Smallwood, a young Black woman arguing her husband's traffic ticket, kicked to death by police in Manhattan. Our dead

line our dreams, their deaths becoming more and more commonplace.

How does a system bent upon our ultimate destruction make the unacceptable gradually tolerable? Observe closely, look around, read the Black press. How do you get a population to accept the denial of the most rudimentary freedoms this country is supposed to be about to over 12 percent of its population? And we know that Black americans are only the beginning, just as the moves against Black Lesbians and Gays are only the beginning within our communities.

In 1947, within my memory, apartheid was not the state policy of South Africa, but the supposedly far-out dream of the Afrikaner Broederbond. Living conditions of Black South Africans, although bad, were not yet governed by policies of institutional genocide. Blacks owned land, attended schools.

With the 1948 election of the Afrikaner white-supremacy advocate Malik, and the implementation of apartheid, the step-by-step attack upon Black existence was accelerated with the dismantling of any human rights as they pertained to Black people. Now, white South Africans who protest are being jailed and brutalized and blown up, also. Once liberal English-speaking white South Africans had to be conned into accepting this dismantling, lulled long enough for the apparatus which was to ensure all white privileged survival to be cemented into place by H. Verwoerd, its architect and later South African Prime Minister.

Now Johannesburg, city of gold, sits literally upon a mountain of gold and Black blood.

After a Sharpeville, why not a Soweto? After a Michael Stewart, young Black artist beaten to death by New York City transit police, why not a Bernard Goetz? After a New York Eight Plus, why not a Philadelphia, where the Black mayor allows a white police chief

to bomb a houseful of Black people into submission, killing eleven people and burning down a whole Black neighborhood to do it. Firemen refused to douse the flames. Five of those killed were children. Police pinned them down with gunfire when the occupants sought to escape the flames, making sure these Black people died. Because they were dirty and Black and obnoxious and Black and arrogant and Black and poor and Black and Black and Black and Black. And the Mayor who allowed this to happen says he accepts full responsibility, and he is Black, too. How are we persuaded to participate in our own destruction by maintaining our silences? How is the american public persuaded to accept as natural the fact that at a time when prolonged negotiations can effect the release of hostages in the Middle East or terminate an armed confrontation with police outside a white survivalist encampment, a mayor of an american city can order an incendiary device dropped on a house with five children in it and police pin down the occupants until they perish? Yes, African-Americans can still walk the streets of america without passbooks—for the time being.

In October 1984, 500 agents of the Joint Terrorists Task Force (see what your taxes are paying for?) rounded up eight middle-income Black radicals whose only crime seems to be their insistence upon their right to dissent, to call themselves Marxist-Leninists, and to question the oppressive nature of this U.S. society. They are currently imprisoned, and being tried in a Grand Jury proceeding that reads like the Star Chamber reports or the Spanish Inquisition. Twenty-two months of round-the-clock surveillance has so far not provided any evidence at all that these Black men and women, some grandmothers, were terrorists. I am reminded of the Johannesburg courts filled with cases brought against Black clericals and salesgirls accused of reading a book or wearing a T-shirt or listening to music thought to be sympathetic to the Afri-

can National Congress. Two years hard labor for pamphlets discovered in an office desk drawer.

How is the systematic erosion of freedoms gradually accomplished? What kind of gradual erosion of our status as United States citizens will Black people be persuaded first to ignore and then to accept?

In Louisville, Kentucky, a Workmen's Compensation ruling awards \$231 weekly disability payments to a thirty-nine-year-old sanitation supervisor, white, for a mental breakdown he says he suffered as a result of having to work with Black people.

A peaceful, licensed march to the Haitian Embassy in New York to protest living conditions on that island, and the imprisonment of three priests, is set upon by New York City mounted police and trained attack dogs. Sixteen people are injured, including women and children, and one man, struck in the head by hooves, may lose his eye. The next day, no major newspaper or TV news station carries a report of the incident, except for Black media.

In New York, the self-confessed and convicted white ex-G.I. killer of at least six Black men in New York City and Buffalo is quietly released from jail after less than one year, on a technicality. He had been sentenced to life for three of the murders and never tried on the others. White men attack three Black transit workers in Brooklyn, stomping one to death. Of the three who are tried for murder, two are sentenced to less than one year in prison and one goes scot-free.

So the message is clear: stock in Black human life in the U.S.A., never high, is plunging rapidly in the sight of white american complacencies. But as African-Americans we cannot afford to play that market; it is our lives and the lives of our children that are at stake.

The political and social flavor of the African-American position in the 1980s feels in particular aspects to be analogous to occur-

rences in the Black South African communities of the 1950s, the period of the postwar construction of the apparatus of apartheid, reaction, and suppression. Reaction in a large, manipulated, and oppressed population, particularly one where minimal material possessions allow a spurious comparison for the better to one's neighbors, is always slow in coming, preceded as it so often is by the preoccupation of energies in having to cope daily with worsening symptoms of threatened physical survival.

