

## Liabilities of Language: Audre Lorde Reclaiming Difference

Lester C. Olson

*Distortions around the naming and the misnaming of human differences are the central foci of Audre Lorde's speech entitled "Age, Race, Class, Sex: Women Redefining Difference," which she delivered at Amherst College in Massachusetts on April 3, 1980. Lorde's speech at Amherst exemplifies her deep understanding of what she refers to in an earlier speech as "that language which has been made to work against us." Paradoxically, by scrutinizing some liabilities that language may pose for members of subordinated communities, Lorde's speech enacts specific and often subtle means for reclaiming language, exemplified by "difference." Lorde's speech undertakes a fundamental transformation in a commonplace understanding of "difference" as domination by redefining it as resource, while calling attention to how complicity inheres in language. She contends that a focus upon relational practices across human differences is more fundamental than demographic categories for people in promoting the human liberation of diverse subordinated communities. **Key words:** Audre Lorde, difference, complicity, feminist rhetoric, human rights, human liberation, women's liberation, Black liberation, gay and lesbian liberation, relational practices*

"But I who am bound by my mirror  
as well as my bed  
see causes in colour  
as well as sex

and sit here wondering  
which me will survive  
all these liberations"

Audre Lorde, "Who Said It Was Simple"<sup>1</sup>

**L**ISTENING can be a radical activity.<sup>2</sup> As James Darsey mentions, "Our word 'radical' shares its origins with the word 'radish'; both are concerned with roots and often bitter. Radicalism is defined by its concern with the political roots of a society."<sup>3</sup> Attentive and critical listening to the voices of those who are "different" can sometimes illuminate such roots, because a listener's understanding of a society may undergo change by attending to a speaker who depicts experiences of domination and oppression. Listening entails complicity with a speaker in a minimal sense that a listener momentarily, at least, uses a speaker's terms for communication. Yet, because the English language is a communal inheritance, the act of using this language to communicate may paradoxically entail complicity with transmitting the manifestations of racism, sexism, and the like that are embedded in it.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, language is never simply a tool that an individual employs to bring about political and social changes. Rather language always entails collusion with its terms in the process of using it. For any listener, at risk are not only a sense of self, place, and society, but also knowledge of one's own complicity with oppression.

These possibilities of radicalism, complicity, and transformation may explain why Audre Lorde often asked members of dominant communities to assume a responsibility for active listening, especially when significant differences separated a speaker and a listener. In "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," which she delivered at the Modern Language Association in 1977, Lorde identified several rationalizations that people may use for refusing to listen across various differences.<sup>5</sup>

Despite what Lorde recognized as frequent misuses of differences to justify not listening to each other, and despite her commentary on dysfunctions in listening across differences, Lorde urged, "Where the words of women are crying to be heard, we, each of us, must recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our living."<sup>6</sup>

To Lorde, stereotypes about the willingness and ability of people to listen across differences cut in multiple directions. In Lorde's "Open letter to Mary Daly," written and published in 1979, she remarked, "The history of white women who are unable to hear Black women's words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging. But for me to assume that you will not hear me represents not only history, perhaps, but an old pattern of relating, sometimes protective and sometimes dysfunctional, which we, as women shaping our future, are in the process of shattering and passing beyond, I hope."<sup>7</sup> Lorde resisted a temptation to stereotype how well Mary Daly would hear her across a racial difference, though both women were lesbian feminists, radical activists, and academics. Subsequently, in Lorde's best-known speech, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," delivered in 1979 at the Second Sex Conference, she condemned anyone who would evade a responsibility to listen to speakers representing subordinated communities.<sup>8</sup>

As a rhetorical critic, I have been actively listening to Audre Lorde's public speeches across multiple differences, including age, race, sex, parental status, political commitments, religious convictions, and economics. Yet differences and similarities among people intersect, overlap, and mingle through communicative practices in multilayered ways that are historically and socially situated. The act of naming such differences may be understood as a way of practicing relationships of domination in the interest of political power, moral judgment, and social privilege, as Lorde contended in a speech at Amherst in 1980.<sup>9</sup> Martha Minow explains, "'Difference' is only meaningful as a comparison. I am no more different from you than you are from me."<sup>10</sup> This insight provides a useful starting point for discussions of diversity in contemporary U.S. culture, because "difference" is ineluctably relational. Further, individuals can only experience "difference" through speech and symbolic action. Consequently, communication scholars may be well situated to participate in a national conversation about the relationships among language, self, and society.

Distortions around the naming and the misnaming of differences are the central foci of Audre Lorde's speech entitled "Age, Race, Class, Sex: Women Redefining Difference," which she delivered to the Copeland Colloquium at Amherst College in Massachusetts on April 3, 1980. Founded in 1971, the Copeland Colloquium provided fellowships for young scholars and brought together "young people with diverse backgrounds and different perspectives to engage with faculty and students at Amherst College."<sup>11</sup> In 1984, the speech was published in *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches By Audre Lorde*, reaching additional audiences interested in Lorde's approach to human liberation.<sup>12</sup> Lorde's speech—the central subject of this essay—suggested that language itself may mitigate against transforming practices across differences.

This essay will explore some liabilities of language that Lorde views as operating on two levels: To Lorde, these liabilities are embedded in language itself, exemplified by what today is known as a problem of essentialism. Other liabilities of language recur in its use, as when people employ language to separate forms of oppression as though they are distinct from each other. Lorde's speech at Amherst exemplifies her deep understanding

of what she refers to in an earlier speech in 1977 as "that language which has been made to work against us."<sup>13</sup> Paradoxically, by scrutinizing the risks that language may pose for members of subordinated communities, Lorde's speech enacts specific and often subtle means for reclaiming language. First, I will examine excerpts from Lorde's poetry, essays, and public speaking that indicate her conscious awareness of some language liabilities with an emphasis on her strategies for engaging them. Having sketched in necessarily broad terms a few outlines of her implicit rhetorical theory about language, I will turn next to the speech at Amherst to explore the ways she redefines "difference" as a resource. She identifies certain language liabilities, provides an abundant range of examples illustrating misnaming in the interest of domination, and enacts varied means of dealing with those liabilities. Finally, I will specify how her speech illustrates her sophisticated techniques of using language in her struggle with language.

Lorde shifts the primary focus of her audiences' attention from high risk groups to high risk communicative practices, exemplified by silencing, devaluing, and marginalizing people and their ideas, while reminding audiences that these practices disproportionately affect subordinated communities. Lorde suggests that both the demographic categories for people and the terms for relations among people are necessary in an adequate analysis of symbolic practices across differences. But she emphasizes that relational practices are more fundamental than categories for people, because such categories are inevitably inadequate to represent the complexity of any individual's experience, and because a focus upon relationships may enable people of diverse backgrounds to cooperate in coalition politics to achieve mutual objectives, such as a just and peaceful society.<sup>14</sup>

Nearly two decades after Lorde's speech, when a deluge of scholarly literature now focuses upon the concept of difference across social variables, it may be difficult to appreciate Lorde's contribution to reclaiming difference in 1980. But many recent analyses of "difference" credit Lorde's speech as a significant source of insight. Among the most important book-length examples are Elizabeth Spelman's *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, Martha Minow's *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion, and American Law* and Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*.<sup>15</sup> Numerous essays in several disciplinary contexts mention the significance of Lorde's speech at Amherst in the scholarly literature on feminism, and, more generally, on human liberation in matters of class, age, race, and sexuality. Although demographic categories for people have an on-going history of organizing differential treatment of groups in education, law, politics, economics, religion, society, and even family, it is the layering, matrixing, or compounding of these multiple variables that textures an individual's self-definitions and experiences, as Lorde contends, though similar people may define similar experiences in diverse ways.<sup>16</sup>

Lorde's speech merits attention by communication scholars, because it articulates an insightful analysis of some liabilities of the English language, a vital means of communicating.<sup>17</sup> In addition, Lorde's speech exemplifies a process that she identifies as "reclaiming" language. As a specific instance, her speech examines the dynamics of "difference" in an endeavor to transform them. Although the title and structure of the speech foregrounds "Women Redefining Difference," in the process of doing so she also redefines "unity" toward the conclusion, perhaps because members of her audiences may have considered "difference" as threatening communal cohesion. Moreover, her

speech comments upon the dangers of essentialism and complicity that attend using the English language, especially dangers that attend simplistic oppositions between such terms as man/woman, white/black, rich/poor, and heterosexuality/same-sexuality. Further, Lorde's speech is rife with insights about collusion with oppression through language and communication practices. Relationships of domination are complex in that, as Mark McPhail mentions, one can be dominant within a system without necessarily dominating the system.<sup>18</sup> In addition, any individual can be dominant in some respect within a culture, such as sex and race in my case, while experiencing severe forms of oppression in other respects, such as economic class and sexuality. Domination and oppression often intermingle in an individual's lived experiences, as Lorde amplifies in her speech.

