A Poetry of Survival: Unnaming and Renaming in the Poetry of Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich

Pamela Annas

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 18, no.1, March 1982, p.9-25

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfKelly@colby.edu.
A Poetry of Survival:
Unnaming and Renaming in the Poetry of Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich

by PAMELA ANNAS

No one who survives to speak
new language has avoided this:
the cutting-away of an old force that held her
rooted to an old ground
the pitch of utter loneliness
where she herself and all creation
seem equally dispersed, weightless, her being a cry
to which no echo comes

Adrienne Rich
“Transcendental Etude”
The Dream of a Common Language

I am
woman
and not white.
Audre Lorde
“A Woman Speaks”
The Black Unicorn

The relation of a woman poet to language has been rather like the
relation of a day laborer to a set of company-owned tools. A careful
worker will not trust company tools. She will check them over thorou­gh­ly; she will be conscious of them as separate from herself. She will not
expect much from them, and she will save up for a set of her own which
she can trust. But the relation of a woman poet to language is even more
complex and problematic than this, for language is not only a tool to
build with, it is also that which is built. Language is a house to inhabit,
a space which one shapes to be comfortable in and, often, uses to define
oneself.

A poem is a room in the house of language. A poem is a stage in the
process of self-definition, a grounding and realizing of self-image and

This paper is a result of my own participation in the community of women scholars/poets/readers
now creating a feminist literary criticism. Particular thanks to Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Carole
Stone for reading and commenting on this version of the article, to the women in my Contemporary
Women Poets course in Spring 1981 for a thorough discussion of many of these poems, and to Martha
Collins, Helene Davis, Linda Dittmar, Mary Anne Ferguson, and Mary Helen Washington for being
supportive co-members of the panels at which portions of this paper were first given—the New England
Women’s Studies Association Conference, April 1980, in Kingston, R.I., and the National Women’s
image of the world. Poetry is always political no matter who is writing it. The form of the poem is an expression of the politics of the poem. The politics of the poem is not detachable from either the poem or the poet. The form of the poem is an expression of everything that the poet is and is expressing. The location of "meaning" in a poem, the center of the poem, is in the dialectical tension between the self-image of the poet and the image of the world or inclusive other in the poem. The interaction, relation, or creative tension between self-image (which may be the poet speaking directly or may be a persona) and image of the world (the physical and/or social setting) is the syntax of the poem. Any writer who is not "mainstream" (white, male, middle class, straight), not writing out of a sense of being the norm, is writing in tension with or writing against a context, a world, where s/he is seen wrongly or not at all. This is clearer with some poets than with others.

For a poet who is a woman, this process of self-definition in the poem is not necessarily comfortable, for it takes place through a medium—language—which is suspect. To go back to my original metaphor for a moment, both the tools and the architectural drawings are not quite right. Embedded in the vocabulary and syntax of any language are assumptions which imply already a definition of self, world, and the relationship between self and world. For a woman, or for any member of an outgroup in this culture, language reflects a code which defines the poet’s existence in a way felt to be false. Insofar as a woman poet accepts without question the language she is given, she is also accepting a set of patriarchal, capitalist, racist, heterosexist assumptions which are built into the language and which, at the least, deny her an identity of her own.

She looks for herself as subject and looks in vain. She finds that the "I" in literature is "a masculine consciousness which has become synonymous with the human consciousness." She finds herself defined as other and as object. "She finds," writes Adrienne Rich in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," "a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face . . . but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together." The necessity for women to reclaim words and images, to revise the way words are put together as well as the words themselves, to review the whole tradition of poetry, to repossess and reinhabit language—seems clear by now. It is the process of renaming—how renaming happens—that I would like to look at in this paper, especially in reference to the poetry of Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne

Rich. The theory I'm about to outline is, I think, applicable to a number of modern American women poets.

There are five stages in the process of renaming. Most other-defined groups need to work through these stages in the progress toward a voice wholly their own. This is true not only of poetry but in general of the literature of the dispossessed. A given writer's work may be located primarily at one point in this process, or s/he may travel through a number of stages in the course of a lifetime of work.

