

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS ACTIVISM:

### LINKING OPPRESSION, IDENTITY, AND FEMINISM

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“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed, but when we are silent we are still afraid. So it is better to speak, remembering we were never meant to survive” (Paterson). These words of autobiographer Audre Lorde begin to answer the question of why she has dedicated much of her life to activism through writing. Some women write autobiography for therapeutic reasons or to obtain a better understanding of themselves. Some write because writing provides the opportunity to speak candidly without the fear of rejection. And some, like Audre Lorde, write because they have something to say that they believe that the world needs to hear. Examination of her writing in light of the ideas of prominent feminist theorists such as Susan Friedman, as well as others, reveals how various forms of oppression have affected the formation of Lorde’s identity in ways that have led her to pursue a life of activism.

*Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* is the story of Audre Lorde, a black, lesbian, feminist, poet, writer, and activist, who grew up in Harlem in the 1950’s. In her autobiography she shares her experiences of growing up as a black lesbian woman in a white heterosexual man’s world. She explains that “being a black woman poet in the 1960’s meant being invisible . . . doubly invisible as a black feminist woman, and it meant being triply invisible as a black lesbian and feminist” (Paterson). There is a strong theme of oppression and discrimination in her writing, as well as a pervasive emphasis on the desire to fight injustice and ignite change. Her book exemplifies a type of autobiographical writing which promotes an awareness of the injustices that the author has experienced. These experiences have evoked enough rage within to necessitate a fight for change, the weapon of which is the voice of one seeking a revolution of unity.

Lorde relays her own experiences of discrimination against many aspects of her self from the time she was a child. As a nearsighted child, she could not go to the same school as her sisters. As an overweight child, she was called “fatty, fatty” by her classmates (25). As a “bad” child (because she accidentally broke her glasses), she was forced to sit in the back of the classroom with a dunce cap on while her teacher had the other students “offer up a prayer for [her] to stop being such a wicked-hearted

child" (30). As a girl, she was not eligible for the class presidency (63). And, as a black child, she was not allowed to eat in an ice-cream shop in Washington D.C., where black people were not served (70). It is important to take all of these types of discrimination into consideration in order to understand how deeply these experiences can impact a developing sense of self. In her article, "Virtual Activists? Women and the Making of Identities of Disability," Helen Meekosha asserts that, "inside ourselves we have to grasp the contradictions of our individual lives. Our identities are constantly in tension, as we are defined by others and redefined by ourselves" (Meekosha). She is referring specifically to women with disabilities; however, the concept can be applied across many marginalized groups in society. Cultural perception and prejudice will always have an effect on one's developing identity, as it did for Lorde.

For Lorde, these experiences of injustice were very confusing. She knew that she was a worthwhile person and hadn't done anything to provoke the disapproval and unfair treatment that she received from those around her; but it was there. When she lost the class presidency election even though she knew she was the most qualified, she writes, "I was shocked. . .something was escaping me. Something was terribly wrong. It wasn't fair" (63). The positive view that she had of herself didn't match up with the negative way that she was viewed and treated. It leads one to the question of where, in the construction of one's identity, the connection is between what one knows to be true of one's self, and what the mainstream culture deems ideal or acceptable. Susan Friedman offers her view of this dilemma in her essay entitled "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice." She explains that "not recognizing themselves in the reflections of cultural representation, women develop a dual consciousness - the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription" (39). This idea of the existence of two sources from which the identity is formed, one from within the individual and one from the environment surrounding the individual, working together to mold self-perception, is illustrated in Lorde's autobiography. This is evidenced by the gap that she felt between the positive light in which she saw herself and the negative light in which other groups of society viewed her. She describes herself as "full of myself, knowing I was fat and Black and very fine" (223). However, she also writes that "to be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet... was considered ... to be simply suicidal" (225). With these statements she displays recognition of both sides of this "dual-consciousness," and

the great disparity between her perception of herself and the mainstream culture's perception of her. As an adult she was subjected to the same types of discrimination that she experienced as a child when she lost the class presidency. The feelings of dissonance remained between the person that she knew herself to be and the unjust way in which she was treated. She experiences a constant tension that stems from the dissonance within her "dual consciousness."

In Lorde's autobiography, the concept of dual consciousness is expanded beyond Friedman's application, which is aimed specifically towards women. In a case such as Lorde's, there is not only a cultural prescription for those who fit into the category of "women" to contend with, but also for the categories of "black" and "lesbian," as well as the other labels that were placed on her as a child. The idea of "dual consciousness" can be applied to Lorde's experience and be further understood as moving beyond Friedman's "dual" consciousness to a multi-layered consciousness. When one belongs to more than one oppressed minority group, it is not only the sum of the cultural prescriptions for each group added to the others that must be taken into consideration, but how each minority group relates to the others as well. Lorde exemplifies the idea of a multi-layered consciousness when she writes of encountering racism in the lesbian community, discussing what it is like to be the only black woman among her lesbian group of friends. She writes, "I was acutely conscious. . .that my relationship as a Black woman to our shared lives was different from theirs, and would be, gay or straight. The question of acceptance had a different weight for me" (181). Lorde also found homophobia in the black community as evidenced by her explanation that "My straight Black girlfriends either ignored my love for women. . .or tolerated it as another example of my craziness. It was allowable as long as it wasn't too obvious and it didn't reflect on them in any way" (180). These barriers within her social circles kept her from feeling totally known and connected to the others in any one group. She is subjected not only to the mainstream culture's prejudices towards the minorities of blacks, lesbians, and women, but also to the cultures of black and lesbian and woman as they view and relate to each other. In one way, this adds to the amount of alienation that she feels from being a part of these marginalized groups. However, on the positive side, it also allows her to experience each of these cultures separately, getting to know what being a part of each of these groups means for her as an individual. As Friedman puts it, "cultural representations of woman lead not only to women's alienation, but also to the potential for a 'new

