Sisterhood as Performance in Audre Lorde's Public Advocacy

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“There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist,” Audre Lorde declared in a 1980 speech in Amherst, Massachusetts. Yet in a 1986 speech to black women at Medgar Evers College in New York, she emphasized, “I am your sister.” I believe that Lorde’s references to sisterhood were not a performative contradiction in her public advocacy but reflected her tactical negotiation of the double birds facing black women and lesbians. During the last decade of her life, as she critically examined differences among women during her international sojourns, she developed an evolving stance on sisterhood. There was a seismic shift in her primary audiences during the mid- to late 1980s, especially after 1984, when she moved from New York to the Virgin Islands and Germany. She focused increasingly on black women’s diverse communities (which encompassed the black women of Australia and New Zealand, who were not of African descent), while engaging the ramifications of the African diaspora in numerous international forums around the globe.

For two decades, I have been systematically studying Lorde’s public advocacy. My essays usually have presented a rhetorical criticism of a major speech or offered an overview of her public address, which consists of numerous poems, speeches, essays, open letters, pamphlets, and books. Here, however, with the goal of capturing Lorde’s standpoint on sisterhood, I examine several public speeches, which she delivered in international settings.
That stance moved beyond demographic categories, geographic locations, and ethnic heritage, even though each of those factors remained salient in her sensibility and activism. Instead, Lorde featured sisterhood fundamentally as a performance, action, or deed enacting solidarity among women. Lorde evoked sisterhood to instill a communal commitment among women activists to strengthening the life-enhancing possibilities of "the erotic" for women (as she defined it) and to intervening collectively to transform oppressive relationships of power, privilege, and resourcefulness. Sisterhood was not so much a term for naming a general relationship than it was a performed way of life enacted by a certain subset of women. For Lorde, being a sister was more than simply being a woman.

At Harvard University in 1982, Lorde asked, "Can any one of us here still afford to believe that efforts to reclaim the future can be private or individual? Can any one here still afford to believe that the pursuit of liberation can be the sole and particular province of any one particular race, or sex, or age, or religion, or sexuality, or class?" As her incisive questions suggest, focusing exclusively on sisterhood might have the problematic result of deflecting attention from other, often overlapping, oppressions across social differences such as race, economic class, and sexuality. One obvious limitation of emphasizing sisterhood was Lorde's willingness to enter into coalition with black men and gay men of any race, even though she viewed white gay men, such as myself, with healthy skepticism. Her openness to working in coalition with gay men such as Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam deepened after her experiences as a keynote speaker at the "Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference" in 1979.

After first commenting on Lorde's references to herself as "sister outsider," I will consider some options for characterizing her standpoint on sisterhood, as cosmopolitan, dispotic, transatlantic, and transnational sisterhood, because each of these ways of modifying sisterhood has value for recognizing salient features of Lorde's advocacy, while nonetheless deflecting attention from other consequential features of it, or possibly having entailments that could misrepresent her advocacy. Noting such entailments will help to refine a precise sense of sisterhood for Lorde. That these categories are not analytically distinct is consistent with Lorde's sensibility inasmuch as she regularly used multiple names for her identity to explore how the terms interacted with one another and could obfuscate or distort by reduction to one or another of them.

SISTER OUTSIDER

Lorde dealt regularly with being a part of communities that were generally oppressed, even by otherwise oppressed groups to which she also belonged. As a black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, and mother, she experienced chasms in already marginalized black communities across differences of sex and sexuality. When she spoke to predominantly black audiences, she regularly addressed the ways in which sexism and heterosexism damaged solidarity in black communities. This pattern in her advocacy is exemplified by such essays as "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving," "Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface," and "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger." It recurs in her speeches, especially "I Am Your Sister" at Medgar Evers College in 1974 and her two public speeches at the "I Am Your Sister" conference in Boston in 1990, where most of the participants were "women of Color," an expression she at first used to name a coalition among diverse women from various racial minorities within U.S. culture and, after the early 1980s, across international boundaries.

