On the Margins of Rhetoric: 
Audre Lorde Transforming Silence into Language and Action 

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Audre Lorde’s speech, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” sheds light on the margins of rhetoric in the sense of the public speech because she examines factors that may cause some people to remain silent while enabling others to speak and act. “Margins” refers both to the parameters employed for defining a practice and the relative place or value of varied activities exemplifying the practice. Lorde interweaves her commentary on the silence surrounding breast cancer with insights about silence drawn from her experiences as a member of several subordinated communities, especially as they relate to the misuse of power to silence those who are different. Her speech comments on silencing and power, sexism, verbal abuse, violence and sexualized aggression, shame, the taboo, and hostile social environments. Paradoxically, Lorde’s speech is as much about the possibilities of rhetoric as its limits. Key words: Audre Lorde, cancer, feminist rhetoric, human rights rhetoric, silence

“These are not natural silences, that necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestation, in the natural cycle of creation. The silences I speak of here are unnatural; the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot. In the old, the obvious parallels: when the seed strikes stone; the soil will not sustain; the spring is false; the time is drought or blight or infestation; the frost comes premature.”

Tillie Olsen, Silences

What underlying cultural conditions encourage or discourage speaking in public forums? What sociological factors, for example, account for speech and silence: Who speaks to and for the community? With what kinds of power and authority? With access to which public forums? Such questions led me to contemplate Audre Lorde’s speech, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” in light of what it reveals about the limits, boundaries, or margins of rhetoric in the sense of the public speech, or oration. By margins, I mean both the parameters employed for defining a practice and the relative place or value of varied activities exemplifying the practice, some of which are considered central, while others are peripheral. As the title of Lorde’s speech suggests, her address in 1977 to the Modern Language Association (MLA) provides a glimpse into some margins of rhetoric, because she examines factors that may cause some people to remain silent, while enabling others to speak and act. Her speech reveals some underlying and necessary conditions for the possibility of rhetoric, conditions that may go unnoticed to the extent that we allow ourselves to be habituated to them as natural or inevitable.

Best known as a poet of international stature, the author of such collections as Coal, The Black Unicorn, and Our Dead Behind Us, Audre Lorde was also an essayist and public speaker, whose oratory focused upon the role of language in communicating differences in ways that construct relations of power among social groups. Her public speeches, some of which were collected in Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde, have an aphoristic, expansive quality resulting from her extensive use of metaphors, maxims, proverbs, and stories to affirm her perspective on the relationship among language, self, and society. Her speeches, like her essays and her poems, often examine human
differences communicated within a sociocultural system of power, ranging as it does across symbolic oppositions between white and black, male and female, capitalist and socialist, heterosexual and homosexual, master and slave—oppositions which Lorde criticizes as simplistic and as useful to dominant groups for exploiting subordinated communities. Her public speaking is a vital resource for communication scholars engaged in examining the role of language and action in transforming self and society.

Audre Lorde’s public speeches merit the attention of communication scholars, not only because they are models of rhetorical excellence, but also because her oratory provides singular access to a point of view about some underlying sociological and political factors entailed in the act of assuming a role as a public speaker. Lorde was keenly aware of these sociological and political factors because, whenever she spoke in public, she explicitly defined her own position as multiply marginal in relationship to dominant groups. “As a forty-nine-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple,” Lorde remarked in a speech at Amherst College during April 1980, “I usually find myself a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong.” In addition to using her public speeches, essays, and poems actively to resist externally imposed and reductive definitions of her differences from dominant groups, Lorde also explicitly resisted the pressure “to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self,” because in her view “this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live.” She affirmed, “My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of an externally imposed definition.” In a speech at Harvard University during 1982, Lorde commented similarly that “As a Black lesbian mother in an interracial marriage, there was usually some part of me guaranteed to offend everybody’s comfortable prejudices of who I should be. That is how I learned that if I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.”

Several recent essays and anthologies have articulated compelling reasons for including diverse voices in critical and theoretical accounts of rhetoric, as did Karyln Kohrs Campbell in her essay, “Hearing Women’s Voices.” But even the best contributions to improving the current situation have omitted Lorde’s speeches or featured her relatively less controversial or challenging public address. Ironically, in the communication discipline Lorde’s speech has been subject to the very silence and invisibility that were the central focus of Lorde’s remarks. Regardless of whether this neglect is the result of deliberately devaluing the significance of her rhetoric or the inadvertent product of habitual attention to the speech of politically powerful and economically privileged figures, such an exclusion can be understood as an act of silencing that in this case conceals some political and social conditions that may make possible a definition of a discipline. The very role of legitimate speaker may rest upon varieties of symbolic power and authority that are derived from underlying political and sociological factors such as those mentioned in Lorde’s public speeches.

In Lorde’s speech to the MLA in 1977, she articulates a deep understanding of some specific ways that underlying sociological and political factors connected to her many differences militate against her public speaking, factors she actively and explicitly engages through her speech. At the same time, Lorde’s speech exemplifies her extraordi-
nary ability to draw upon the diverse aspects of herself as resources in defining her own understanding of silence. The central insights in her speech on transforming silence into language and action were precipitated by her own recent experiences with doctors diagnosing a tumor in her breast, because the doctors had informed her of a 60 to 80 percent likelihood it was malignant. In fact, Lorde’s immediate response to experiencing the first biopsy was not to attend the conference. In an interview with Lorde, Adrienne Rich recalled her remarks, “you said there was no way you were going to the MLA—remember? That you couldn’t do it, you didn’t need to do it, that doing it could not mean anything important to you.” At Rich’s urging, “Why don’t you tell them about what you’ve just been through,” Lorde transformed her initial reaction by developing and delivering an eloquent speech at the MLA about her experiences with cancer. Yet her public meditation on the silence surrounding breast cancer is interwoven with insights drawn from her experiences as a member of several subordinated communities, especially as they relate to the misuse of power to silence those who are different.

There are at least three published versions of Lorde’s speech, which was printed initially in Sinister Wisdom in 1978, later in The Cancer Journals in 1980 and in Sister Outsider in 1984. Each of these texts conveyed Lorde’s ideas to additional audiences beyond the MLA. Each is a reiteration reaching additional audiences in a broadening range of contexts. The later placement of the speech’s text in The Cancer Journals significantly alters the context for reading it, however, because in 1977 when Lorde spoke to the MLA the biopsy had been for a benign tumor. The reprinting of the speech in The Cancer Journals occurred in 1980 after a diagnosis of a malignant tumor and a mastectomy, relocating the text as a moment in dealing with a disease that ultimately claimed Lorde’s life.

“The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” is a brilliantly designed speech that enacts what it requests of its audiences. Lorde’s speech is a powerful and eloquent example of human liberation rhetoric. In this essay, I will comment briefly on the varied perspectives on silence and speech as treated in communication scholarship. Next, I will discuss literature in other disciplines commenting on silence insofar as it sheds light on recurring topics in Lorde’s speech about silence: silencing and power, sexism, verbal abuse, violence and sexualized aggression, shame, the taboo, and hostile social environments. Then, because silence is a theme in Lorde’s oeuvre, I will examine the interrelated metaphors of silence and speech that are so central to understanding Lorde’s rhetoric, not only to shed light on this single speech, but also to illuminate a salient aspect of the rest of her speeches, essays, and poems. One result of these inquiries will be a glimpse into the margins of rhetoric in the sense of the public speech. To Lorde, silence as a response to either internalized shame or wrongful deeds is as devastating to an individual’s self as cancer is to the body. Because of cancer’s associations with the fear of a protracted and painful death resulting from the body’s betrayal of itself, a wasting away in a stereotypical narrative with a familiar and ineluctable conclusion, cancer becomes a powerful metaphor for any silent destroyer.