Careful listening to Lorde's speech will be instructive to communication scholars interested in the complexity of communicating across significant differences because it analyzes numerous examples illustrating some risks in speaking about and speaking for others. Linda Alcoff cautions that "the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons" has often increased or reinforced the oppression of the group spoken for.<sup>19</sup> But it may be even more dangerous to avoid making the necessary effort as one outcome of attentive listening, as Alcoff contends. She observes, "adopting the position that one should only speak for oneself raises similarly problematic questions. For example, we might ask, if I don't speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my privilege?"<sup>20</sup> Alcoff emphasizes, "Even a complete retreat from speech is of course not neutral since it allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance."<sup>21</sup>

In addition, Alcoff contends that the manner in which the categories for membership within groups are constructed is profoundly political. She remarks, "The criterion of group identity leaves many unanswered questions for a person such as myself, since I have membership in many conflicting groups but my membership in all of them is problematic."<sup>22</sup> She adds, "Location and positionality should not be conceived as one-dimensional or static, but as multiple and with varying degrees of mobility. What it means, then, to speak from or within a group and/or a location is immensely complex."<sup>23</sup> To Alcoff's insightful analysis, I would add that if a listener or critic must be essentially like the person being studied to make scholarship legitimate, then this criterion may be reduced to an absurdity that underscores some dangers of such thinking. We will not have many commentaries on Lorde's public speaking, for instance, if the only legitimate listener and critic of her speeches must be a black lesbian socialist coupled in an interracial relationship and having children of both sexes, as Lorde was. Personal experience is certainly an invaluable source of insight, but it is not the only basis for knowledge. Further, one may question whether personal experience is best expressed or organized by reference to broad, demographic categories rather than kinds of experiences.

Careful attention to Lorde's rhetorical techniques for dealing with the liabilities of language may enable communication scholars to participate in a conversation about what Lisa Flores has referred to as "a rhetoric of difference."<sup>24</sup> To Flores, "A rhetoric of difference . . . must come from within the group; in a rhetoric of difference, outsiders cannot speak for a people."<sup>25</sup> In contrast, Audre Lorde decided in a rhetoric of difference to define herself as "sister outsider," because she considered herself as being, at once,

both inside and outside of diverse communities organized around race, sex, sexuality, age, and economic class. Gloria T. Hull writes, "When Lorde names herself 'sister outsider', she is claiming the extremes of a difficult identity."<sup>26</sup> Hull explains, "I think we tend to read the two terms with a diacritical slash between them—in an attempt to make some separate, though conjoining, space. But Lorde has placed herself on that line between the either/or and both/and of 'sister outsider'—and then erased her chance for rest or mediation."<sup>27</sup> Hull remarks, "Lorde's seemingly essentialist definitions of herself as black/lesbian/mother/woman are not simple, fixed terms. Rather, they represent her ceaseless negotiations of a positionality from which she can speak."<sup>28</sup> Hull adds, "Lorde's tricky positionality . . . also extends to community, which she likewise desires, but problematizes and finds problematic."<sup>29</sup> Hull comments, Lorde "is a repository of 'others' personified."<sup>30</sup> Most of us may be located both inside and outside of the imagined communities to which we appear to belong, but Lorde was especially so as a consequence of her membership in several subordinated communities. Lorde mentions membership without belonging, an illusion of community that has as its counter-statement the illusion of an individual.

Lorde's relationship to her speech and audiences takes such rhetorical forms as identification, enactment, and embodiment, as when she calls awareness to herself as embodying multiple differences. In analyzing her speech, I will interweave the commentary on it by numerous other audience members to provide multiple voices commenting on the meanings of the text, at times extending some implications in earlier commentators' remarks, at other times outlining a range of possible interpretations of the same line, and at still other times disagreeing with earlier commentary. In a cultural context wherein an acknowledgement of any difference often implies division and hierarchy, Lorde employs a range of both simple and complex patterns of identification to promote cooperation across differences.<sup>31</sup> At times, she calls for unity among women in opposition to patriarchy, sexualized aggression, and violence. At other moments, she encourages identification across differences through shared goals: "equality" and freedom from a fear of "violence." Later, I will illustrate one of her most sophisticated techniques: strategic sequencing of carefully chosen and closely interconnected examples. Paradoxically, where difference often translates into division in U.S. culture, Lorde evokes "difference" as a basis for identification across divisions by focusing on similarities in oppressive, relational practices.

### Audre Lorde on Language as a Site of Struggle

Like many others, Lorde considered language a site of struggle. Her view of language is replete with paradox in the specific form of a double-bind. The paradoxical aspects of her view of language can be brought into high relief by juxtaposing her remarks about language in various speeches and essays. In her speech, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," delivered to the Modern Language Association in 1977, Lorde voiced awareness that language as a tool "has been made to work against us," because Lorde recognized that language tends to represent and reproduce the interests of dominating groups.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, it became important to examine "the words to fit a world in which we all believed"<sup>33</sup> and it became vital "to scrutinize not only the truths of what we speak, but the truth and validity of that language by which we speak it."<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, she recognized that language can be a creative and dynamic resource for transforming self and society. She observed in "Poetry Is Not A Luxury," published

initially in *Chrysalis* in 1977, that poetry “is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.”<sup>35</sup>

Because language is in some respects a tool of domination and in other respects a vehicle for self-definition, community building, and resistance, Lorde stressed the necessity of scrutinizing language. To Lorde, language as a communal resource enables one to define oneself in relationship to a community through a complex process of identification and differentiation, but not without the inherent risk of language subverting a self definition because of the English language’s history as a communal resource dominated by others.<sup>36</sup> As a woman, Lorde often addressed groups devoted to feminism and dominated by white women. In this context, Lorde’s poem, “A Woman Speaks,” affirms identification with a group and difference within it: “I am / woman / and not white.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, as a Black lesbian, Lorde spoke to African American groups dominated by heterosexuals. In this context, her poems such as “Scar”<sup>38</sup> and “Between Ourselves” addressed exclusion based on sexuality within Black communities. In the latter poem, Lorde writes: “Once when I walked into a room / my eyes would seek out the one or two black faces / for contact or reassurance or a sign / I was not alone / now walking into rooms full of black faces / that would destroy me for any difference / where shall my eyes look? / Once it was easy to know / who were my people.”<sup>39</sup> A pattern of affirming identification with a community while acknowledging differences and alienation within it recurs in Lorde’s oratory.<sup>40</sup>

To engage the double bind posed by language for members of subordinated communities, Lorde underscored the value of naming, renaming, and redefining experiences though an activity that she referred to as “reclaiming” language.<sup>41</sup> Whether she believed that reclaiming language would ultimately dismantle the special privileges embedded in language is speculation, because it may be that she engaged in reclaiming language despite insights about its abiding ideological dimensions. Yet reclaiming language was vital in her estimation. Lorde’s commentary in “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” underscored the importance of integrating self with community through language, while at the same time distinguishing oneself within community through language. She wrote, “As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression.” The passive voice construction obscured who has done this teaching, but she exempted no one from perpetuating practices of domination. She added, “But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”<sup>42</sup>

In “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving,” an essay published initially in the *Black Scholar* in 1978, Lorde commented on the underlying role of social position, point of view, or perspective in dealing with this double bind, by turning it on its side: “For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment.”<sup>43</sup> Such remarks underscored the value of attending to social position, point of view, or perspective in relationship to language. Lorde added to her analysis of the vital role of language in relationship to perspective, despite its risks, when she mentioned in an interview with Adrienne Rich, “I’m not going to be more vulnerable by putting

weapons of silence in my enemies' hands."<sup>44</sup> This insight about silence impelled her movement through the double bind posed by language for members of subordinated communities, as may be exemplified by turning next to the process of reclaiming "difference" in her speech at Amherst College.

