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Anger Among Allies: Audre Lorde's 1981 Keynote Admonishing the National Women's Studies Association

Lester C. Olson

This essay argues that Audre Lorde's 1981 keynote speech, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," has much to contribute to communication scholars' understanding of human biases and rhetorical artistry. The significance of Lorde's subject is one reason for devoting critical attention to her speech, because, in contemporary public life in the United States, anger has abiding relevance in an extraordinary range of rhetoric and public address. Another reason for contemplating Lorde's speech is the fact that anger was a major theme throughout the internationally acclaimed poet-activist's advocacy. The essay suggests that Lorde's speech illustrates a communication technique, shifting subjectivities, which recurs in her rhetorical artistry.

Keywords: Audre Lorde; Anger; Emotions; Racism; Feminism; Women's Public Address

We are working in a context of oppression and threat, the cause of which is certainly not the angers which lie between us, but rather that virulent hatred leveled against all women, people of Color, lesbians and gay men, poor people—against all of us who are seeking to examine the particulars of our lives as we resist our oppressions, moving toward coalition and effective action.

—Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger"

In this essay, I will argue that Audre Lorde's keynote speech, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," which she delivered to the National Women's

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Studies Association (NWSA) at Storrs, Connecticut during June 1981, has much to contribute to communication scholars' understanding of human biases.¹ Established as an academic, professional organization in 1977, the NWSA's mission is to "lead the field of women's studies in educational and social transformation."² In her speech, Black lesbian feminist Lorde endeavored to communicate concerning a difficult subject across multiple differences with her audiences, especially a predominantly white and heterosexual female audience of scholar-activists at the NWSA, and whomever engaged various published versions. During 30 years since Lorde's keynote, humanities scholarship has regularly mentioned excerpts from Lorde's speech in commentary on racial anger in particular and tactical uses of emotions in general. As a touchstone of agonistic oratory, Lorde's speech models how marginalized scholar-activists have engaged in public spaces with members of relatively dominant social groups, who consider themselves to be allies, not adversaries.³

Anger can be prismatic. In this resides both its utility and its hazard. On the one hand, anger can illuminate with clarity and precision while energizing action. In her 1981 speech, Lorde observed, "Anger is loaded with information and energy" (127). She claimed, "Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (127). On the other hand, however, anger can fracture and deflect the same light, splintering it into guilt, hurt feelings, defensiveness, fear, vengefulness, retaliation, or hatred. Anger's propensity to become uncontrolled, injurious, or destructive rage makes it dangerous. Lorde noted these Janus-faced qualities of anger in her keynote by alluding to "the approaching storm that can feed the earth as well as bend the trees" (130). Anger's precarious potentialities might explain discomfort many people experience in anger's presence. Anger can be useful and vexing to anyone committed to social justice.

Lorde's public advocacy—an immense and consequential body of work consisting of poems, speeches, essays, open letters, interviews, pamphlets, and books—is invaluable for reasons that extend beyond her extensive commentary on human biases, because of its rhetorical artistry while communicating across multiple human differences. In general, Lorde's advocacy demonstrated her understanding of how privilege and oppression can combine in each person's life situation, influenced as she was by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, among other intellectual sources.⁴ Consequently, her public advocacy avoided a simplistic reduction of conflicts to the roles of oppressor and oppressed, noticing as she did how social, political, economic, educational, and religious factors impinge on lives in ways that oftentimes have people, including herself, operating within both roles, even if they are only mindful of one or another of them. In 1982, Lorde asked, "In what way do I contribute to the subjugation of any part of those who I define as my people?"⁵

In this essay, I will suggest that Lorde translated Freire's insights concerning the combined roles of oppressor and oppressed into a powerful communication technique that I have named *shifting subjectivities*. An advocate articulates a shift in the second persona of an address, wherein the auditors or readers occupy one kind of role initially and then, drawing on what is remembered or learned from that position, are repositioned subsequently into a different role that is harder for them to recognize or occupy, but that might possess some transforming power. Initially, for example, Lorde focused on her women allies' first-hand experiences of oppression

under patriarchy to help them subsequently to recognize their own roles as oppressors in similar practices across differences of race and sexuality. Concurrently, another shift transpires in the advocate's persona from a posture of identification with the auditors or readers to confrontation of them across a difference. Both shifts recur together in intricate combination in Lorde's NWSA speech.