Perspectives on Silence and Speech

Silence recurs as an important topic in scholarship on communication. Recognizing as I do that, as Robert L. Scott puts it, “I cannot truly essay all the motivations for silence,” I should like here to examine scholarly literature on silence that illuminates recurring
topics in Lorde’s rhetoric, beginning with general treatments of silencing and power. Tillie Olsen’s classic book, *Silences*, identified several factors that tend in general to silence literary figures: “work aborted, deferred, denied. . . . Censorship silences. Deletions, omissions, abandonment of the medium. . . . paralyzing of capacity. . . . Publisher’s censorship, refusing subject matter or treatment as ‘not suitable’ or ‘no market for’. Self censorship. Religious, political censorship. . . . ‘the knife of the perfectionist attitude in art and life.’”16 More recently, Charles A. Braithwaite has contributed to our understanding of the relationship between power and silencing in his careful review of most of the literature on silence and speech produced specifically in the communication discipline. Summarizing such literature, he stresses two “warrants” about the nature of silence in relationship to power, mentioning in the first warrant derived from Keith Basso’s scholarship that “Silence as a communicative action is associated with social situations in which the relationship of the focal participants is uncertain, unpredictable, or ambiguous.”17 The second warrant that Braithwaite mentions has equally obvious relevance to this essay in light of Lorde’s explicit recognition of power differences among the races, sexes, sexualities, and economic classes: “Silence as a communicative action is associated with social situations in which there is a known and unequal distribution of power among focal participants.”18

Silence is often represented in scholarship as a product of gender socialization, a factor that merits mention in that Lorde defined herself as speaking in her role as a woman, as when she wrote in an essay that “Black feminists speak as women because we are women and do not need others to speak for us.”19 By drawing upon the extensive literature in women’s studies and by focusing specifically on the role of silence and the “voice of authority” of women in American colleges and Universities, the environment within which Lorde worked most extensively, Nadya Aisenberg and Mona Harrington devote a chapter of their book, *Women of Academe: Outsiders in the Sacred Grove*, to “the difficulties women have in developing a voice of authority, despite long training and experience.”20 The authors affirm that “A strong, clear voice is necessary to the practice of the profession, both literally in the classroom and figuratively in written research.”21 They inquire, “Why do women find persistent difficulty with forms of public assertion? Why do they refer to silence, apology, diffidence, hesitancy, as characteristic of their discourse?”22 In response, the authors answer, “One powerful reason is that a voice of authority is exactly the voice the old norms proscribe.”23 They add to this analysis by stressing that women “encounter resistance to authority in women from the moment they begin to claim it”24 and by focusing upon double binds: “Thus a conflict is set up early—silence to further social ends, speech to develop intellectual goals.”25 They conclude in general that “women’s voice of authority is, to some degree, contingent on a broad redefinition of social responsibility, a redefinition of male and female roles in all spheres of life.”26

Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule have argued in *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* that speech and silence are gendered in general in that “women commonly talked about voice and silence: ‘speaking up,’ ‘speaking out,’ ‘being silenced,’ ‘not being heard,’ ‘really listening,’ ‘really talking,’ ‘words as weapons,’ ‘feeling deaf and dumb,’ ‘having no words,’ ‘saying what you mean,’ ‘listening to be heard,’ and so on in an endless variety of connotations all having to do with sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from or connection to others.”27 They add, “One growth metaphor
in particular reverberated throughout the women’s stories of their intellectual development. Again and again women spoke of ‘gaining a voice.’ 28 The authors also contrast metaphors for knowledge employed typically by women and men, emphasizing that “The tendency for women to ground their epistemological premises in metaphors suggesting speaking and listening is at odds with the visual metaphors (such as equating knowledge with illumination, knowing with seeing, and truth with light) that scientists and philosophers most often use to express their sense of mind.” 29 Accordingly, speech and silence are rife with gendered implications for epistemology and the development of self in relationship to community.

While silence has a tendency to be gendered in significant respects as a consequence of commonplace patterns of socialization, it also may result from underlying factors such as disproportionate experiences of verbal abuse, violence, and poverty that cut across diverse subordinated communities within a culture, as Lorde often mentions in her essays and speeches. Examples of such communities include children and minority groups organized around such variables as race, sexuality, religion, and economic class. Because the experiences of individuals within such communities are heterogenous, and because individuals also define for themselves in varying ways their responses to similar experiences, I want to emphasize that these factors point to tendencies in patterns of socialization, not causally determining forces. Lorde herself often stressed this role of self definition explicitly, as I will illustrate later in this essay with reference to her use of the terms “casualty” and “warrior.” One difficulty in reviewing scholarly literature on silence, however, is a tendency in much of the literature to treat the experiences of communities as uniform or homogenous in respect to one or another characteristic, even when the authors explicitly affirm awareness of diversity of experiences within communities and the varied definitions of those experiences by oneself and others.

Silence as a product of child abuse, for instance, can be one significant factor in the development of a fundamental way of knowing. Child abuse may contribute to shaping the epistemology of some individuals as a result of a deep distrust of language, the very tool for constructing what one knows. The authors of Women’s Ways of Knowing comment, “These silent women were among the youngest and the most socially, economically, and educationally deprived of all those we interviewed.” 30 They explain the epistemological problem of the silent women: “Words were perceived as weapons. Words were used to separate and diminish people, not to connect and empower them. The silent women worried that they would be punished just for using words—any words.” 31 In addition to this use of words to wound children, the English language contains an all too familiar list of terms employed to distance, degrade, and thereby silence the members of subordinated communities. Examples include bitch, cunt, dyke, faggot, queer, sissy, nigger, kike, spic, dago, heathen, and Christ-killer, to name only a few.