### A Process of Reclaiming Differences

Strategic sequencing of Lorde's ideas is a vital technique in Lorde's rhetoric identifying and engaging the liabilities of language by exposing the hierarchies that language disguises. It is necessary to feature the reclaiming of language as a process, because she layers her insights about language as the speech unfolds in several respects. For instance, a rhetorical strategy informing Lorde's organization of the speech is highly sophisticated, especially the sequencing of the categories for people and the examples of misnaming. In the arrangement of her ideas, Lorde's technique of moving systematically from general ("sisterhood" and "woman") through increasingly specific points-of-view ("black lesbian feminist") enables her to reject the homogenization of experience through such categories in language as "sisterhood." At the same time, the examples illustrate hierarchies within subordinated groups as she moves downward through increasingly vulnerable ranks of people. Lorde exposes hierarchies hidden within a single symbol, "sisterhood," while underscoring how simplistic references to "sisterhood" and "woman" become complicitous with the oppression of others through obfuscation that makes them invisible.

Through strategic sequencing of the categories for people, Lorde uses a rhetorical technique of first promoting identification among women in opposition to patriarchy as a means of bringing those insights about relational practices to bear on analogous relations of domination among women across class, age, race, and sexuality. Through this sequencing, Lorde's analysis of sexism in a vocabulary familiar to most feminists becomes a means of illuminating relational practices across other differences among women. Later, she uses this rhetorical technique in a way layered by the initial treatment of sexism. Specifically, she draws upon heterosexual Black women's understandings of both sexism and racism to confront these Black women about practices excluding and devaluing Black lesbians across differences of sexuality. Although difference often translates into division in U.S. culture, Lorde's rhetorical technique endeavors to build identifications among diverse subordinated communities by focusing upon commonalities in oppressive, relational practices across differences.

Finally, the unfolding process is vital in an analysis of Lorde's rhetorical techniques, because Lorde's analysis of key "misnamings" that appear early in the speech add layers to the implicit understanding of interrelated misnamings subsequently, as I will illustrate in her commentary on "unity." But the most noteworthy features of Lorde's layering, compounding, or matrixing process may be organized topically in the order that they become salient within the speech: hierarchical dynamics of difference; self-positioning in relation to difference; equality across difference; relational practices across difference; a mythical norm in naming differences; multiple memberships across differences; a matrixing of class, age, race, and sexuality; and, in her conclusion, an examination of the oppressor internalized within every person. Each topic constitutes a noteworthy feature of Lorde's rhetoric of difference articulated from a position as "sister outsider"—part of and yet apart from any specific community.

*Hierarchical Dynamics of Difference*

Lorde's opening line focuses on the hierarchical dynamics of difference. She affirms, "Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior" (114). As this remark affirms, the term, "difference," constitutes the central focus of Lorde's remarks, unifying her speech by providing both a destination and a pathway to the heart of her subject. She scrutinizes difference by interrelating sex, economic class, age, race, and sexuality, as instances illustrating difference. "Difference" provides the deepest symbolic unity for what she names as "Racism," "Sexism," "Ageism," "Heterosexism," "Elitism," and "Classism" (115). The distortions around difference operate in these namings on two levels. There are the specific distortions in terms of superiority and inferiority in the relational practices of representing sex, class, age, race, and sexuality. Subtler distortions result from using language to separate these relational practices around difference, as though the namings through language render them distinct. In these respects, the term, "difference," exemplifies some liabilities of language.

To magnify the stakes, Lorde connects the interconnected political, moral, and social dynamics of representing differences to economic systems, but she does not reduce language to such economic systems. She comments, "In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior" (114). She explains, "Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people" (115). She comments on an economic system as a factor in general, not specifying capitalism, because in an earlier essay she rejected as simplistic the idea that racism or sexism results from capitalism.<sup>45</sup> Lorde underscores collusion with this exploitation by adding, "As members of such an economy, we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate" (115). Joan Martin comments, "These three elements—blindness, eroticization, and destruction—constitute the hegemonic discourse of difference through what Lorde terms the misnaming of difference and its resulting distortion." Martin adds, "Anything 'different' in this scheme becomes divisive, deviant, and threatening from the perspective of the dominant, normative, and exploitative group and their power."<sup>46</sup> Despite Lorde's awareness of such hierarchical dynamics of difference, and despite her recognition of pervasive collusion with these dynamics, she then positions herself in relationship to multiple differences.

*Self-Positioning In Relation to Difference*

Much more than conventional notions of *ethos* are entailed when Lorde defines herself in the introduction: "As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong" (114). These self-namings position Lorde within multiple hierarchies by affirming her membership in multiple communities, at times having mutual interests but often conflicting with each other. These subordinated communities are often stigmatized groups subject to disproportionate experiences of violence, verbal abuse, and economic discrimination including



poverty and devaluation of labor. Regenia Gagnier remarks, "Post-modern literature shows the diffusion and dispersal of the centered, self-reflective subject among multiple signifying practices," offering Lorde's self-definition here as an instance.<sup>47</sup> Yet Lorde complicates such "diffusion and dispersal," when she asks later in this speech that "we be seen as whole people in our actual complexities—as individuals, as women, as human—rather than as one of those problematic but familiar stereotypes" (118). Lorde rejects reduction of herself to one or another of "the many different ingredients of my identity" (120).

To Christina Crosby, Lorde's remark has considerable value in its rhetorical technique: "Such specifying statements are now *de rigueur* and serve to locate one implicitly in relation to others, a useful exercise that does guard against certain presumptions of universality."<sup>48</sup> Stephanie Riger specifies another aspect of Lorde's rhetorical technique in her self-namings: "Each of these identities becomes salient in a different situation; at times, they conflict within the same situation."<sup>49</sup> Lorde names a series of social groupings often treated as though homogeneous, while she articulates diversity within each of them, thereby enacting one of her rhetorical techniques of resistance to complicity with a normalizing or essentializing of these subordinated communities through categories: human, but not male; woman, but not white; Black, but not straight; lesbian, but not childless; parent, but not married; coupled, but not with a husband; and so on. Lorde's rhetorical technique calls awareness to herself as embodying at once several differences, not only from dominant groups, but also within subordinated communities.

### *Equality Across Relations of Difference*

To engage the hierarchical dynamics around the many differences that Lorde embodies, she uses a rhetorical technique of placing "differences" within considerations of "equality." She claims, "But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals" (115). By implication, the only patterns we have for relating across difference is as domination. Both "differences" and "equals" are relational terms, the latter providing a point of reference for gauging and transforming the former. Both terms are deeply rooted in American culture through myths of individualism celebrating differences among people on the one hand and the high idealism of equality enshrined in the U.S. constitution on the other. As Celeste Condit and John Lucaites remark, "Equality . . . is at once a normative abstraction that resonates with the highest ideals of America's collective being, and a rather narrow and pedestrian, empirical characterization of the sameness or identity of any two objects."<sup>50</sup> In this light of "sameness or identity," an underlying tension between being at once both different and equal poses a dilemma, as Minow comments: "when does treating people differently emphasize their differences and stigmatize or hinder them on that basis? and when does treating people the same become insensitive to their difference and likely to stigmatize or hinder them on *that* basis?"<sup>51</sup>

To even recognize this dilemma rests upon a placement of "differences" within "equality," while the actual relations of domination tend instead to result in "misnaming" and "misusing" difference, contributing to separation and marginalizing, a vast inconsistency between the ideals of equality and lived experience. Lorde affirms, "As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion" (115). This reference to "the service of separation" underscores a liability of language to the extent that misnaming represents oppressions as separate or distinct,

providing the privileged with a powerful tool for driving wedges among subordinated people with closely interrelated interests. The shift in understanding difference as a relational practice is a move from considering difference as an innate trait of a person to reconsidering difference as naming an underlying, comparative relationship among people, while a focus upon situating a relational practice of difference within equality represents a basis for reclaiming difference. What Lorde seeks, then, is “not sympathy, tolerance, or even compassion, each of which leaves the viewer’s understanding fundamentally unchanged,” but rather a fundamental transformation in relationships at the level of practices, as Minow affirms about another of Lorde’s speeches.<sup>52</sup>

### *Relational Practices Across Difference*

Lorde stresses a role of domination in speaking across differences. She begins these observations with an emphasis on human survival to magnify the stakes. She affirms, “For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection” (114). Patricia Hill Collins refers to this practice of adopting the oppressors’ ways as “the mask of behavioral conformity imposed on African-American women.”<sup>53</sup> This complicity in adopting the oppressors’ *techné* provides only an “illusion of protection” because the activity enacts and perpetuates the mechanisms for one’s subordination in other relationships. In addition, there is an endless appropriation of the energies of those who are different, ostensibly for better “communication.” Lorde recognizes such “communication” as a misnaming: “Whenever the need for some pretense of communication arises, those who profit from our oppression call upon us to share our knowledge with them. In other words, it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes” (114).