Today, Lorde is an iconic figure to several, diverse and overlapping communities in the United States and abroad, especially people concerned with the advancement of women, Blacks and other racial minorities, the impoverished, as well as gay men and lesbians. Black feminist and political activist Angela Davis captured a key feature of Lorde's lifetime achievement in generating unanticipated coalitions: "Through her life, she galvanized alliances among individuals and groups who were not expected to discover points of convergence."⁶ Because I agree with Lorde that "There is no hierarchy of oppression,"⁷ it is important to me, as a white man, to come to terms with racism and sexism, among factors such as economic class, sexuality, age, gender identity, ability, religion, and the like. As a gay scholar of modest, rural origins, I believe, moreover, that serious errors of judgment can result from concentrating on one's own oppression, however daunting it is to deal competently with human diversity or to recognize one's own role in the systemic devaluation of others. I concur with Lorde, too, that I should recognize and use my privileges with care.⁸ So for more than 15 years now, I have been attending to Lorde's public advocacy. In 2002, after reading my earliest essays on Lorde's speeches, her estate opened her otherwise closed papers at Spelman College Archives to me, an act of trust in a white male which, to my knowledge, had only been extended previously to Lorde's biographer, Alexis De Veaux.

That I am white and male raises legitimate concerns about the risks of dominance and colonization across chasms of race and sex.⁹ Communicating about any group that one does not belong to oneself can be hazardous to the group.¹⁰ However, it can be even more hazardous to them to misuse privilege by never trying, because this practice assures consequential inattention to their lives and ideas. Even difficult or disturbing communication can provide a prospect for mutual growth. In my opinion, it becomes a matter of being accountable for my interpretations and encouraging others who view Lorde's speeches differently to offer alternatives. Relatively dominant members within marginalized communities have an understandable history of discouraging and, sometimes, silencing examinations of intra- and intergroup conflict as divisive and a "luxury we can little afford."¹¹ At the 1981 NWSA conference, this comment surfaced among attendees' responses to Lorde's keynote. In this regard, my maleness in dealing with a sustained conflict over racism between white and Black women is a delicate matter, even though I have participated at various national conferences organized primarily by and for women, among them two conferences of the NWSA.

Lorde regularly encouraged scholars of diverse backgrounds to engage her ideas. In a 1980 speech, for instance, Lorde listed distortions around human differences used to exclude work by "women of Color" from the curriculum: "All too often, the excuse given is that the literatures of women of Color can only be taught by Colored women, or that they are too difficult to understand, or that classes cannot 'get into' them because they come out of experiences that are 'too different.'" She intimated

hypocrisy in such excuses: “I have heard this argument presented by white women of otherwise quite clear intelligence, women who seem to have no trouble at all teaching and reviewing work that comes out of the vastly different experiences of Shakespeare, Molière, Dostoevsky, and Aristophanes.” Having amused audiences by the inconsistency of these excuses, she added, “Surely there must be some other explanation.”¹² Lorde’s humor acknowledged her diverse audience’s concerns, while encouraging reflection on how scholars can misuse privilege by disengagement or “protection” in ways that uncritically preserve power rather than examine how it can be used to learn constructively from human differences to advance social justice.

This essay concentrates on Lorde’s 1981 keynote speech to the NWSA in an endeavor to understand and appreciate anger from her standpoint, a brilliant, accomplished Black lesbian public advocate and political activist, who participated in several social justice movements. Her entire speech was published in the *Women’s Studies Quarterly* for Fall 1981 along with her co-presenter Adrienne Rich’s keynote, “Disobedience is What NWSA is Potentially About.”¹³ In January 1982, an abbreviated version of Lorde’s remarks circulated in the *Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force Bulletin*.¹⁴ Being a perfectionist, Lorde revised her keynote by using the text from *Women’s Studies Quarterly* as a draft for another version published in *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde* (1984).¹⁵ I assume that this text best reflects her views. So I feature this version in the absence of a recording. During mid-November 1984, Lorde read the NWSA keynote at a public gathering in Eugene, Oregon, where she and Barbara Smith conducted a community dialog concerning a Black man’s recent homicide.¹⁶ In addition, Dagmar Schultz had Lorde’s keynote translated into German for publication in Berlin.¹⁷ Since 1987, the speech has been anthologized in numerous collections concerning race, women, gender, language, and multi-cultural experiences.¹⁸ Lorde’s keynote has become a touchstone to diverse, marginalized communities in the United States and abroad.