1) In the first stage the individual (or group) accepts the definition of self ascribed to her by the dominant voice in the culture. In this culture that voice is white, male, middle class, and heterosexual. The individual is entirely oppressed because unconscious of the contradictions in which s/he lives and which s/he has thoroughly internalized.

2) The second stage is dual consciousness, in which one is aware of two definitions of self—the one imposed from outside, which defines the way she is supposed to act, and the growing sense of self that contradicts that earlier definition. W. E. B. DuBois said in The Souls of Black Folk (1903): “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others.”

3) The third stage is the beginning of redefinition. Renaming begins with unnaming as the poet stands apart and separates out the false or other-defined self. One names the false self and then unnames it, cancels it out part by part. Unnaming is central and necessary to the process of renaming. It is uncomfortable as the individual gives up parts and qualities of self that are no longer useful but that may have been around for a long time, or as she admits that she never had parts and qualities she was supposed to have. Unnaming is difficult and dangerous. It involves a confrontation of self that is frequently painful. Audre Lorde, in “Portrait,” writes:

   Strong women know the taste of their own hatred
   I must always be building nests in a windy place

Unnaming is frightening. In “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” Adrienne Rich writes:

The void is the creatrix, the matrix. It is not mere hollowness and anarchy. But in women it has been identified with lovelessness, barrenness, sterility. We have been urged

3. Ibid.
5. Audre Lorde, The Black Unicorn (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978). The Black Unicorn is the only one of Audre Lorde's volumes of poetry in print at this time. Other volumes are: The First Cities, Cables to Rage, From A Land Where Other People Live, The New York Head Shop and Museum, Coal, and Between Our Selves. Unless otherwise noted, the poems quoted here are from The Black Unicorn.
to fill our "emptiness" with children. We are not supposed to go down into the darkness of the core.
Yet, if we can risk it, the something born of that nothing is the beginning of our truth.™

4) Stage four redefines and renames the self, connects parts of the self, puts the self back together.

I choose to be a figure in that light,
half-blotted by darkness, something moving
across that space, the color of stone
greeting the moon, yet more than stone:
a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle.™

Both Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde rename themselves through their identification as lesbians and by their context as part of a women's community. In addition, Lorde in The Black Unicorn renames herself through the recreation in her poems of the history and mythology of Dahomey, country of the Amazons. In "125th Street and Abomey" her historical self and her contemporary self come together into one name:

Seboulisa mother goddess with one breast
eaten away by worms of sorrow and loss
see me now
your severed daughter
laughing our name into echo
all the world shall remember.

(my italics)

There is an exhilaration at the beginning of naming, where the poet reclaims language and history as well as self.

5) Finally, the renamed self renames the world and finds a new balance. She brings the world, through language, into an alignment with the new self. When Pat Parker, in "i have a dream," writes: "In my dream- / i can walk the streets / holding hands with my lover" and "In my dream- / i can walk ghetto streets / & not be beaten up by my brothers," she is beginning to rename the world from the perspective of a black lesbian poet.™ When Audre Lorde redefines the erotic as "an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives," she is renaming the world.

During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag. We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it

gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, leaving it thoroughly colored.

I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. 9

At some point in the process of naming, usually at the destructive/creative time of unnaming, there is either a breakdown or a breakthrough. Sylvia Plath’s greatest poems are primarily at the point of unnaming, in which she tries to break through to renaming but finally breaks down. Adrienne Rich’s theme is change and her work moves through the five stages. Audre Lorde and Pat Parker, while very different poets, both have written poems which rename through unnaming. It should be very clear that this is not a hierarchical or evaluative schema. Its relation to the poems is primarily descriptive. Where a poem is in this process is not a measure of the poem’s worth. It is rather a comment on the poet’s social and historical context.

Sylvia Plath died the same year, 1963, that Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique was published, a book that talked about “the problem that had no name,” a description of the sense of misdefinition felt by the American woman. 10 Sylvia Plath’s poetry is as much about rebirth as it is about death. Her poetry as a whole is an attempt at redefinition of self, a narrative of the possibilities for a transformed self reborn into a transformed world, and a listing of the obstacles in the way of that transformation. Plath’s early poems, such as “The Colossus,” describe the situation of a woman poet trying to learn her craft in the face of a tradition of perception and of poetry that is overwhelmingly male. The huge statue, the male other that looms over this poem, is described specifically in reference to language.

