Standing in the Intersection: Feminist Voices, Feminist Practices in Communication Studies

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Chapter 5

Intersecting Audiences:
Public Commentary Concerning
Audre Lorde's Speech, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”

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We have chosen each other and the edge of each other's battles.

—Audre Lorde

In Audre Lorde's numerous public speeches from the mid-1970s until her death at St. Croix in 1992, she usually described herself as a Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, and mother. For decades, Lorde lived in New York in an interracial family—initially, during the early 1960s, with Edwin A. Rollins, a white gay man who became the father of her two children, Elizabeth and Jonathan; later, for almost two decades, with a white professional woman, Francis Clayton, who helped her to raise her children on Staten Island. An internationally acclaimed poet and political activist, Lorde addressed the topics of race, sexuality, age, sex, and economic class in a wide range of fora and publication outlets: on occasion, single broadside poems and, more typically, pamphlets and books released by small presses. Lorde's entire body of public advocacy was complex, insightful, and instructive in commenting on racism, sexism, ageism, heterosexism, and other varieties of often overlapping biases in U.S. culture during the later half of the twentieth century.

In general, overlapping lesbian feminist and Black feminist social movements for justice constituted the heart of Lorde's extensive network of allies, colleagues, and younger admirers. Their exchanges,
dialogues, and disputes enriched Lorde's understanding of "interlocking oppressions," as interacting systems of power were called years before "multiple jeopardy, multiple consciousness," "matrices of domination," "compounding differences," and "intersectionality" emerged as resources to guide critical analysis of political and social conditions. A panoramic view of the primary audiences for Lorde's scholar-activism can be inferred from magazines, journals, and books for feminist, lesbian, and Black readerships to which she contributed during the 1970s and 1980s. As a cofounder in 1980 of Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, Lorde endeavored with allies Barbara Smith and Chicana-lesbian-feminists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa to make it possible for diverse "women of Color" to publish their poetry, essays, and other artistic works without constantly adapting their consciousness to publication outlets that were predominantly male, white, or heterosexual. Their strategy of ownership of a press was informed by the Black arts movement, and, more fundamentally, by their recognition of what it meant to own the means of production within capitalism, which these radical feminists usually challenged in their literary and artistic works.

During the mid- to late 1970s, some of Lorde's closest allies were members of the Combahee River Collective, who, in the classic 1978 manifesto, affirmed: "The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives." The metaphor of "systems of oppression" as "interlocking" recurred during the late 1970s and 1980s, and this sensibility suffused Lorde's public advocacy in that she held that "racism, sexism and homophobia are inseparable." Like Barbara Smith and other Black feminist scholars during the late 1970s and 1980s, Lorde saw that, as Smith generalized, "Black feminism, if it is to provide sound analysis of Black women's situation, must incorporate an understanding of economic oppression and racism as well as of sexism and heterosexism." Consequently, Lorde was both an advocate and a model for explorations of interacting systems of power more than a decade before Kimberlé Crenshaw's proposal for intersectionality for analyzing public advocacy in legal systems.

This chapter concentrates on Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality" to scrutinize how diverse audiences have actively interacted with Lorde's views by their public commentary on published
versions of her 1980 speech "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." This speech concerning "the erotic" is the most often reprinted of Lorde's orations. Because of its popularity, it is possible to ascertain patterns in public commentaries on her speech that evidence intersectionality as a relational factor between a speaker and her audience. This chapter centers primarily on Lorde's self-identifications as woman, Black, lesbian, and socialist, as these multiple components of her identity intersected with her audiences in her radical advocacy concerning "the erotic." I argue that public commentaries usually evoked Lorde's speech as illustration, amplification, or support for the other authors' claims about the erotic, women, pornography, spirituality, or power in ways that usually deflected attention from Lorde's socialism, lesbian sexuality, and race. One major factor that contributed to these patterns of commentary was the authorizing publication outlets' power to deliver readerships that, however diverse, consisted primarily of white, heterosexual women. Moreover, Lorde's speech had supplemental meanings for women who recognized pervasive problems posed by patriarchy in the United States, even as the surface text allowed for varied identifications among a range of diverse auditors interested in reclaiming "the erotic" for women. While recognizing the value of Crenshaw's concept to scrutinize how multiple components of an individual's embodied identity can interact with systems of power, this chapter also evokes an earlier concept of "interlocking oppressions" to silhouette some contours and concerns attending "intersectionality" for criticism of radical advocacy in general. Although each metaphor for interacting systems of power has value for communication scholars attending to the dynamic relationships between an advocate and her audiences, the early work on interlocking oppressions offers communication scholars something with regard to Lorde's advocacy that intersectionality does not precisely capture.