The significance of Lorde’s subject matter is one reason for devoting attention to her speech. In contemporary public life, anger has abiding relevance today in an extraordinary range of rhetoric and public address. In 2007, syndicated columnist George F. Will asserted that “anger is more pervasive than merely political grievances would explain.” He averred that Americans are “infatuated” with anger because it is “democratic.” He asserted, “Anyone can express it, and it is one of the seven deadly sins, which means it is a universal susceptibility.”¹⁹ Although I will question Will’s claim that anger is “democratic,” his column testified nonetheless to anger’s ubiquity in US culture. On July 16, 2010, *The Chronicle Review* devoted essays to “Anger: How We Became the United States of Fury,” in which Sasha Abramsky characterized rage as “the most bipartisan emotion in America.”²⁰ Yet contributions by such recognized journalists and academic leaders have concentrated on anger expressed by the powerful and privileged whose optimism and entitlement have been recently diminished or lost (such as the so called Tea Party), not by members of marginalized communities such as Lorde.

Another reason to contemplate Lorde’s speech is the fact that anger was a major theme throughout the internationally acclaimed activist’s advocacy. In her NWSA keynote, she acknowledged, “My anger has meant pain to me but it has also meant

survival, and before I give it up I'm going to be sure that there is something at least as powerful to replace it on the road to clarity" (132). Lorde distinguished between anger and hatred, and she salvaged the former as potentially useful and generative (129). Pamela Annas generalized that Lorde's keynote "talked about the empowering and creative energy of anger, and the differences between anger and hate."²¹ As Elaine Maria Upton observed, "One of the prominent feelings to which the reader must respond in Lorde's writing is anger and often rage."²² It is not possible to understand or appreciate Lorde's advocacy without coming to terms with anger as a commonplace response to injustices and a resource for political activism—at times, deliberately disruptive and consciously rupturing the usual rules of engagement.

The essay begins with a brief sketch of anger's social and political uses, especially in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, to place Lorde's keynote speech to the NWSA within its historical moment, by encapsulating commonplace beliefs and norms concerning anger and by identifying risks that attended racial expressions of anger. After a necessarily concise orientation to anger in twentieth-century US ideology, the essay turns to specific experiences impinging on Lorde's decision to make anger the central subject of her keynote, not an obvious decision given risks that racism's systemic roots could be characterized as merely feelings. Here I will scrutinize her conflicts with white feminists in women's organizations during the late 1970s. Finally, the essay examines Lorde's remarks at the NWSA to explore possible rhetorical explanations for her substantive claims and techniques. The conclusion considers fragmentary evidence suggesting how Lorde's audiences interacted with her views during the conference and afterward. One result will be an appreciation for an insightful speech by an exceptional orator and radical visionary. Another outcome will be a deeper understanding of certain rhetorical uses of anger when expressed by members of marginalized communities within US culture.

Anger, Marginalized Communities, and US Culture

Let me begin with a distinction between experiences of an emotion and social norms or rules guiding its expression in public and private life. The latter has been referred to as "emotionology" by Carol Z. Stearns and Peter N. Stearns to designate "norms that describe and to some extent regulate emotions such as anger." They underscore that "Emotionology is not the same thing as emotional experience. . . . A family may discountenance anger, but there may be much anger in that family's operations." Their book affirms accurately that "American scholars largely have shared a wider public desire to keep the problems of anger carefully beneath the surface."²³ This distinction is useful for approaching Lorde's speech, because she both performs anger and comments about re-envisioning norms for working constructively with it.

These germane norms can vary with race, sexuality, class, sex, and the like. Notice, moreover, the specific places and ways in which emotions are expressed: alone in a solitary space, in a private setting in the presence of others, by distant, personal or open letters, or in public before groups, where emotions might be displayed or carefully concealed. Mari J. Matsuda observed, "There is a politics of anger: who is

allowed to get angry, whose anger goes unseen, and who seems angry when they are not.”²⁴ Lorde’s speech noticed differences in anger stemming from white women’s violated presumptions of entitlement or privilege, on one hand, and Black women’s affective responses to being the target of their misuses, on the other.

