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The Myth of Universal Womanhood: Audre Lorde's Language of Difference and the Limits of Second-Wave Feminism

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ABSTRACT: Second-wave feminism promised to represent all women, yet it largely centered the experiences of white, middle-class women. Feminist scholars have shown how the movement's standard story erased the organizing of women of color, but studies of Audre Lorde have tended to treat her poetry, essays, and activism separately. Drawing on NOW's 1966 Statement of Purpose and the Combahee River Collective Statement, this paper reads Lorde's essays and poems together to ask how she used language to challenge the movement's universalizing assumptions. It argues that the movement's universal language, from "sisterhood" to "choice," concealed differences of race and class: in Lorde's writing, the same words, "I can't afford it," can mean a choice for one woman and hunger for another. The paper shows that Lorde did not reject feminism but demanded a broader one, treating differences between women as a source of collective power, a vision that extended to her solidarity with anti-apartheid and Indigenous movements. This language of difference anticipated what Kimberlé Crenshaw would later name intersectionality. The paper concludes that exclusion is reproduced not only through discriminatory beliefs but through language itself: a movement's claim to universality can reproduce the very hierarchies it sets out to oppose.

Keywords - Audre Lorde, difference, intersectionality, poetry, second-wave feminism

I. INTRODUCTION

When the second-wave feminist movement emerged in the 1960s and the 1970s, it promised to represent all women. The founding statement of the National Organization for Women (NOW), adopted in 1966, called for "a new movement toward true equality for all women in America" [1]. NOW pushed for equal pay and workplace equality [1], while younger activists were willing to "break existing laws to provide safe and accessible abortions" [2]. Both groups framed these goals as universal concerns shared by women across the country. That same statement acknowledged that "Negro women" were "the victims of double discrimination of race and sex" [1]. Yet the movement that claimed to speak for all women largely centered the experiences of white, middle-class women [3], leaving those who faced overlapping forms of racial, economic, and sexual oppression unheard.

As Audre Lorde put it in 1980, "There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist" [4]. The word "sisterhood" promised that all women shared one bond. But it assumed that bond before anyone had talked about their differences. As a result, the experiences of white, middle-class women stood in for everyone's [3]. In 1977, the Black feminist Combahee River Collective wrote that "Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation" [5]. Benita Roth likewise argues that "previous pictures of second-wave feminism have erased the early and substantial activism of feminists of color" [6]. Audre Lorde, a Black lesbian feminist poet and activist, exposed the contradictions at the heart of mainstream feminism [7]. Through her body of poetry and essay collections, Lorde's works serve as a representation of how mainstream feminism failed to account for the compounding oppressions of race and class, ultimately revealing the racial limitations of the second-wave women's movement.

Scholars have studied Lorde's critique of the second wave in two main ways. Sociologists and women's studies scholars such as Becky Thompson and Benita Roth have shown that the standard story of the

movement left out the organizing of women of color [2], [6]. Literary scholars have usually focused on one part of Lorde's work at a time. Linda Garber reads her poetry as an "identity poetics" that anticipated queer theory [8]. Kelly Lynch Reames focuses on her autobiographical writing [9]. Cheryl Higashida and the writers in *Audre Lorde's Transnational Legacies* follow her activism outside the United States [10], [11]. This paper asks: How does Audre Lorde use language in her essays and poetry to challenge the universalizing assumptions of second-wave feminism and to redefine feminist solidarity through difference? Because these studies mostly treat Lorde's poetry, essays, and activism separately, this paper reads them together as historical evidence. It shows how the universal language of the second wave, from "sisterhood" to "choice," hid differences of race and class. It also shows how Lorde offered difference, not sameness, as the basis for a broader feminism.

II. THE MYTH OF A UNIVERSAL SISTERHOOD

One of Lorde's most persistent arguments was that mainstream feminism treated white women's experiences as the default, erasing the distinct experiences of women of color. Becky Thompson, borrowing Chela Sandoval's term, calls this "hegemonic feminism": a feminism that "is white led, marginalizes the activism and world views of women of color, focuses mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression" [2]. In "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," a speech delivered at a feminist academic conference in 1979, Lorde directly challenged her audience, asking what feminist theory could say about "the women who clean your houses and tend your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory" who were "for the most part, poor women and women of Color" [4]. Lorde was pointing out a facet of women's experiences that feminist conferences ignored: the women most burdened by economic oppression were the least represented in feminist spaces.