Likewise, in the United States, when Lorde addressed feminist audiences, which usually consisted primarily of white heterosexual women, she would press her concerns about the ways in which racism and heterosexism harmed solidarity among women in the interest of realizing political, economic, and social change for women. For example, in her 1985 keynote speech to the National Women's Studies Association in Storrs, Connecticut, she highlighted how racial conflict fractures and weakens women as a group: "What woman here is so enamoured of her own oppression that she cannot see her footprint upon another woman's face?" In the aftermath of several sustained confrontations with white heterosexual women during the late 1970s and early 1980s, she came to believe that she needed to make difficult decisions about how to use her limited life's energy, as her health crisis deepened. On June 22, 1984, in Berlin she wrote, "Rather than siphoning off energies in vain attempts to connect with women who refuse to deal with their own history or ours, black women need to choose the areas where that energy can be most effective."

As a way to name her own recurring life situation, she coined the expression "Sister Outsider," which became the title of both her 1984 book and a poem. A motif in her advocacy, the phrase emphasizes the stark alternative between being an isolated individual and an active participant in a community, and her writing around the issue was typified by concerns
that a retreat from community would leave her vulnerable, oppressed, and
lethal to survive. In one of her best-known speeches, "The Master's Tools
Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," she affirmed, "Without com-
munity there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary
armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must
not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these
differences do not exist." The speech reiterated comments she had written
in her journals a month earlier on October 3, 1979, although there she had
featured her own life predicament. Sisterhood was one of her sometimes
hazardous expressions for entering into community with others, danger-
ous when it served as a "pretense to a homogeneity of experience."26

COSMOPOLITAN SISTERHOOD

Lorde's view of solidarity among women might be characterized as an
embrace of cosmopolitan sisterhood inasmuch as she considered herself a
citizen of the world with political responsibilities to look beyond U.S. bound-
aries. Sister Outsider (1984) featured her trips to Russia and Grenada, and A
Burst of Light (1988) focused on apartheid in South Africa and chronicled
her travels to Germany, Switzerland, Australia, Saint Croix, and elsewhere.27
According to Kwame Anthony Appiah, "there are two strands that enwince
in the notion of cosmopolitanism. One is the idea that we have obligations
to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related
by the ties of kith and kin, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship.
The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of
particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and
beliefs that lend them significance."28

These qualities apply characteristically Lorde's sensibility in her advocacy.
For instance, in an October 23, 1984, journal entry written in East Lansing,
Michigan, she noted, "For me as an African-American woman writer, sister-
hood and survival means it's not enough to say I believe in peace when
my sister's children are dying in the streets of Soweto and New Caledonia
in the South Pacific."29 She sought, moreover, to cultivate her audience's
commitment to responsibility in the world, as she recorded in a February
28, 1984, journal entry written in Ohio: "Last night I gave a talk to the Black
students at the University about coming to see ourselves as part of an inter-
national community of people of Color; how we must train ourselves to
question what our Blackness—our Africaness—can mean on the world
stage. And how are members of that international community, we must
assume responsibility for our actions, or lack of action, as americans."

Yet there is a notable problem: when the literature on cosmopolitans is
invested in human rights, it may at times minimize human differences
because it universalizes western cultures in ways that could colonize non-
western cultures.30 As Arabella Lyon and I have noted elsewhere, human
rights rhetoric can be used for advocacy from a range of political positions,
including the position of severely oppressed people.31 Yet Lorde regarded the
language of human rights as a tool that elites usually mobilize harmfully.
By selectively using that language, they could either deflect attention from
oppressive mistreatment or dominate and control already oppressed popula-
tions—which, in the case of South Africa, was a majority of the citizens.32 In
a 1984 speech at Harvard University, she commented, "Our papers are filled
with supposed concern for human rights in white communist Poland while
we sanction by acceptance and military supply the systematic genocide
of apartheid in South Africa, of murder and torture in Haiti and El Salvador."33
In Apartheid U.S.A., she regularly mentioned South Africa to emphasize how
human rights rhetoric worked to the disadvantage of already oppressed
people.34 The problem with characterizing Lorde's standpoint as cosmopol-
tan sisterhood is that we may associate her with an uncritical embrace of
human rights when in fact she scrutinized human rights rhetoric, distrust its
integrity and its general tendency to universalize British, European, and
American principles across other cultures.35

