

# The Responsibilities of Rhetoric

# Audre Lorde's Embodied Invention

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Our labor has become more important than our silence.

—Audre Lorde, “A Song for Many Movements”

Beginning in late autumn 1977, a fundamental transformation is evident throughout the public life and advocacy of Audre Lorde, the internationally acclaimed poet, visionary activist, and public speaker, who described herself as a Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, mother of two. At this time, Lorde received medical news concerning the diagnosis of a benign breast tumor followed soon afterward in 1978 by news of yet another tumor that was malignant. As she put it, she became “forcibly and essentially aware” of her “mortality” (*Cancer Journals* 20, *Sister Outsider* 41). So dramatic were the resulting changes in her public address that biographer Alexis De Veaux writes of Lorde as having lived two lives—one before the cancer diagnosis in 1978 and another after it: “The impact of cancer performed a transfiguration not only of Lorde’s physicality but of her personality, creativity, and social activism” (xii). During this transformation, Lorde came to voice as a public speaker and regularly addressed diverse audiences between 1977 and 1992. A wounded warrior, she tapped her already finely honed talents as a poet to develop a fifteen-year career as an orator (for an overview, see Olson, “Audre”).

Lorde’s achievements as a public speaker during those fifteen years have been so overshadowed by her accomplishments as a poet that not until 1997 did any rhetoric scholar contribute a sustained discussion of any one single speech. This first article recounted her December 1977 masterpiece, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” which she delivered to the Modern Language Association in Chicago (Olson, “On the Margins”). It was the first of several speeches that Lorde explicitly identified as a speech in its subsequently published form, though she had delivered public papers on earlier occasions. It is probable, however, that some earlier prose, such as Lorde’s 1977 essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” was based, at least in part, on earlier orations (*Sister Outsider* 36–39). Before publication of the essay, Lorde had delivered similar remarks for a panel, Poetry Makes Something Happen:

The Poet as Teacher, Writer, and Person, at the Midwest Modern Language Association on October 27, 1977, when she appeared with May Sarton. To judge from a typed manuscript held at the Spelman College Archives in Atlanta, Georgia (which holds the most extensive collection of Lorde's unpublished papers), it appears that these conference remarks informed her subsequent essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury."

After the 1978 cancer diagnosis, Lorde continued to produce extraordinary poetry, but now, in addition, she developed an exceptional series of speeches that articulated her understandings of what it meant to her to be both "different" and marginalized, even within diverse minority communities in U.S. culture, as a Black, lesbian, feminist, mother in an interracial relationship (for Lorde's views concerning difference, see *Sister Outsider* 114–23, also Olson, "Liabilities"). She regularly explored how those who embody differences of race, sexuality, age, sex, and class might endeavor to survive, despite overt hostility toward such differences.

Long before Lorde's breast cancer diagnosis, her rhetorical invention in her poetry, including her early collections published by Poet's Press at New York, Broadside Press at Detroit, and Eidelon near San Francisco, had drawn primarily on her personal experiences. In her 1977 essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," she began,

The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt. (*Sister Outsider* 36)

After the cancer diagnosis and mastectomy, however, Lorde's public advocacy enacted an urgency, directness, and presence that might best be called embodied invention. In these respects, embodied invention is different in degree rather than kind from meditating on specific personal experiences. As she affirmed in a November 19, 1979, entry in her *Cancer Journals*, "There must be some way to integrate death into living, neither ignoring it nor giving in to it" (13).

This essay examines the ways in which Lorde's body, especially through dealing with breast cancer, became a resource for her embodied rhetorical invention. Her portrayals and representations of her experience of the disease were not merely a disruptive ordeal evident throughout her public address, consisting of speeches, poems, essays, open letters, and political pamphlets. Instead, through language and symbolic action, she actively transformed her fear, vulnerability, and even the surgical amputation of her breast into rhetorical resources as potential strengths and bases for concerted community actions. By embodied invention, I mean the ways in which Lorde's public advocacy drew resourcefully, explicitly, and extensively on her own naming

of her bodily experiences in her physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and symbolic relationships to others. Her bodily experiences became a well-spring that suffused her remarkably insightful and influential advocacy for political and social changes in U.S. culture.