Lorde's critique extended beyond academic settings. In "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," Lorde observed that after fifteen years of a women's movement that "professes to address the life concerns and possible futures of all women," she still encountered the assumption on campuses that racism was "a Black women's problem, a problem of women of color, and only we can discuss it" [4]. Lorde argues that the feminist movement claimed to represent all women but never succeeded. Women of color still faced racism within the feminist movement. Lorde made the same point in a 1986 interview. She said that "the white feminist movement, has been notoriously slow to recognize that racism is a feminist concern, not one that is altruistic, but one that is part and parcel of feminist consciousness" [12]. The Combahee River Collective described the same frustration, writing that Black feminists were "made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism" [5].

One of Audre Lorde's goals in her writing was to be a voice for those who could not speak out themselves. Scholar Kelly Lynch Reames argues that Lorde's aim was "neither to ignore race nor to allow it to undermine unity" [9], and, drawing on Elizabeth Alexander, that Lorde consistently named differences among women as "empowering rather than divisive forces" [9]. By exposing the movement's failure to live up to its own promises, Lorde challenged second-wave feminism to cope with the exclusions that had been built into its foundation.

III. RACE, CLASS, AND THE LIMITS OF GENDER

Lorde argued that gender alone could not explain the full range of oppressions women face, because race and class shaped women's lives in fundamentally different ways. In "The Uses of Anger," she illustrated this point by contrasting how an academic woman and a woman on welfare might both say "I can't afford it," yet mean something entirely different: the academic woman is making a choice about spending, while the woman on welfare "is surviving on an amount of money that was barely subsistence in 1972, and she often does not have enough to eat" [4]. The repetition of the same phrase "I can't afford it" to capture radically different women's lives was a deliberate rhetorical choice to show how language which appears universal can obscure profound inequalities. By exposing the vastly different realities concealed behind the same phrase, Lorde demonstrates why a feminism based only on gender cannot adequately address inequality. If women experience economic hardship in fundamentally different ways, then political solutions designed around the experiences of middle-class white women will inevitably leave others behind. The example reveals how appeals to a shared female experience can erase the material conditions that shape women's lives. Lorde warned of this danger directly in "The Language of Difference," a 1985 address in Melbourne: "It is when language appears most similar that it becomes most dangerous, for differences may pass for a time, unremarked" [11]. In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Lorde names the hidden default behind such language a "mythical norm," which in America "is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure" [4].

This argument is also found in "The Master's Tools," where Lorde wrote that poor women and women of color "know there is a difference between the daily manifestations of marital slavery and prostitution because it is our daughters who line 42nd Street" [4]. Her imagery forces the reader to confront a form of suffering that mainstream feminist theory had largely set aside. Lorde's point was that poor women and women of color required a different theoretical framework that mainstream feminism had not developed. Rather than rejecting feminism altogether, Lorde demanded that it become more expansive. Her criticism was directed at the movement that treated the experiences of privileged women as representative, while failing to recognize how race and class altered the forms that oppression could take. Kimberlé Crenshaw later described the same problem. She wrote that feminist theory "evolves from a white racial context that is seldom acknowledged." She also argued that women of color's "exclusion is reinforced when white women speak for and as women" [13].

Lorde's poetry makes the same argument as her essays. In "The Same Death Over and Over, or Lullabies Are for Children," the speaker tells a white feminist poet that "the white cop" who killed ten-year-old Clifford Glover in 1973 "did not fire because he saw a girl" [8]. The line shows why a feminism based only on gender was not enough. The police officer did not shoot Clifford because of his sex. He shot him because of his race. Lorde makes the same point in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex": "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" [4]. In "Power," a poem about the same killing, Lorde repeats the officer's own words at his trial: "I didn't notice nor nothing else / only the color" [14]. The officer himself admits that the only thing he saw was the boy's color. Read together, these poems and essays show that Lorde's critique was not only a theory. It was a response to real violence that mainstream feminist theory did not have the words to address.