Lorde illustrates her claim with numerous examples ranging across diverse communities, using a rhetorical technique of parallel phrasing to underscore similarity in how the relational practice recurs across varied groups: “I am responsible for educating teachers who dismiss my children’s culture in school. Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world” (114–115). While superficially such educational projects may appear to have merit, Lorde discloses deep deficiencies. Such projects provide advantages to the oppressors, while disadvantaging the oppressed: “The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions” (115). She adds that for those who undertake the educating, “There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future” (115). A certain meaning of “communication” is a “pretense,” because participants are practicing, rehearsing, and perpetuating the hierarchical dynamic between oppressor and oppressed with the latter tending to the former’s needs.

To Lorde, this relational dynamic must change, because collusion with these practices of domination in one context keeps the practices available for use in other contexts. The insight about tending the oppressor’s needs is thematic in Lorde’s rhetoric, because it recurs as a relational practice across several subordinated communities, and because Lorde presumably recognized, as Carol Gilligan remarked, “If you have power, you can opt not to listen. And you do so with impunity.”<sup>54</sup> Yet if the members of subordinated

communities do not undertake this teaching, it does not get done. In her remarks at Amherst, in fact, Lorde engages in teaching members of dominant groups about patterns of exclusion through language, a performative contradiction in her speech resulting perhaps from a double bind in which complicity in reproducing the relational practice may be a dark underside of educating dominant communities. However, by adopting a stance as an equal, not a supplicant, and by commenting on complicity, she may mitigate its impact.

Lorde mentions that dominant groups may use language to deny meaningful differences as a complicitous means to retain power and privilege. To Lorde, these practices of denial result in significant patterns of distortion through two extremes. She remarks, "Too often, we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring difference into pretending those differences are insurmountable barriers, or that they do not exist at all. This results in a voluntary isolation, or false and treacherous connections" (115). These remarks name a creative tension between the extremes of individuating or universalizing, differentiating or normalizing, transgressing or assimilating, going it alone or in communities—false alternatives, on inspection, between self and community, because self is embedded in relationship to community through language and action.<sup>55</sup> Listing Lorde's speech at Amherst among the examples, Linda Alcoff comments, "these works resist the universalizing tendency of cultural feminism and highlight the differences between women, and between men, in a way that undercuts arguments for the existence of an overarching gendered essence."<sup>56</sup> At the same time, Lorde's remarks avoid the other extreme of isolation and complete separation of the individual from communal action. Lorde mentions a misnaming of difference itself, "We speak not of human difference, but of human deviance" (116). This remark is a key transition to the role of "a *mythical norm*" in collusion with exclusion and devaluation through language, because a norm is necessary to discern "difference" as "deviance."

### *A Mythical Norm In Naming Difference*

Lorde uses a rhetorical technique of making explicit the often unstated point of comparison in a relational practice of assigning differences. Lorde stresses, "Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our hearts knows 'that is not me' " (116). That the norm is usually unstated and unexamined underscores the power, judgment, and privilege that the unspecified point of comparison exercises in affirming and situating a difference within social relationships. At the same time, naming any difference among people often distracts from these underlying relations of power, judgment, and privilege by dealing in what may be misunderstood as innate traits of an individual.<sup>57</sup> Lorde locates such a mythical norm within the broad context of culture. She states, "In america, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society" (116). Each term in Lorde's list names a dominant position in the oppositions among social groups, oppositions that Lorde had earlier referred to as "simplistic." Minow explains the value of this rhetorical technique, "Noticing the unstated point of comparison and point of view used in assessments of difference does not eliminate the dilemma of difference; instead, more importantly, it links problems of difference to questions of vantage point."<sup>58</sup>

A mythical norm of necessity excludes and, as a consequence, renders invisible or silent. A norm tends to become a standard against which individuals measure, assess, or

judge themselves and others, as Collins comments about Lorde's remarks.<sup>59</sup> A norm provides a point of reference for conferring and receiving power and privileges. With specific reference to a "mythical norm," JoAnn Pavletich and Margot Gayle Backus comment upon the position of people who stand outside of a norm and, consequently, "experience American society as 'an abyss of defeat', in which their subject position is coded in terms of lack relative to what Audre Lorde has called 'the mythical norm'."<sup>60</sup> Lorde then complicates these hierarchical dynamics of difference by stressing that every person occupies multiple places in multiple hierarchies. She remarks, "Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practising" (116). This comment on tacit collusion with oppression is a transition to considerations of practices of domination by members of subordinated communities in dealing with others.

### *Multiple Memberships Across Differences*

In Lorde's analysis, every person occupies multiple placements in multiple hierarchies—a complex intermingling of power and vulnerability, privilege and privation, advantage and disadvantage. Lorde begins her analysis of multiple memberships by focusing on the categories of "sisterhood" and "woman," almost certainly using a rhetorical technique of adaptation to her audiences consisting primarily of women. She then moves among various categories for humanity understood as conveying an implicit norm, by outlining through specific examples how simplistic oppositions and normative representations obscure diversity within them. She remarks, "By and large within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist" (116). These remarks, which Elizabeth Spelman features prominently in *Inessential Woman*,<sup>61</sup> underscore a reductionist tendency of language as a liability in naming communal commitments. Lorde does more than simply specifying the range of diversity within the categories in that she systematically examines the hierarchical operations of power, judgment, and privilege by the members of these communities, operations that reproduce the tools of domination.

Lorde's observations about a mythical norm embedded in "sisterhood" have evoked responses seeking to respect the diversity of women's experiences and calling attention to a dilemma. Nancy Corson Carter, for example, experiences Lorde's remarks as a "warning." She affirms, "I listen to Audre Lorde's warning in *Sister Outsider* not to pretend to 'a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist'."<sup>62</sup> In contrast, Minow underscores a dilemma, "The tendency of some women to claim to speak for all poses a special dilemma for feminism, which has celebrated 'women's experience' as the touchstone for a new source of authority. If this authority speaks only for the individual and not for the group of women, how can it counter the predominant structures of societal authority?"<sup>63</sup> Minow's insight applies with equal force to a tendency of some to speak on behalf of all Blacks, all same sexuality, all of the poor, and so on. Later, Lorde speaks similarly about conformity in Black communities by discussing calls for "unity" as a desire for "homogeneity." Lorde's next rhetorical technique is to illustrate how layering, matrixing, or compounding of variables can complicate analysis to include those situated outside of a normative naming. In *Black*

*Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses this type of analysis as a “matrix of domination.”<sup>64</sup>

*Matrixing of Class, Age, Race, and Sexuality Within “Sisterhood”*

In Lorde’s analysis the term, “sisterhood,” often represents one instance of misnaming, a symbolic reduction to a mythical norm precisely because of how it is represented as middle class to affluent, white, and heterosexual. Lorde amplifies her insight about an implicit norm within “sisterhood” by sequentially considering economic class, age, race, and sexuality. Lorde begins with differences of economic classes among women: “Unacknowledged class differences rob women of each others’ energy and creative insight” (116). Lorde provides a subtle example of how differences in women’s economic classes may impact the forms of creative expression and how that underlying difference in class is misnamed through distorting assessments such as “rigorous” and “serious.” Lorde remarks, “Recently a women’s magazine collective made the decision for one issue to print only prose, saying poetry was a less ‘rigorous’ or ‘serious’ art form. Yet even the form our creativity takes is often a class issue” (116). After presenting herself as one who has written both poetry and prose, she comments, “Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical” (116). In contrast, Lorde alludes to Virginia Wolfe’s famous line, “A room of one’s own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter, and plenty of time” (116). Lorde recognizes that assessing the forms of expression in terms of superiority and inferiority may function rhetorically as surrogates for assessing the economic classes of women. This language is a complicitous misuse of difference that results in dividing women and devaluing the creativity of those possessing limited resources.