At one end of a continuum for characterizing salient qualities of rhetorical invention, Lorde's explicit and extensive use of personal experience in her embodied invention can be contrasted sharply with the other end of this continuum, where rhetorical invention consists of impersonal, abstract, and disembodied systems, such as the universal *topoi* of the ancient Greek writers (e.g., from consequence) and even, to a somewhat lesser extent, the *loci* concerning the person and the act in the classical Roman treatises on rhetoric. For while the latter did concentrate on the specific corporeal person and his or her deeds, the person in Roman treatments of the *loci* transcended the specific sociological and political ramifications of race, sexuality, age, class, and sex as they interacted with each other systemically in an individual's lifetime. Such factors account, in part, for my reluctance to use classical Greek treatments of rhetorical invention, such as the *topoi*, to describe Lorde's processes of rhetorical invention, although the Roman discussions of *loci* may be nonetheless useful as I continue to study Lorde's embodied invention because of their emphasis on the person and the act and their relevance for considerations pertaining to justice. The classical and traditional treatments of rhetorical invention nonetheless have tended to presume a unitary speaking subject rather than a plural or multiple understanding of the individual as a cluster of symbolic selves in contingent, contextual relationship to others.

What follows is a preliminary exploration of an aspect of Lorde's public advocacy that deserves more expansive treatment than is possible here. This essay explores how her public address regularly enacted an activity that Lorde had described variously as a "distillation of experience" (*Sister Outsider* 36) or "metabolizing experience." In an 1986 interview with Marion Kraft, Lorde generalized, "Poetry—for me—is a way of living. It's the way I look at myself, it's the way I move through myself [*sic*], my world, and it's the way I metabolize what happens and present it out again" (Kraft 146). Similarly, on January 23, 1981, during a recorded interview by Jennifer Abod, apparently in preparation for *A Radio Profile of Audre Lorde*, she observed that "When I write prose, I am a poet writing prose. . . . I am speaking of a whole way of looking at life, of moving into it, of using it, of dealing with myself and my experience. I am not speaking of living itself, I am speaking of a use of my living."

I will argue that Lorde transposed her sensibility as a poet into her oratory. This is not to insinuate that her embodied rhetorical invention was either hermetic or narcissistic, but rather that its richly textured layers of consequential public meanings had extensive personal resonances in the moment of her living. She embedded in public speeches oftentimes deeply personal feelings and convictions about her experiences of bias and hatred—especially during her collaborations and confrontations with others, when she would

physically internalize emotions ranging from anger and fear to other, life-enhancing feelings, such as what she termed "the erotic" (*Sister Outsider* 53–59). I will first reflect briefly on bodily experiences in Lorde's rhetorical invention before concentrating on her general use of corporeal experiences as a potential common ground for diverse audiences and, ultimately, will consider how Lorde's experiences as a Black lesbian became a powerful resource in her embodied invention during her struggle with breast cancer.

## BODILY EXPERIENCE IN LORDE'S RHETORICAL INVENTION

Bodily metaphors evoking life experiences permeated Lorde's public address, at times constituting a corporeal basis for grasping abstract and intangible ideas. She alluded, for instance, to misunderstandings and distortions of her ideas as them having been "bruised" (e.g., *Cancer Journals* 19, *Sister Outsider* 40), an evocative image probably suggesting violence or the threat of violence, or possibly a symptom of life-endangering diseases such as leukemia, to which she once alluded in *The Cancer Journals* (15), although she did not experience that specific illness. Even so, bruises are, more generally, a symptom of cancer. Lorde depicted hatred and biases impacting her life—heterosexism and homophobia, racism, ageism, and sexism—as "forms of human blindness" (e.g., *Sister Outsider* 45, *Cancer Journals* 12 and 14), a disability that her own severely limited eye sight had given a bodily resonance since her youth. But rather than summoning her physical condition to describe her own limited sight, her language called to mind the active and symbolic character of anyone's willed inability to see or recognize others: "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, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism" (*Cancer Journals* 21, *Sister Outsider* 42). A commonplace manifestation of bias is to look through, past, and around despised or devalued others. In her view, Black women, both as individuals and a group, were "deeply scarred" by "virulent hostility" and hatred in U.S. culture (*Sister Outsider* 151). Her emphasis on being "scarred" visualized a bodily trace of previous physical injuries to portray analogous harms from bias offences, which do sometimes extend to physical assault, injury, and their legacies. Even if executed through vivid words or symbolic deeds, discrimination can nonetheless injure a person's symbolic sense of place, belonging, and security.

