

these as ‘enemy’ territory”<sup>19</sup>—a statement that is evocative of the current state of the war on terror. Furthermore, “the pseudo-creative power of boundary violation . . . is clearly an invasion of women’s bodies/spirits and of all our own kind: earth, air, fire, water.”<sup>20</sup>

What are Furious Women to do with these wars among nations and environmentally unsound corporate activities that are artificial boundary violations in which countless women (and men and children) are killed, maimed, and raped, while the earth’s carrying capacity is also placed at risk? Daly unequivocally proclaimed:

The adequate response of Furious Women is refusal to be tricked into pouring our energy into false loyalties. Our sane surviving requires seeing through male-made, maddening artificial boundaries, as well as deriding male “violation” of these false boundaries. Furious women will refuse to follow the man-made model of Dionysus’s sister Athena, the brainchild of Zeus, who is obsessed with abetting and supporting the Battles of the Boys. For we can see that she is M-A-D with Male Approval Desire.<sup>21</sup>

In the end, credit must be given to Daly for naming the systems and strategies that have held women in mental, emotional, or physical captivity and bondage in service to, in her day, patriarchal males, and in our day, to systems of domination and oppression that go far beyond individual men and women. Credit must also be given to Daly for identifying the necrophilic impulse that lies behind both runaway market capitalism and the slow poisoning of the earth’s atmosphere, soils, waters, and myriad life-forms, and a military-industrial-prison-corporate complex whose elites belong to the same club around the world, while their casualties have to work their way to seeing through their webs of illusion. In both cases, her work has made possible the ability to name, to be furious, and to strategize in ways that take into account the contextually specific factors that constitute the ongoing subordination of many women and the degradation of the earth’s ability to sustain life.

#### A LETTER TO MARY DALY

*Laura S. Levitt*

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I know this letter comes at a strange moment, but letters circulate even after those to whom they were originally addressed are no longer around to receive

<sup>19</sup> Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*, 71.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–71.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 71–72.

them. In this case, my response is perhaps less strange since I am responding belatedly to an old and very public exchange. Well, sort of. I am responding to an exchange that has only relatively recently come to light. I am writing to tell you, Mary Daly, about my long-standing engagement with Audre Lorde's open, very public letter to you, a text I first read over twenty years ago as a graduate student, a text I have continued to teach ever since. I write to tell you about my response to that letter and how over the years my reading has changed.

When I first encountered this letter, I was a young white feminist studying modern Jewish and Christian thought and theology in a doctoral program in religion. At the time, I knew your work. I appreciated and identified with much of what you had written about the legacies of patriarchal hegemony in Jewish and Christian sources. I came to Lorde knowing you. And so as a feminist scholar of religion, I read Lorde's words carefully. I felt indicted. For me, the open letter was a cautionary tale. Her careful reading of *Gyn/Ecology* challenged me to think critically about how I would address race in my work, how I would cite the words of other scholars and writers. She made me think a great deal about tokenism and glib citation. She made me think about how these tactics can be used to avoid doing the hard work of addressing racism. And it holds true to this day. Racism remains pervasive even in feminist scholarship. These are hard lessons. Lorde's clarion call felt as if it were addressed just to me. It still does. And, I should tell you that my students, even now over twenty years later, also feel the sting of that critique. For this reason, her letter remains a powerful part of my feminist theory courses in Women's Studies.

For a long time, perhaps too long, I took a certain comfort in teaching Lorde's open letter. The "facts" that Lorde supplies—that you did not respond to her most especially—enabled me to offer a rather stark argument for how to read her text. What did it mean to make this letter public? How long is long enough? And for my students, the real question was how could you, Mary, have never responded? This was the most upsetting thing. And in these discussions, your presumed "lack" of the notion that you had never responded fueled a kind of energy and confidence. We often agreed that you were wrong not to engage with Lorde. And so it went for so many years. And now I suspect that you knew this would indeed be the case. It was not until Lorde's death that you yourself allowed even some of your closest colleagues to know that in fact you had responded. Reading the account in Alexis De Veaux's biography of Lorde, it seems that there was a small circle of feminist colleagues of yours who did know (especially Adrienne Rich) and that you all decided to keep this knowledge to yourselves.<sup>1</sup> My sense is that you decided it best to let Lorde have this one. What an astonishing thing to do. You kept silent in a way that I can only marvel at, especially now so long after you made this decision.

Just before De Veaux's book was published, our mutual friend and colleague

<sup>1</sup> Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: Norton, 2004).