Nancy Corson Carter endeavors to extend Lorde’s remarks about class and forms of creative expression, by adding that Hispanic writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa face additional concerns in that they “must bend their ideas into English.”<sup>65</sup> Emily Erwin Culpepper focuses upon the role of naming and misnaming the qualities of the forms of expression in terms of “validation for one’s intellectual approach.”<sup>66</sup> To Culpepper, “When one’s activities are not contained within academia, the sources for insight are significantly altered.”<sup>67</sup> To Murray Forman, in contrast, Lorde’s remarks about economic class are a communication specifically to Black women about assessing their own work: “The passage both calls attention to and encourages the ways that black women translate their activities at home or in the workplace into words that become a statement of individual subjectivity, creating a patterned discourse to which other young black women are then also encouraged to add their voices.” He adds, “Lorde indicates the value of poetry as a means for women to write themselves into being and to add greater relevance to their daily activities, interactions, experiences.”<sup>68</sup> Such an interpretation is plausible, despite the audiences consisting of both white and Black women and despite a stereotype of “Black” as poor. For women of all races, Lorde’s insight is about assessing forms of expression as surrogates for assessing economic classes of people of any race.

After having exemplified distortions around the differences of class and then age, Lorde next turns her attention to differences of race obscured by “sisterhood” in her sustained illustration of a mythic norm embedded in “sisterhood.” She affirms, “Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power. As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own

experience alone, then women of Color become ‘other’, the outsider whose experience and tradition is too ‘alien’ to comprehend” (117). Lorde exemplifies her claims about “woman” as “white” through commentary on the curriculum of women’s studies: “The literature of women of Color is seldom included in women’s literature courses and almost never in other literature courses, nor in women’s studies as a whole” (117). She reiterates the extreme distortions resulting from misusing differences to justify distance from others’ ideas: “All too often, the excuse given is that the literatures of women of Color can only be taught by Colored women, or that they are too difficult to understand, or that classes cannot ‘get into’ them because they come out of experiences that are ‘too different’ ” (17). Lorde humorously yet incisively reveals the hypocrisy and collusion with oppression concealed in such excuses: “I have heard this argument presented by white women of otherwise quite clear intelligence, women who seem to have no trouble at all teaching and reviewing work that comes out of the vastly different experiences of Shakespeare, Molière, Dostoyefsky, and Aristophanes” (117).

Without naming the possibilities of hypocrisy and complicity resulting from differences in power obfuscated within a mythical norm of “sisterhood” and “woman,” Lorde may engage in confrontational consciousness raising, because of her earlier naming of “racism” as a general distortion. But she maintains a focus instead upon “guilt” in a way that focuses on authenticity. “This is a very complex question,” Lorde adds, “but I believe one of the reasons white women have such difficulty reading Black women’s work is because of their reluctance to see Black women as women and different from themselves” (117–118). Lorde explains, “To allow women of Color to step out of stereotypes is too guilt provoking, for it threatens the complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex” (118). In this connection, Lorde’s multiple names for self and the corresponding mythical norm of power, judgment, and privilege underscore selective perception in recognizing some oppressive practices while ignoring others in ways that are complicitous with oppression. To Joan Martin, an insight from Lorde’s remarks is that “People’s struggles must be seen in their particularity and complexity as well as in their commonality.”<sup>69</sup>

Lorde employs a recurring rhetorical technique of identification through opposition to a mutual adversary, “patriarchal power,” when she focuses next upon the “different problems” and the “sources of suspicion” between white and Black women. Throughout the commentary, she emphasizes the necessity of unity among these women to attain mutual goals in engaging patriarchal privilege (118–119). She observes, “in a patriarchal power system where whiteskin privilege is a major prop, the entrapments used to neutralize Black women and white women are not the same” (118). She may begin with concerns of Black women before treating those of white women, because members of the dominant race would be more open to hearing criticism if she first focused on the subordinated community to which she belonged. She states, “For example, it is easy for Black women to be used by the power structure against Black men, not because they are men, but because they are Black. Therefore, for Black women, it is necessary at all times to separate the needs of the oppressor from our own legitimate conflicts within our communities. This same problem does not exist for white women” (118). Lorde then outlines the “pretended choices” available to white women, a naming that resonates with her earlier reference to an “illusion of protection” to call awareness to membership without belonging and to stress the necessity of looking beneath the surface of relational practices.

Lorde amplifies another distortion around racial differences among women in terms of relative vulnerability to violence and aggression. She affirms, "Black women and our children know the fabric of our lives is stitched with violence and with hatred, that there is no rest. . . . For us, increasingly, violence weaves through the daily tissues of our living—in the supermarket, in the classroom, in the elevator, in the clinic and the schoolyard, from the plumber, the baker, the saleswoman, the bus driver, the bank teller, the waitress who does not serve us" (119). Lorde offers several examples of racial differences affecting women, especially race-motivated violence. She summarizes, "Some problems we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you, we fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reasons they are dying" (119).<sup>70</sup>

After examining distortions and misnamings around class, age, and race within "sisterhood" and "woman" by calling awareness to a mythical norm informing these terms, Lorde then layers her analysis by focusing her confrontational consciousness-raising specifically on "people of Color." She remarks, "The threat of difference has been no less blinding to people of Color" (119). She amplifies this point by considering such intertwined factors as sexism, violence, and sexuality within Black communities. Lorde observes, "Within Black communities where racism is a living reality, differences among us often seem dangerous and suspect" (119). Such factors lead to a misnaming and distortion around difference that Lorde outlines: "The need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity, and a Black feminist vision mistaken for betrayal of our common interests as a people" (119). In the interest of conformity, then, the label "Black" sometimes takes priority over "woman," because of sexism as a factor within Black communities. Lorde observes, "Because of the continuous battle against racial erasure that Black women and Black men share, some Black women still refuse to recognize that we are also oppressed as women, and that sexual hostility against Black women is practiced not only by the white racist society, but implemented within our Black communities as well. It is a disease striking the heart of Black nationhood" (119–120). To Jane Gaines, these remarks indicate that Lorde "sees sexism in black communities as not original to them, but as a plague that has struck," an interpretation that assumes diseases originate from sources external to one's own communities.<sup>71</sup> But in this speech Lorde never speculates on the origins of sexism, though she does examine Black women's complicity with sexism.

Lorde then examines a closely interconnected and densely layered sequence of strategic examples that enact a reclaiming of "unity," while illustrating sexism within Black communities, violence as manliness, and, ultimately, how these misnamings may inform anti-lesbian sentiments among heterosexual Black women. In connection with "female circumcision," Lorde affirms, "it is not a cultural affair . . . , it is a crime against Black women" (120). As for rape, she stresses a misnaming and distortion: "rape is not aggressive sexuality, it is sexualized aggression" (120). She may deliberately complicate and reject any reductive analysis of power in terms of men categorically dominating women by quoting a Black male, Kalamu ya Salaam, objecting to rape as "male domination." This testimony features a member of a dominant group resisting collusion with domination. Turning next to a normative treatment of "Black women" as though it is a homogeneous category, Lorde comments, "Differences between ourselves as Black women are also being misnamed and used to separate us from one another" (120). Lorde

mentions, "A fear of lesbians, or of being accused of being a lesbian, has led many Black women into testifying against themselves" (121).<sup>72</sup> She notes a role for misnaming and distortion by treating Black as uniformly heterosexual as a means for Black men to divide and conquer Black women: "the punishment for any female self-assertion is still to be accused of being a lesbian and therefore unworthy of the attention or support of the scarce Black male" (121). She adds to this analysis of homophobia and sexism, "But part of this need to misname and ignore Black lesbians comes from a very real fear that openly women-identified Black women who are no longer dependent upon men for their self-definition may well reorder our whole concept of social relationships" (121). Because of an underlying misnaming of "unity" as a covering term for a desire for "homogeneity," and because of a related misnaming of "self-assertion" as "lesbian" to discourage Black women's "self-assertion" as a threat to such "unity," Lorde comments that some Black women have treated lesbians with hostility.