Lorde often raised to conscious awareness such abusive uses of language to silence members of subordinated communities. In an essay entitled “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger,” Lorde mentions several childhood experiences in public contexts in which she was subjected to overt expressions of contempt rooted in racism, sexism, and economic class: “as a child I decided there must be something terribly wrong with me that inspired such contempt.” 32 She remarked, “As children we absorbed that hatred, passed it through ourselves, and for the most part, we still live our lives outside of the recognition of what that hatred really is and how it functions.” 33 In addition, she often commented in her speeches and essays on the use of the term, “lesbian,” to intimidate
women into silence, while driving a wedge of distrust and suspicion between women. She remarked in one speech that "A fear of lesbians, or of being accused of being a lesbian, has led many Black women into testifying against themselves." She countered such uses of language by using the term, "lesbian," to define herself for herself and by laying claim to her heritage as a black woman, as when she remarked that such relationships are among "twelve different kinds of marriage" in parts of Africa. In other speeches and essays she comments upon "such filth" used by a black academic to refer to homosexuals, and "nigger bitch" used to refer to a black woman. In "Man Child," an essay about her son, Jonathan’s, childhood experiences, she commented, "for years, in the namecalling at school, boys shouted at Jonathan not—‘your mother’s a lesbian’—but rather—‘your mother’s a nigger.’" In addition to verbal abuse, the experiences of violence and shame also contribute to silencing members of subordinated communities, and these experiences are often interrelated to the extent that survivors of violence are often blamed for having had the experience, especially in cases of sexualized aggression. Focusing primarily upon the gay and lesbian movement in a way that interweaves considerations of race, sex, and economic class in the United States, Urvashi Vaid writes in Virtual Equality that "Hate crimes against gay people were regarded in much the same way as violence against women had been before the feminist movement shifted the paradigm of patriarchy. Gay people were told we should not go out at night, not be so blatant, that we invited this violence upon ourselves, that we were murdered because we picked up strangers in bars." Vaid stresses that under the Reagan administration "the Justice Department of Edwin Meese issued a report in 1987 that termed lesbians and gay men ‘probably the most frequent victims of hate violence in this country.’" Under such conditions, it is not surprising, as Vaid writes elsewhere in her book, that "Invisibility and silence about homosexuality are two of our oldest enemies." Violence and sexualized aggression recur often as topics in Lorde’s rhetoric in connection with race, sex, religion, class, and sexuality. In an essay, Lorde comments on a pattern in American culture in which it is common "to blame the victim for victimization: Black people are said to invite lynching by not knowing our place; Black women are said to invite rape and murder and abuse by not being submissive enough, or by being too seductive." In one of her speeches, Lorde observes that "Rape is on the increase, reported and unreported, and rape is not aggressive sexuality, it is sexualized aggression." She often commented upon rape, violence, and the threat of violence as pervasive experiences: "Black women and our children know the fabric of our lives is stitched with violence and with hatred, that there is no rest . . . violence weaves through the daily tissue of our living." While Lorde considered acts of intimidation and violence as tools used by dominating groups to silence members of subordinated communities, she laid special stress on such uses of threats and violence by members of some subordinated communities against other minorities. In general, Lorde observed a deep interconnection among diverse subordinated communities’ experiences of symbolic and physical aggression, as when she remarked in a speech at Harvard University, "Each one of us here is a link in the connection between antipoor legislation, gay shootings, the burning of synagogues, street harassment, attacks against women, and resurgent violence against Black people." Depicting shame, anxiety, and fear as patterns of human response to such experiences as verbal abuse, violence, sexualized aggression, and the misrepresentation of one’s
difference as deficiency, Gershen Kaufman and Lev Raphael draw extensively upon psychological literature on silence and shame to argue that “The hallmark of shame is silence.”48 They add that the interrelationship of silence and shame has a cyclical quality in that “Silence breeds shame every bit as much as shame breeds further silence. The two are locked in an endless cycle of mutual reactivation.”49 The authors stress that “When silence is systematically imposed on a broad societal plane, it becomes a more powerful form of oppression than is experienced in the family.”50 Generalizing across social groups, they affirm that “The phenomenon of gay bashing that has become even further magnified in response to the AIDS crisis is not unlike lynchings for African Americans and pogroms for Jews who lived in Eastern Europe. These are all magnified expressions of contempt for those who are outcasts.”51 Again generalizing across several subordinate communities, they claim that “You cannot simultaneously belong to a minority group and the wider culture without some measure of conflict. It is that conflict which must be confronted directly if it is to be eventually transformed.”52 As Joan Nestle affirms and reiterates in one of her poems, “Shame is the first betrayer.”53 This role of shame in self-betrayal may shed light on some underlying reasons that Lorde’s rhetoric explicitly comments on the necessity of overcoming internalized shame, anxiety, and fear as well as the underlying factors that contribute to these emotions. Lorde’s speech to the MLA exemplifies perhaps her most sustained commentary on undertaking such transformation.

While the underlying factors of verbal abuse, physical violence, and internalized shame often contribute to silencing members of subordinate communities, there are also the variations of silence surrounding other taboo topics. Some of these topics, like sexual harassment, often entail a complex intermingling of these factors, while other taboo topics, such as cancer, ordinarily do not. Some of these varieties of silence are overt as when expressions that are superficially about sexual interest are, in fact, vehicles for communicating power, domination, and control that silences victims, sometimes through the explicit threat of a face smashed beyond recognition, or bruised breasts. Such silences have been explored in anonymous narratives about the experience of sexual harassment in the communication discipline. Julia T. Wood affirms in her introduction to the narratives, “these stories do more than break the long and oppressive silence surrounding sexual harassment; they also argue for change.”54 There are subtle variations of silence surrounding various forms of sexualized aggression that may enable it to continue. Sometimes the silence of an entire community enables inappropriate behavior, because the silence is a necessary condition for the behavior, regardless of whether the silence is rooted in self protection, a sense of professional duty, the impositions of gags, or less tolerable factors such as personal convenience, political opportunism, cowardice, fear of legal fees, or a misguided belief that an institution’s public relations and fund raising are harmed by acknowledging a problem in the spirit of going to the root of it. Such silence and silencing by those around a perpetrator enables the harassment to continue in the work place.55 It is sometimes appropriate to recognize and name the willed silence of an entire community as an enabling behavior in the sense that the silence provides a necessary condition for the behavior.

It is possible that Lorde directly addresses the transformation of silence into language and action precisely because she recognizes the role of silence as an enabling behavior, though she never articulates this insight in her speech. Instead, she focuses upon silence as the equivalent of acquiescence, surrender, and even death. Lorde certainly recognized
the role of a hostile social environment in making violence and abuse increasingly likely. For example, Lorde remarks in “Scratching the Surface” on one instance when “Phone calls threatening violence were made to those Black women who dared to explore the possibilities of a feminist connection with non-Black women.” Lorde adds, “When threats did not prevent the attempted coalition of feminists, the resulting campus-wide hysteria left some Black women beaten and raped.” Lorde then identifies a role for a hostile social environment in supporting such deeds: “Whether the threats by Black men actually led to these assaults, or merely encouraged the climate of hostility within which they could occur, the results upon the women attacked were the same.”

Silence has many further dimensions, not all of them negative, including, for instance, silence as a means of active, political resistance, as Lisa Delpit has argued. There is a variety of silence in the tranquility of the Quaker’s inward light, as discussed by Richard Bauman: “Silence, for the Quakers, was not an end in itself, but a means to the attainment of the defining spiritual experience of early Quakerism, the direct personal experience of the spirit of God within oneself.” Bauman explains, “God spoke his Word anew within the soul of every person, doing away with virtually all mediating agencies in the ultimate exaltation of inner experience. . . . As this most important act of speaking took place inwardly and was spiritual, it required that one refrain from speaking that was outward and carnal.” There is the value of silent meditations both spiritual and secular. Silence and speech should not be reduced to a simplistic opposition in which silence is negative and speech is positive, if only because there are liberating deeds done in eloquent silence and talk can conceal a significant silence.

For Audre Lorde, however, silence was almost always negative, as she stressed at length in an interview with Karla Hammond:

Silence for me is a very negative quality because it’s the nameless. As Adrienne (Rich) has said, what remains nameless eventually becomes unspeakable, what remains unspoken becomes unspeakable. That silence is a very negative quality when it’s preserved by violence. Some people can’t tolerate any silence at all and that’s equally bad. But that enforced silence, the inability to speak, the refusal to speak is a very violent silence, where you know there is a great deal happening but it’s not spoken.

Lorde’s remarks stress her perception of silence as detrimental to the extent that it results from violence, abuse, and shame. Her speech to the MLA in 1977 focuses entirely on harmful aspects of silence as an insidious destroyer.

Lorde’s speech, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” adds to our understanding of silence specifically as a response to internalized shame or wrongful deeds by underscoring that such silence is as devastating to a healthy sense of self as cancer is to the body. Delivered as a part of a panel at the MLA during 1977, the speech endeavored to deal in public with what had been a very private issue. As Nancy K. Bereano noted in her editorial introduction to Sister Outsider: “Here Lorde grapples with a possible diagnosis of cancer. . . . She deals in public, at an academic gathering, in front of 700 women.” The large size of the audience probably accounts for the declamatory style of the delivery, while its demographics shed light on Lorde’s rhetorical strategies. According to an interview between Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich recorded during August 1979 and printed in part in Signs during 1981, the silence surrounding breast cancer was central to Lorde in this speech, though she amplified her treatment of it by interweaving numerous sources of silence. The speech illustrates Lorde’s extraordinary
ability to draw upon the diverse and multiple aspects of her self to explore and enact the transformation of silence into language and action.

