

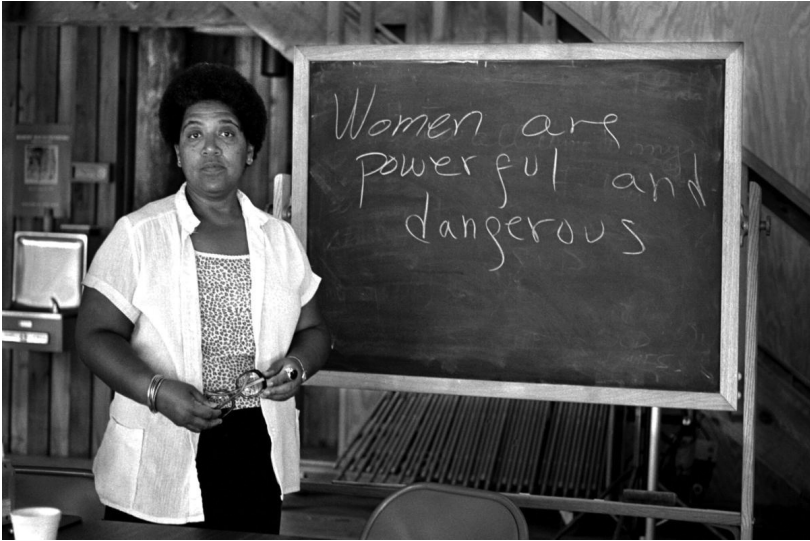
Preserving and Salvaging Black Female Voices

By Pascale Florestal, Dramaturg

Author Octavia Butler

When I read *The Resurrection of Michelle Morgan* by Christina Anderson, the first person that came to mind was Audre Lorde. Next came Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou. These Black women have been considered some of the most important thinkers of our time but so many others have passed on and have had little to no recognition. I think about that a lot as an artist: what does it mean to create a body of work, inspire a group of people, create new systems and then be abruptly taken away from this earth without any chance of preserving that legacy? What happens to that work? What happens to that inspiration? Who remembers the ones that have passed on when no one heard or listened to them when they were living? So much of this play reminded me of the ancestors before us, and the way we continue to be inspired by their work. How we continue to learn from the past as we move further and further into a future we never anticipated.

Anderson's play, written in 2017, takes a look into the not-so-far future of 2040. She builds that future by summoning the many Black female writers before her who did the same. We hear nods to Lorde's biomythography style—combining myth, history and biography—as Anderson takes us to her past, illuminating the impacts her childhood experience had on her adult self. Showing us how, so often, these small moments in our past become the most impactful to



Poet and Activist Audre Lorde

our adulthood. We flow in and out of memory throughout the audio play, never knowing how much more we will learn about her past but knowing that what we do learn is all that we need to know.

Anderson evokes the futuristic elements of writers like Butler as she predicts a collapse of the public school system. Constructing an entirely new educational system is not an easy feat yet Anderson beautifully creates an alternative eerily similar to the one we currently see unfolding in the pandemic. Parents moving their children out of schools and looking to alternatives like learning pods to keep their children safe and on track—sounds like the imminent collapse of a system to me. This prophecy of the future of education is another reminder of the gift so many Black female writers have, the ability of seeing an almost too real future that general society refuses to admit as achievable. Yet I can remember cartoons from my youth like *The Jetsons* and *Jimmy Neutron* telling me flying cars and living in space would be the world of 2020. How close are we to *that* world?

Though the clocks have fast forwarded, the generational trauma faced by Black people—especially Black women—resumes as if unpausing your Netflix just as your bathroom break has ended. Reminding us that these systems and ideologies do not dissipate after one generation but continue to evolve in ways we could never know. Just as it did when slavery was abolished and the prison system took up the same racism cloaked under false ideals and policies meant to benefit the white men who created them. As a Black woman, this feeling was not new to me. For centuries Black scholars have been debunking the very systems we were conditioned to believe were made to save us but in reality had no interest in our survival. When I picked up for the first time this fall Audre Lorde's "The Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's House," I felt even more enraged to hear the truths Lorde had known even in

the late 70s. I had been a fan of Lorde since college not really even knowing who she was then, another silenced Black female voice. A voice I had to seek out in order to learn the truth that so many had tried to cover up. As Anderson quotes in the play: “The world is full of Black women who have never really been heard from.”

