

# AUNT CHLOE

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Alexis Pauline Gumbs's short story "Evidence," included in adrienne marie brown and Walidah Imarisha's anthology *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (2015), imagines a future where Black women communicate across generations to document the apocalyptic fall of the patriarchal capitalist system that ignited intersectional oppression across the world, and its replacement by new and more equitable modes of communitarian living based on a redefinition of self, wealth, and technology. In doing so, Gumbs replaces the ruggedly individualistic, archetypal, White, male hero who dominates classic apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fictions such as Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series and Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The revised archetype, which I call the "womanist speculative archetype," undertakes a quest to build a better world for herself, Black women, Black people, and all humanity through the creation of "zamis," or female-centered communities.

The womanist speculative archetype is an avatar of womanism, a social theory based on the history and everyday experiences of Black women. Womanist scholar Layli Phillips (Maparyan) describes a womanist as one who is "triply concerned with herself, other Black women, and the entire Black race, female and male—but also all humanity, showing an ever-expanding and ultimately universal arc of political concern, empathy, and activism" (xxiii). The term was first coined by Alice Walker in her 1979 short story "Coming Apart"; later, in the essay "Womanist," Walker would more formally describe a womanist as a "Black feminist or feminist of color... Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people" (xi-xii). These dreams of an egalitarian, communitarian future revolve implicitly and explicitly around the figure of the future-facing Black woman who creates new communities based on new modes for healing for the community and the world as a whole.

Lorde's text *Zami* is central to the work of the womanist speculative archetype. Lorde defines the term in her biomythography as a "Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (223). Monica B. Pearl expands this definition to explain that zami is "a name that, in its designation, is an attempt to make community, to break silence, to make a common acknowledgment and a common bond" (300). Throughout *Zami*, Lorde illustrates her experiences with communities of women who offer the author varying levels of support and recognition as she recognizes, explores, and celebrates key aspects of her personhood that do not fit neatly into pre-existing patriarchal, heteronormative, Eurowestern societal constructs—namely her sexuality, her race, and her experiences as a first-generation American. Indeed, her coming-of-age experiences are inseparable from her sociopolitical and personal liberation. The womanist speculative archetype follows a similar trajectory, both learning how to become more herself from the Black female communities she encounters and how to use her newfound strength and talents to connect with others across space and time in the effort to build better futures for all.

The zamis of "Evidence" are created and populated by characters who embody the womanist speculative archetype. Over the course of Gumbs's story, the reader meets three pivotal

characters, related to one another but separated by generations, who write letters, annotate research and lecture notes, and otherwise offer the reader a variety of written artifacts that document occurrences during and reactions to the world-changing silence breaking. These characters are Alexis (Lex/Lexi), who lives through and builds new kinds of community during the apocalypse; Drix, a researcher and lecturer who documents the apocalypse sometime after that event; and Alandrix, a descendant of Alexis (and presumably Drix) who thrives in her post-scarcity world five generations after the silence breaking.

Gumbs invites readers to view these characters as interdependent reflections of the past, present, and future and to interpret the protagonists as part of an anachronistic community. As explained by Drix in her lecture notes, the “self should be understood as a vessel open to time and fueled by presence, where presence is as multiple as it is singular” (34). In other words, one exists in multiple realities in a given moment. Not only does a person exist in the present, but because they are the product of their ancestors and harbingers of the future, they always represent a combination of varying temporal realities. Drix describes this phenomenon as such: “This is what black feminist scientists called ‘integrity,’ a standard for affirming the resonance of presence across time, where action was equal to vision embodied through variables” (34). While all of Gumbs’s characters are integral to the story, the one who most clearly inhabits the womanist speculative archetype is founding ancestress Alexis (sometimes known as Lex or Lexi). Her letter, from herself after the silence breaks to herself in the BSB (Before the Silence Broke) era and presented as Exhibit E, the last piece of evidence, provides a blueprint for the reimagined zami she hopes to help manifest for herself and her community.

As she assures her BSB-era self, humanity not only survives the apocalyptic breaking of the silence, which involves the literal end of capitalism, but, guided by women like Alexis, she and her community members begin to create a new social model in which “life, although not exactly easier, is life all the time. Not chopped down to billable minutes, not narrowed into excuses to hurt and forget each other” (39). As they do away with capitalism, the progenitors of these zamis redefine the concepts of “wealth” and “technology” to promote equity and compassion.

Whereas BSB-era humans use technology to compete with one another and accumulate wealth for themselves and perhaps their immediate biological families, Alexis’s descriptions of the post-BSB era provide readers with a glimpse of a more equitable future where wealth and technology are redefined in communal terms that provide everyone with the opportunity to thrive. Indeed, twelve-year-old Alandrix reflects the successful completion of the womanist speculative archetype’s journey. In the fully realized zami of the future, Alandrix understands self-actualization as a matter of course, not something one has to fight for. As she writes to “Ancestor Alexis”: “I read your writing, and the writing of your other comrades from that time and I feel grateful. It seems like maybe you knew us. *It feels like you loved us already.* Thank you for being brave” (34, my emphasis). Much like Alexis’s own post-apocalypse letter to her pre-apocalypse self, Alandrix’s message sent backward through time and space serves as both a challenge to narratives that silence Black women in the guise of capitalist reality and as testament to the radical imagination of Black women who imagine more generous and equitable futures for themselves and their descendants.

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