"Uses of the Erotic" has been described as "a feminist classic," "virtually canonical," and "groundbreaking." "Uses of the Erotic" is significant to intersectional scholars for another reason. Its key terms, "the erotic," "pornography," and "power," are emotionally charged, ambiguous, and politically and ideologically loaded. To reclaim "the erotic," Lorde significantly redefined its meanings and, in the process, she redefined "the pornographic." Lorde's speech illuminated a patriarchal culture's ramifications for "the erotic" and spotlighted capitalism's implications for erotic satisfaction as experienced from artistic labor. Lorde located pornography at the intersections of patriarchy and capitalism, which she viewed as interlocked, systemic obstacles to women's erotic satisfaction. Yet
“the pornographic,” to her, was not simply the graphic, sexually explicit, commercial product produced for profit, typically by men, to the detriment of women. Lorde’s expansive sense of pornography encompassed specific modes or styles of human relationships characterized by “plasticized sensation” and “abuse.” The pornographic, as the opposite of “the erotic,” was likewise complex in its reclaimed meanings.

Lorde defined the erotic to encompass sexual pleasure, as in her description of “moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love” [58]. Her sense of “the erotic,” then, allowed for graphic imagery, but not of varieties that dehumanized women. Yet Lorde defined the erotic as much more comprehensive than sexual pleasure in several passages—for example, when she asserted, “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” [54]. When Lorde identified specific examples of “erotically satisfying experience,” she mentioned as specific instances “dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea” [57]. To Lorde, reclaiming “the erotic” in its capacious sense was a means for women to recover human agency, despite systemic obstacles posed primarily, in her analysis, by patriarchy and capitalism: “For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within” [58].

To begin my analysis, I identify the two major fora in which Lorde delivered her speech, a radio broadcast, and the various publication outlets that, by reprinting her speech, made her ideas available to others. This initial step furthers the twin objectives of identifying precisely Lorde’s diverse, overlapping audiences and the numerous reprints they have actively interpreted. Moreover, Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality entails attention to specific organizations [such as publication outlets] as systems of power within which multiple components of an embodied identity interact in intricate, at times unanticipated, ways, by foregrounding certain components of an identity while effacing others that may be as germane to a message, if not more so. I then turn to examples of commentary to illustrate broader patterns among those interactions, beginning with economic systems and then considering sexuality and race before contemplating how women’s alienation under patriarchy surfaced in a recurring pattern of reception to Lorde’s speech. One result of
this sequence will be documentation for how intersectionality was a noteworthy factor in how audiences interacted with Lorde's ideas. Another outcome is a better sense of certain risks and limitations of using intersectionality for critical studies of radical advocacy, which, by its very definition, actively sought changes more fundamental and extensive than reform of existing systems.

INSTITUTIONS AUTHORIZING AND CIRCULATING LORDE'S SPEECH

Several organizations featured Audre Lorde's public speech as well as its subsequent radio broadcast and numerous published reprints, making her remarks available to a range of listening and reading audiences interested in feminism and the women's liberation movement. It is necessary to consider these occasions and publication outlets, because Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality does not consist simply in an insight that each person's identity has multiple, social components at the level of language, or representation. More precisely, as a consequence, this language or representation situates multiple components of each person's identity within inherited systems of power in ways that, in combination, can have unanticipated or unrecognized consequences that can harm individuals who are oppressed within more than one system. For example, while women as a group are oppressed within a patriarchal system, additional factors in the system pertaining to sexuality, race, and class, for instance, can interact with patriarchy to further subordinate or elevate them within a culture's hierarchies. From this standpoint, each specific speaking forum and publication outlet can be recognized as an institution that enabled some audiences to hear or read Lorde's ideas, while, at the same time, circumscribing recognition of other, overlapping components of her multiple identities such as her socialism, sexuality, and race.

Lorde delivered her remarks concerning "Uses of the Erotic" for public speeches twice—initially on August 25, 1978, to participants at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, an academic conference held at a prestigious women's college, Mount Holyoke College. The immediate audience for Lorde's speech consisted primarily of white, academic women with an intellectual and political interest in women's history. Significantly, the panel's organizer "wanted to ensure that this Berks would include a lesbian session." Because this was the first time in the organization's history that an entire session centered on lesbians, Lorde's treatment of "the erotic" implicated some heterosexual women's discomfort and
hostility for inhibiting erotic satisfaction among women. A caucus on lesbian concerns was formed immediately after the session and, subsequently, extended correspondence pressed issues of explicit recognition of lesbian sexuality in the organization's intellectual labor.\textsuperscript{16}

Three months later, Lorde delivered her speech again during November 17–19, 1978, in San Francisco to the Feminist Perspectives on Pornography conference, sponsored by Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media.\textsuperscript{17} This organization was devoted to establishing linkages between pornography and the dehumanization of women's bodies by promoting public discussions, conducting tours of pornography theaters, confronting those responsible for the production of pornography, distributing monthly newsletters, and sponsoring Take Back the Night Marches—in an endeavor "to put an end to all portrayals of women being bound, raped, tortured, killed, or degraded for sexual stimulation or pleasure. We believe that the constant linking of sexuality and violence is dangerous."\textsuperscript{18} Lorde's second delivery of her speech occurred within a rhetorical and political campaign to expose dangers posed to women by pornography.