Mule-bray, pig-grunt, and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It’s worse than a barnyard.
Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other. 11

Because the poet has not yet found anything to take over the place of this system of perception, the whole world of this poem becomes fragments and her labor trying to glue them together in some way that seems to make sense. In a later poem, “Two Campers in Cloud Country,” she describes the seductive terror of a wilderness where “there is neither measure nor balance / To redress the dominance of rocks and woods.” There are no “labelled elms” or “tame tearoses.” There is instead the danger of language slipping away entirely and, with it, the magic control of one’s surroundings that language can seem to provide. “No gesture

11. Sylvia Plath’s volumes of poetry are The Colossus, Crossing the Water, Ariel, and Winter Trees. The Colossus (1960) is the only volume Sylvia Plath herself put together. The others were assembled, mostly by Ted Hughes, after she died.
of yours or mine could catch their attention, / No word make them carry water or fire the kindling / Like local trolls in the spell of a superior being.” In a poem from the same period, “Crossing the Water,” the campers are two “cut-paper people” and clearly have less vitality and substance than the trees that surround them. The two human intruders, the aliens in this setting, can become part of this world and therefore real only by becoming wordless. “The spirit of blackness is in us,” Plath writes in “Crossing the Water,” and if we yield, then

Stars open among the lilies.
Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?
This is the silence of astounded souls.

The poems suggest that Sylvia Plath was realizing about this time that what her own language represented was an internalization of a set of assumptions hostile to her own growth. As a result of feeling trapped inside these assumptions, integrity of self is often seen in her late poetry as purity. Purity is freedom from being defined. It is also self-enclosure, numbness, sensory deprivation, a wish to be “nun-hearted and blind to the world” (“Small Hours,” Crossing the Water). It is death, the dead body of a woman wearing a “smile of accomplishment” (“Edge,” Ariel). Less passive images of breaking through this set of patriarchal assumptions often take the form in Sylvia Plath’s late poetry of a self-image as a goddess figure of personal and social vengeance, like those who appear at the end of “Stings” and “Lady Lazarus”: “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air.”

What characterizes the Ariel poems is their emotional and dialectical tension between stasis and movement, isolation and engagement, self and world, and the possibility of a resolution of this tension in some kind of rebirth of a transformed self into a transformed world. The poems are not so much about death as about trying to survive. In “Tulips” this tension is centered on perception itself and the possibility of beginning to redefine oneself through the act of unnaming. The hospital is associated in “Tulips,” as it is throughout Plath’s poetry, with winter and its reduced life functions of dormancy and hibernation and endurance, with water, with coldness, with numbness and sleep, with emptiness and flatness, with neutrality, a state of null emotions, with detachment, sterility, depersonalization, purification, and peacefulness. The hospital represents a peeling off of encumbrances, a kind of return to an essential, blank state. “I am nobody,” says the speaker of the poem. “And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.”

I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.

The rhythm of the poem is lazy, drugged, in slow motion. The lines are long, Whitmanic, with series like “as the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.” However, while Whitman’s long breath line was
meant to signify a kind of cosmic inclusiveness, Plath’s naming of things in “Tulips” is for the opposite purpose. As she names them, they disappear, as though the word cancels out the thing in a kind of reverse incantation, until finally everything will have been named and there will be nothing left and the world will be pure and clean and blank. Working from the most superficial associations down to the most essential, she can blank things out one by one, until only she is left and she can say Sylvia and she too will disappear.

Most of Sylvia Plath’s poetry is at the stage of unnaming, of recognizing and cancelling out the other defined self. “Daddy,” for example, is a poem of unnaming or exorcising her father in herself. “You do not do, you do not do / Any more” the poem begins, and ends with a stake driven into the heart of her vampire father by “the villagers,” an action in concert unusual in her poetry. The pain of Plath’s poetry comes from their unsuccessful attempts to rename. In “Lady Lazarus,” she tries over and over to be reborn, but continually comes back “to the same place, the same face.” I imagine her in a pit trying to climb up the sides, slipping and falling back to the bottom again, trying to climb up, slipping and falling back until she was exhausted and couldn’t try any more. She did not break through from unnaming to renaming at least partly because of her profound isolation from other women, to some extent self-imposed and to some extent typical of 1956-1963. In poem after poem, it is clear that she saw herself struggling alone with a male-defined tradition of poetry within a society also patriarchal. She was isolated temporally from a female tradition; she was isolated spatially from a community of women. Though Sylvia Plath herself didn’t make it, her poetry did; her struggle to survive has had a deep and continuing effect on the women poets who write after her.