Lorde's public advocacy featured bodily experiences and senses, activities and desires ranging from dancing, birthing, and working to writing poetry and "moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love" (*Sister Outsider* 58). She recognized, moreover, that powerful emotions such as anger, fear, affection, and what she termed "the erotic" ordinarily have powerful bodily dimensions, too. To deal effectively with her fear of others' hostility, Lorde claimed, "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" (*Cancer*

*Journals* 23, *Sister Outsider* 44), a line that might have special resonance for people familiar with fatigue, depression, and despair as both emotional and physiological consequences of prolonged ordeals or experiences of terror. In her journal and an essay, she wrote that sometimes she was “metabolizing hatred like a daily bread” (*Sister Outsider* 152), a disquieting bodily metaphor in that it suggested feeding on hatred.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as she recognized in her 1973 poem, “For Each of You,” “Everything can be used / except what is wasteful / (you will need / to remember this when you are accused of destruction)” (*Sister Outsider* 127, *Collected* 59). In this regard, her “metabolizing” of others’ hatred reversed its potentially devastating bodily and symbolic valences by refusing to internalize them and instead converted them into insights of abiding value. She spoke in public concerning potential uses for both the erotic and anger. Neither of these, she stressed, could be experienced second hand, and both, she argued, could become empowering resources, despite the stigmas associated with being either erotic or angry (see *Sister Outsider* 53–59, 124–33). For Lorde, her embodied invention provided a means to enact the transformation of such powerful feelings and bodily experiences into sources of poetic insight in the form of spoken or written language, symbolic deeds to be communicated to others as potential resources for community activism.

Perhaps because Lorde’s own body needed, throughout her entire lifetime, to survive diverse discriminatory, oppressive, and supremacist deeds, she was synthetically able to recognize practices adversely affecting varied groups so similarly, but not identically, that in her rhetorical invention those practices, or symbolic deeds, became a potential common ground among vulnerable communities—regardless of others’ tidy distinctions and clear hierarchies among oppressions. On some occasions, she commented on the necessity of resisting certain fragmenting pressures to sort out and give priority to specific components of her identity. In a speech during 1980, for example, Lorde commented:

As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. 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 externally imposed definition. (*Sister Outsider* 120–21)

This idea was thematic in Lorde’s public advocacy. And yet, Lorde nonetheless felt tensions between self and other, even within already vulnerable social groups, because diverse minority communities are capable of practicing bias across other social differences. In her *Cancer Journals*, she wrote in an entry on October 23, 1979, “I am defined as other in every group I’m a part of. The outsider, both strength and weakness. Yet without community there is cer-

tainly no liberation, no future, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between me and my oppression" (12–13).

While, with evident ambivalence, Lorde both recognized and resisted such fracturing pressures, and while she nonetheless acknowledged differences within vulnerable social groups, on other occasions she sometimes transposed explicit parallels from one group's commonplace experiences to shed light on other, overlapping groups' concerns (e.g., see *Sister Outsider* 113, 114–15, and *Burst* 21).<sup>2</sup> For example, to encourage Black men and women to comprehend the terror that lesbians routinely experienced from publicly heterosexual populations, including Black heterosexuals, she wrote about bodily presence in an essay for the *Black Scholar's* readership: "To the racist, Black people are so powerful that the presence of one can contaminate a whole lineage; to the heterosexist, lesbians are so powerful that the presence of one can contaminate the whole sex" (*Sister Outsider* 51). Her rhetorical technique of foregrounding many Black people's firsthand understanding of racism provided the *Black Scholar's* audience with an experiential basis for common ground with a similar, but not identical, pattern of exaggerated fear that lesbians and gay men encounter routinely, regardless of race. Sometimes such bias was performed by Black people in ways that consequently rehearsed and perpetuated the oppressive practice, thereby harming both overlapping groups by keeping the practice available for use (which was her point).

In summary, Lorde featured corporeal experiences in her bodily metaphors to make abstract and intangible ideas—such as discrimination and bias—vivid and present to her audiences, whether as "bruises" or "blindness." Her rhetoric portrayed bodily experiences and activities, such as feeding or dancing, to characterize specific moments in her embodied invention. An illustration of this was her active "metabolizing" of others' hatred into her own life-affirming nourishment and, ultimately, into her public advocacy. To Lorde, emotions entailed both psychological and bodily dimensions, especially when they were internalized as responses to others' deeds. She drew on bodily experiences of her activities and emotions (ranging from the "uses of anger" to "the erotic") to suggest common ground across differences, to identify similar practices adversely impacting diverse groups, and to encapsulate her ideas about public and political matters. Examples of the latter included evoking "the erotic" to criticize capitalism or "the uses of anger" to characterize intellectual labor during collaboration with others.