Lorde's speech is remarkable among the conference contributions in that she articulated a vision that women could move forward by reclaiming "the erotic." Her speech did not center on merely rejecting or negating pornography. Nor did Lorde's speech promote any legal mechanisms to limit or prohibit pornography, probably because such strategies would have deferred primary responsibility to others who may not have women's concerns at heart, and because she believed, as she affirmed on various occasions, that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Indeed, her earlier 1979 speech with that title had challenged reformist feminists to embrace radical feminism. Her poem "Power" (1976) testified to her outrage concerning law enforcement's misuses of power, as did later poems as "Equal Opportunity" (1986) and "For the Record" (1986) as well as her pamphlet Apartheid U.S.A. (1986).\textsuperscript{19} In regard to radical change, Lorde's sensibility in "Uses of the Erotic" does not mesh ideally with Crenshaw's primary focus on revision of legal systems, because, however worthwhile, to Lorde that sort of primary focus is strategically reformist and seldom radical.

Lorde's speech continued to be disseminated throughout 1979. Pacifica Radio broadcast highlights from the Feminist Perspectives on Pornography conference, under the title "Fair Sex, Fair Game: Women Say No to the Sexual Safari," as well as speeches and panel discussions, among them Lorde's entire speech under the title "Eroticism and Pornography."\textsuperscript{20} Pacifica Radio's broadcasts significantly widened the range of audiences that could hear the views expressed
at the conference. Men and women alike, regardless of their sexual-
ity or race, could hear highlights from the conference, though most
radio listeners for Pacifica would have been progressive and left
leaning in their politics.

The trajectory of the print distribution of Lorde's speech is
equally important. Shortly after Lorde's initial presentation in
1978, Out & Out Books printed the speech text in a pamphlet titled
*Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.* A typeset note inside the
front cover of a second printing of this pamphlet mentioned that
this speech text "was first published in a private edition of 250 cop-
ies for distribution at the Conference on Feminist Perspectives on
Pornography, San Francisco, November 1978." A small, low-budget
press located in Brooklyn, New York, Out & Out Books was founded
by Joan Larkin to publish short pamphlets and anthologies by les-
bian feminist authors, among them Elly Bulkin, Jan Clausen, Jane
Creighton, Bernice Goodman, Marilyn Hacker, Joan Larkin, Adri-
enne Rich, Joanna Russ, and Barbara Smith. Another undated type-
set copy of Lorde's speech was distributed by the Lesbian Feminist
Clearinghouse at Pittsburgh presumably about that time. Because
both of these publishing houses primarily addressed white lesbian
feminists, Lorde's statement on the erotic would presumably have
reiterated similar dynamics of the Berkshire conference in that their
readerships centered on lesbian concerns in dealing with a predomi-
nantly heterosexual culture.

The following year, in 1979, the text of Lorde's speech was
published again in *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Women's Culture,* for
which Lorde was its poetry editor. *Chrysalis* presented itself as
"a magazine of women's culture" and, from its founding, sought to
represent the women's movement as diverse: "Feminism is not a
monolithic movement, but rather includes the experiences, values,
priorities, agendas of women of all lifestyles, ages, and cultural and
economic backgrounds," the magazine affirmed in the initial issue's
front matter. Again, during 1979, *Big Mama Rag,* "a women's jour-
nal" in a newspaper format, published Lorde's speech with a head
note mentioning that it was from the conference in San Francisco.

In 1980, the anthology *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornog-
raphy* published conference contributions by Lorde, and others, as
well as additional essays on pornography. In the introduction, the
anthology's editor commented on the 1978 Feminist Perspectives
on Pornography conference that stimulated the anthology: "Over
5,000 women from thirty states participate and return to their own
communities to continue the work." She characterized the confer-
ence: "For the first time in history, women from across the country
gather to discuss the destructive consequences of pornography, to
exchange information and analysis, and to plan strategies for eliminating pornography." In this anthology, the opposition between the pornographic and the erotic was even more emphatic because of the anthology's title and because of Lorde's speech's placement among numerous essays concentrating on pornography and rape. This anthology, and the Pacifica broadcast, focused on the erotic and pornography in ways that focused attention primarily on white heterosexuality under patriarchy, while, to a degree, eliding Lorde's criticisms of capitalism and her affirmation of Black lesbian sexuality.