Lorde's example of Black women's hostility illustrates displacement of differences across other social differences as a distortion through language use, since Lorde claims that the heterosexual Black women "once insisted that lesbianism was a white woman's problem" (121). One consequence is a bind for Black lesbians, who, according to Lorde, are "caught between the racism of white women and the homophobia of their sisters" (122). She adds that, within Black communities, the work of Black lesbians often "has been ignored, trivialized, or misnamed," naming several examples (122). Lorde suggests that Black heterosexual women use the very practices in their hostile treatment of Black lesbians that they find objectionable in their experiences of racism and sexism. With reference to Lorde's remarks, Arlene Stein comments, "Women of color, in particular, often felt that they were forced to pick and choose among identities." Stein observes, "What was problematic, I believe, was not so much that boundary-making took place—for it does in all identity-based movements—but that the discourse of the movement, rooted in notions of authenticity and inclusion, ran so completely counter to it."<sup>73</sup> Even the depiction of the Black lesbian as "threat" to Black communities illustrates a misnaming and misuse of difference in the specific form of scapegoating subordinated others. Lorde deftly mentions, "it is certainly not Black lesbians who are assaulting women and raping children and grandmothers on the streets of our communities" (122). To the contrary, she remarks, "Black lesbians are spearheading movements against violence against Black women" (122).

### *Confronting the Complicitous Oppressor Internalized Within Each Person*

Having surveyed instances of distortions and misnamings around differences of sex, class, age, race, and sexuality, Lorde summarizes her central point about a role of language in collusion with oppression across differences. She confronts her audiences with the claim that each member must examine how she or he is complicitous in reproducing practices of domination across differences. She depicts this activity as confronting the oppressor internalized within each person. To unify her audiences by focusing on a mutual problem, she suggests, "It is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences" (122). The use of differences to divide communities, a use that Lorde recognizes as a classic technique among the tools of domination, operates in language itself to the extent that the names for communities suggest absolute or essential distinctions among them.



She adds, "As a tool of social control, women have been encouraged to recognize only one area of human difference as legitimate, those differences which exist between women and men" (122). To Lorde, a liability of such categories is its use to divide and conquer.

Lorde endeavors to unify the audiences by focusing on a shared opposition to patriarchal privileges. Including herself in her observations, Lorde looks to the past and present before envisioning a better future. She affirms, "All of us have had to learn to live or work or coexist with men, from our fathers on. We have recognized and negotiated these differences, even when this recognition only continued the old dominant/subordinate mode of human relationship, where the oppressed must recognize the masters' difference in order to survive" (122). She adds, "But our future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality. As women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change" (122). Consistent with Lorde's focus upon educating oneself and one's own communities, she concentrates on herself and subordinated communities with which she identifies by calling for a deeper awareness and change. Lorde urges "all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. The old definitions have not served us, nor the earth that supports us" (123). By redefining "difference," Lorde enacts the call for examining language in the struggle to reclaim it through consciousness raising and active redefinition of key terms. She mentions "power" as another term to be reclaimed, using a layered pun referring to both the term and the quality in human interactions.

Lorde alludes to her own earlier speech, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (123). This allusion reminds her audiences of the necessity of rooting out the practices of domination every person has learned and internalized in the process of struggling to survive, "adopting them for some illusion of protection" (114). This activity of self-examination and personal transformation is vital for subordinated communities. As she states, "For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures" (123). To encourage her audiences to confront the oppressor internalized within every person, Lorde alludes to the seminal work of Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: "the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships" (123).<sup>74</sup>

By concentrating on changing one's self and one's own complicitous practices, through a metonymic process one changes the society. By learning to rethink the old oppositions ("dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior") and by recognizing "differences among women who are our equals" (122), many can act together as one to achieve shared goals. Thus, she culminates a reclaiming of unity through mutual objectives as a means of reclaiming difference. To Lorde, a community may be imagined most meaningfully through mutual objectives unifying diverse people. Lorde affirms in conclusion that "we sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals. For Black and white, old and young, lesbian and heterosexual women alike, this can mean new paths to our survival" (123). Lorde's vision of a future is utopian, as suggested not only by her strategic placement of "difference" within

“equality,” but also by the final line of an unpublished poem, “Outlines,” concluding her speech: “*we seek beyond history/for a new and more possible meeting*” (123).<sup>75</sup>

### Conclusion

To summarize, Lorde mentions that one liability embedded in language is a tendency of categories for people to imply “a pretense to a homogeneity of experience” of diverse individuals within communities through the very process of categorizing people together. To Lorde, this is exemplified by the terms, “sisterhood” (116) and “woman” (117). Another liability is a tendency of language to separate the “inseparable” oppressions of diverse communities by defining them in misleading ways that suggest artificial distinctions among such distorting and destructive activities as “racism, sexism, and homophobia.”<sup>76</sup> Lorde mentions this liability in her speech by stressing “those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion” (115). To Lorde, the categories of language have a vital role in the homogenization of experiences on the one hand and the separation of oppressions on the other, distortions from using language to obfuscate differences within and among communities on the one hand and additional distortions from using language to obscure deep similarities within and among communities on the other. Both of these roles for language illustrate how using it entails complicity with oppression.

In addition to these liabilities embedded in the nature of the English language itself, Lorde mentions liabilities resulting from language use. “Difference” translates into devaluation and distance, a justification for exclusion and lack of communication, and a rendering of others as silent and invisible. “Difference” translates into complex hierarchical dynamics of political power, moral judgment, and social privilege. “Difference” provides a rationalization for assigning responsibility for working across the difference to members of the less powerful group, a practice which often takes a form of blaming the victims of oppression. Lorde mentions a tendency toward “the ignoring and misnaming of those differences” (122), as well as “misusing” them through such feelings as “guilt” and defensiveness (118). As further illustrations of misusing language, Lorde mentions instances of evoking difference for such practices as displacement, using subordinated others as surrogates and scapegoats. Yet another liability of language is its use in internalizing “patterns of oppression within ourselves” (122).

Lorde asks her audiences to join her in a struggle with language itself. Without suggesting that any list would adequately summarize Lorde’s range of rhetorical techniques for engaging the liabilities of language, I should like to identify some techniques, because attention to them may improve communication practices across differences. Lorde enacts reclaiming language, exemplified here through her redefinition of ‘difference’, by examining and transforming language in an endeavor to achieve personal and social change. To do this, Lorde makes explicit a mythical norm implicit in numerous categories such as “sisterhood,” “woman,” “manliness,” “rape,” and “unity” in an endeavor to underscore the diversity obscured in some terms and the misnaming distortions in others. She contends that there is a loss of differences within categories for people through a mythical norm which may result from relative power among members of these communities. To counter such a norm, Lorde begins her process of reclaiming language with “sisterhood,” the broadest basis for identification with her audiences at Amherst, and engages in differentiating within it. She enacts a process of self-definition through language understood as communal, normative resource, by situating herself

within the norms to dismantle them. "Black lesbian feminist" lies not at the margin, but at the center of "sisterhood" when she has reclaimed her differences. Throughout, Lorde employs confrontational consciousness-raising as a rhetorical technique to question and to redefine homogenizing uses of language. In addition, she promotes identifications among listeners by stressing similarities in the relational practices across the divisions among subordinated social groups, exemplified by silencing, marginalizing, and devaluing others. Her remarks heighten a conscious understanding of the necessity of transforming both language and the complicitous oppressor internalized within every person.