DIASPORIC SISTERHOOD

After 1984, Lorde became especially focused on diasporic sisterhood
with women of African descent, as exemplified in her incise naming of
"Afro-Germans," "Afro-French," "Afro-Dutch," and more generally
"Afro-European[,] whom she saw as "a growing force for international
change."36 During her stay in Berlin, she asked in a May 22, 1984, journal
entry, "Who are they, the German women of the Diaspora? Where do our
paths intersect as women of Color—beyond the details of our particular
oppressions, although certainly not outside the reference of those details?
And where do our paths diverge? Most important, what can we learn from
our connected differences that will be useful to us both, Afro-German and
The term diaspora refers to the dispersal of a people who lack compelling claims to or control over a homeland, which might be a factor in Lorde’s recurring use of the lowercased word america. She remarked in an October 10, 1986, journal entry written in New York: “As an African-American woman, I feel the tragedy of being an oppressed hyphenated person in America, of having no land to be our primary teacher. And this distorts us in so many ways. Yet there is a vital part that we play as Black people in the liberation consciousness of every freedom-seeking people upon this globe.” When she continued, “as Afro-Americans we must recognize the promise we represent for some new social synthesis the world has not yet experienced,” she risked presenting “Afro-Americans” as role models for other nations, thus positioning one portion of the black diaspora as emblematic for the rest. But in her essay (and in her pamphlet with the same title) “Apartheid USA,” she added, “The connections between Africans and African-Americans, African-Europeans, African Asians, are real, however dimly seen at times, and we all need to examine without sentimentality or stereotype what the injection of Africaness into the socio-political consciousness of the world could mean.”

The 1984 edition of Sister Outsider makes no references to diaspora or cosmopolitanism and few to either civil or human rights. For Lorde the notion of diaspora began to resonate after her relocation to Saint Croix and Germany, and she mentions it in her 1982 speech in East Lansing, Michigan, at the “Black Woman Writer and the Diaspora Conference.” In an April 3, 1986, journal entry referring to “Ties That Bind,” a conference in Saint Croix that her partner Gloria Joseph had planned with the Sojourner Sisters, Lorde exhaled, “In addition to being a tremendous high, these days are such a thrilling example to me of the real power of a small group of Black women of the Diaspora in action.” Her work as a founding member of Sisterhood in Support of Sisters in South Africa (SISA), an organization that Joseph had founded, continued to fire her interest in both diasporic and transatlantic sisterhood (which I will discuss in the next section).

Yet Lorde criticized the idea of diaspora or geographic dispersal in connection with the term black: “There is the reality of defining Black as a geographical fact of culture and heritage emanating from the continent of Africa—Black meaning Africans and other members of a Diaspora, with or without color.” She continued: “Then there is a quite different reality of defining Black as a political position, acknowledging that color is the bottom line the world over, no matter how many other issues exist alongside it.” She saw “certain pitfalls” with that approach to defining Black, notably that “it takes the cultural identity of a widespread but definite group and makes it a generic identity for many culturally diverse peoples, all on the basis of a shared oppression,” which in her view “runs the risk of providing a convenient blanket of apparent similarity under which our actual and unacceptant differences can be distorted or missed.”

Further, Lorde knew that black does not imply African descent in either New Zealand or Australia. 84 In Australia the word refers to indigenous aboriginal peoples such as the Wurundjeri, while in New Zealand it refers to the Maori. In an October 21, 1984, journal entry, she observed, “When an African-American woman says she is Black, she is speaking of her cultural reality, no matter how modified it may be by time, place, or circumstances of removal. Yet even the Maori women of New Zealand and the Aboriginal women of Australia call themselves Black. There must be a way for us to deal with this, if only on the level of language. For example, those of us for whom Black is our cultural reality, relinquishing the word in favor of some other designation of the African Diaspora, perhaps simply African.”