In December 1982, Ms. magazine published an excerpted, unauthorized, and disorganized version, which Lorde protested in a January 15 letter to an editor as "a three-paragraph non-sequitur patchwork shred from it, distorting the whole impact of the original essay." Later, in 1984, the speech was included in Lorde's book titled Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde. In 1989, "Uses of the Erotic" was reprinted in the Whole Earth Review. By the early 1990s, Lorde's complete speech had been reprinted at least six times, reaching additional audiences with a range of interests within the women's movement. And, in 1991, the Utne Reader published a lengthy excerpt.

Although these publication outlets varied in their readerships in noteworthy ways, all of them except the Whole Earth Review and Utne Reader consisted primarily of white women interested in the overlapping concerns of liberation and feminism. Only two of the outlets concentrated primarily on white lesbian feminists with progressive or left-of-center politics. To my knowledge at this writing, Lorde's speech concerning "the erotic" has not been published in print outlets primarily for Black readerships. Her speech was omitted from I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde (2009), edited by an accomplished team of Black scholars, who did reprint other works by Lorde from Sister Outsider, A Burst of Light, and elsewhere. Why this is the case is a matter of speculation.

INTERSECTING AUDIENCES: PUBLIC INTERACTIONS WITH LORDE'S SPEECH

The publication outlets for Lorde's speeches made audiences of predominantly white and heterosexual women available to Lorde in consequential ways for interpretations of her speech. Her intersectionality with these audiences both highlighted commonalities and deflected attention from certain differences between them. At the time, it may have been risky or unusual for some of these outlets to
circulate her words, but also relatively conventional and even possibly delightful for others to do so. Among the extensive public responses and interactions with Lorde's speech, race and racism were regularly downplayed in that they usually went unmentioned, presumably because most of her audiences were predominantly white and because Lorde did not allude to race explicitly until well into her speech. Yet, her mention of racism was emphatic. Notably few readers seem to have noticed Lorde's criticisms of capitalism as pornographic in its ramifications for artistic labor, even though Lorde devoted an entire section to this systemic concern.

With regard to intersectionality, Lorde refrained from turning to differences among women until well into her speech. This may have allowed her to build identifications among women, creating allies, before considering factors that might be viewed as divisive or adversarial inasmuch as racism and heterosexism complicated dependable alliances among women. Because Lorde's speech depended heavily on a stark opposition between men and women, it may not be immediately evident that other intersections mattered in audiences' patterns of interaction with her speech. Yet intersectionality accounts for several patterns of public engagement with Lorde's speech. In this next section, I organize the patterns of interaction in public commentaries on Lorde's speech through an intersectional lens, by beginning with economic systems, sexuality, and race before turning to commentary concerning patriarchy's implications for women, because Lorde dealt with these subjects in her speech, and because audiences' responses evinced noteworthy elisions, amplifications, and revisions with regard to capitalism, lesbian sexuality, and racial differences. Consequently, these topics illustrate how intersectionality impacted audiences' interpretations of Lorde's speech.

Economic Systems
Lorde's commitment to socialism was one noteworthy factor evident in her speech. Yet few commentaries have discussed Lorde's criticism of capitalism as antierotic, possibly because few were prepared to question the prevailing economic system's ramifications for artistic labor, and because she did not specifically name the system in which profits took priority over human needs. I am referring here to an entire section on capitalism in which Lorde affirmed: "The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of
that need—the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment” (55, see 58). To Lorde, capitalism was an economic system inhibiting the erotic satisfaction from work insofar as it contributed to production for profit, not pleasure in the producing. However, almost all commentaries on Lorde’s speech have ignored her analysis of an economic system’s impact on “the erotic,” as Lorde defined it, usually concentrating instead on sexism under patriarchy. On the one hand, it may have been too risky, daunting, or simply bewildering for Lorde’s audiences to experience capitalism in general or labor in particular as pornographic. On the other hand, envisioning labor as erotically satisfying in Lorde’s sense might have seemed utopian or metaphoric. In the opposition between capitalism and socialism, the dichotomizing qualities of Lorde’s radical advocacy might, moreover, have seemed too reductive for her audiences, because some profitable work may be pleasurable and primarily satisfy fundamental human needs.

One commentary that did focus on economic factors was by Kathlyn Breazeale, who generalized, “Poet Audre Lorde suggests the connection between suppressed energy and oppression.” Breazeale continued, “Our passion, both spiritual and physical, draws us into acknowledging that we are connected to others. This is important because corporate structures cannot be dismantled by individuals. We must acknowledge that communities have created structures of exploitation, and therefore communities must work together to dismantle these structures, and to create new ones of mutually enhancing relationships.” Other writers might have an economic analysis in view; however, they offer only vague references to “genuine selfhood and power,” “visionary social change,” or “genuine change.”