This phrase comes from the great Patricia J. Williams, an American Legal Scholar and professor who emphasizes critical race theory in the study of law. Before this piece, I didn't know who Ms. Williams was and as a Black woman I felt robbed of this knowledge. Here I am, a twenty-nine-year-old college-educated Haitian American theatre artist who spends most of her work illuminating and supporting the African diaspora, and here is another example of another voice I have never heard of. This continued silence of great Black thinkers, especially Black women, angers me to my core. As we move into another month of this pandemic, I think about Octavia Butler's book *Parable of the Sower*. When I first read the book, I couldn't understand a world like the one Butler envisioned. Now it feels like we are living in the same world she created in 1993.



Legal Scholar Patricia J. Williams



Novelist Toni Morrison

It makes me wonder how different the world would be if we listened to Black women. What kind of world would we live in if Black women were heard and listened to? What if their ideas and theories were taken seriously? I think so often of the Afro-futuristic artists who have been creating futures of this idyllic world. Like the people of Wakanda in *Black Panther*, a fictional country in Africa that has harnessed technology and science, and is filled with all kinds of beautiful Black people. They live in a state of true community without the constant threat of white supremacy so many of us endure in this country. Or artists like Solange and Janelle Monáe redefining music and Black femininity. Of course as we see more and more of the possibilities of this future of Blackness, some trepidation lies beneath in co-opting the culture and not valuing the people it comes from.



Poet and Activist Maya Angelou

Anderson says it best: “Folks will consume a Black product. But won’t invest in a Black maker.” Though the aspects of Blackness may be more mainstream now, we continue to see the Black body just as devalued as it always has been. George Floyd’s heinous and gruesome murder in May ignited a wake up call around the country. A deluge of white people felt it was finally time to understand the deep roots white supremacy and racism have in our systems and country. Within weeks bookstores were flooded with orders for books on White Fragility, Anti-Racist Theory, White Supremacy and countless others. In a matter of weeks every Audre Lorde book was sold out in almost every book store. Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* became a *New York Times* Bestseller almost twenty-seven years after its publication. There was a small part of me that felt a bit of relief, that maybe this would be a turn in the right direction. Though as a Black woman I knew I had to continue to keep my guard up even with some hope looming in the distance.

One of Christina Anderson’s inspirations for this piece was an essay written by Myisha Priest entitled “Salvation is the Issue.” Priest speaks to the true enemy of the Black female voice: death. She states that “Death is becoming an occupational hazard of Black female intellectual life” and goes on to explain the all too real coincidence of so many great Black female writers, thinkers, scholars and activists who have passed much too early due to disease and cancer. In the 2008 essay she states the life expectancy average for Black women is 75. A 2016 CDC study stated the average life expectancy of a Black woman had risen to 78, while a white woman’s life expectancy was 81. Priest goes on to explain that the brutal excess of stress, isolation, fear and despair that Black women experience can lead them to disease and shorter life expectancy. As these great Black women’s lives are cut short so too is the longevity of their work.

“When we lose Black women scholars, writers, and activists, we all pay the price in the weakening of our political power, the silencing of our spiritual voices, and the diminished possibility of our deliverance.” (Priest, “Salvation is the Issue”)

It's true, we lose so much more when these voices are silenced and forgotten. We can not wait decades after their passing to finally acknowledge their importance and innovation to the world we live in today. We can not have a generation that doesn't know the work of Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Zadie Smith, Christina Anderson and so many others. Their experiences, ideas and theories are instrumental to the liberation we all so desperately seek. As Priest urges in her essay:

"To achieve that we must acknowledge their deaths as a call to arms, because the reality is that their lives are our own, and if we do not assume the responsibility for their salvation, then none of us - not our lives nor our work - will be saved."

For me, *The Resurrection of Michelle Morgan* is a call to arms, an entry point to salvation. It is past time to invest in Black people, not just Blackness. So let us prioritize Black female voices, create space, opportunities and salvation for us because the world will be better for it. The work and legacy of Black women deserves salvation, so let us provide it in all that we do.



Scholar Myisha Priest



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