Anger can be vexing within overlapping, marginalized communities because it can become a source of fracture within and between already vulnerable social groups, even though anger can be a resource sometimes mobilizing concerted action. In an essay concerning AIDS activism, for instance, Robert Ariss observed, “The most overt organizational feature of ACT UP was its focus on the emotion of anger, an emotion which was evoked to unite its members.” ACT UP’s mission statement declared, “ACT UP is a diverse, non partisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis.”²⁵ While ACT UP’s mission exemplifies anger mobilizing concerted action, anger has torn groups apart, as it did at NWSA’s subsequent conference during the late 1980s in Akron, Ohio, where I witnessed the organization’s implosion at a well-attended Women of Color panel condemning its national office for racism.

In the United States, anger is routinely situated in public life as psychological. Consequently, justifiable anger concerning systemic injustice can be displaced into each person’s attitude or sensibility.²⁶ Myths encouraging individualism habituate many people to collude in anger’s dis-location from public life into private malady. Characterized as merely personal, anger may be mis-recognized as a maladjusted individual, not a malfunctioning culture that rational people ought to experience with outrage. In this view, what becomes necessary is therapy, not social and political change. In the United States, this psychological maneuver has been a tool of political oppression for decades across various marginalized communities.²⁷ Although anger can be a habitual response to any frustration and a dysfunctional, harmful emotion for people who are, as Ronald T. Potter-Efron characterized it, *Angry All the Time*, anger can nonetheless be a legitimate response to wrongful deeds, exemplified in Lorde’s speech by the systemic character of racism, sexism, and biases against lesbians and gay men.²⁸ Consequently, in listening to Lorde’s speech, a familiar pitfall for audiences consists in making the political merely personal.

An extensive literature features anger among commonplace psychological responses to death and dying, grief and loss.²⁹ A few years before her 1981 speech, Lorde confronted her mortality during her diagnosis for breast cancer, as she recounted the previous year in *The Cancer Journals* (1980). Before her keynote, Lorde was engaged in her ongoing battle with a disease that ultimately claimed her life. In a handwritten draft for her keynote, Lorde wrote a definition of “ANGER,” as meaning to “distress, vex, hurt, trouble, wound, incite to wrath.” She added that anger, “from the Old Norse,” was “to grieve.”³⁰ However, while her health crisis fueled her anger, to characterize Lorde’s anger in psychological terms could deflect attention from the public slights and injuries enacted through capricious biases. It is, therefore, necessary to reject a simplistic binary between the psychological and the public, or the personal and the political, by focusing instead on these entwined factors in Lorde’s experiences of biases with the public and political firmly in the foreground.

Another simplistic dichotomy between the emotional and rational operates in rhetoric and public address to the disadvantage of women, members of racial

minorities, gay men, lesbians, the impoverished, the disabled, children, and other vulnerable populations. Those who inhabit one or more of these categories are regularly portrayed in stereotypes as merely emotional, and anger, in particular, signals a distorted capacity for sound judgment. Along lines reminiscent of Aristotle's view,³¹ F. G. Bailey stressed, "Displays of passion signal that reason (prudence) is in abeyance; and those who lack prudence have a diminished capacity to plan realistically and to foresee and so prevent an undesirable eventuality."³² In such a culture, to foreground any emotion at all risks reproducing stereotypes of women and minorities as emotional and feeling beings rather than rational and logical humans. In contrast, in much of Lorde's advocacy, including her 1981 keynote, she endeavored to synthesize reasoning and feeling, not artificially separate them. Moreover, her NWSA keynote spotlighted systemic sources for legitimate anger, which, in her view, prudent and self-respecting people should recognize as rightfully worthy of wrath.

Lorde had to contend with a stereotype of the angry Black woman, as she acknowledged during her keynote. For marginalized populations, anger can sometimes seem emblematic for the entire group. Anger becomes an existential condition or an immutable characteristic, a stereotype, not transient experiences or a warranted affective response to unfair treatment. In US culture, Linda M. Grasso generalized, "To women envisioning a new America in the 1970s, anger was a vital political tool." She might mean that women tactically used prevailing stereotypes deliberately by inhabiting them. Grasso affirmed, "Anger demanded attention, it propelled insight, artistry, action; it exposed knowledge that had been buried, speech that had been silenced."³³ More generally, referring to war protests and the counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Barbara Deming observed a commonplace error that anger results from relative powerlessness in the presence of injustice, because, Deming stressed, it is "precisely when some real hope is born at last, when a movement for change begins to gain momentum, that anger pushes up—and has to be contended with."³⁴