From the deafening silence otherwise concerning capitalism, one could infer reasonably that patterns of intersectionality and differences between the speaker and her audiences’ convictions concerning capitalism impacted most commentaries on Lorde’s speech about the erotic as power.

Even so, some insightful commentaries concentrated on interconnections between the symbolic and material or corporeal, as exemplified by embodied experiences of the erotic and the pornographic. Anne Balsamo wrote:

Feminist theorists have traditionally asserted that female bodies are not one-dimensional surfaces which bear easy-to-read meanings. Indeed, feminist writers honor the body as the site of the production and reproduction of fragmented
identities and affinities—in short, the site of material practice. They identify the place and meanings of the female body in mass culture, sometimes to reassert the importance of female sexuality (for example, Audre Lorde [1978]); sometimes to propose a radically new form of cultural production—writing the body, or the body as instrument; and sometimes to articulate "the site for the coming together of feminist theory and politics."34

Because these corporeal and symbolic bodies have a sexuality, race, age, and class—among other factors—reading the bodily basis of Lorde's meanings is more complex than an emphasis on sex alone might be understood to imply. In connection with pornography as a commercial product, moreover, economic exchanges cannot be neatly separated from corporeal bodies so integral to such transactions nor can these combined material components be distinguished altogether from specifically symbolic aspects of bodies. Further interpretive difficulties may have arisen from the bodily basis for Lorde's claims, because, as she put it, "the erotic cannot be felt second hand" (59). Referring to Lorde's speech, Elizabeth Alexander observed, "Lorde is preoccupied with things bodily: that which is performed upon the body versus what the body performs and asserts."35 Because each body has a sexuality and a race, as Lorde mentioned, the next section turns to these potential intersections among Lorde's audiences of diverse women in relationship to her speech. Recall that Lorde's speech was spoken and distributed to audiences consisting primarily of women who, though diverse in some measure, were predominantly white and heterosexual, while only two reprinted texts circulated primarily among lesbian feminists.

**Sexuality**

Lesbianism represented another aspect of intersectionality in widely varying patterns of commentary on Lorde's speech concerning "the erotic." Certain commentaries probably deflected attention from Lorde's centering on lesbianism, while others have sharpened her point about lesbian sexuality. An illustration of the former was Barbara Sellers-Young, who commented, "The diversity of performing environments and styles reflects the consistent search by women to understand their sensuality. Either consciously or unconsciously, they attempt to discover what Lorde identifies as the female power associated with the erotic."36 Sellers-Young continued, "The power women have found varies from 'turning on' males in a physically
safe situation (restaurants and bellygrams), to the discovery of the
power of the movement styles of specific ethnic groups, and finally
the connection with the power of ancient women's rites and participa-
tion in the creation of new ones." Sellers-Young ignored that it
was unlikely that Lorde was referring to the erotic as the power of
"turning on" males. Had Sellers-Young mentioned Lorde's sexuality,
or her views that the erotic could be understood to extend beyond
sexual pleasures to labor and working conditions, Sellers-Young
would have been less vulnerable to criticism for her appropriation
and erasure of lesbian concerns or misgivings about capitalism.

Among those who sharpened and amplified Lorde's point about
erotic, lesbian sexuality was Evelyn Torton Beck. To frame her state-
ment, Beck remarked, "In 'The Erotic as Power,' Audre Lorde ex-
presses the interrelationship of the many kinds of powers accessible
to us as women, powers that we have been afraid of, because we
have been taught that they are inappropriate to us as women." After
quoting Lorde's comment that "The erotic is a resource within each
of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted
in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling," Beck as-
serted, "Lesbian sexuality is not separable from female sexuality.
Therefore, if feminists who define themselves as heterosexual live
with a fear of lesbianism, they live with a fear of their own possi-
bilities." Additional examples of authors amplifying Lorde's views
on lesbianism included Barbara DiBernard, Marilyn R. Farwell, and
Janice Gould. In commentaries featuring sexuality, the race of
the writers usually went without mention, a signal of presumptive
whiteness. In this regard, racial differences, discussed below, are an-
other noteworthy factor in intersecting and overlapping audience
members' commentary on Lorde's speech.