consciousness' of self" (81). Lorde's identification with each of these marginalized groups amplify those various aspects of her identity. Each group reflects back to her a piece of her self, though none of them can completely define her.

In attempting to understand this concept of "dual" or multi-layered consciousness, especially in light of Lorde's writing, a causal relationship becomes apparent. While Lorde's sense of self was greatly influenced by the biases of the cultures surrounding her, the reverse is also true, that is, that as an individual she was also able to influence prevalent biased beliefs of society through activism. First, considering how her view of self as an individual is affected by the cultural reflection, it can be seen that she has gained a more whole self-view through experiences with groups of others representing different aspects of her self. For instance, she explains that even in her high school years "Each part of my school life was separate from the other, with no connection except through me. None of the other people would have anything to do with each other" (86). At a young age, she learned that although she could find solidarity with others who were in some way like her, she did not fit into any one category or "type" of people. Margaret Kissam Morris writes of Lorde that, "she refuses absolutely to confine herself, even temporarily, to any one aspect of her heterogeneous identity, whether to support a political program or to make others feel comfortable" (168). It seems that the insight that she gained from being involved with the multiple minority groups that she belonged to and understanding the cultural perceptions of each of these groups provided her with a self image that included various aspects of her person.

On the flip side, her perception of self as an individual also has a causal effect on the cultural perception of those in the minority groups to which she belonged, as evidenced in Lorde's successes in her attempts to influence the public's understanding of these groups. As the author of ten books of poetry and seven books of prose, she spent much of her life getting her ideas out to the public. Changing cultural perceptions is her motivation for writing. In an interview with Lorde in the documentary entitled "A Litany for Survival: the Life and Work of Audre Lorde," she tells the story of being at a convention where a young black lesbian poet stood up and asked if it is possible to be who you need to be and live to tell the story. Her response was that "if that young woman can say that and not know that yes, it's quite possible to be who you need to be and live to tell the story . . . that must mean that I have not been telling my stories loud enough. And that was, interestingly enough, one of the

first times I really thought that I would attempt to write prose" (Paterson). This experience led her to the realization that expanding her work to include this other genre might increase the efficacy of her writing.

Lorde's transition from writing only poetry to becoming an author of prose raises the question of the role of both of these genres in feminist writing. Vicki Feaver addresses the power of poetry in her essay, "Body and Soul: The Power of Sharon Olds." She argues that Olds "offers the poetry of her survival - her courage to speak out, to tell about it, in her refusal to accept powerlessness, her quest to identify good and evil, her celebration of sexuality and love - for the survival of humanity" (qtd. in Kirkpatrick). This argument speaks to the validity of poetry as a feminist genre that empowers the reader. Claire Wills distinguishes between the two genres in her essay, "Marking Time: Fanny Howe's Poetics of Translucence," stating that "the poetic self isn't simply autobiographical," but instead a self "fractured and opaque, traversed by all kinds of unconscious forces, and reverberating with cultural and historical echoes and memories which are beyond its control" (qtd. in Kirkpatrick). This interpretation suggests that poetry is written out of, and evokes in the reader, deep feeling as opposed to narrative autobiography that stems from, and results in, more conscious thinking. This is not to marginalize the power of autobiography, which claims the discovery of self and works in feminist writing toward instilling empowerment through solidarity and in many cases, promotes appreciation of diversity. Audre Lorde is an accomplished writer in both genres of poetry and prose.

Her autobiographical narrative, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, can be considered a mixed genre because of her insertion of poems intermixed in the chapters of prose. For example, while relaying memories of time spent with her best friend Gennie, who died while they were young, Lorde inserts a poem to further express the impact of the death.

And you did not come back to April though spring was a powerful lure  
but bided your time in silence knowing the dead must endure

And you came not again to summer nor till the green oaks were leaving  
traces of blood in the autumn and there were hours for grieving. (124)

Her poetry is vague about the specific event, but focuses on the deeper feelings associated with it. This allows the reader to relate to the emotions expressed, which gives poetry a universal quality. Her prose establishes a different connection with the reader. The telling of the story of her life offers a concrete look at the circumstances

that shaped her into the strong individual that she became in a way that she could not accomplish with poetry alone. Lorde's endeavors in both genres allow her to be a more effective activist and provide for wider readership.