A Metaphoric Analysis of Silence and Speech

Lorde’s speech scrutinizes two antithetical topics, silence and speech, which she amplifies through interrelated metaphors to develop her central insight that silence as a response to internalized shame or wrongful deeds is as devastating to the self as cancer is to the body. The first of these metaphors affirms her personal position that speech is ineluctably an act of self-revelation with the attendant possibilities of self-examination and transformation: “I have come to believe over and over that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect.”64 The speech begins with a highly personal and introspective focus upon the self that is so characteristic of human liberation discourse, while calling conscious awareness to some risks that attend breaking silence. Yet Lorde’s opening enacts a course of action that she models for the audiences, whom she later encourages explicitly to collaborate with her in the uses of language to change self and society.

Her next several sentences quickly introduce three taboo topics, each surrounded by silence in contemporary U.S. culture—race, sexuality, and a life-threatening illness, breast cancer:

I am standing here as a Black lesbian poet, and the meaning of all that waits upon the fact that I am alive at all. . . . Less than two months ago I was told by two doctors, one female and one male, that I would have to have breast surgery, and that there was a 60 to 80 percent chance that the tumor was malignant. Between that telling and the actual surgery, there was a three-week period of the agony of an involuntary reorganization of my entire life. The surgery was completed, and the growth was benign.

Because breast cancer affects all women, without regard for race, class, or ethnicity, Lorde’s remarks about her experience of fear articulate a basis for identification across such differences among women, though such cancer does affect biologically childless women disproportionately. Delese Wear comments, “Perhaps no other disease summons the kind of dread in women than that evoked by even the mention of breast cancer.” Wear adds, “She is terrified because of the sharp double edge of facing a potentially fatal disease, and of losing a precious part of her body that is deeply tangled in her sexuality/femininity/self.”65

Lorde’s literal confrontation with her own personal mortality provides the foreground in the speech for a series of metaphors about the nature of silence and speech in terms of death and life: “I was forced to look upon myself and my living with a harsh and urgent clarity that has left me even now still shaken but much stronger. . . . Some of what I experienced during that time has helped elucidate for me much of what I feel concerning the transformation of silence into language and action.” She adds, ‘[W]hat I most regretted were my silences.’ Lorde amplifies the imagery that silence is death, as when she affirms, “Death . . . is the final silence. And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else to say the words for me.” Such remarks affirm a need to speak for oneself as an act of personal integrity, courage, and self respect, not to defer responsibility to another. Beyond the deep issues associated with endeavoring to overcome one’s own
internalized shame through the act of speaking, there is also the matter of regretting one’s acts of silent omission in facing one’s own death: “priorities and omissions became very strongly etched in a merciless light.”

Lorde draws upon personal experience to dispel as an illusion the idea that silence provides protection: “I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken. My silences had not protected me.” This personal insight becomes the basis for a broader claim in a pattern that recurs throughout the speech, moving from personal experience and insight to communal, political ones. She adds, “Your silence will not protect you.” To the contrary, the refusal of language amounts to self betrayal and self destruction, if only because language is essential to the process of self definition. Silence is in these respects like an undetected cancer embodying a betrayal of oneself. Her use of direct questions coaxes audience participation in an open-ended, expansive way: “What are the words you do not yet have? What is it that you need to say? What are the tyrannies that you swallow day after day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them eventually, still in silence?” The tyrannies that are swallowed become the seed of the “cancer” that grows in silence undetected within the self.

To Lorde, the metaphor that silence provides protection is not only illusory; it also represents a way that one internalizes an enemy with outposts in one’s own head: “In the cause of silence, each one of us draws the face of her own fear—of contempt, of censure, of some judgment, of recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear that very visibility without which we also cannot truly live.” In Lorde’s analysis, silence often results from a complex intermingling of feelings of shame, guilt, and internal anger at oneself, which she conveys through humorous remarks attributed to her daughter: “But my daughter, when I told her of our topic and my difficulty with it, said, ‘Why don’t you tell them about how you’re never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there’s always that one little piece inside of you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don’t speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth.’” In telling this story, Lorde was probably aware that active cancer was described as “hot” in medical circles, yet another resonance between the consequences of silence and cancer for self and body. Speech and other uses of language, by implication, represent freedom, visibility, and life.

These metaphors about speech and silence unfold temporally as antithetical motifs which Lorde brings together through another, more fundamental motif—more fundamental, that is, because to Lorde fear is an underlying cause of both silence and speech. She asks herself in the presence of her audiences: “Of what had I ever been afraid? To question or to speak what I believed could have meant pain, or death.” Yet Lorde also articulates an underlying role for fear in choosing to speak, “And of course I am afraid—you can hear it in my voice or not—because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation always, and that very frequently seems fraught with danger.” She adds, “The fear is a weapon used to encourage our silence.” While silence equals the illusion of protection, an illusion endangering the self as undetected cancer endangers the body, speech equals the real risks attendant on visibility, the risk of having one’s ideas “bruised or misunderstood,” as she remarked in her opening comments.

While speech, for Lorde, represents risk, it also represents the possibilities of naming oneself for oneself, of transforming oneself and of bridging differences with others
entering into community: "[F]or every real word I had ever spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women . . . , bridging our differences." This contact with others through speech and action provided her with a resource in that it connected her with communal support: "And it was the concern and caring of all those women that gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my life." Again, Lorde draws upon her personal experience in a way that promotes broad identifications across sociological groups: "The women who sustained me through that period were Black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual, [and] heterosexual, and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence." She affirms identification among all women through division in a "war" with silence.67

Lorde's speech treats the antithetical metaphors in a candid, highly personal and intimate style that points frankly toward the underlying factors that compel her speech in this instance–factors that provide a glimpse into the limits of rhetoric in what I take to be a tragic way. Her speech asserts bluntly that it was the greater fear of what she took to be her own impending death that led her to reexamine her silences and her own fears of the visibility accompanying her speech, an acknowledgement that she transforms: "And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is, of course, most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gave me a great strength." Later, in her conclusion, she encourages the audience members to recognize and confront the sources of their own fears and to put them into perspective, "We can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear far more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury, that epiphany, of fearlessness, the silence will choke us to death."

What are the sources of this fear? As indicated in earlier quotations, the fear is, in part, a product of each individual having internalized her own forms of oppression thereby betraying the self as cancer betrays one's own body in initially undetected but ultimately devastating ways. Lorde lists the sources of fear directly when she locates some causes of silence in what Brigid Brophy refers to as "the invisible cage,"68 for example. This source of fear becomes the locus of powerful opposition from within oneself, as Lorde herself articulated in an essay, "It is easier to deal with the external manifestations of racism and sexism than it is to deal with the results of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another."69 In her speech, the fear of the outsider within gives shape to a paradox: "Within those weeks of acute fear came the knowledge that within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle and otherwise, conscious or not—I am not only a casualty, I am a warrior." Lorde repeats her pattern of moving from personal insight to communal political action toward the conclusion, when she urges her audience to take part in the transformation from silence into language and action: "It is not without fear—of visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death. But we have lived through all of these already, in silence, all except death."