Lorde recognizes that attention to language by itself is not sufficient to transform self and society. She remarks in the introduction on economic factors and in the conclusion on sociological and psychological factors in reproducing practices of domination. Lorde's attention here to the culture within which we use language points to a limitation in adopting a language-based approach to social change. As Jane Gaines remarks, "My frustration with the feminist voice that insists on change *at the level of language* is that this position can only deal with the historical situation described above by turning it into discourse, and even as I write this, acutely aware as I am of the theoretical prohibitions against mixing representational issues with historical ones, I feel the pressure to transpose people's struggles into more discursively manageable terms."<sup>77</sup> Even so, there is value in reclaiming language in connection with culture, because language contributes to a homogenization of experiences on the one hand or a separation of oppressions on the other. Users of the English language are complicitous in enacting and transmitting such relational practices through language. Lorde's advice has abiding relevance in asking that users of the English language examine strategic misnaming through language in relationship not only to perspective, but also to economic, sociological, and psychological aspects of culture. She contends that the qualities of relationships across differences merit scrutiny. To those of us who share a commitment to ideals of equality and a democratic culture, Minow's criterion for assessing practices is one ethical guideline: "attributions of difference should be sustained only if they do not express or confirm the distribution of power in ways that harm the less powerful and benefit the more powerful."<sup>78</sup>

Despite the extraordinary insights, Lorde's speech is not without shortcomings. She engages in strategic representations of others by referring to members of dominant communities in broad categories such as "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure" (116). Such a use of language reproduces in mirror image what Lorde recognizes as problematic within "sisterhood" and "woman." Lorde's use of categories for others is a performative contradiction in that she depends on the liabilities of language in naming the "other" as "master," while calling for a reclaiming of language to include diverse individuals. Although Lorde uses various techniques to engage this liability of language—techniques such as strategic essentialism, standpoint epistemology, and even a movement from depicting binary oppositions to exploring multiple associations—these techniques in various ways smuggle back in the practice of using undifferentiated categories for human beings.<sup>79</sup> Lorde struggles with complicity, endeavoring to engage it in some measure by shifting levels of abstraction (individual, women, human), by shifting among and by juxtaposing terms (woman, black, lesbian, feminist), and, above all, by relentlessly reminding her listeners of complicity to raise awareness of it as embedded in language. Yet Lorde is unable to overcome the liabilities

of language, because they cannot be completely overcome by any user of the English language, a communal heritage rife with preexisting relations of power.

Lorde's appeals may be circumscribed by central premises featuring ideals of equality. Although many Americans from diverse backgrounds share a commitment to ideals of equality, there may be skepticism about the possibility of eliminating hierarchy altogether. Kenneth Burke, who has contended that the principle of hierarchy is inherent in language, allows for the prospect of transforming hierarchy: "Hence, to say that hierarchy is inevitable is not to argue categorically against a new order on the grounds that it would but replace under one label what had been removed under another. It is merely to say that, in any order, there will be the mysteries of hierarchy, since such a principle is grounded in the very nature of language, and reinforced by the resultant diversity of occupational classes."<sup>80</sup> Burke comments on hierarchy and equality: "to say that the hierarchic principle is indigenous to all well-rounded human thinking, is to state a very important fact about the rhetorical appeal of dialectical symmetry. And it reminds us, on hearing talk of equality, to ask ourselves, without so much as questioning the possibility that things might be otherwise: 'Just how does the hierarchic principle work in this particular scheme of equality?'"<sup>81</sup>

However skeptical people may be about eliminating hierarchy, it may be possible to halt symbolic practices that embody arbitrary and capricious discrimination exemplified by violent hate crimes and sexualized aggression. Although coalition politics are notoriously problematic in practice, Urvashi Vaid underscores in *Virtual Equality* that a powerful coalition made possible passage of the federal Hate Crimes Statistics Act in 1990. She adds, however, such a coalition "never reproduced itself at the state level to protect all the people covered by the federal bill." Vaid observes, "Anti-Semitic, racist, gender-based, religious, and homophobic violence have all risen in the past several years, but the groups working in each of these areas have not joined forces to work for anything beyond a handful of legislative enactments."<sup>82</sup> As for coalitions to end sexualized aggression, I know of one case in which a University determined that a professor was guilty of sexual harassment and retaliation. That every woman who protested the unwelcome sexual advances and harassment completed her degree and found employment was an accomplishment. These women students found support from a white, heterosexual woman, a gay man, and a Jewish man. One such successful coalition, even if the participants did not consciously conceive of it as such, may lend credibility to the importance of reclaiming key terms in a rhetoric of sexualized aggression exemplified by rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, intimate partner violence, incest, violence against transgenders, anti-gay and anti-lesbian violence, lynching with its ritual castration, and sexualized racism. Like violent hate crimes, sexualized aggression may be understood as complex communication practices that establish, maintain, and transform relationships of power among the participants. A coalition in opposition to such relational practices may depend upon radical listening.

## Endnotes

Lester C. Olson is an Associate Professor and Chancellor's Distinguished Teacher in the Department of Communication at the University of Pittsburgh. He presented earlier versions of this essay to the Speech Communication Association at San Diego during November 1996 and Women's Studies at Pittsburgh during October 1997. For substantive suggestions, he would like to thank Trudy Bayer, Robin R. Means Coleman, Jack Daniel, Mark McPhail, John Stewart, Philip Wander, and Jennifer K. Wood. This essay is dedicated to Rebecca Carroll.

<sup>1</sup>Audre Lorde, "Who Said It Was Simple," *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: Norton, 1997) 92.

<sup>2</sup>In rhetorical criticism, listening rarely receives attention as a radical activity. Susan Zaeske, "The 'Promiscuous Audience' Controversy and the Emergence of the Early Woman's Rights Movement," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 191-208.

<sup>3</sup>James Darsey, "Die Non: Gay Liberation and the Rhetoric of Pure Tolerance," *Queer Words, Queer Images: Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality*, ed. R. Jeffrey Ringer (New York: New York UP, 1994) 45.

<sup>4</sup>Ossie Davis, "The English Language Is My Enemy," in *Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America* (New York: Harper, 1972) 49-57.

<sup>5</sup>Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, CA: Crossings, 1984) 43-44. For a rhetorical interpretation, Lester C. Olson, "On the Margins of Rhetoric: Audre Lorde Transforming Silence into Language and Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83 (1997): 49-70.

<sup>6</sup>Lorde, "Transformation of Silence," *Sister Outsider* 43. This quote is not identical with the printed text, because the language is from an audiotape of the speech recorded by Judith McDaniel, a copy of which she provided to me.

<sup>7</sup>Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," *Sister Outsider* 66.

<sup>8</sup>Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House," *Sister Outsider* 110-112.

<sup>9</sup>Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, Sex: Women Redefining Difference," *Sister Outsider* 114-123.

<sup>10</sup>Martha Minow, "Justice Engendered," *Harvard Law Review* 101.1 (1987): 13.

<sup>11</sup>Inquires to Amherst College's librarians and public relations office yielded little about the specific context for Lorde's speech, except a brief notice, *Amherst Student*, April 3, 1980. They provided materials on the Copeland Colloquium. Daria D'Arienzo, Carol Trabulsi, and Elaine D. Trehub letter to the author, July 15, 1997.

<sup>12</sup>Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, Sex," *Sister Outsider* 114-123.

<sup>13</sup>Lorde, "Transformation of Silence," *Sister Outsider* 43.

<sup>14</sup>Additional speeches that examine coalition politics include Adrienne Rich, "If Not with Others, How?" *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986) 202-209; Angela Davis, "Let Us All Rise Together: Radical Perspectives on Empowerment for Afro-American Women," *Women, Culture, & Politics* (New York: Random House, 1990) 3-15; Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table, 1983) 356-368.

<sup>15</sup>Much of this literature cites Audre Lorde's speech in ways that are fundamental to the analysis: Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1988); Martha Minow, *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion, and American Law* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Numerous additional examples of essays and books are in this essay's citations. I do not want to overstate the case, however, by suggesting inaccurately that Lorde was alone in advancing insights about the value of attending to difference in the early 1980s. Linda Gordon, "On 'Difference,'" *Genders* 10 (1991): 91-111, provides an historical background on the discussions of difference in feminism during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

<sup>16</sup>By referring to "layering, matrixing, and compounding," I am using metaphors, none of which are altogether satisfying intellectually. Scholarship that discusses the implications of these metaphors includes: Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33.6 (December 1986): 514-532; Patricia Hill Collins, "Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment," *Black Feminist Thought* 221-238; Nancy A. Hewitt, "Compounding Differences," *Feminist Studies* 18.2 (Summer 1992): 313-326; Deborah K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology," *Signs* 14.1 (1988): 42-72; Maxine Baca Zinn and Bonnie Thornton Dill, "Theorizing Difference From Multiracial Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 22.2 (Summer 1996): 321-331.