A history of discrimination is a strong motivation for autobiographical writing with the purpose of activism. Friedman acknowledges this kind of purposeful writing for minorities, in this case the black community, in her belief that "the autobiographical form is one of the ways that black Americans have asserted their right to live and grow. It is a bid for freedom" (43). She recognizes the power of autobiography by stating that "writing the self shatters the cultural hall of mirrors" (41). It speaks to the world the value of a person beyond cultural roles and stereotypes. Lorde expands on the significance of these roles and stereotypes in relation to the personal affect that they have on individuals within minority groups. She writes, "many of us (Black lesbians) wound up dead or demented, and many of us were distorted by the many fronts we had to fight upon. But when we survived, we grew up strong" (225). Oppression can either kill the spirit or evoke enough rage to inspire activism, depending on the internal strength of the person on whom it is inflicted. Audre Lorde is an example of an autobiographer who was able to take the pain of her alienation and turn it into a powerful positive force to create change.

Lorde's writing illustrates the idea presented by Friedman that "women can move beyond alienation through a collective solidarity with other women" (40). Her autobiography points toward the concept of collective empowerment that Friedman describes, in finding validity and greater acceptance of self. She gathered strength from solidarity with others who experienced the same types of oppression that were imposed on her. She writes of the importance of the solidarity that she felt with her friends as a teenager, explaining that "we learned that pain and rejection hurt, but they weren't fatal and that they could be useful since they couldn't be avoided...We became The Branded because we learned how to make a virtue out of it" (Lorde 82). Her connection with others who were considered different made the different-ness that she felt more acceptable to her. The alienation that she felt was transformed into pride in the fact that she was unique. She later writes that "every Black woman I ever met in the Village in those years had some part in my survival" (225). She attributes her survival to the strength that came from knowing she was not alone.

Though Lorde strives to promote solidarity among people within oppressed minority groups in order to instill power to fight, the fight is not against those

individuals or groups responsible for the oppression as much as it is against the pervasive disunity caused by discrimination. She describes the origin of her activism, writing that “my revolutionary fervor that had begun with a white waitress refusing to serve my family ice cream in the nation’s capital was becoming a clearer and clearer position, a lens through which to view the world” (87). She never expresses negative feelings toward the waitress responsible for carrying out this act of discrimination; rather, she begins to understand an unfortunate problem with the world and decides that there is a necessity for people to step up and take a stand against these laws and attitudes. Lorde’s greater vision is not about combating societal groups that have not accepted people like her, which would add to the dissention that already exists. Rather, her fight is against injustice itself, and for exposing and celebrating the differences between all groups in society. Morris writes of Lorde that, “she convinces us that the Other is essential, not to constitute ourselves through exclusion but through the creative dynamics of difference” (183). Lorde expresses the need for acceptance of diversity. She explains in her autobiography, “I was in high school that I came to believe that I was different from my white classmates, not because I was Black, but because I was me” (82). This statement signifies that diversity is individual and transcends boundaries of societal groups, and it is a positive thing. There are certain things we will not learn about ourselves if we never see ourselves in contrast to those who are different. In *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives*, theorist Nancy Miller expands on this idea stating that “reading the lives of other people with whom we do not identify has as much to tell us (if not more) about our lives as the ones with which we do,” (xv) and furthermore, that “everything that makes us different, that makes us say - no, not my story at all - is exactly what makes the memoir valuable to my own history” (19). Lorde’s writing persuades the reader to realize not only the power in finding solidarity with those who they can identify with, but also in understanding, accepting, and celebrating those qualities which set us apart from one another. The presentation that offers some solution by promoting appreciation of diversity rather than simply displaying disdain for the problem allows for more personal value to the reader, even to one who may not share the same experiences of social opposition, and is more effective in advancing the cause of unity.

It is the prejudice against and mistreatment of marginalized groups in society that has given autobiographers like Audre Lorde a reason to write. Discrimination

and alienation cause anger that leads to the passion in the author that makes the writing of autobiography both necessary and effective in working towards a vision of equality and appreciation of diversity. Patterson quotes the statement of her mission :

I took who I was and thought about who I wanted to be and what I wanted to do and did my best to bring those three things together. And that, perhaps, is the strongest thing I wanted to say to people. It's not when you open and read something that I wrote . . .the power that you feel from it doesn't come from me. That's a power that you own. The function of the words is to tick you in to "Oh, I can feel like that" and then go out and do the things that make you feel like that more.

Writing is one of the ways that Lorde pursued this goal, however, her activism is not limited to the books that she published. She co-founded The Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, and formed the Sisterhood in Support of Sisters in South Africa. She also spoke at the first national march for gay and lesbian liberation in 1979 in Washington D.C. and helped to organize disaster relief efforts for St. Croix after Hurricane Hugo. Knowing firsthand the consequences of injustice and the beauty of diversity, she found ways to make her voice audible to the world. Though altering deeply ingrained cultural perceptions is a daunting task for an individual to undertake, Lorde dedicated much of her life to making as much of a difference as possible, and hoped that what she did would inspire others to continue the work that she started.

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