Such reflections suggest that, while diasporic sisterhood mattered profoundly to Lorde, her vision of sisterhood extended beyond an African heritage to encompass the “Black” women of New Zealand and Australia who were not of African descent.

The term diasporic sisterhood can be problematic because it tacitly sets up priorities among oppressions by giving race central attention, despite Lorde’s conviction that there is no hierarchy of oppressions. Many of her speeches addressed to black women as sisters pressed intersecting and overlapping concerns about sexuality, heterosexism, and homophobia among these women. Perhaps the best example of this pattern in Lorde’s advocacy is her 1986 speech “Sisterhood and Survival” at the East Lansing conference. And as she had already noted in her earlier essay “Scratching the Surface,” sexuality divided black women as “heartless competitors for the scarce male.”

In short, to name Lorde’s views of sisterhood diasporic may occlude her...
abiding concerns about other forms of bias, which often intersected with race to further oppress women, as well as various distinguishable strands of racism. In her 1986 keynote speech in Melbourne, she explained, "When I say I am Black, I mean I am of African descent. When I say I am a woman of Color, I mean I recognize common cause with American Indian, Chicana, Latina, and Asian American sisters of North America (as well as . . . Black South African women) and . . . my Black sisters of Australia." As a term, diasporic sisterhood does not capture her abiding commitment to common cause with women of diverse races or her recognition of the varying meanings of black.

TRANSATLANTIC SISTERSHIP

After 1984 much of Lorde’s work took place in the Virgin Islands and Germany as she regularly crossed the Atlantic Ocean for medical treatments and public activism. Thus, transatlantic sisterhood is a useful term to encompass her advocacy in the Caribbean, Europe, Britain, and the eastern United States, especially New York and Massachusetts. Yet the term remains imperfect because, like diasporic, it may deflect attention from her advocacy elsewhere around the globe. Her work in support of SBSA and her recurring concerns about South Africa as well as her advocacy in New Zealand and Australia underscore the international character of her activism.

In an interview, Lorde alluded to “trans-oceanic conversations” among women. Nonetheless, while transoceanic sisterhood would include her appearances in the South Pacific, it is less useful than transatlantic for identifying the predominant forums for her activism and advocacy. Moreover, using either geographic term could implicitly deracialize and desexualize her activism by foregrounding the locations of her advocacy at the expense of race, sex, and sexuality. For instance, Lorde observed that Berliners “are interested in dealing with racism in America, and in England, but are much less prepared to deal with racism in terms of their Turkish and Middle Eastern workers who are the ‘Black’ people of Germany.”

TRANSNATIONAL SISTERSHIP

Transnational sisterhood might be the most valuable term to use when thinking geographically about Lorde’s advocacy. As Donald B. Pease has explained, “the transnational is not a discourse so much as it is itself a

volatile transfer point that inhabits things, people, and places with surplus connectivities that dismantle their sense of a coherent, bounded identity. Drawing upon an interstitial dynamic that it advances, this complex figuration bears the traces of the violent sociohistorical processes to which it alludes.” He notes, “The transnational mobilizes plural, often competing discourses that generate contradictions, new truths, and ruptures.” Unlike globalization and international studies, it “names an undecidable economic, political, or social formation that is neither in nor out of the nation-state. Inherently relational, the transnational involves a double move: to the inside, to core constituents of a given nation, and to an outside, whatever forces introduce a new configuration.” These statements aptly encapsulate Lorde’s international activism in that she sought to build coalitions within national boundaries to transform their oppressive practices while cultivating international solidarity.