For Adrienne Rich, the process of connection, re-vision, and renaming has been inseparable from her growing sense of woman identification. She has moved, in the course of her thirty years of poetry, from being influenced by male poetry and writing for a male literary establishment to finding herself as a woman, as a woman poet, as a woman loving women, as a woman writing for women, as a woman who is part of a community of women.

I am the lover and the loved,
home and wanderer, she who splits
firewood and she who knocks, a stranger
in the storm, two women, eye to eye
measuring each other’s spirit, each other’s
limitless desire,
a whole new poetry beginning here.
(“Transcendental Etude”)

Adrienne Rich has been concerned with language and with her own relation to it throughout her poetry; that concern becomes a main focus in
The Dream of a Common Language (1978). Her poetry works through the five stages of renaming; her emphasis in the latest poetry (and essays) is on connecting the renamed self to a renamed world, connecting woman and woman, middle class and working class women, black women and white women. Since the late 1960’s, her poetry has been explicitly political.

“An Unsaid Word,” from Rich’s first volume of poetry, A Change of World (1951), demonstrates the way one can build into a poem an acceptance of oppression. Here the speaker of the poem is other-defined and tries to find her subordinate place in a world certainly not her own.

She who has power to call her man
From that estranged intensity
Where his mind forages alone.
Yet keeps her peace and leaves him free,
And when his thoughts to her return
Stands where he left her, still his own
Knows this the hardest thing to learn.

“Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” written from 1958-1960 and the title poem of her third volume of poetry (1963), is located at the stage of dual consciousness, or recognition of the ways one has been defined. The poem collects and names the contradictions in a woman of middle age, “in the prime of your life.” There are a number of quotes in the poem, from men on woman’s “nature” and limitations, and from women like Simone De Beauvoir and Mary Wollstonecraft on women’s needs and capacities. Rich names her oppressions and names her champions—and she says elsewhere that this poem was an extraordinary relief to write—but the actual woman who opens the poem seems to disappear in the subsequent argument between the two sides of herself: “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. / The beak that grips her, she becomes.”

“The Trees,” a 1963 poem collected in Necessities of Life (1966), is at the beginning of unnaming and, for Adrienne Rich, breakthrough rather than breakdown. “The trees inside are moving out into the forest.” The poem narrates how the trees disengage their roots one night and break out of the house, where they are met in celebration and reunion by winds and moon. For Adrienne Rich, as for a number of women poets, trees are recurrent images. Like the moon and the ocean, they are symbols of self and of woman. The speaker of “Trees” is a double self who is both detached from and identifies with the trees. In this poem, the speaker is at least an accomplice to the captive trees’ break for freedom.

I sit inside, doors open to the veranda
writing long letters

in which I scarcely mention the departure of the forest from the house.
The night is fresh, the whole moon shines in a sky still open
the smell of leaves and lichen still reaches like a voice into the rooms.
My head is full of whispers which tomorrow will be silent.

Listen. The glass is breaking.

The poet observer, on the one hand, tries not to get too involved or to think too directly about the consequences of the trees’ departure; hers is a curious sort of revolution that doesn’t try to change the structure of things within the house, but simply withdraws its presence, its implicit support through acquiescence, says, “I prefer not to.” The speaker of the poem is not yet ready to follow the trees’ example, yet she identifies with them and their action; there is something quite exultant about the poet’s tone in “Listen. The glass is breaking.”

