

**Sister Love: The Letters of
Audre Lorde and Pat Parker
1974 - 1989**

**Introduction by Mecca Jamilah Sullivan
Edited by Julie R. Enszer**



sapphic classics from
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Introduction

“I think you changed the world”: Black Lesbian Feminism in Love and Letters

There were poems in her mouth, on the tables, in the refrigerator, under the bed, and in the way she cast about the apartment, searching for—not answers—but rather, unexpressable questions. We were both Black; we were both Lesbians; we were both poets in a very white, straight, male world, and we sat up all night trading poems.

—Audre Lorde, Foreword to Pat Parker’s
Movement in Black (1978)

Now this woman
sits in my house
reads
 no devours
 my words.

No comment.

Just
clicking and um-humming
then has the nerve
to say I write good but
not enough.

*Push more
take the harder road.*

Who is this woman?

—Pat Parker, “For Audre” (1986)

Reading writers’ letters is the best kind of eavesdropping. It brings the rush and sweetness of hidden listening—the secret drinking-in of voices children thrive on, clinging to doorways, palms slick, ready to learn what they have yearned and yearned to know. The hiddenness somehow makes the listening better: these words are not meant for *us* but for a world before and beyond us, and so each syllable is a gem. The words demand we reach for them and that we grow in the reaching.

Whether we are (as I am) the grown-up black/queer/women/writer versions of little black girls eavesdropping on our mothers and aunties at the kitchen table, or are queer, or women, or feminist in some other way, this stunning volume of letters between Audre Lorde and Pat Parker carries that breathlessness of urgent listening, the thrill that sparks when learning is both demanding and deeply sweet.

As poets, writers, activists, and thinkers, Lorde and Parker’s immense contributions to feminist, black, lesbian, queer, and American literary culture cannot be overstated. Their combined oeuvres include over twenty poetry collections and non-fiction monographs; dozens of published poems, essays, and lectures; and several short stories, plays, performance pieces and mixed-genre works¹. With these works—and with their activism and teaching—Lorde and Parker made foundational contributions to feminist

1 See Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1982). See also Pat Parker, “Two Plays” and “Prose” in *The Collected Works of Pat Parker*. Ed. Julie R. Enszer, (Dover, FL: A Midsummer Night’s Press and Sinister Wisdom, 2016).

discourses of the 1970s and 1980s and offered incisive critiques of gender, sexuality, race, class, and power around which black feminism takes its shape today.

Lorde and Parker sit at opposite points of the kitchen tables—real and figurative—around which my black queer feminist literary politic has taken shape. I encountered Lorde in the late 1990s as a teenager in high school—Hunter High School, which Lorde had also attended some forty-five years earlier. I discovered her autobiographical coming-of-age “biomythography,” *Zami*, and immediately felt what would become a familiar mix of rapture and rage. Like many of us, I was awed at the precision with which she articulated black lesbian feminist life, a life that was just beginning to unfold for me. I was grateful for the intimate sense of history she offered, the proof she gave of a black queer political and literary past that I needed badly without knowing I needed it. I was also enraged that I had not learned about her before, particularly as I had also grown up on the same Harlem block she describes in *Zami* (far across town from Hunter), and had attended the Catholic church where she went to grade school. That something so necessary as her work could be erased from all these spaces—the coinciding spaces of school, home, and spirit—in-furiated me. That anger needled deeper years later when I finally learned of Pat Parker through Alexis De Veaux’s pathbreaking *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde*.² In *Warrior Poet*, De Veaux offers an extremely moving and important picture of the friendship between Lorde and Parker. By that time, I had recently finished my B.A. in Afro-American Studies at a women’s college and was applying to Ph.D. programs to study gender and sexuality in black women’s literature. I was both baffled and incensed by this

2 De Veaux, Alexis, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004).

October 12, 1974

Dear Pat:

Warmth from a cold place¹ to you and Ann.² It was so good to see you again, and to meet Ann. I hope things are going well with you both.

Having come up for air after the deluge of work descending upon me on my return, I find, in rapid and devastating succession that: 1) my copy of Paper Trip upon which I wrote your address is missing, so I've got to scurry about and find it again³ 2) you're in the forthcoming Directory of American Poets, not the last, so that doesn't help me either, 3) you managed not to give me a copy of your new long poem, which was pretty slick of you but not very nice, since I asked you at least twice,⁴ and 4) you have not yet written to Galen Williams,⁵ which is a mistake. Get it together, lady. Of course it's not REALLY important on the cosmic scale of things: we both know it, but like every other kind of grease, it helps to keep the kinks at least manageable and I know you know what I mean.

1 Lorde's letterhead indicates that she was writing from her home on St. Paul's Avenue in Staten Island.

2 Ann Bernard was Parker's lover in October 1974.

3 "Paper Trip" was a small pamphlet first published in Iowa City by The People's Press with the subtitle, "the how and why's of getting false I.D.'s: a manual on how to get false I.D.'s for draft evaders, military deserters, fugitives from the "law", underage people, runaways and just plain people."

4 It is unclear which long poem Lorde is referencing, but Parker was possibly working on either "Movement in Black" (95) or "Womanslaughter" (149) in 1974 (Dover, FL: *The Complete Poems of Pat Parker*, Sinister Wisdom/A Midsummer Night's Press, 2016).

5 Galen Williams was the director of the Poetry Center at the 92nd Street Y in New York City from 1961 until 1970 and then the founder of Poets & Writers. Lorde encouraged Parker to write to Williams about the Poets in Schools program (discussed later in the correspondence.)