Race

Lorde faced rhetorical challenges in discussing "the erotic" be-
cause of inherited stereotypes about Black women and lesbians as
overlapping social groups, especially the risks of reproducing ste-
reotypes and distorting insights about the erotic, as Lorde defined
it. Elizabeth Alexander noted, "Images of black people's bodies in
American culture have been either hypersexualized or desexualized
to serve the imaginings and purposes of white American men and
women." A pattern of oversexualizing and desexualizing lesbians is
likewise commonplace in U.S. culture. In other words, overlapping
stereotypes portraying both Black women and lesbians may have had an impact on interpreting Lorde's remarks as various audiences
endeavored to understand her. Alexander stressed, however, that “Eroticism as she defines it has nothing at all to do with how African-American women are conventionally sexualized.”

Women’s Alienation under Patriarchal Aggression

In contrast with omissions, elisions, and amplifications with regard to economic systems, sexuality, and race, intersectionality resulting from understanding women’s alienation under patriarchy appears to have influenced many commentaries on Lorde’s speech, suggesting a broad-based identification between Lorde and her audiences. This pattern of interaction usually concentrated on a binary between the erotic and the pornographic, as well as another binary between living on what Lorde labeled “internal” or “external” directives. Lorde commented on disconnections between mind and body, as well as between self and other, when she remarked, “When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual’s.”

In an essay titled “Numbering the Hairs of Our Heads: Male Social Control and the All-Seeing Male God,” Anne Marie Hunter emphasized exaggerated surveillance by men in abusive relationships with women. Hunter wrote, “In this disconnection, women’s voices and knowledges are lost. Reality becomes shaky and unpredictable. Women experience a profound alienation, confusion and self-doubt.”

Concentrating primarily on sexism as a system of power, AnnLouise Keating likewise mentioned Lorde’s speech in “Making ‘Our Shattered Faces Whole,’” as she commented with nuance on racial differences among women. Additional poignant commentaries by Maureen E. Shea and Mary D. Pellauer concentrated on women’s alienation as a consequence of patriarchal aggression against women, while interpreting Lorde’s speech concerning “Uses of the Erotic.”

Yet, to Lorde, the challenges in “reclaiming” the erotic appear to have resulted, in part, from sexism in relations between men and women, but also, in part, from further alienation in dealing with heterosexism, racism, and certain economic systems like capitalism. As a lucrative business that profited economically from women’s sexualized dehumanization and objectification, pornography concisely exemplified Lorde’s concerns about the systemic roots of antierotic, external impositions on women resulting from capitalism,
heterosexism, racism, and patriarchy. In this connection, in an essay titled "Afterword: Voices and Violence—A Dialogue," Ellen Wright Clayton and Jay Clayton quoted from Lorde's speech, but relocated her remarks to present them as "OTHER VOICES: In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change' (Audre Lorde)." Accordingly, reclaiming the erotic entailed endeavoring to transform systems of capitalism, heterosexism, racism, and sexism, all of which, in Lorde's analysis, contributed to women's alienation and dehumanization. Brenda Carr generalized, "Erotic knowledge thus becomes a tool for critical interrogation of all the forms of 'anti-life' or oppression that Lorde speaks out against.” Carr emphasized that, "While Lorde reformulates our cultural understanding of the erotic as purely sexual, she does not de-sexualize it."

In Lorde's analysis, to transform these systems, women individually and collectively needed to heed internal directives instead of the externally imposed, intermeshed demands of patriarchy and capitalism. This general pattern of interpretation may have been heightened by Lorde's emphasis on women reclaiming agency as desiring actors by giving priority to internal directives rather than by relinquishing agency to externally imposed directives. To Lorde, the process of reclaiming the erotic entailed representing lesbians and other women as erotic agents, not only, or merely, the victims of patriarchy. To Judith Mitchell, for instance, "Only when the hierarchical relation of idealized subject/degraded object is dispensed with, when women come to own their own desire as opposed to being objects of male desire, will it be possible to attain the wider sense of the erotic put forward by Audre Lorde, as encompassing the true source of power and pleasure in human life."

CONCLUSION

The bodily basis for experiencing Lorde's topic along with inherited stereotypes about her embodied experience of "the erotic" makes her speech an especially appropriate text for exploring the ramifications of intersectionality because the specific qualities of Lorde's sexuality and race were elided in most public commentaries on her speech. In other words, her audiences' apparent inattention to Lorde's lesbianism, Blackness, and socialism, taken together, tended to recur in many public commentaries. On the whole with remarkably few exceptions, such patterns of commentary transformed her radical advocacy from her embodied standpoint of "interlocking" or
“inseparable” oppressions into perspectives that, in fact, did separate them: Most public commentaries refrained from criticizing capitalism or explicitly embracing either lesbians or Black people. A juxtaposition of interlocking oppressions with intersectionality enables us to notice this fundamental transformation in the dynamic relationship between an advocate and her auditors or readerships.