_Diving Into the Wreck_ (1973) includes poems which begin to document Adrienne Rich’s renaming of herself. In “When We Dead Awaken,” she writes about the “fact of being separate”: “You give up keeping track of anniversaries, / You begin to write in your diaries / more honestly than ever.” The poems of_Diving Into the Wreck_ are about separating from men and discovering one’s autonomy as a woman. “From a Survivor” begins “The pact that we made was the ordinary pact / of men & women in those days” and ends:

Next year it would have been 20 years
and you are wastefully dead
who might have made the leap
we talked, too late, of making

The title poem, “Diving Into the Wreck,” is an account of putting the self back together in a new way; Rich uses here the inclusive metaphor of androgyny. “I am she; I am he,” says the diver, turning the generic “he” into the generic “s/he,” who came down into a dangerous and unfamiliar territory and medium to explore “the wreck and not the story of the wreck / The thing itself and not the myth.” Other poems in_Diving Into the Wreck_, like “The Phenomenology of Anger” and “Trying to Talk With a Man,” name the poet’s anger, work through it, and direct it outward.

So that in _The Dream of a Common Language_ (1978), anger is not only no longer directed inward, it is also no longer the dominant emotion. The poet has moved into a new world, one which the renamed self is in the process of reclaiming—picking up parts of that world, turning them over in her hands, tasting their texture, giving them names. Renaming of the self continues, in creative tension with the world’s transformation. The movement from _Diving Into the Wreck_ to _The Dream of
a Common Language is a movement from hesitancy to confidence, from solitude to community—specifically to a community of women, from demythologizing to remythologizing, and from water to fire. In “Diving Into the Wreck,” the sea was a female image. In Poem XI, the central poem of “Twenty-One Love Poems,” Adrienne Rich claims the volcano, with its connotations of passion and of active power, also as a female image.

XI.

Every peak is a crater. This is the law of volcanoes, making them eternally and visibly female. 

No height without depth, without a burning core, though our straw soles shred on the hardened lava. 

I want to travel with you to every sacred mountain smoking within like the sibyl stooped over her tripod, I want to reach for your hand as we scale the path, to feel your arteries glowing in my clasp, never failing to note the small, jewel-like flower unfamiliar to us, nameless till we rename her, that clings to the slowly altering rock—that detail outside ourselves that brings us to ourselves, was here before us, knew we would come, and sees beyond us.

For Rich, it is essential that the “Twenty-One Love Poems” be read as poems written by a lesbian, from one woman to another. She says, in an interview in Conditions: Two, that some heterosexual couples told her they read the poems to each other and that they wanted to let her know that the poems were universal. Rich commented that she did not want the poems to be universal, that she didn’t believe that universality was necessarily a good thing, particularly when it denied the reality of a particular group, and that to read the poems in that way was to tear them out of their context, to undermine their meaning, not really to read them.13 Poem XI is a complex realigning into sympathy of what would ordinarily be considered in opposition: peak / crater, height / depth, burning core / hardened lava, hardened lava / our straw soles, hand / arteries inside hand, noticing / the unfamiliar, nameless / rename, flower / the slowly altering rock, detail outside us / brings us to ourselves, before us / beyond us. The poem undermines duality. The poem brings together inner and outer, makes them one, inclusive, as the earlier “Diving Into the Wreck” renamed the self by bringing together the self and the past.

13. Elly Bulkin, “An Interview with Adrienne Rich: Part II” in Conditions: Two (1977). She goes on to say: “‘That kind of acceptance’ of the book seems to me a refusal of its deepest implications. The longing to simplify, to defuse feminism by invoking ‘androgyny’ or ‘humanism,’ to assimilate lesbian existence by saying that ‘relationship’ is really all the same, love is always difficult—I see that as a denial, a kind of resistance, a refusal to read and hear what I’ve actually written, to acknowledge what I am. . . . To be ‘universal’ seems to me a dubious distinction as long as we are still in such ignorance of what it means to be a woman, to be lesbian. I believe that lesbian/feminist art is starting to create a new center from which to voice compassion, human caring, the protection of life. But that center, that space, will not be reached by any short-cut through the dread inspired by women’s primary intensity directed toward women. We’re not trying to become part of the old order misnamed ‘universal’ which has tabooed us; we are transforming the meaning of ‘universality’ ” (p. 58).
Here the renamed self renames the world. Literally what is renamed in the poem is the "small, jewel-like flower," which, like the volcano, stands for female passion and sexuality. The poem celebrates change of perception. For Adrienne Rich, survival has meant change, "a succession of brief, amazing movements, / each one making possible the next."