Yet using language and symbolic deeds to portray bodily experiences, whether metaphorically or literally, in public advocacy was complicated for Lorde's embodied invention in that experiences and representations of them are always informed by inherited ideologies. This factor made it necessary for her explicitly to connect the personal and the political with exacting discernment. Fraught with hazards precisely because of their ideological dimensions, the language and symbolic actions that Lorde used to convey her bodily experiences meant situating herself explicitly within different, overlapping groups, whose demographic affiliations contributed to fracturing pres-

tures and double binds (such as “choosing” between the extremes of isolation and imagined community), even as she sought to sort out what it meant to be a Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, mother of two, including one boy, in an interracial relationship. Yet, Lorde found nonetheless powerful corporeal resources for her embodied invention precisely through her varied and multiple relationships to others. Drawing explicitly on her recognition of her plural selves, she would transpose insights from one sociological group’s commonplace experiences onto another’s as potential common ground or, at least, the recognition of similar social practices.

## CORPOREAL EXPERIENCES AS POTENTIAL COMMON GROUND

To illustrate some further observations concerning Lorde’s embodied invention, I have selected three quotations, all taken from her 1980 book, *The Cancer Journals*, which chronicled the poet’s experiences of undergoing a mastectomy (for essays on breast cancer in Lorde’s *oeuvre*, see Wear and Hartman). The first excerpt is her entry for December 29, 1978: “What is there possibly left for us to be afraid of, after we have dealt face to face with death and not embraced it? Once I accept the existence of dying, as a life process, who can ever have power over me again?” (25). Her poignant, maxim-like reflection fused powerful personal emotions, such as the fear of death, with her public reasoning concerning her entwined bodily and symbolic experiences of vulnerability and power. A post-mastectomy woman, Lorde articulated insights concerning her own prospects for continued living in ways that synthesized idealism and materialism, mind and corporeal body. But note, too, how Lorde shifted among pronouns: “What is there possibly left for *us* to be afraid of, after *we* have dealt face to face with death and not embraced it? Once *I* accept the existence of dying, as a life process, who can ever have power over *me* again?” (emphasis added). Who are the *we* and the *us*? And, just as important, who is the *I* and the *me*?

I want to suggest that all these pronouns were ambiguous and evocative in suggesting a corporeal common ground with her audiences of diverse women. Lorde’s pronouns tapped a densely woven combination of rhetorical concepts that here I will only mention: presence (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 116–120; Gross), experience (Scott), enactment (Campbell and Jamieson), performance (Austin), habitus (Bourdieu), and embodiment (Morris). Her pronouns, moreover, pertained to the activity of speaking for and about others—sometimes inhabiting categories along with her as one of her audience members, other times noting the differences between them (Alcoff). This activity entailed risks of appropriation and false identification on the one hand or exaggerated barricades of difference and division on the other (Spelman). And yet, Lorde was emphatic that limitations of personal experience should not be allowed to become an excuse for disengagement with others, because it was one among varied ways of learning and knowing. She noticed, for example, the absence of literature by “women of Color” in



women's studies courses, because of the "excuse" that "they are too difficult to understand, or that classes cannot 'get into' them because they come out of experiences that are 'too different.'" She added with incisive, evident humor,

I have heard this argument presented by white women of otherwise quite clear intelligence, women who seem to have no trouble at all teaching and reviewing work that comes out of the vastly different experiences of Shakespeare, Molière, Dostoyefsky, and Aristophanes. Surely, there must be some other explanation. (*Sister Outsider* 117)

Yet experience, to Lorde, was a touchstone, resource, or fount for generating her poems, essays, open letters, political pamphlets, speeches, and "biomythography." In a 1983 interview with Karla Jay, Lorde commented on this last term, "biomythography," which she coined in 1982 to describe *Zami*, a book-length recollection of being young, Black, and lesbian in New York City during the 1950s. Lorde objected to Jay's questioning about a "biomythography" being "accurate" by affirming, somewhat defensively, that, while the experiences in the book were not necessarily only her own, they were "accurate" representations of her life experiences and the lives of those close to her:

But I am giving an accurate account of a time and a place, of a connection between black women with African roots, in terms of how we raise our children, how we maintain strength, how we find ourselves, the question of the Black Goddess, the creator, in all of us, what happens with home life. (Jay 110, see especially 109–10)