She adds to her analysis of the sources of fear again metaphorically when she alludes to "a war against the tyrannies of silence" and, more specifically, "this dragon we call america [sic]." She describes the activities of the unnamed enemy through a series of passive voice constructions listing evil actions without naming specific actors: "We can
sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted [by whom?], while our children are distorted and destroyed [by whom?] while our earth is being poisoned [by whom?]; we can sit in our safe corners or our offices or our homes or wherever mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid.” The lack of specificity allows each member of the audience to name her own oppressors, her own fears, opening and expanding the implicit range of unspoken implications. For instance, the image of “wasting away” alludes to the physiological course of cancer that is analogous to silence wasting away the self. The references to birth defects and environmental poisoning specify personal health concerns resulting from an excessively profit-driven culture, just as silence often results from a hostile and intimidating environment.

In this context, her cryptic references to herself as a “warrior woman” or her statement, “I am not only a casualty, I am a warrior” take on an enigmatic ambiguity that allows the message to open up possible interpretations. Lorde’s self-definition as “warrior” against the silent destroyers within, cancer and silence, expands politically and socially to the warrior who breaks silence to combat the community’s failure to address women’s health concerns, or, for that matter, any wrongful deeds endangering the political health of the entire community. There is also the political concern of alien ideas planted by the dominant culture within the mind of even those who would fight the system. In addition, there is the movement from the passivity of being defined as a “victim” or “casualty” awash in despair, powerlessness, and silence to “battling” such despair through actively resisting the sources responsible for one’s wasting away, whether of self or body, as Lorde amplifies explicitly in The Cancer Journals: “I have found that battling despair does not mean closing my eyes to the enormity of the tasks of effecting change, nor ignoring the strength and the barbarity of the forces aligned against us.” Later in the Journals, she adds, “I was also afraid that I was not really in control, that it might already be too late to halt the spread of cancer, that there was simply too much to do that I might not get done, that the pain would be just too great.” The feelings of a loss of control, typical of many persons living with cancer and other life threatening illnesses, are rooted in defining oneself as “casualty” without also naming oneself as “warrior.” As Lorde also explains in The Cancer Journals, “For silence and invisibility go hand in hand with powerlessness.” She stresses that “It was very important to me, after my mastectomy, to develop and encourage my own internal sense of power. I needed to rally my energies in such a way as to image myself as a fighter resisting rather than as a passive victim suffering.” Members of her audience could have responded to her remarks to the MLA by supplying any of these unspoken implications in response to the paradox of being both “warrior” and “casualty,” though drawing upon The Cancer Journals to suggest unspoken implications risks revising the rhetorical understandings at the moment of her speech in light of her later experiences as conveyed in her writings. For example, Lorde amplifies in remarks after her mastectomy that the Amazons of Dahomey were one breasted women, alluding to being a “warrior” in a way that also refers to her own body.

At the time of the MLA, Lorde almost certainly conceived of herself as a “warrior” on several fronts. First, she stood in agonistic opposition to dominating groups whose characteristics she outlines in detail in connection with “a mythical norm” in another speech: “In america [sic], this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure.” Second, she engaged in confrontational consciousness raising of potential allies across differences within the women’s communities, especially affluent, white, heterosexual women who too often ignore or
explicitly distance themselves from considerations of class, race, and sexuality. Finally, of course, she experienced inner conflicts within herself over her priorities for speaking during an abruptly limited lifetime. In fact, in another speech, Lorde questioned the value of speaking to the representatives of the dominating groups beyond the women’s community, recognizing as she did that “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.”75 Lorde’s comments in “An Open Letter to Mary Daly” suggest that she even enacted her role as warrior within the women’s communities with misgivings. In this letter, Lorde remarks that shortly before the speech to the MLA she had “decided never again to speak to white women about racism. I felt it was wasted energy because of destructive guilt and defensiveness, and because whatever I had to say might better be said by white women to one another at far less emotional cost to the speaker, and probably with a better hearing.”76 Whatever the sources of fear, whether external or internal, to Lorde they will abide as a consequence of silence recognized as a symptom of failing to become a warrior on these many fronts.

Indeed, Lorde’s speech enacts her role as warrior engaging audiences whom she regularly experienced as devaluing her contributions, silencing her, or rendering her invisible, as may be discerned in several of her rhetorical strategies. For example, Lorde calls conscious awareness to herself as an embodiment of some audience members’ fears with her remark earlier in the speech to the MLA: “Perhaps for some of you here now, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself—a black woman warrior poet doing her work—come to ask you, ‘Are you doing yours?’ ” The sequence of self-namings is a significant technique in her confrontational consciousness raising, because it moves from the broadest basis of identification with the women at the MLA to a series of differences within the group. In this connection, an allusion to Winnie Mandela in the introduction, where Lorde dedicates a poem to Mandela and depicts her as “A South African freedom fighter,” and a later allusion to Kwanza, an “African American festival of harvest” that Lorde is celebrating during the MLA convention, may take on additional, implicit significance, because of Lorde’s presentation of herself as a Black lesbian: “Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, we have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. And yet even within the women’s movement, we have had to fight, and still do, for that very visibility which also renders us most vulnerable, our Blackness.” Invisibility is to the eyes what silence is to the ears. To Lorde, it is vital to speak and be visible as both different within and yet intimately related to one’s communities as a means of actively constructing one’s own sense of self with adequate attention to one’s own distinct yet interrelated interests.77 In The Cancer Journals, Lorde amplifies on the underlying dilemma posed by language in defining self as a member of various communities: “I am defined as other in every group I’m a part of. The outsider, both strength and weakness. Yet without community there is certainly no liberation, no future, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between me and my oppression.”78

In her speech to the MLA, Lorde’s discussion of Kwanza outlines the general structure of the speech and serves as a transition from a central focus upon self to community, while underscoring ineluctable differences among members of a community: “There are seven principles of Kwanza, one for each day,” she remarks. The first principle, which
"means unity, the decision to strive for and maintain unity in self and community" is followed by the second principle, "self determination—the decision to define ourselves, name ourselves, and speak for ourselves, instead of being defined and spoken for by others." The third principle corresponds to the final section of the speech: "Today is the third day of Kwanza ... collective work and responsibility—that decision to build and maintain ourselves and our communities and to recognize and solve those problems that we share together." The speech unfolds in predominant emphasis temporally through these three principles, the only ones she mentions, though they are interwoven without sharp demarcations among them, no emphatic transitions. It could be argued that these organizing principles represent an epistemologically specific conceptualization of rhetoric such as Afrocentrism in that Kwanza embodies the principles of African American cultural nationalism that emerged during the late 1960s and 1970s. By alluding to this social, political, and rhetorical movement, Lorde incorporates and extends those principles to promote forms of identification and differentiation among the women in her audience. To the extent that the audience members respond to her call for collective action, their deeds can be defined and understood as participation in the principles of Kwanza.

The final section of the speech calls upon audience members to reflect upon aspects of personal responsibility for the transformation from silence into language and action, but not in the traditional, directive way characterized by urging one specific plan, or course of action. She calls upon the audiences to engage in self-examination, consciousness raising, and personal transformation as well as communal engagement, because one can only define the self through language in relationship to the community: "Each one of us here is here because in one way or another we share a commitment to language and to the power of language, and to the reclaiming of that language which has been made to work against us. In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary, I believe, for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation." This request opens up the possibilities for active, creative, and unanticipated contributions by her audiences. At the same time, it voices awareness that language as a tool "has been made to work against us," calling attention to another layer of fear in the process of speaking through language, because Lorde recognizes language itself as one of the master's tools in that language tends to represent and reproduce the interests of dominating groups. For this reason, it becomes important that "we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed" and it becomes vital "to scrutinize not only the truths of what we speak, but the truth and validity of that language by which we speak it." To Lorde, language as a communal resource enables one to define oneself in relationship to the community through a complex process of identification and differentiation, but not without the inherent risk of language subverting that very sense of self because of any language's history as communal resource.