The poetry of Pat Parker and Audre Lorde is distinguished by a tension or dialectic between unnaming and renaming. A creative tension around identity is at the center of the work of these black lesbian poets. This poetry is political not only in the sense that the personal is political (and that therefore the poet, in expressing her particular reality, is engaged in a political act), not only in the sense that art is inevitably political (in that it emerges from and expresses the social dynamics and tensions of a given age and place), but in the very specific sense that it is conscious of itself as coming out of an experience of triple oppression—woman, black, lesbian. If you are a black lesbian poet like Audre Lorde and if you are in addition working class like Pat Parker, then you can be seen wrongly or not seen at all in an astonishing number of ways. If a major task of a group coming to consciousness of itself as a group is to take some control over language in order to rename itself, redefine itself in a way that feels more comfortable, real, empowering, then the task of a person so misdefined as the black lesbian poet is unusually complex. Both Parker and Lorde often define themselves in their poetry in terms of what they are not. They define themselves against something, in contradiction to something, contrary to something or some concept. They are blacklesbianpoets in a racist homophobic society and their survival as whole persons depends on recognizing and writing out of that contradiction.¹⁴

"The lady" is one of the more oppressive stereotypes a woman has to encounter and subdue. In this image women are soft, gentle, Christian, graceful, sweetly maternal and nurturing, fluffyheaded, incompetent, gracious, small and weak, quiet, polite, composed of neither sweat nor snot but sugar spice and everything nice.

My Lady Ain't No Lady

my lady ain't no lady
she doesn't flow into a room—
she enters & her presence is felt.
she doesn't sit small—
she takes all her space.
she doesn't partake of meals—
she eats—replenishes herself.

my lady ain't no lady—

¹⁴. They are not part of the time black poets and part of the time lesbian poets.
she has been known
  to speak in loud voice,
  to pick her nose,
  stumble on a sidewalk,
  swear at her cats,
  swear at me,
  scream obscenities at men,
  paint rooms,
  repair houses,
  tote garbage,
  play basketball,
  & numerous other
  un lady like things.

my lady is definitely no lady
which is fine with me,

cause i ain’t no gentleman.

Pat Parker’s poem takes on the cluster of images and qualities that add up to “lady,” an image most women have to deal with in some way in our socialization: “Ladies do this. . . ,” “Ladies don’t do that. . . ,” “Be a little lady now. . . .” “Lady” is synonymous with the kind of woman one is supposed to be in Western culture. It is a middle to upper middle class, white, heterosexual idealized blond image of woman. That Parker is writing about a lesbian relationship is essential to her process of redefining “lady.” In the last three lines of the poem—“my lady is definitely no lady / which is fine with me, / cause i ain’t no gentleman”—the concept of “lady” depends in part upon the corresponding concept of “gentleman.” “Lady” both upholds and is created by a heterosexual structure. To change that structure is tied up with the need to change the language. In “My Lady Ain’t No Lady,” Pat Parker defines her lover (and, of course, herself) by what she is not.

What does it mean to define yourself by what you are not? It is: 1) provocative—the reader asks, well, if your lady ain’t no lady, what is she? Who are you? 2) positive—it helps to clear out, uproot, wash off what she is not as she says what she is. 3) necessary—for the poet to unname in order to rename. 4) Though it seems in language indirect, a way of sneaking up on something rather than confronting it, it is in fact a direct representation of the complex way one unnames and renames at the same time, the way that unnaming and renaming can be—if one is not bogged down in unnaming—two parts of the same process. It might be written “not this/this.” The relationship between the unnamed and the renamed is not “and”; it is not “or.” It is not “not only, but also”; it is not “if this, then that.” The relationship is neither inclusive nor exclusive, but assumes a definition against which one works (in this case, “lady”). The new definition, “not lady,” includes and encompasses “lady.” You couldn’t have the poem without the concept “lady,” but the poem is launching itself off that term into a new naming, a new real-
PAMELA ANNAS

ity. Women rename themselves by working out of, rebelling against, disobeying, contradicting old names rather than simply discarding them. I think you cannot rename without unnaming.