Lorde's position might have anticipated certain particulars in Joan W. Scott's insights about evidence from experience in that the very process of naming and describing life experiences for any "I" is necessarily ideological and communal, if only because the language and available narratives are inherited, cultural resources. As such, they transcend any individual's experiences and become necessary conditions for communicating about them. Lorde's "I" is consciously composed of plural "selves" and is communal, not merely individual (e.g., *Cancer Journals* 15). She asserted in *The Cancer Journals*, "I could die of difference, or live—myriad selves" (11). Lorde's "we" is diverse, particular, and social. Despite the fact that she did sometimes speak as a woman about "women" in general, her "we" is not necessarily essentialist, because she did regularly differentiate within such demographic groups (e.g., see *Cancer Journals* 10).<sup>3</sup>

Lorde's attention to differences within social groups can be illustrated with a second excerpt, also taken from *The Cancer Journals*, which consists of Lorde's first two sentences from the introduction: "Each woman responds to the crisis that breast cancer brings to her life out of a whole pattern, which is the design of who she is and how her life has been lived. The weave of her everyday existence is the training ground for how she handles crisis" (9). These opening lines focused on gender as a cultural factor in women's socialization as a potential resource for inventing each woman's particular response

to undergoing a mastectomy. In other words, gender socialization and biological sex blur together differently through each woman's experience, depending on the varied particularities of each woman's life situation. As I read Lorde's first few pages, beginning with denial ("nothing much has occurred"), "imposed silence," "anger and pain and fear," "isolation," "shame" and, at the same time, the difficult processes of coming to "voice," becoming visible and being "recognized," naming one's experiences for oneself to be "respected" and to enter into community, reclaiming agency and power, working in community as embattled, if wounded, "warriors," I began to ponder a more focused question: In what specific ways, if any, were Lorde's earlier experiences of becoming a life-affirming Black lesbian a potential resource for her embodied invention in dealing with breast cancer?

Let's turn now to a third excerpt, also from the introduction to *The Cancer Journals*: "imposed silence about any area of our lives is a tool for separation and powerlessness" (9). When Lorde made these comments concerning the "travesty of prosthesis" (9) and, later, when she poignantly refused a Reach for Recovery volunteer's emphatic expectation that she conceal her amputation with a pale, pink, false breast for the sake of "the morale of the office" (59), did Lorde's life experiences as life-affirming Black lesbian shape the contours of her rhetorical invention, her embodied, generative response by words and deeds to the crisis concerning breast cancer? I believe that it did, and the impetus for this essay evolved out of that conviction and, later, by extension, the broader ramifications for reflection on embodied invention throughout Lorde's entire career as a public advocate. The next section considers Lorde's embodied invention as a Black lesbian, an invention that helped generate her insightful, provocative views on breast cancer.

## **BLACK LESBIAN EXPERIENCES AS A POWERFUL RESOURCE FOR EMBODIED INVENTION**

This section explores how Lorde drew on her particular experiences as a Black lesbian as an invaluable resource for her embodied rhetorical invention in dealing with breast cancer. For instance, just as invisibility of lesbians tended (and still does) to make such women vulnerable and isolated from each other, Lorde commented on how breast cancer survivors' use of prosthesis made them invisible to each other and, consequently, vulnerable and isolated from communities of similarly situated women. Just as lesbianism, when kept secret or internalized as shameful, made the prospects of meaningful political or social change minute, so too the secrecy and internalized shame surrounding breast cancer severely circumscribed women's ability to change adverse medical practices and harmful cultural norms. The discrepancies between appearance and authentic selves and the battling for survival against all odds likewise were commonalities suggesting that her earlier experiences with becoming visible as a lesbian informed her later sensibility on

becoming visible as a cancer survivor. As an integral part of their liberation struggles, moreover, both groups needed also to confront their own complicity by comporting with externally imposed expectations (on complicity, see Mathison; McPhail; Strine).<sup>4</sup>

And yet, Lorde suffused her experiences as a Black lesbian in particular with those of being a woman generally in U.S. culture to conclude that, for her, prosthesis was both a metaphor and an index of women's predicament within a patriarchal culture. After her confrontation with a Reach for Recovery volunteer, Lorde observed: "As I sat in my doctor's office trying to order my perceptions of what had just occurred, I realized that the attitude towards prosthesis after breast cancer is an index of this society's attitudes towards women in general as decoration and externally defined sex object" (*Cancer Journals* 60). That this external expectation was being imposed on Lorde by another woman dramatized differences between these women, even though each of them had endured a mastectomy. The conflict also illustrated the capacity of one woman to oppress another woman because of internalized, cultural conventions. Indeed, in Lorde's view, the volunteer's expectations became a synecdoche for those of the culture. She explained, "Attitudes toward the necessity for prostheses after breast surgery are merely a reflection of those attitudes within our society towards women in general as objectified and depersonalized sexual conveniences" (*Cancer Journals* 64). The "pale pink breast-shaped pad" was also the "wrong color" for her (*Cancer Journals* 42, 44) because its color presumed whiteness, which added racism to the conflict between women.