Mindful of the inherent risks that attend using language, Lorde then treats language as a resource for acknowledging and bridging differences among human beings, developing toward the conclusion of the speech an idea foreshadowed by a single line in the introductory poem dedicated to Mandela: "our spices are separate and particular/but our skins sing in complementary keys." After mentioning as specific examples some possible roles for women who write or who teach literature, she endeavors through confrontational consciousness raising to engage subtle forms of defensiveness among her
audiences, what Betty Schmitz refers to as indirect forms of resistance that might enable the audiences to distance themselves from the literature of those who are different.\textsuperscript{82} Lorde urges

That we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own. For instance, "I can't possibly teach Black women's writing--their experience is so different from mine." Yet how many years have you spent teaching Plato and Shakespeare and Proust? Or another, "She's a white woman and what could she possibly have to say to me?" Or, "She's a lesbian, what would my husband think, or my chairman say if he sees my book list?" Or again, "This woman writes of her sons and I have no children." And all the other endless ways in which we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other.

In these remarks, the sequence again proceeds from the broadest identifications with the immediate audience, women, to examine a series of differences within the community across race, sexuality, and parental status. More important, Lorde endeavors to dispel a form of silence rooted in anxieties about communicating across differences, anxieties that cut in multiple directions. As Lorde's opening poem for Winnie Mandela affirmed and reiterated, "Our labor has become more important than our silence."

Finally, she focuses upon silence as more fundamental than difference among sociological groups, since speech can enable us to identify with one another and act together in diverse respects in the community: "The fact that we are here and that I speak even now these words are an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us. For it is not difference that immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken." While Lorde affirms in these final lines that the breaking of silence is fundamental, not only primarily to constructing and sustaining the health of the self, but also to acknowledging and bridging differences, and so identifies one of the most fundamental causes for the increasing importance of communication in a heterogeneous society, communication also requires \textit{listening}, an activity that complicates the ways in which we engage messages such as Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," as Lorde herself recognizes when she urges her audience, "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."

The title of one of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell's recent essays is suggestive in this connection, because she stresses "Hearing Women's Voices."\textsuperscript{83} As Abena P. A. Busia affirms, "the systematic refusal to hear our speech is not the same thing as our silence."\textsuperscript{84} Comments by bell hooks along similar lines raise a question about whether Lorde was adapting her treatment of silence and speech to her audience of predominantly white women:

Within feminist circles, silence is often seen as the sexist 'right speech of womanhood'--the sign of woman's submission to patriarchal authority. This emphasis on woman's silence may be an accurate remembering of what has taken place in the households of women from WASP backgrounds in the United States, but in black communities (and diverse ethnic communities), women have not been silent. Their voices can be heard. Certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard.\textsuperscript{85}

These remarks complicate our understanding of black women's rhetoric, reminding us of the dangers of essentialism in characterizing the speech of entire communities as though it were uniform or homogeneous. Ultimately, hooks recognizes diversity among black
women's experiences with silence explicitly, when hooks comments, "for women within oppressed groups who have contained so many feelings—despair, rage, anguish—who do not speak, as poet Audre Lorde writes, 'for fear our words will not be heard nor welcomed,' coming to voice is an act of resistance." hooks adds, "Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject." Breaking silence is a necessary condition for overcoming internalized shame or for acknowledging and bridging differences in the interest of combating wrongful deeds, but it is not a sufficient condition. We have evidence in the historical record of how well we listen to such voices.

Conclusion

But listening is always a difficult activity, especially when the perception of differences is great, especially when differences in underlying cultural experiences may shape our very abilities to listen. Lorde's speech has a haunting quality in that it specifies the tragic circumstances that in her own personal case impelled her to speak. This effect of the speech cannot be ascribed simply to her intentions, or to the prevailing concerns of her immediate audience. The central metaphor of the essay, that silence equals death, Lorde articulated in 1977, several years before the AIDS pandemic that has moved so many to break the silences surrounding sexuality and life threatening illnesses. Today, we cannot possibly hear Lorde's speech in precisely the same terms as when she delivered it, because the underlying cultural conditions that inform its meanings have changed so dramatically, so swiftly and unpredictably. This represents—perhaps ineluctably—an appropriation of Lorde's language and action, but one consistent with Lorde's endeavors to broaden the range of identifications among social groups. Her insights about silence abide.

In closing, I want to underscore that Lorde's treatment of speech and silence through metaphors represents one point of view that should not be categorized simply in terms of sex, race, sexuality, economic class, or health. Her speech is about human liberation in the context of any acts of domination and control over speech, including such acts by the members of one's own community. This essay has by no means exhausted the topic of silence, having only explored a few of its roots in power, domination, verbal abuse, violence and the taboo, as well as resulting emotions such as shame, anxiety, or fear. Several additional dimensions of silence and communication merit further consideration, not only the negative variations of silencing or remaining silent as a response to wrong, but also the positive roles of silence in reflecting on self development in life enhancing ways. Silence has multiple meanings. It is sometimes a product of oppression, a survival skill in dealing with domination and violence, at other times a chosen form of liberation, and on yet other occasions the exercise of a fundamental human right, as in the right to remain silent. Moreover, speaking is not necessarily an act of liberation. In fact, speech about any consequential matters may inherently entail what may be represented as significant silences simply because an individual's speech necessarily entails a progression of ideas expressed one at a time in a finite time and space. But to theorize silence adequately would require the space of an entire book, not an essay, as Adrienne Rich's On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, or Tillie Olsen's Silences may imply.

Although much more remains to be said about silence, Lorde's speech does shed light on the opening questions about the margins of rhetoric. What, then, are the limits of rhetoric? Lorde's oration identifies one limitation in the fear of social, political, or
economic sanctions that can result from speech and visibility. This fear can become the source of invisible impositions upon oneself that are more powerful and effective than any external ones. Lorde’s speech also amplifies the role of external sources of fear such as physical violence, which can be understood as a symbolic practice that limits the possibilities of rhetoric: from rape and harassment to lynching and fag bashing, a broader, cultural pattern emerges enabling us to recognize the symbolic role of acts of intimidation in keeping some of us in our places while enabling others of us to dominate the public space. Lorde’s speech points to yet another limit of rhetoric by underscoring the role of the taboo in demarcating topics surrounded by silence. Her remarks about race, sex, and sexuality underscore sociological factors that shed light on the question, Who gets to speak to and for the community, with what authority and power, with access to what public forums? As a Black lesbian poet, Lorde can draw upon her personal experiences in a way that provides her with a privilege to speak and be heard with a power and authority that others cannot possess, except possibly through imaginative and sympathetic understanding. Yet her access to public forums may be circumscribed by the very aspects of her personhood that give her speech its power and its urgency.

These features of the margins of rhetoric may seem obvious to those who have devoted energy to studying the communicative practices of various subordinated populations. Yet these margins merit mention for those of us who have become so habituated to acts of devaluation and exclusion that the limits of rhetoric are neither noticed nor appreciated. They also enable us to see clearly the enabling conditions of a discipline to the extent that rhetoric is defined as synonymous with oratory or speech. The role of speaker may emerge out of underlying political and social factors that as a matter of habit lend authority, legitimacy, and symbolic power to the speech. If further evidence is necessary to support this claim, perhaps it will be sufficient to mention that every President in U.S. history has been a politically powerful and economically privileged white male, who almost always has a traditional family with a wife and children signifying heterosexuality. To the extent that underlying political and social factors contribute to empowering some while disempowering many, these factors outline a few noteworthy margins of rhetoric in the sense of both boundaries and relative value. Yet a deeper margin of rhetoric may be at the point where words fail us: This may be the silence imposed by child abuse, by grief, by incest, rape and other forms of physical assault, by fear of any kind, and certainly by the confrontation with one’s own mortality. Silence may be more decorous than a scream, but silence is unlikely to secure necessary support, assistance, and care from concerned communities, or to bring about social or political change.