There has recently been increased discussion among African-Americans concerning crime and social breakdown within our communities, signaled in urban areas by highly visible groups of unemployed Black youths, already hopeless and distrustful of their or their elders' abilities to connect with any meaningful future. Our young Black people are being sacrificed to a society's determination to destroy whomever it no longer needs for cheap labor or cannon fodder.

No one in the U.S. government will say openly now that apartheid in South Africa is good, or that the advancing technocracy in this country is making a large underprivileged pool of cheap labor increasingly unnecessary. No one actually says that Black people are more frequently seen as expendable in this economy, but nonetheless the nation that plans to finance Star Wars in space and run shuttle flights to the moon cannot seem to remedy Black teenage unemployment. Because it does not wish to remedy it. Better to wipe them out, blow them away. African-Americans are increasingly superfluous to a shrinking economy. A different stage exists in South Africa where a cheap labor pool of Blacks is still pivotal to the economy. But the maintenance of the two systems is closely related, and they are both guided primarily by the needs of a white marketplace. Of course no one in the United States government will openly defend apartheid—they don't have to. Just

support it by empty rhetorical slaps on the wrist and solid financial investments, all the time honoring South African orders for arms, nuclear technology, and sophisticated computerized riot-control mechanisms. The bully boys stick together.

I remember stories in the 1960s about the roving bands of homeless and predatory *tsotsis*, disenchanted and furious Black youths roaming the evening streets of Sharpeville and Soweto and other Black townships.

The fact that African-Americans can still move about relatively freely, do not yet have to carry passbooks or battle an officially named policy of apartheid, should not delude us for a minute about the disturbing similarities of the Black situation in each one of these profit-oriented economies. We examine these similarities so that we can more effectively devise mutually supportive strategies for action, at the same time as we remain acutely aware of our differences. Like the volcano, which is one form of extreme earth-change, in any revolutionary process there is a period of intensification and a period of explosion. We must become familiar with the requirements and symptoms of each period, and use the differences between them to our mutual advantage, learning and supporting each other's battles. African-Americans can wield the relative power of our dollars—for better or worse. We have the ability to affect South Africa where it lives, financially, through our support of divestment for companies doing business in South Africa. Black South Africans have the base of their own land upon which they operate. We lack that as African-Americans, suffer the rootlessness of a "hyphenated" people. But within those differences, we can join together to effect a future the world has not yet conceived, let alone seen.

For no matter what liberal commitment to human rights is mouthed in international circles by the U.S. government, we know

it will not move beyond its investments in South Africa unless we make it unprofitable to invest there. For it is economic divestment, not moral sanction, that South Africa fears most. No one will free us but ourselves, here nor there. So our survivals are not separate, even though the terms under which we struggle differ. African-Americans are bound to the Black struggle in South Africa by politics as well as blood. As Malcolm X observed more than twenty years ago, a militant, free Africa is a necessity to the dignity of African-American identity.

The mendacity of the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, as he recited all the "help" this country has given to Black South Africans, is matched only by the cynicism of the South African president who self-righteously condemns the spontaneous violence against Black collaborators in the Black townships, calling that the reason for the current state of emergency. Of course, it is the picture of Blacks killing a Black that is flashed over and over across the white world's TV screens, not the images of white South African police firing into groups of Black schoolchildren, imprisoning six-year-olds, driving over Black schoolgirls. And I think about my feelings concerning that Black mayor of Philadelphia, and about Clarence Pendleton, Black man, Reagan-appointed head of the Federal Civil Rights Commission and mouthpiece of corruption, saying to young students at Cornell University, "The economic pie is just too small for everyone to have a fair share, and that's not the function of civil rights." Eventually institutional racism becomes a question of power and privilege rather than merely color, which then serves as a subterfuge.

The connections between Africans and African-Americans, African-Europeans, African-Asians, is real, however dimly seen at times, and we all need to examine without sentimentality or stereotype what the injection of Africanness into the socio-political

consciousness of the world could mean. We need to join our differences and articulate our particular strengths in the service of our mutual survivals, and against the desperate backlash which attempts to keep that Africanness from altering the very bases of current world power and privilege.

Turning The Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986

These days it seems like everywhere I turn somebody is either having a baby or talking about having a baby, and on one level that feels quite benign because I love babies. At the same time, I can't help asking myself what it means in terms of where we are as a country, as well as where we are as people of Color within a white racist system. And when infants begin to appear with noticeable regularity within the Gay and Lesbian community, I find this occurrence even more worthy of close and unsentimental scrutiny.

We are Lesbians and Gays of Color surviving in a country that defines human—when it concerns itself with the question at all—as straight and white. We are Gays and Lesbians of Color at a time in that country's history when its domestic and international policies, as well as its posture toward those developing nations with