Moreover, to Lorde, use of a prosthesis meant sacrificing her own internal needs and desires for embodied presence to accommodate the externally imposed expectations of others: "The real truth is that certain other people feel better with that lump stuck into my bra, because they do not have to deal with me nor themselves in terms of mortality nor in terms of difference" (*Cancer Journals* 64). Beyond Lorde's recognition of others' capacity for denial with its ramifications for complacency, Lorde amplified additional, practical consequences of this difference between internal needs and external expectations:

In order to keep me available to myself, and able to concentrate my energies upon the challenges of those worlds through which I move, I must consider what my body means to me. I must also separate those external demands about how I look and feel to others, from what I really want for my own body, and how I feel to my selves. (*Cancer Journals* 65)

The use of a prosthesis, for Lorde, colluded with externally imposed expectations for women, generally, and for lesbians, in particular, to be invisible, to conform, and to fit in with received notions of bodily presence, appearance, and public conduct. All of this was imposed on a post-mastectomy woman immediately after a surgery when, in Lorde's opinion, reclaiming agency and embodied presence were paramount.

At length, Lorde commented on certain tensions between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, by contemplating these stark alternatives in

relationship to internalized shame, a term that links a commonplace, internalized response to cancer, regardless of sexuality, with certain taboos concerning lesbianism. Notice the layers of potential meanings in her comment: "A mastectomy is not a guilty act that must be hidden in order for me to regain acceptance or protect the sensibilities of others. Pretense has never brought about lasting change or progress" (*Cancer Journals* 65). Guilt and shame, concealment of certain deeds to secure a false "acceptance" by others, valuing the "sensibilities of others" above one's own needs—these phrases powerfully transposed commonplace experiences among many lesbians at the time onto post-mastectomy women's experiences as potential common ground in Lorde's rhetorical invention. She expanded: "Prosthesis offers the empty comfort of 'Nobody will know the difference.' But it is that very difference which I wish to affirm, because I have lived it, and survived it, and wish to share that strength with other women" (*Cancer Journals* 61). Then, in a shift of pronouns from "I" to "we," Lorde generalized: "If we are to translate the silence surrounding breast cancer into language and action against this scourge, then the first step is that women with mastectomies must become visible to each other" (*Cancer Journals* 61). Such visibility to each other was consequential for entering into communities positioned to deal meaningfully with breast cancer and, just as important, to affirm personal pride and worth in the aftermath of surgery. In contrast, Lorde amplified the deleterious ramifications of complicity:

By accepting the mask of prosthesis, one-breasted women proclaim ourselves as insufficients dependent upon pretense. We reinforce our own isolation and invisibility from each other, as well as the false complacency of a society which would rather not face the results of its own insanities. In addition, we withhold that visibility and support from one another which is such an aid to perspective and self-acceptance. (*Cancer Journals* 61)

As a post-mastectomy woman, Lorde stressed the life-enhancing value of bodily presence as visibly different—one-breasted or no-breasted—women, while she called attention to another tension between the extremes of difference, on the one hand, and apparent similarity or conformity to tacit norms, on the other. To amplify this tension, she gave it an additional rhetorical edge by turning to the alternatives between the authentic or mere appearance. She observed:

Women have been programmed to view our bodies only in terms of how they look and feel to others, rather than how they feel to ourselves, and how we wish to use them. We are surrounded by media images portraying women as essentially decorative machines of consumer function, constantly doing battle with rampant decay. (*Cancer Journals* 64)

The stark alternative between authenticity and appearance gave Lorde's readership yet another alternative between reclaiming agency and acquiescing with passivity, as well as between being a self-defining adult or accepting

infantilization by others (e.g., *Cancer Journals* 64). Lorde affirmed: "I cannot wear a prosthesis right now because it feels like a lie more than merely a costume, and I have already placed this, my body under threat, seeking new ways of strength and trying to find the courage to tell the truth" (*Cancer Journals* 60–61). Openness and candor, visibility and pride, integrity and self-respect—Lorde apparently transposed all of these life-affirming qualities from her prior experience as a Black lesbian during her subsequent embodied invention concerning breast cancer.