The poetry of Pat Parker and Audre Lorde is dissimilar in style, in use of language and image. Lorde writes a more literarily complex, more obviously crafted, more traditionally poetic type of poetry. Some of Parker’s poems are jokes or anecdotes, others seem to come directly out of an oral storytelling tradition. In “Pit Stop,” her poem about alcoholism, she captures the weary, self-mocking voice of the bar habitue.

Let us drink to your new lover
Let us drink to your lover—gone
Let us drink to my lover
Let us drink to my lover—gone
Hey, let’s drink to the good people
Let’s drink to the nearest holiday
Let’s drink to our ability to drink

Pat Parker is a vernacular poet whose poems and whose voice come from the street, the bars, who chants, shouts, and curses, who writes long epic poems. Audre Lorde is a myth maker, a poet/priestess whose language is smooth, beautiful, and hypnotic, who seems to write her poems from some quiet place, won after struggle, powerful with the energy of her own anger but outside the fury of the world.

Though their styles are very different, Audre Lorde and Pat Parker, as black lesbian poets, share certain themes, images and concerns: 1) survival against odds and the strength that comes from that struggle to survive. Audre Lorde writes in The Cancer Journals: “I am not only a casualty. I am also a warrior.” 2) their sense of precariousness and marginality as they face homophobia in the black community and racism in the (white) women’s community. 3) their concern with the necessity of speaking, of breaking silences. “Silence and invisibility go hand in hand with powerlessness.” Both Parker and Lorde write out of the complexity and contradictions that come from the fact that as black lesbian poets they are an affront and a challenge to a society that wants to deny their very existence.

Many of Pat Parker’s poems are located in the contrary and powerful space between unnaming and renaming. “WomanSlaughter” is an angry requiem for her sister who was shot by her husband, “a quiet man” whom the white (male) court let off with a charge of manslaughter and a one year jail sentence. The sing-song rhythm is savagely ironic:

15. Pat Parker needs to be heard as well as read. Where Would I Be Without You: The Poetry of Pat Parker and Judy Grahn (Los Angeles, Calif.: Olivia Records, 1976).
16. Audre Lorde’s keynote address at the National Women’s Studies Association Conference, Storrs, Conn., June 1981, talked about the empowering and creative energy of anger, and the differences between anger and hate.
18. Ibid., p. 61.
There was a quiet man
He married a quiet wife
Together, they lived
a quiet life.
Not so, not so
her sisters said
the truth comes out
as she lies dead.

The entire long poem is a contradiction: the sisters telling the truth denied by white and male culture. The relationship between the poet and the subject of her poem is also formalized into negatives in its opening lines:

It doesn't hurt as much now
the thought of you dead
doesn't rip at my innards
leaves no holes to suck rage
(my italics)

The negatives are both a way of distancing pain and a powerful way of evoking that pain for the reader as, in another way, the concept of lady in “My Lady Ain’t No Lady” provides a powerful background for the assertion of all that is “not lady.” In both cases, the center of the poem is in the tension between its two contradictory edges. On a more explicitly political level, she points out the contradictions within which she lives when she writes in an untitled poem

1 am a child of America
a step child
raised in the back room
yet taught
taught how to act
in her front room.

“Movement in Black” is a long poem of renaming: “I am the Black woman,” she writes. “I have been all over / I was on the bus / with Rosa Parks.” The tension in the poem, the defining against, is in the refrain—“Movement in Black / can’t keep em back.” Part IV of “Movement in Black” is literally a naming, a roll call of heroes, of black women from “Phyllis Wheatley / Sojourner Truth / Harriet Tubman” through twenty-four more names “to me / and me / and me / and me / and me,” yet ends again with negative naming:

and all the names we forgot to say
and all the names we didn’t know
and all the names we don’t know yet

Parker states one contradiction most bluntly in “For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend,” which begins: “The first thing you do is forget that I’m Black. / Second, you must never forget that I’m Black.” And, speaking to white feminists in another poem, she
Audre Lorde begins an essay addressed to the black community with four definitions:

Racism: the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance.

Sexism: the belief in the inherent superiority of one sex and thereby the right to dominance.

Heterosexism: the belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance.

Homophobia: the fear of feelings of love for members of one's own sex and therefore the hatred of those feelings in others.