While Kimberlé Crenshaw has emphasized the intersectionality of multiple, demographic components of identities within systems of power, focusing primarily on reform within legal systems, and while Patricia Hill Collins has emphasized how matrices of social variables provide another useful means to complicate what Collins referred to as a “Black feminist” analysis,48 perhaps an earlier concept of “interlocking oppressions” likewise deserves communication scholars’ reconsideration for its depth, vitality, and thoroughness in examining how multiple components of identity can interact with systems of power, and how those interlocking systems can be ignored. Each metaphor for interacting systems of power has value for communication scholars, contingent in some measure on whether the advocacy is predominantly radical or reformist and on each advocate’s life situation. At the outset, this chapter evoked an earlier concept of “interlocking oppressions” to silhouette contours and concerns with using the later concept of “intersectionality” for radical advocacy. In general, Lorde’s sensibility in “Uses of the Erotic” does not mesh ideally with Crenshaw’s primary focus on legal systems within which multiple identities are systemically situated, because, however worthwhile, to Lorde that primary focus was strategically reformist in its politics. For that basic reason, in her speech concerning the erotic, Lorde never turned to law to envision an inhabitable future for women, as did many other public advocates dealing with pornography during the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, consideration of intersectionality as a metaphor helps to chart how Lorde’s radical advocacy was transformed with few exceptions into reformist interpretations of her now famous speech. Of course, there is a complex interplay between radical and reformist advocacy that is more intricate than this chapter has time to explore.

Still, “interlocking oppressions” might be more appropriate than “intersectionality” for understanding Lorde’s standpoint in her radical public advocacy. This is because, as developed by Black radical feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, “interlocking oppressions” captured the experiences of being “locked into” narrow and limiting views of both sexuality and economic systems. These are the systems of power most featured in Lorde’s speech on the erotic. In addition, the language available to Lorde at the historical moment
featured "interlocking" or "inseparable" oppressions. Like Smith and certain other Black feminists in the Combahee River Collective during the late 1970s and 1980s, Lorde proposed and enacted her explorations of inseparable, interacting systems of power that impinged on their embodied presence and experiences a decade before Crenshaw's proposal of intersectionality.

Has "interlocking oppressions," as presented in the discourse of the 1970s and 1980s by the Combahee River Collective, Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and other radical "women of Color," become relatively domesticated with regard to sexuality and economic systems in Crenshaw's original essays on "intersectionality" within legal systems? Crenshaw's original essays structured her central analysis on intersections of the demographic categories of race and sex (using "gender" as synonym for sex), while she placed both sexuality and economic systems in the rear ground of her essays. To her credit, Crenshaw mentioned this emphasis explicitly in 1991 in "Mapping the Margins":

[I]ntersectionality is not being offered here as some new, totalizing theory of identity. Nor do I mean to suggest that violence against women of color can be explained only through the specific frameworks of race and gender considered here. Indeed, factors I address only in part or not at all, such as class or sexuality, are often as critical in shaping the experiences of women of color. My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.49

Despite Crenshaw's caveat in these observations, why has Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality received extensive scholarly attention in comparison with earlier work on "inseparable" and "interlocking" oppressions by Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, and others? Is there a reformist appeal to intersectionality for scholars situated within colleges and universities? Smith's book, The Truth that Never Hurts, offers as reminders her early essays breaking this ground in a textured way, as does Audre Lorde's Sister Outsider. In general, does featuring "intersectionality" rather than "interlocking oppressions" appeal to some precisely because of the downplaying of sexuality and economic systems to be found in the work of the Combahee River Collective and Lorde's extensive intellectual labor throughout the 1970s and 1980s? There are major stakes here in how the past is [mis]represented in the present, in
general, as well as communication scholars' recognition of fundamental differences between predominantly reformist and radical advocacy.

On the other hand, reformist and radical activists alike have, in fact, routinely separated out the "inseparable" oppressions, because of expediency and their diverse, symbolic, and corporeal life situations within inherited systems of power. What Black lesbian radical feminists genuinely experienced in their embodied, situated lives as "inseparable" oppressions did not and does not have precisely the same ramifications for white, heterosexual, and/or financially comfortable women and men, however oppressed by systems of power impinging on other components of their identities. Intersectionality, as proposed by Crenshaw, provides a powerful concept for charting these kinds of patterns within inherited, interacting systems of power.