Rejecting the appearance of normalcy, the public "lie" through a concealment made possible by prosthesis, Lorde turned to the value of public engagement and group strength as stark alternatives to living in secrecy, shame, and vulnerable isolation. She averred:

For as we open ourselves more and more to the genuine conditions of our lives, women become less and less willing to tolerate those conditions unaltered, or to passively accept external and destructive controls over our lives and our identities. Any short-circuiting of this quest for self-definition and power, however well-meaning and under whatever guise, must be seen as damaging, for it keeps the post-mastectomy woman in a position of perpetual and secret insufficiency, infantilized and dependent for her identity upon an external definition by appearance. In this way women are kept from expressing the power of our knowledge and experience, and through that expression, developing strengths that challenge those structures within our lives that support the Cancer Establishment. (*Cancer Journals* 58)

Consistent with this insight, the final section of *The Cancer Journals* moved from Lorde's personal experience of a mastectomy to contemplate economic and other systemic roots of breast cancer and its treatment. Perhaps because it is profitable, the American Cancer Society, Lorde suggested, "has consistently focused upon treatment rather than prevention of cancer" (*Cancer Journals* 71).

Lorde's embodied rhetoric enacted her decision to become an active, wounded warrior, not a passive, suffering victim, by affirming: "When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less important whether or not I am unafraid" (*Cancer Journals* 15). She asserted:

I refuse to have my scars hidden or trivialized behind lambswool [*sic*] or silicone gel. I refuse to be reduced in my own eyes or in the eyes of others from warrior to mere victim, simply because it might render me a fraction more acceptable or less dangerous to the still complacent, those who believe if you cover up a problem it ceases to exist. I refuse to hide my body simply because it might make a woman-phobic world more comfortable. (*Cancer Journals* 60)

By her presence as a one-breasted woman warrior, explicitly inspired by the Amazons of Dahomey (*Cancer Journals* 35, also 28, 45, *Sister Outsider* 49), Lorde enacted her own liberation, overtly rejecting complicity with her oppression by

her bodily presence and by offering to her readers a model in public action whose words and deeds depended on her embodied rhetorical invention.

## CONCLUSION

Although this necessarily brief essay has concentrated on how Lorde's Black lesbian sensibility became an embodied resource for her particular response to breast cancer, there were other periods of momentous changes in her living that permeated her public advocacy. Throughout Lorde's lifetime, she negotiated difficult conflicts between being both an individual and an underrecognized part of various vulnerable communities as a Black, a woman, a lesbian, a feminist, a socialist, and a mother, whose public virago persona was that of a wounded warrior. At present, it is possible to identify at least four periods of deep and intense transformation in Lorde's embodied invention. The first of these sea changes in her sensibility occurred in 1968, during the six weeks that she was a Poet-in-Residence at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, where she taught Black students and first met Frances Clayton (see *Sister Outsider* 88–93). It was then that she actively and dramatically sought to draw upon the diverse aspects of herself in synthesizing, integrated ways, not only because she was working with “young Black poets,” but also because it was “a crisis situation” and “a siege situation,” with white people acting out of racial hostility overtly nearby.<sup>5</sup> A second sea change in Lorde's bodily basis for her rhetorical invention transpired in the early 1970s, about the time that she published her expressly lesbian, erotic “Love Poem” in *Ms Magazine* (*Collected* 127, see *Sister Outsider* 98–99). Though she believed that she had not been secretive concerning her lesbian sexuality—and certain earlier poems, such as “Martha” and “On a Night of the Full Moon,” attest to this (*Collected* 37–44, 172, 198–205)—“Love Poem” was a public statement with profound ramifications for her as a faculty member at John Jay College (*Sister Outsider* 98). This poem also had consequential ramifications for her relationship to her publisher at Broadside Press, which had launched the careers of several accomplished Black poets, mostly men (see Thompson 130–31).<sup>6</sup> The third and most dramatic sea change in Lorde's bodily basis for her rhetorical invention resulted from her confrontation with cancer and its ramifications for her own mortality. A fourth pivotal period is more difficult to pinpoint precisely by year, but its broad outlines extend from the late 1970s until the mid-1980s, when she spoke often as a featured poet or keynote speaker at feminist conferences dominated by white and heterosexual women. The most dramatic, public conflict occurred at *The Second Sex Conference* in 1979 (see *Sister Outsider* 110–13), but its ramifications persisted for a time as she sorted through the magnitude of racism, classism, and heterosexism within women's communities as obstacles and barricades for her work. A more comprehensive exploration of Lorde's embodied invention would need to consider each of these precipitating moments in her living, and possibly others.