In my opinion, Pease’s tidy distinctions do not capture the diversity of international studies at the time of Lorde’s advocacy. She used the term international rather than transnational because the distinction was not then available, but she used it so seldom that it would be risky to attempt to encapsulate her sense of the term from those few instances. I do believe that Pease’s sense of transnational works accurately for describing her activism in Australia. In Lorde’s 1986 keynote speech there, she enacted sisterhood with black aboriginal women to counter their experiences of erasure, nonrecognition, and disengagement from the relatively privileged women who were attending the conference. In considering this speech, I find it useful to remember Lorde’s earlier disappointment with the 1984 International Feminist Book Fair in London, which she considered “a monstrosity of racism” that “distorted much of what was good, creative, and visionary about such a fair.” She explained, “I think the organizers of the Bookfair really believed that by inviting foreign Black women they were absorbing themselves of any fault in ignoring input from local Black women . . . They totally objectified all Black women by not dealing with the Black women of the London community.” To her, the organizers’ decision to feature token accomplished black women from abroad evaded the more difficult, necessary work of examining racial conflicts within the local community.

When Lorde delivered her keynote in Melbourne, she began by acknowledging her difficulty in finding ideas to share that would have mutual use for her audience: “I have struggled for many weeks to find your part in,
to see what we could share that would have meaning for us all." Minutes later, she reiterated this difficulty: "I find my tongue weighted down by the blood of my Aboriginal sisters that has been shed upon this earth." She amplified, "For the true language of difference is yet to be spoken in this place. Here that language must be spoken by my Aboriginal sisters, the daughters of those indigenous peoples of Australia with whom each one of you shares a destiny, but whose voices and language most of you have never heard." She affirmed that "where we sit now today, Wurundjeri women once dreamed and laughed and sang. ... Where are these women?" Her speech sought to enact solidarity with the absent black women of Australia, although she was careful to underscore that the term did not have the same meaning in Australia as it did in the United States. She concluded, "I will move on. But it is the language of the Black Aboriginal women of this country that you must learn to hear and to feel." 

Lorde firmly declined to play the role of a token black woman from abroad, whose presence would provide a relatively safe, evasive, and distant engagement with "difference." At the same time, she was confronting an audience of predominantly white women with the necessity of dealing with black aboriginal women. We might view her speech as a performative contradiction because she claimed to decline becoming a token black even as she assumed a keynote role nonetheless. Yet it would be more accurate to observe that she negotiated a double bind by using her role as speaker to stress a crucial absence that otherwise would have gone unnoticed. This combination of tactical moves in her advocacy allowed her to enact transnational sisterhood in ways that neither transatlantic nor diasporic sisterhood captures. The tactical moves illustrate the way in which she moved across national boundaries as she built coalitions within and across international spaces to transform local relationships of power, privilege, and resourcefulness. Like other geographic names for sisterhood, the term transnational sisterhood may implicitly devalorize and desexualize Lorde's activism by foregrounding the locations of her advocacy at the expense of particular overlapping biases. Even so, the transnational has to do with disrupting oppressive relationships within and between nations, and the ambiguities here could apply to sexuality, sex, age, race, or whatever biases needed to be confronted and changed to advance social justice. 

CONCLUSION: CONCERNING SISTERHOOD UNMODIFIED

For Lorde, sisterhood is not simply demographic (women), geographic, or even relational (oppression). Rather, sisterhood is contingent, and it is enacted in ways that demonstrate a communal commitment to doing something about transforming oppression while encouraging oppressed women to embrace each other within and across national boundaries. Sisterhood among women is contingent inasmuch as relationships of power, privilege, and resourcefulness can vary significantly with location, position, and social identities across various cultures, as Lorde regularly stressed. Sisterhood is a deed or a performance.

Lorde habitually drew connections among apparently disparate concerns: "Batting racism and battling heterosexism and battling apartheid share the same urgency inside me as batting cancer. None of these struggles are ever easy, and even the smallest victory is never to be taken for granted." On November 8, 1986, she affirmed, "I have always known I learn my most lasting lessons about difference by closely attending to the ways in which the differences inside me lie down together." Even so, after 1984 she centered emphatically on black women and the African diaspora, while welcoming other, often overlapping, groups of oppressed people to also use her words.

Notes


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