IV. DIFFERENCE AS COLLECTIVE POWER

On top of criticizing mainstream feminism, Lorde offered an alternative vision of feminism that treated differences between women as a source of collective power. In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," she argued that "the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" [4]. The metaphor of a bridge signifies the connection between two separate female experiences, without either having to compromise into one homogeneous group. Lorde was asking women to make connections between racial and socioeconomic classes to create a stronger feminist movement. The bridge metaphor is particularly significant because bridges allow for movement and understanding across a distance. Lorde rejects the idea that solidarity requires sameness. Coalition-building depends on acknowledging differences between people. Lorde extended this invitation even to the women she criticized: "We welcome all women who can meet us, face to face, beyond objectification and beyond guilt" [15].

"The Master's Tools" also expresses this idea of diversity as a strength where Lorde wrote that "difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic," and that "only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate" [4]. She also uses the phrase "grossest reformism" to describe mere tolerance [4], [8]. In Lorde's view, tolerance was an inadequate, even condescending response to inequality, because it left power imbalances intact. Real feminist change required recognizing difference as generative. Marginalized women's perspectives transformed how feminism understood oppression and liberation. Difference was the condition that made a more complete and effective movement. Lorde imagined equality as the ability of different groups to participate in shaping political goals together. This distinction separated her vision from many mainstream feminist approaches that sought unity by emphasizing common experiences. Attempts to ignore differences often benefited those whose experiences were already in the forefront. A movement committed to justice therefore had to confront differences and treat them as sources of knowledge.

V. SILENCE AND SURVIVAL IN "A LITANY FOR SURVIVAL"

Lorde's poetry also takes on the problem of silence. In "A Litany for Survival," she wrote for those "who live at the shoreline / standing upon the constant edges of decision / crucial and alone," and who "cannot indulge / the passing dreams of choice" [16]. The shoreline is an image that represents the lives of those who live on the margins of identities, never fully belonging to either world, always navigating between them. The image also suggests instability because a shoreline is constantly reshaped by waves and tides. In the same way, those who occupy marginalized positions must continually adapt to shifting forms of discrimination and exclusion. Lorde's metaphor captures the precariousness of living at the intersection of multiple identities, an experience that mainstream feminism overlooked. The phrase "passing dreams of choice" is equally poignant because it emphasizes how Lorde's audience is defined by what they are denied. Choice was often celebrated by

mainstream feminism as a marker of liberation [1], but choice is also inaccessible to those facing racism, poverty, or homophobia. Lorde exposes the limitations of politics that assumes all women possess the same opportunities to exercise agency.

In the second stanza, Lorde writes how fear was passed down "with our mother's milk," and that it served as a weapon, an "illusion of some safety" that "the heavy-footed hoped" would be used to silence marginalized people [16]. Calling safety an "illusion" reveals Lorde's belief that silence fails to protect marginalized people. Lorde states this directly in "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action": "My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you" [4]. The fear that keeps women quiet is itself a product of oppression because it convinced them that speaking out is more dangerous than remaining unheard. By connecting fear to something as intimate as a mother's milk, Lorde suggests that silence is a learned survival strategy passed down generations. Oppression becomes internalized, controlling people's behavior before they are able to recognize it as a political force. As Mrovlje and Kirkpatrick argue, in Lorde's account "silence becomes wrongly equated with survival" [17].

The poem's conclusion makes Lorde's claim clear: "So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive" [16]. Speaking out is not a guarantee of safety, but it is a refusal to accept powerlessness. The collective pronoun "we" broadens the poem beyond Lorde's individual experience and transforms it into a statement about marginalized communities more generally. "We" encompasses those who have been excluded because of race, gender, sexuality, or class. The words "never meant to survive" suggest that existing social and systemic structures were not designed with the flourishing of these groups in mind. However, the line reframes speaking out as an act of resistance. Andrea Dionne Warmack reads the line in a similar way. Warmack sees in it "no past tense, no survivor, only the shoreliner who is surviving (who is doing, being, reframing, and transforming by speaking)" [18]. If survival was never guaranteed in the first place, then silence offers no meaningful protection. Lorde rejects the logic that marginalized people should remain quiet to preserve their safety. Resistance becomes necessary because the safety of these groups has always been uncertain.