In a preliminary way, this essay has proposed and sketched the idea of embodied invention, primarily by characterizing it as a rhetorical process for generating public advocacy. Embodied invention draws extensively and explicitly on personal experiences as a resource during the production of ideas and deeds to be expressed through language and symbolic action to others. Such embodied invention for use in public address explicitly reflects on the sociological and political factors impinging ideologically on the rhetor's experiences and plural identities within a specific history and culture. In other words, embodied invention attends to personal experiences as intrinsically social and political, however personal or individual experiences might seem, if only in a bodily or corporeal way. Embodied invention tends to recognize, moreover, that language and symbolic actions provide the cultural conditions for the expression, representation, or communication of experiences to others. Consequently, while experiences might seem individual or merely personal, they are nonetheless profoundly cultural as they are recognized, understood, and portrayed through communal resources.

Future scholarship on embodied invention, so defined and considered, will need to engage such matters as standpoint epistemology, the idea that people construct what they know from specific locations, histories, and life experiences. In addition, future scholarship might examine the complicated processes of centering on an advocate's affiliations with his or her communities rather than either assimilating uncritically with others or accepting detrimental representations by others as different, marginal, or other—processes that also surface within apparently dominant communities, however unnoticed. Last, but not least, scholarship on embodied invention should scrutinize relationships among such rhetorical concepts as presence, experience, enactment, performance, habitus, embodiment, and identification. This list of germane concepts is meant to be evocative and suggestive, not exhaustive or conclusive.

Embodied invention can be situated on one end of a continuum for varied approaches to rhetorical invention with the other end of this continuum consisting of disembodied, impersonal, and abstract approaches, such as the classical *topoi*. Attention to embodied invention can help critics of public advocacy to better synthesize an author's personal biography in descriptive accounts of her or his public address, especially transformations evident in deeds and words during moments of major change or precipitating events. In the case of a speaker such as Audre Lorde, who was situated politically and socially as different against oftentimes unspoken or unrecognized norms, which tended to presume that power resided within whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, affluence, and the like, it might be particularly evident that there were systemic, cultural factors impinging on her plural identities. And yet such embodied invention might nonetheless be particularly powerful precisely when it goes unnoticed as presumed or normative, a factor suggesting that future scholarship on embodied invention should concentrate on how presumptions about whiteness, maleness, heterosexuality, affluence, and the

like may inform the embodied invention by relatively privileged speakers, writers, and social activists who, at times, might presume to speak or write in a universal voice.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lorde's germane journal entries on March 6, 1983, were apparently for "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger" (the phrase appears again in *Sister Outsider* 152). Lorde's journal for December 21, 1982–August 7/8, 1983 is held at the Spelman College Archives, Spelman College, Georgia. This specific journal is useful for appreciating her complex views concerning the uses of anger.
- <sup>2</sup> Two journal entries made explicit Lorde's conscious transposition across different and/or overlapping social groups. The earliest of the two was in a journal for the period extending from November 1977 until May 30, 1978, in which Lorde endeavored on February 13, 1978, to draw on ideas concerning a "Black Aesthetic" to point to the existence of a "Black female aesthetic." Later, in another journal entry on June 21, 1984, concerning the "Poet as Outsider," Lorde explicitly transposed ideas concerning the "Black Aesthetic" into reflections on "the lesbian aesthetic." She wrote, "In the same way as the De Americanization of Black People lies at the heart of the Black Aesthetic so does the de malc ization [*sic*: there are spaces after "de" and "malc"] of women lie[s] at the heart of the lesbian aesthetic. Categories cross & merge." These two journals, which are held at the Spelman College Archives, are identified currently with round blue stickers numbered "26" and "62" respectively (which are perhaps a temporary means of identifying them until they are processed at the archives).
- <sup>3</sup> For a concise discussion of the plural selves and differences within social groups, see Hammond 26–44, especially 30–31.
- <sup>4</sup> Because some might find it hard to recognize Black lesbianism as a resource for dealing with breast cancer, I have endeavored in this section to provide ample quotations as evidence to support the section's central claim. I have also made a conscious decision to keep Lorde's voice in the foreground; her voice is deliberately more predominant than my own.
- <sup>5</sup> Lorde made the comments on a video among materials transferred by Gloria Joseph to Audre Lorde's papers held at the Spelman College Archives, Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia.
- <sup>6</sup> Julius E. Thompson calculated that "Broadside published at least 270 men and 140 women writers during its first decade. Men were clearly the dominant group published, and authored 66 percent of all Broadside publications produced in the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies, compared to only 34 percent for women" (126). On the political situation for Lorde, see *Sister Outsider* 98–99 and De Veaux, *Warrior Poet* 130–31 and 141.

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