Jennifer Rycenga showed me a copy of your letter. We were at the American Academy of Religion meeting and she was busy compiling materials for the long-awaited collection of your writing that she was working on. In confidence she allowed me to read the letter with the promise that I would not say a word about this until the Lorde biography was out and this information was made public. I kept my promise and eagerly awaited that publication. It was at least a semester before I could say anything about this to my students, but since De Veaux's biography was published in 2004, I have radically rethought how I teach Lorde's text.

These days, I allow my students to read the open letter on its own much as I have read it. We discuss it in detail: what it says, how it says it, the power of her critique remains vivid in my classrooms, but after we have this discussion, I share with them the fact that you did indeed respond. We then talk a lot more about you. We discuss your powerful career, the importance of your work as the most famous and perhaps the very most influential feminist scholar of religion. I share with my students just how much of a public figure you were, how important an icon you were. Although De Veaux argues that you and Lorde were both already iconic figures, I am not as convinced. Lorde, it seems to me, needed to go after you in particular because you were so well known. She had to pick a major figure to make her argument and you were an ideal target. This is not to say that I do not still agree with much of what she argues, but rhetorically, Lorde was very savvy to have chosen you.

As a prolific writer and speaker, Mary, I am still struck by your silence. And without you here to tell us why you never went public with your response, we can only speculate. It is such a powerful statement, an ambiguous but deeply respectful gesture, a nod to Lorde's critique. You let it stand for all of these years in her voice. You gave her the last word—a gift. But now, belatedly, knowing this, you teach us something new about yourself, about your respect for Lorde, about your willingness to hear Lorde's critique. I cannot say for sure the degree to which you were ever able to internalize what Lorde was asking you to do, but by letting that letter stand, you helped so many of us take in that critique and attempt to enact its challenge in our own work. Your silence strengthened how we responded. We felt the urgency of Lorde's plea without distraction. You made that happen. And now, we have both the legacy of our own long-standing engagement with Lorde's text and this more recent revelation. It is all messier than I once thought. Idealizing Lorde or you is not really very helpful. This is, in part, what your letter and your silence have taught me.

I know that you and I would argue about many things were we to have had the pleasure of a real exchange. I want my students now to appreciate all you were able to accomplish in your wild spinning. I want them to appreciate the power of your contributions to feminist knowledge. I want them to laugh and luxuriate in the ways you played with language, especially in your *Wickedary*, and I want them and us to be able to remember you in ways that that other Wiki text has not yet done.<sup>2</sup> I want my students not simply to know that you did not

<sup>2</sup> Mary Daly, Jane Caputi, and Sudie Rakuson, *Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

allow men in your classes, I want them to appreciate your powerful public voice and at the same time, this singular instance of respectful silence. And here contra Lorde, silence enabled a great deal. It allowed especially a few generations of feminist scholars with race and class privilege to hear Lorde's call, a call addressed specifically to you but really, as you seem to have known, a much larger call directed to all of us through you.

Thank you, Mary, for this,  
LAURA

### THE GIFT OF ARGUING WITH MARY DALY'S WHITE FEMINISM

Traci C. West

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As a religious studies major in college during the late 1970s and early 1980s, I wrote a senior thesis on contemporary Christian ethics and theology. I decided that a fundamental goal of my thesis would be an exploration of the most radical critiques that I could find of racism and sexism in Christian theology and church practices.

By my senior year in college, I had already taken the initial steps in my ordination process in the United Methodist Church. I had been impatiently waiting to begin this process since I was fifteen, when I first announced to a somewhat skeptical male pastor that I had the desire to become a minister. As a college senior I was excited about entering seminary the following year.

While writing my senior thesis, I remained the stubborn, black feminist campus activist I had been throughout my previous years in college. I sought scholarly discussions for my thesis in Christian religious studies that substantively engaged politics and offered insights about systemic injustices. My conceptualization of systemic injustice was fed as much by my campus activism as by the texts that I had been studying for classes. My activism focused on anti-apartheid corporate divestment by my university, a procedure to address sexual harassment of women students by their professors, and other institutional justice issues that preoccupied me and a cohort of troublemaking students.

For the most politicized critique of the church combined with the most expansive vision of post-Christian feminist religiosity I naturally turned to Mary Daly. I focused mainly on her *The Church and the Second Sex with a New Feminist Post-Christian Introduction* and her *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, at age twenty-one, I had the

<sup>1</sup> Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex with a New Feminist Post-Christian Introduction* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, [1968] 1975), and Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974).