Reames reinforces Lorde's argument in her analysis of *The Cancer Journals*, noting that Lorde identified "the silencing forces of the dominant culture that disempower women" while encouraging women to analyze their own bodily experiences as political acts [9]. For Lorde, the body itself was another site of political struggle for women of color. She also notes that Lorde's brush with cancer "forced her to reconceptualize the fear that had kept her silent," leading her to conclude that "although speaking could at times seem dangerous, silence offers no protection" [9]. Lorde shows how writing and speaking are political acts aimed at forcing conversations about racism and exclusion that mainstream feminism avoided.

VI. BEYOND U.S. BORDERS

Lorde's critique of mainstream feminism also extended beyond U.S. politics. She argued that women's liberation could not be separated from broader struggles against racism, colonialism, and economic oppression around the world. Cheryl Higashida documented how in the 1980s Lorde forged feminist alliances through her involvement with Sisterhood in Support of Sisters in South Africa, an organization co-founded by her partner Gloria Joseph, which recognized the South African women's self-help movement as "a form of political resistance to apartheid" [10]. The connections between Black liberation in America and anti-apartheid struggles in Africa were evidence that feminism focused solely on gender equality within the U.S. could not account for the global dimensions of racial oppression that shaped Black women's lives. Lorde herself described these struggles as one: "Battling racism and battling heterosexism and battling apartheid share the same agency inside me as battling cancer" [19]. This perspective challenged the tendency of many second-wave feminists to frame women's issues through the lens of American domestic politics. Thompson names this national focus as one of the defining traits of hegemonic feminism, which "focuses mainly on the United States" [2]. Lorde instead argued that systems of oppression operated across national borders and were interconnected. A feminism that ignored colonialism, apartheid, and economic exploitation abroad would not understand the conditions affecting women of color.

Lorde's global analysis was also influenced by her engagement with Indigenous activism in New Zealand and Australia, where Māori and Aboriginal women were fighting for land rights and cultural autonomy [10], [11]. Speaking in Melbourne in 1985, Lorde told her audience that Aboriginal women "are not exotic oddities. . . . They are joint inheritors of this land" [11]. Higashida explains how Lorde's activism in other countries pushed her to become aware of "resistant nationalisms that challenge hegemonic nation-states" [10]. Contrasting feminism in the context of other global anti-colonial and Indigenous movements, Lorde demonstrated that activist movements which ignored race and history were perpetuating the systems they claimed to oppose.

VII. CONCLUSION

Audre Lorde spent her career asking feminism to see its own exclusions. Her challenge to universal womanhood operates at the level of both political theory and language. Her work reveals that exclusion is reproduced not only through discriminatory beliefs but through the language by which movements define their subjects and goals. A feminism that speaks of "women" without examining which women its language assumes will continue to present partial experience as universal truth.

Across her essays and poetry, Lorde refuses the assumption that difference weakens solidarity. Difference becomes destructive when institutions deny it, rank it, or exploit it [4]. When recognized directly, however, it can become a source of knowledge and coalition. This does not produce an easy unity. Lorde's solidarity is demanding because it requires people to acknowledge unequal relationships within the very communities that seek liberation, whether in the United States or across national borders. Her work laid the intellectual groundwork for what scholars would later call intersectionality, the understanding that race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identities compound one another and cannot be addressed in isolation. The Combahee River Collective had already argued in 1977 that "the major systems of oppression are interlocking" [5]. Although the term would not be coined until later, when Kimberlé Crenshaw argued in 1989 that "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" [13], Lorde's essays and poetry repeatedly demonstrated the dangers of treating any single category of identity as sufficient for political analysis. As she wrote in 1982, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" [4]. Barbara Christian later wrote that Lorde "enlarged the race-feminist theory of that period." Because of Lorde, she argued, "the concept of difference as a creative force is today as 'natural' a part of our analyses of the world as the notion that oppressions exist" [8].

This paper has focused on a small number of Lorde's essays and poems, mostly from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. It also relies mainly on sources written in English. Future research could look at more of Lorde's poetry, or compare her critique with that of other women of color in the second wave, such as the Chicana feminists that Roth describes [6]. Even in the early twenty-first century, any political movement that treats one group's experience as universal risks reproducing systemic hierarchies. As Lorde told her audience in Melbourne, "as we learn the language of difference, we will someday be able to speak of a true feminism" [11]. Lorde's enduring contribution was to insist that the work of liberation must begin by including those it has historically left out.

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