She goes on to say, “the above forms of human blindness stem from the same root—the inability to recognize or tolerate the notion of difference as a beneficial and dynamic human force, and one which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self.”

Pat Parker’s “I have a dream” begins by stating what her dream is not: “not Martin’s—/ not the dream of the vanguard / not to turn this world—/ all over / not the dream of the masses.” In her dream, she says, she “can walk the streets / holding hands with my lover.” Her dream includes her reality as a lesbian that the Black Movement’s dreams left out. Audre Lorde in “Between Ourselves” addresses the same issue:

Once when I walked into a room
my eyes would seek out the one or two black faces
for contact or reassurance or a sign
I was not alone
now walking into rooms full of black faces
that would destroy me for any difference
where shall my eyes look?
Once it was easy to know
who were my people.

Both Parker and Lorde are as much black poets writing out of the experience of being black women in a racist society as they are lesbian poets writing out of the experience of being lesbian in a heterosexist society and women in a sexist society. And Parker, Texas dirt poor, had also to deal with classism, which she writes about most directly in her early poem, “Goat Child.” The poetry has a complexity that comes out of so many assumptions that are not given.

To define yourself by what you are not is powerful and empowering, constructive not destructive. In “New York City 1970,” Lorde writes: “For how else can the self become whole / save by making self into its own new religion?” Audre Lorde’s poems in The Black Unicorn, her most recent volume, are located at the boundary between unnaming and
renaming. The first three poems in the volume end with a self-definition through what she is not. The title poem ends: “the black unicorn is restless / the black unicorn is unrelenting / the black unicorn is not / free” (italics mine). The first four lines of “A Woman Speaks,” the second poem in the volume, are a complex assertion of a contradictory identity, specifically as a writer/seer/witch.

Moon marked and touched by sun
my magic is unwritten
but when the sea turns back
it will leave my shape behind.

The poem ends with her redefinition of woman, a necessary renaming through unnaming, since in Western literature “woman” has historically meant “white.”

I have been woman
for a long time
beware my smile
I am treacherous with old magic
and the noon’s new fury
with all your wide futures
promised
I am
woman
and not white.

Audre Lorde’s poetry is concerned with margins, edges, and boundaries. “From the House of Yemonjá” is about the complex relation between a black daughter and mother in a white society. The speaker of the poem feels her mother had two sides—one warm/one cold, one black/one white—“one dark and rich and hidden / in the ivory hungers of the other.” By the end of the poem, she has become not only two people engendered by a dual mother, but her identity is located in the very tension between them.

I am,
the sun and moon and forever hungry
the sharpened edge
where day and night shall meet
and not be
one.

In “From the House of Yemonjá” the poet’s identity is “the sharpened edge”; in “Fog Report” she cannot tell where she ends and her lover begins. All identities merge “in this misty place where hunger finds us / seeking direction.”

the shape of your teeth is written
into my palm like a second lifeline
when I am fingerprinted
the taste of your thighs
shows up
outlined in the ink.
A Litany For Survival” brings together the crucial issues for all four of these poets of boundaries, survival, renaming, and the tension between self and world that exists for any person defined as “marginal”: “those of us who live at the shoreline / standing upon the constant edges of decision / crucial and alone.” These lines remind me of the little mermaid, who in the fairy tale had to choose between her ability to speak and her ability to walk.11 Caught between two mutually contradictory realms, living between land and sea, speech and silence, the woman artist is more aware both of potentialities and of limitations. She must speak. Her survival is in her renaming of herself and her world. She speaks this reality into a world that would ignore her, trivialize her, or silence her. “When we are silent / we are still afraid,” writes Lorde. So it is better to speak remembering we were never meant to survive.

From Sylvia Plath, who didn’t herself survive, but whose words are myths to caution and empower women poets, through the continuous change of Adrienne Rich’s philosophical poems, which explain us to ourselves, and the energy/anger/humor of Pat Parker’s epics, to the magic and intelligence of Audre Lorde’s poetry, where the junkies of New York City, the Amazons of Dahomey, herself as a child, and the sisters/lovers/friends of her present women’s community all blend together into a tentatively renamed world—for the twentieth century woman poet, language is the medium of survival and the battleground for self: “For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak but the truth of that language by which we speak it.”22

University of Massachusetts—Boston