<sup>17</sup>Lorde's speech, "Age, Race, Class, Sex," *Sister Outsider* has never been cited in any national journals on communication sponsored by the National Communication Association (formerly the Speech Communication Association), to judge from the Arts and Humanities Citation Index through 1996.

<sup>18</sup>Mark McPhail, "Complicity: The Theory of Negative Difference," *Howard Journal of Communications* 3.1-2 (Summer/Fall 1991): 3.

<sup>19</sup>Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (Winter 1991-2): 7. For an analysis of this concern, see Michael Awkward, "Negotiations of Power: White Critics, Black Texts, and the Self-Referential Impulse," *American Literary History* 2.4 (1990): 581-606.

<sup>20</sup>Alcoff 8.

<sup>21</sup>Alcoff 20.

<sup>22</sup>Alcoff 8.

<sup>23</sup>Alcoff 16-17.

<sup>24</sup>Lisa A. Flores, "Creating Discursive Space Through a Rhetoric of Difference: Chicana Feminists Craft a Homeland," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 82 (1996): 142-156.

<sup>25</sup>Flores 153, n. 4.

- <sup>26</sup>Gloria Hull, "Living on the Line: Audre Lorde and *Our Dead Behind Us*," *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989) 154.
- <sup>27</sup>Hull 154.
- <sup>28</sup>Hull 155.
- <sup>29</sup>Hull 159.
- <sup>30</sup>Hull 166.
- <sup>31</sup>Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: George Braziller, 1955). Lorde's speech can be understood as a strenuous exercise in demystification, confronting the various sources of mystery stressed by Burke: mystification resulting from symbolism, social relations, and hierarchy (115, 117, 120, and 279).
- <sup>32</sup>Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence," *Sister Outsider* 43.
- <sup>33</sup>Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence," *Sister Outsider* 41.
- <sup>34</sup>Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence," *Sister Outsider* 43. This quote is not identical with the printed text, because the language is from an audiotape recorded by Judith McDaniel.
- <sup>35</sup>Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not A Luxury," *Sister Outsider* 37.
- <sup>36</sup>Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Spinsters Ink, 1980) 12–13.
- <sup>37</sup>Lorde, *The Collected Poems* 234.
- <sup>38</sup>Lorde, *The Collected Poems* 220–221, 270–272.
- <sup>39</sup>Lorde, *The Collected Poems* 223, 323.
- <sup>40</sup>Pamela Annas, "A Poetry of Survival: Unnaming and Renaming in the Poetry of Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich," *Colby Library Quarterly* 18 (1982): 23–24; Brenda Carr, "'A Woman Speaks . . . I am Woman and Not White': Politics of Voice, Tactical Essentialism, and Cultural Intervention in Audre Lorde's Activist Poetics and Practice," *College Literature* 20 (1993): 133–153.
- <sup>41</sup>Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," *Sister Outsider* 55.
- <sup>42</sup>Lorde, "Master's Tools," *Sister Outsider* 112.
- <sup>43</sup>Audre Lorde, "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving," *Sister Outsider* 45.
- <sup>44</sup>Lorde, "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich," *Sister Outsider* 99.
- <sup>45</sup>Lorde, "Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface," *Sister Outsider* 64.
- <sup>46</sup>Joan M. Martin, "The Notion of Difference for Emerging Womanist Ethics: The Writings of Audre Lorde and bell hooks," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9 (1993): 44.
- <sup>47</sup>Regenia Gagnier, "Social Atoms: Working-Class Autobiography, Subjectivity, and Gender," *Victorian Studies* 30 (Spring 1987): 363, n. 52.
- <sup>48</sup>Christina Crosby, "Dealing with Differences," *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992) 137.
- <sup>49</sup>Stephanie Riger, "Epistemological Debates, Feminist Voices: Science, Social Values, and the Study of Women," *American Psychologist* 47 (1992): 734.
- <sup>50</sup>Celeste Michelle Condit and John Louis Lucaites, "Toward Consideration of the Rhetorical Culture of Equality," *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993) ix.
- <sup>51</sup>Minow, *Making All the Difference* 20.
- <sup>52</sup>Minow, "Justice Engendered" 79, n. 324, commenting on Lorde "The Master's Tools."
- <sup>53</sup>Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 91.
- <sup>54</sup>Carol Gilligan and others, "Feminist Discourse, Moral Values, and the Law—A Conversation," *Buffalo Law Review* 34 (1985): 62.
- <sup>55</sup>Riger 734.
- <sup>56</sup>Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs* 13 (1988): 413, n. 19.
- <sup>57</sup>Minow, *Making All the Difference* 50–51, 153.
- <sup>58</sup>Minow, "Justice Engendered" 14. Similarly, Minow, *Making All the Difference* 50.
- <sup>59</sup>Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 165, 194.
- <sup>60</sup>JoAnn Pavletich and Margot Gayle Backus, "With His Pistol in *Her* Hand: Rearticulating the Corrido Narrative in Helena María Viramontes' 'Neighbors'," *Cultural Critique* 27 (Spring 1994): 150, n. 14.
- <sup>61</sup>Spelman, *Inessential Woman* 1. Similarly on racism, Midge Wilson and Kathy Russell, *Divided Sisters: Bridging the Gap Between Black Women and White Women* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1996) 204.
- <sup>62</sup>Nancy Corson Carter, "Claiming the Bittersweet Matrix: Alice Walker, Sandra Cisneros, and Adrienne Rich," *Critique* 35.4 (Summer 1994): 195.
- <sup>63</sup>Minow, "Justice Engendered" 63, n. 246.

<sup>64</sup>Collins comments on this line, "Resisting the Matrix of Domination," *Black Feminist Thought* 229.

<sup>65</sup>Carter 203.

<sup>66</sup>Emily Erwin Culpepper, "New Tools for the Theology: Writings By Women of Color," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 4.2 (1988): 42.

<sup>67</sup>Culpepper 41.

<sup>68</sup>Murray Forman, "'Movin' Closer To An Independent Funk': Black Feminist Theory, Standpoint, and Women in Rap," *Women's Studies* 23 (1994): 50.

<sup>69</sup>Martin 49.

<sup>70</sup>For commentary on this line, Minow "Justice Engendered" 64; Minow, *Making All the Difference* 232; Martin 45.

<sup>71</sup>Jane Gaines, "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," *Screen* 29.4 (1988): 23. Wilson and Russell comment on this line, *Divided Sisters* 143.

<sup>72</sup>For such uses of "lesbian" in the communication discipline, Carole Blair, Julie R. Brown, and Leslie A. Baxter, "Disciplining the Feminine," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994): 399.

<sup>73</sup>Arlene Stein, "Sisters and Queers: The Decentering of Lesbian Feminism," *Socialist Review* 22.1 (1992): 45. Martin comments on this line (50).

<sup>74</sup>Collins, "Resisting the Matrix of Domination," *Black Feminist Thought* 229.

<sup>75</sup>Subsequently, Lorde revised and published the poem as "Outlines," *The Collected Poems* 366. Revisions delete both of these final lines.

<sup>76</sup>Lorde, "Master's Tools," *Sister Outsider* 110. Lorde reiterates the idea of inseparable oppressions in Karla Hammond, "An Interview with Audre Lorde," *American Poetry Review* 9.2 (1980): 21.

<sup>77</sup>Gaines 26. Similarly, Forman 39.

<sup>78</sup>Minow, *Making All The Difference* 112.

<sup>79</sup>Mark Lawrence McPhail, "The Politics of Complicity: Second Thoughts About the Social Construction of Racial Equality," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994): 343-357. Virginia R. Dominguez, "A Taste for 'the Other': Intellectual Complicity in Racializing Practices," several commentators' responses, and the author's reply to the commentators in *Current Anthropology* 35.4 (August-October 1994): 333-348. Maureen Mathison, Mark McPhail, and Mary Strine, "Forum," *Communication Theory* 7.2 (1997): 149-185.

<sup>80</sup>Burke 279.

<sup>81</sup>Burke 141.

<sup>82</sup>Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay & Lesbian Liberation* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1995) 208.