Paradoxically, Lorde’s speech is as much about the possibilities of rhetoric as its limits. For those who define rhetoric as the study of public speech or oratory, Lorde’s message calls for an imaginative re-vision of the range of discourse from which we generalize as well as a revaluing of the varieties of speaking practices, for surely rhetorical techniques vary with the range of personal experiences, types of power and authority, and access to public forums. Lorde’s speech enacts at once her roles as both an orator and a critical rhetorician. It articulates a powerful synthesis of these two roles through her use of stylistic eloquence as well as her critical self-reflection and scrutiny of language. While oratory ordinarily reinforces and reproduces the ideology of dominant groups, occasionally rhetors endeavor to employ language to resist domination and to transform self and community. This is in many respects a paradoxical undertaking. Alternatively, because
Lorde calls for both language and action, Lorde’s speech underscores the value of focusing upon rhetoric defined in terms of symbolic action along the lines articulated by such theorists as Kenneth Burke or, more recently, Pierre Bourdieu, because this sense of rhetoric as symbolic action provides one means of including and respecting the diverse ways in which people communicate their perspectives. Deeds can be done in eloquent silence, and ideas conveyed through a wide range of symbolic means beyond the spoken or written word.

Throughout the centuries, public figures have broken silence in endeavors to transform self and society. Speakers will continue using language, as bell hooks puts it, to choose the margin as the space of radical openness, a site of resistance, a place for freedom of expression and action, despite powerful sanctions for speech, including the loss of life. In this connection, observations by bell hooks in her book, *Talking Back*, are instructive. In an essay bearing the same title, she explains that “In the world of the southern black community I grew up in, ‘back talk’ and ‘talking back’ meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion.” Although hooks expresses skepticism about typifying all women as silent, she resists the temptation to essentialize the speech of entire communities. She affirms in her conclusion: “Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of ‘talking back,’ that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice.” As for the audiences of such liberating speech, hooks remarks in another essay, “When we end our silence, when we speak in a liberated voice, our words connect us with anyone, anywhere who lives in silence.”

Enacting the breaking of silence can take many forms. For Audre Lorde, the process entails a complex sequence of self-namings through reference to demographic groupings that she evokes sequentially to promote identifications and differentiations: human, but not male; woman, but not white; black, but not straight; lesbian, but not childless; living with cancer, but not a passive victim. The ways of breaking silence can be enacted through additional forms, as illustrated in this essay when I endeavor to use language to affirm and promote underlying values, such as active and respectful listening across many differences between Lorde and myself in age, race, sex, parental status, health, political commitments, and economic theories, while drawing upon some similarities in sexuality, nationality, and humanity. Jeanne Perreault points out that “academic retreat from the complexities of cross-cultural and cross-racial reading and writing can serve only those who wish to maintain the status quo, to sustain the academy’s now precarious grip on an aging world view.” Perreault cautions, however, “This self-awareness need not be the naıve assumption that if one merely names one’s heritage, or sexual orientation, or class background, one will be thus ‘positioned,’ and thus a known entity. Instead, what readers and writers need to do is to discern from within the critical material ... what values are held and how they are expressed.” Because differences and similarities are inherent in the relationship between any two people, it follows that the challenge becomes reading and speaking and writing across differences, not allowing differences to become an excuse for disengaging from others, but instead exploring the variations among us as welcome resources for creating a more complex understanding of communication practices within and among communities.
Endnotes

Lester C. Olson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Pittsburgh. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Speech Communication Association in New Orleans in 1994 for a panel on "Rhetoric and Human Rights." He would like to thank Associate Provost Jack Daniel, Trudy Bayer, and Jennifer Wood for commenting on earlier versions of the paper. The essay is dedicated to Trudy Bayer, Ph.D.

1Tillie Olsen, Strenches (1965; New York: Dell, 1978) x.


6Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, & Sex" 120–121.

7Audre Lorde, "Learning from the 60s," Sister Outsider 137. Later in the same speech, she makes another similar set of observations about multiple features of her identity and the external pressure to be fragmenting and reductive in her self-definition (143).


9There is no entry for Audre Lorde’s public address, for example, in Karyl Kohrs Campbell, ed., Women Public Speakers in the United States: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook, 2 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993–94). Nor is there an entry for her in Richard W. Leeman’s forthcoming volume in the same Greenwood series on African-American Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook (Richard W. Leeman, letter to author, 9 June 1995). These omissions probably result from the fact that Lorde is best known as a poet and had been included in a volume in a Greenwood series devoted to writers: Sandra Pollack and Denise D. Knight, eds., Contemporary Lesbian Writers of the United States: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993) 316–324. Lorde is listed, for example, in Ernest Kay, ed., International Who’s Who in Poetry, 4th ed. (Cambridge, Eng.: Melrose, 1974) 275. One of Lorde’s speeches, "Learning from the 60s," was printed in Robbie Jean Walker, ed., The Rhetoric of Struggle: Public Address by African American Women (New York: Garland, 1992) 125–140. But because most of Lorde’s rhetoric challenged patriarchal authority, it is unfortunate in this respect that her only anthologized speech is a tribute to Malcolm X. One of the selections representing Alice Walker, who gave us the term "Womanist," is likewise a tribute to Martin Luther King (121–124), though the volume does include two additional speeches by Walker. Likewise, Victoria L. DeFrancisco and Marvin D. Jensen, eds., Women’s Voices in Our Time: Statements by American Leaders (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1994) makes available a wide range of women’s rhetoric, but omits any speeches by Lorde, except a collaborative "Statement for Voices Unheard" prepared by Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker in 1974, when Rich refused to accept the National Book Award "as presented" for her poetry collection, Dining into the Week (271–272). The editors recognize "There are silences amid the voices in this collection" (xiii). Ronald K. Burke, ed., American Public Discourse: A Multicultural Perspective (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1992) omits any texts of Lorde’s rhetoric altogether. Lorde’s speech, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," has never been cited in any national journals on communication sponsored by the Speech Communication Association (SCA), to judge from the Arts and Humanities Citation Index through 1994. There are, however, references to one of her best known speeches, "Uses of the Erotic," in an essay by Anne Balsamo in Communication in 1988 and one of her essays, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," in articles after feminism by Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson in Communication in 1988 and about Mary Daly by Cindy Griffin in Communication Monographs in 1993 (where it was cited in the version published in 1981 in This Bridge Called My Back). Both the essay and the speech by Lorde were reprinted in Sister Outsider.


12Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Sinister Wisdom 6 (1978): 11–15; rpt. with revisions in The Cancer Journals (San Francisco, CA: Spineters In, 1980): 18–23 and in Sister Outsider 40–44. None of these texts exactly transcribe her remarks to the MLA, to judge from the audiotape of her remarks recorded by a panel participant, Judith McDaniel, a copy of which she provided to me. Judith McDaniel, letter to author, 17 February 1995. All quotations ascribed to Lorde are from the audiotape except for one sentence that was not recorded when the tape was turned over. I am grateful to Professor Merrily Swoboda for calling my attention to this speech and to Judith McDaniel for providing me with an audiotape of it.