In addition, for reformist advocacy concerning substantive matters wherein multiple components of identities might be separated, de facto, by law in specific systemic respects, communication scholars could reconsider Crenshaw's concept collaboratively in combination with Mari Matsuda's practice that she calls "asking other questions," because this practice provides a means to recognize intricacies of political coalition and academic scholarship across multiple differences of race, sexuality, class, religion, ability, and the like. Matsuda explained, "When I see something that looks racist, I ask, 'Where is the patriarchy in this?' When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, 'Where is the heterosexism in this?' When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, 'Where are the class interests in this?'" She observed, "[N]o form of subordination ever stands alone." Systems of power intersect in embodied identities in ways that often have cross-cutting valences of consequence among overlapping social groups that a metaphor of "interlocking oppressions" would ignore and "intersections," at least in its earliest formulation, would obfuscate in the absence of "asking other questions," as Matsuda proposed. This crucial factor of cross-cutting valences among political activists and reformers within systems of power is precisely why coalition politics have proven to be fragile, fleeting, and undependable with rare exceptions.

Communication scholars could extend intersectionality, furthermore, to locate differences consciously within social relationships so as to complete the implied, typically unstated comparisons, by making whiteness, heterosexuality, and the like explicit, as I have tried to model in this chapter. What Martha Minow has identified accurately as a "dilemma of difference" complicates any easy
resolution to questions about whether to represent situations demo­
graphically and/or relationally with complete comparisons.51 In this
regard, communication scholars could continue to study intersec­
tionality with attention to structural, political, and representational
components, as Crenshaw suggested.

Finally, communication scholars might acknowledge complex­
ity in multiple and overlapping components of identities by or­
ganizing historical, theoretical, and critical analyses to center on
recurring, parallel communication practices. These parallel com­
munication practices might be as, or more, fundamental than the
demographic, social variables.52 To be sure, Crenshaw does have
sustained discussions of certain types of symbolic and physical ex­
periences (e.g., rape, battering, and violence against women), pri­
marily as a means to foreground specific, systemic ramifications of
presumptions concerning demographic categories in relationship to
one another within legal systems with race and "gender" in the fore­
ground. However, it can be illuminating to reverse the foreground/
rear ground in historical, theoretical, and critical analyses of sys­
tems of power and to center parallel communication practices that
can help communication scholars understand human differences,
human interpretations, and the ways individuals might [mis]under­
stand one another based on their often interlocking and intersecting
identities.

NOTES

I am grateful to Jack Daniel and Carol Stabile for comments and suggestions
on an earlier version of this essay, which I presented at the National Com­

1. Audre Lorde, "Outlines," from a version of the poem in "Age, Race,
Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Sister Outsider: Essays and
Speeches by Audre Lorde (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 123.

2. Deborah K. King, "Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The
Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance
of Black Feminist Thought," Social Problems 33, no. 6 [1986]: 514–532; Col­
lins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics
of Empowerment [New York: Routledge, 1990]; Nancy A. Hewitt, "Com­
pounding Differences," Feminist Studies 18, no. 2 [1992]: 313–326; Kim­
berlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and
Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist
Theory, and Antiracist Politics," University of Chicago Legal Forum 147
[1989]: 139–167; Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Iden­
INTERSECTING AUDIENCES


7. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in This Bridge, 98.


10. This claim is based on an arts and humanities citation search of all references to Audre Lorde’s prose and poetry.


14. An audiotape recording titled “Power and Oppression” of the entire panel has been preserved at the Lesbian Herstory Archives [henceforth LHA], Brooklyn, New York. Several papers from the conference are held at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe, but not the texts from the specific panel featuring Audre Lorde. Sara Hutcheon, Reference Assistant, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, letter to the author, June 20, 2000.


17. An audio recording of this speech is held at the GLBT Historical Society, San Francisco. Extensive evidence among this historical society’s records of the conference document that videotapes were made of the entire proceedings to broaden its impact. But it has not been possible for me to locate them.


21. Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (Freedom, CA: Out & Out Books, 1978). About that time, copies of a forty-four-page book titled *Power, Oppression and the Politics of Culture: A Lesbian/Feminist Perspective* were printed. Despite a title implying that the texts were from the conference’s panel and despite an identification of the conference as “author,” Audre Lorde’s only entry in it was a reprint of her earlier essay, “Poetry Is Not Luxury.” Berkshire Conference on the History of Women [4th, 1978, Mount Holyoke], *Power, Oppression, and the Politics of Culture: A Lesbian/Feminist Perspective* (s.l.: s.n., [1978]). My claims are based on a copy held at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

22. A copy is held in the Audre Lorde papers, Box 3, f. 8, LHA.


37. Sellers-Young, "Raks El Sharki," 149.


49. Crenshaw, "Mapping," 1244–1245. In Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing," she again centers on race and gender with only one passage (151) dealing with what she terms "sexual preference" and "class." There ensues no depth of engagement with either systemic factor. Nor is there any mention of economic systems in general, which is key to Lorde's analysis of the erotic. In Crenshaw's "The Marginalization," recommendation eight mentions poverty and class and recommendations six and nine on multiple vulnerabilities include sexuality. She does do more with class here. Yet again, economic systems go unexamined in an explicit way.

