

Dear Poets,

Today we explore Audre Lorde's "Lightly" from her 1978 collection *The Black Unicorn*. I've also included Lorde's essay "[The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House](#)" which everyone should read. I'm grateful to the University of Southern Mississippi's Dr. Linda M. Pierce Allen, who taught it in her Fall 2018 Toni Morrison seminar.

LIGHTLY

Don't make waves
is good advice
from a leaky boat.

One light year is the distance
one ray of light can travel in one year and
thirty
light years away from earth
in our infinitely offended universe
an electronic cloud announces our presence
finally
to the unimpressible stars.

This is straight from a Scientific American
on the planet earth
our human signature upon the universe
is an electronic cloud
of expanding 30-year-old television programs
like Howdy Doody Arthur Godfrey
Uncle Miltie and Hulahoops
quiz shows and wrestling midgets
baseball
the McCarthy hearings and Captain Kangaroo.

Now I don't know what
a conscious universe might be
but it is interesting to wonder
what will wave back
to all that.

How it's put together

Stanza 1: An idiom paired with ironic speaker.

Stanza 2: We shift to a scientific fact. This fact repeats certain words ("one," "light," "year").

Note the lineation contrasts (one-word lines below the stanza's two longest lines).

In Lorde's poem, the universe takes offense at our presence (the electronic cloud we've delegated as our representative).

Adverb: "infinitely" . . . this has a solid tie to "universe" (infinite universe, infinite cosmos, to infinity and beyond). **BUT** the adjective that's sandwiched between "infinitely" and "universe" ("offended") changes the stanza's tonal game quite a bit.

Closing adjective: "unimpressible" . . . this raises the question, which is worse regarding humanity's ego: cosmic offenses or failure to impress the cosmic?

Stanza 3: Source of the fact listed.

Repetition of "electronic cloud" (from Stanza Two).

Carry-over of "30" (from spelled to numeric).

List of television programs/pop-culture fads/history.

Among the list: a string of iambs (six in a row), "Howdy Dooey Arthur Godfrey / Uncle Miltie."

Note the repeated "d" and "y" letters, plus the long "E" sounds. This is impeccable.

One-word line (penultimate line).

Final line: end-word has the -oo, same as the -oo end-word three lines above. (Hulahoops . . . Captain Kangaroo). Don't forget the Dooey.

Stanza 4: Rhetorical turn with "Now I don't know . . ."

I admire the sonic effects of "conscious universe." Lorde's word choices not only provide alliterative intimacy, they pair the short-u vowel of *conscious* with the long-U of *universe*. Sidenote: I would so name my podcast on alien-life searches *The Long U of Universe* if I had a pod to cast.

While not as intimate, "wonder / what will wave" provides additional alliteration. Think of alliterative intimacy as how letters inside the words are behaving, as opposed to letters at the front of the words.

Lorde imbues her universe with the ability to make a human gesture ("wave back").

Rather than re-use "electronic cloud," Lorde condenses thirty years of cultural/historical noise to "all that."

Punctuation: Did you notice it's a four-sentence poem? One sentence per stanza, the comma on hiatus. This is a good example of lineation's extreme contrasts performing a poetry sleight-of-hand, Lorde's density distilled to four periods and the words in-between.

Prompt

Stanza 1:

Begin with an idiom.

Turn the idiom on its head by virtue of who speaks the idiom.

Stanza 2:

Shift to the scientific in the next stanza. Try a biology or chemical fact. Or go with tried-and-true physics. Convey the pissed-offness biology/chemistry/physics (and their representatives) takes at humanity's intrusion. Umbrage!

Avail yourself of Lorde's trio-construction . . . 1) adverb – 2) adjective – 3) noun

- 1 typically-associated-adverb (in relation to the noun, when said adverb is in its adjectival form, example: infinite universe)
- 2 connotation-changing adjective
- 3 noun

Employ significant lineation contrasts in support of your punctuation's sleight-of-hand.

Stanza 3:

Infuse the next stanza with popular culture/history/fads from your childhood. Might your list emulate Lorde's sonics/iamb/s/near-rhymes?

Stanza 4:

Final Stanza, rhetorical gesture.

Revisit the biology/chemistry/physics you brought up in Stanza Two. Give it a human action, but not "wave back."

Condense your popular culture/history/fads cluster from Stanza Three, but don't use "all that."

What role does repetition play in your poem? Alliterative intimacy?

Happy Writing,

Jon