The text in Sinister Wisdom is the most reliable, because it includes several prefatory remarks omitted from the version in Sister Outsider: an allusion to Winnie Mandela’s struggles as a “South African freedom fighter,” the text of a poem entitled “A Song for Many Movements” that Lorde had written and dedicated to Mandela, and a transition alluding to Mary Daly’s use of language during her earlier speech on the same MLA panel. Sinister Wisdom is especially useful for information about the rhetorical context of the speech, because it published the texts for the rest of the panel presentations. The version of the speech printed in The Cancer Journals is also better than the version in Sister Outsider in
degree of completeness, but it excises a transition alluding to Daly's earlier speech, probably because of the new context for the remarks in the Journals. The least reliable version in Sister Outsider is the most frequently quoted in published commentary on Lorde's speech, all of which has taken place outside of the national journals of the SCA. Because I discuss this secondary literature in detail in a companion essay, "Other-Wise: Listening Across the Essential Chasm to Audre Lorde's Speech, The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," I omit a discussion of it here out of respect for journal space. In addition to the excised lines mentioned above, Sister Outsider also omits self-reflexive statements on the quality of Lorde's voice as she speaks to the MLA. In the original speech, for example, Lorde had remarked, "And of course I am afraid--you can hear it in my voice or not--because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation always." The text in Sister Outsider omits the reference to the aural qualities of her voice.

The introductory poem, "A Song for Many Movements," was published in Lorde, The Black Unicorn 52. At least two other poems in this collection also bear a close relationship to Lorde's speech, because one of them, "Sister Outsider," was also the title for her collection of speeches and essays including one text of the speech (106), and because another of them, "A Litany For Survival," contains several lines that closely resemble remarks in the speech (31-32).

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson introduce the concept of enactment and illustrate it in "Introduction to Form and Genre," Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action [Falls Church, VA: SCA, [1978]]: 16-32.

Audre Lorde's speech fulfills several of the generic conventions that Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has outlined in her essay, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron," Quarterly Journal of Speech 59 (1973): 74-86, though Lorde was interested more generally in human liberation.


Olsen 8-9.

For a more detailed review of the literature on silence as discussed in communication journals, see Charles A. Braithwaite, "Communicative Silence: A Cross-Cultural Study of Basso's Hypothesis" and an earlier essay by Keith H. Basso, "To Give Up on Words: Silence in Western Apache Culture," both in Donal Carbaugh, ed., Cultural Communication and Intercultural Contact [Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1990]. Braithwaite 324.

Braithwaite 324.


Aisenberg and Harrington 64.

Aisenberg and Harrington 64-65.

Aisenberg and Harrington 65.

Aisenberg and Harrington 66.

Aisenberg and Harrington 68.

Aisenberg and Harrington 82.


Belenky et al. 16.

Belenky et al. 18.

Belenky et al. 23-24. For the exploration of child abuse as a factor influencing some women, see the chapter entitled "Silence" 23-35.

Belenky et al. 24.

Audre Lorde, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," Sister Outsider 146; for the childhood experiences, see esp. 145-159.

Lorde, "Eye to Eye" 146.

Her most extensive commentary in Sister Outsider on the uses of "lesbian" occur in "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving" (esp. 47-50), but the topic recurs in several speeches and essays (e.g. "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich" 99 and 106, "Age, Race, Class, & Sex" 121, "Learning from the 60s" 143-144). Similarly, Audre Lorde, I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities [New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color, 1985] 4-5. Evidently, the communication discipline is not free of such uses of language, as exemplified in an anonymous reviewer's criticisms as quoted in Carole Blair, Julie R. Brown, and Leslie A. Baxter, "Disciplining the Feminine," Quarterly Journal of Speech 80 (1994): 399.

Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex" 121.


Lorde, "Learning from the 60s" 143.
38 Lorde, “Learning from the 60s” 142; Lorde, “Eye To Eye” 170.
41Vaid 143.
42Vaid 79.
43Lorde, “Sexism” 61.
44Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, & Sex” 120. For examples of additional commentary by Lorde on rape in various essays, Lorde “Scratching the Surface” 47 and 49; Lorde “Sexism” 64; and Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” Sister Outsider 70.
45Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, & Sex” 119.
46This idea is well illustrated by one entire essay: Lorde, “Sexism” 60–65, esp. 64; another sustained series of examples can be found in Lorde, “Scratching the Surface” 46–48.
47Lorde, “Learning from the 60s” 139.
49Kaufman and Raphael 103.
50Kaufman and Raphael 104.
51Kaufman and Raphael 82.
52Kaufman and Raphael 80.
55The twenty-first narrative in the series points to such a subtle variation of silence surrounding harassment that may enable it to continue. The author comments, “I cannot discuss the details of the charge. I have been gagged.” In addition, the author mentions that even though the college administration established the perpetrator’s guilt, secured his signature admitting his guilt, and imposed minimal sanctions, the administration also took “no action” after the perpetrator later violated the terms of those sanctions. Further, the author alludes to “the lawyers” who saw to it that “There will be nothing in his permanent record” signalling the misconduct to prospective employers. “‘Telling Our Stories’” 379–381.
56Lorde, “Scratching the Surface” 47.
59Bauman 29–30.
63An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich” 108.
64The idea that language is important because it enables self-definition and transformations is one that Richard B. Gregg would almost certainly consider an instance of the ego-function in rhetoric, “The Ego-Function of Protest Rhetoric,” Philosophy and Rhetoric 4 (1971): 71–91. Lorde’s speech, “Age, Race, Class, & Sex” 114–123, provides ample evidence that Gregg’s formulation requires re-visions in terms of both the assumptions that inform the perspective and the substantive claims.
66The idea of the enemy with outposts in one’s own head was articulated by Sally Kempton in “Cutting Loose,” as quoted in Campbell, “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation” 80.
69Lorde, “Eye to Eye” 147.
70Lorde, The Cancer Journals 17.


Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, & Sex” 116.

Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, & Sex” 115.


Lorde articulates such concerns about difference and relatedness within communities in her speech, “Age, Race, Class, & Sex,” for instance, when she amplifies the insight that “There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist” (116). The idea may also be illustrated by the entirety of “An Open Letter” (66–71).


I have used the spelling of Kwanza employed by Lorde and her editors in all three printed versions of the text.


Campbell, “Hearing Women’s Voices” 33–49.


Bell hooks, “‘when i was a young soldier for the revolution’: coming to voice,” *Talking Back* 12.

Lorde comments, “The history of white women who are unable to hear Black women’s words, or to maintain dialogue with us, is long and discouraging.” Lorde, “An Open Letter” 66. I treat this activity of listening at length in a companion essay, “Other-Wise.”

Lorde devoted extensive time and energy to engaging the problems resulting from silencing by members of one’s own communities. For example, as a black, she focused upon such activity by black men in “Sexism” 60–65; as a woman, she engaged such activities by white women in “Age, Race, Class, & Sex” 114–123; as a lesbian, she examined such silencing by heterosexual black women in *I Am Your Sister, 3–8*, as well as heterosexual white and black women in “Age, Race, Class, & Sex” 121–122.


One recent book that revalues and creatively engages in re-vision of rhetoric is Mark Lawrence McPhail’s *Zen in the Art of Rhetoric: An Inquiry into Coherence* (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 1996). His position on essentialism rejects several premises that inform Audre Lorde’s rhetoric, while he imaginatively articulates philosophical alternatives to what he characterizes as binary thinking about language. In order for the analysis to be compelling, however, he would have to engage the history of essentialist language as deeply embedded in the rituals, legal codes, and formal procedures of several institutions. Essentialism looms large, for example, in the current controversy in the United States over various exclusion from marriage acts which have been strategically maimed as “defense” of marriage acts, since inclusion would not have the effect of dissolving existing marriages or change the rights of those who may now marry.


Books, *Talking Back* 18; for hooks’ skepticism, see 6–7 and 12.