Then, too, in the United States, emotional labor tends to be done by members of marginalized communities for dominant groups, Lorde believed. She wrote in an early, handwritten draft for her NWSA keynote: "I do not exist to feel your anger for you. I have enough of my own."³⁵ Oftentimes this labor is done in isolation or private settings, because the public display of anger tends to be a privilege practiced among aggressive supremacists across differences of race, sexuality, class, and the like. Despite stereotypes, members of dominant groups oftentimes vent anger in public ways that members of marginalized communities absorb into our bodies, at times with harmful physiological consequences from internalized stress—that is, when we are not practicing anger ourselves from positions of relative political power, social privilege, or economic resourcefulness. Carol Tavris notes that, "Paradoxically, some of the angriest revolutionaries came from worlds of privilege, not misery."³⁶ Public displays of anger by the entitled can become authoritarian, a deliberately intimidating demand for control or power, and, therefore, corrosive of democratic processes.

Thematic in Lorde's public advocacy was her recognition that women and minorities regularly misused anger across differences in that they tended hierarchically to vent anger horizontally or downward, not upwards toward precise systemic

sources of oppression.³⁷ In Lorde's view, misdirected anger usually resulted from fear of dominant groups' power and authority. Yet horizontal expressions of anger might not always be misplaced, because of recurring problems that can arise from collusion, betrayal, and opportunism among vulnerable populations through complicity with dominant ones. In Black feminist bell hooks' collection of essays entitled *Killing Rage*, she commented with evident ambivalence on such anger.³⁸ For members of marginalized communities to display anger in public can become a risky mode of what hooks has called "talking back" by speaking "as an equal" to figures of authority and power, despite the dangers of punishment.³⁹

Even so, as Mari Matsuda recognized in insights concerning a practice that she called "ask the other question," women's displays of anger can sometimes be a convenient public mask for rehearsing bigotry, as relatively privileged women discipline minorities across differences of race, sexuality, and class. 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, "No form of subordination ever stands alone."⁴⁰ Sometimes because of genuine pain or fear, other times under feigned or cultivated personae of speaking truth to power, such women presume that they may safely vent rage precisely because of the target's recognized vulnerabilities. Examples of such anger will be evident in the next section.

Lorde believed that, despite the hazards of misusing anger, passionate emotions were necessary for bringing about radical change. By featuring anger in her NWSA keynote, she ventured to negotiate an intricate, entrenched ideology, buttressed by individualism, in which no options were likely to have altogether positive outcomes, as she surely realized. So why did Lorde feature anger as the central subject for her NWSA keynote? Allow me to turn next to Lorde's experiences before her 1981 speech, because her confrontations with white feminists probably account for her decision to concentrate on anger in her keynote, though certain personal matters factored in her decision, too.

Racial Conflicts in Predominantly White Women's Organizations

During 1977, Lorde participated in an organization in Brooklyn, New York called "The Sisterhood," whose membership included other accomplished Black women writers and artists, among them June Jordan, Toni Morrison, Donna Simms, Ntozake Shange, and Alice Walker.⁴¹ Lorde's experiences in this organization provide background for appreciating her activism within predominantly white women's feminist organizations, because the minutes for The Sisterhood affirmed a collaborative decision to press for Black women writers' and artists' inclusion in major Black and feminist journals and magazines. The March 20, 1977 minutes, for instance, mentioned Zita Allen's proposal "that The Sisterhood try to influence major publications such as *Essence*, *Ms.*, *Ebony*, and *First World* to publish more young black poets and writers." Lorde attended that March 20 meeting. In the minutes for April 10, 1977 was Margo Jefferson's suggestion that "The Sisterhood should try to

influence *Chrysalis*, the new West Coast feminist magazine, to include black women as much as possible” and “VeVe Clarke suggested that the West Coast organization, Black Women Organized for Action, could help us in regards to *Chrysalis*.”⁴² As this new magazine’s Poetry Editor, Lorde was well situated to implement such suggestions, too, as indeed she did.

During the late 1970s, Lorde experienced conflicts with white women feminists concerning racism in national forums. Examples of these included a public confrontation with radical feminist Mary Daly over her exclusion of Black goddesses from her book *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), which had argued that Christianity and other religions perpetuated patriarchy, plus in house disagreements with the editorial board of *Chrysalis* over race, and, above all, political confrontations during *The Second Sex Conference* held at New York University in 1979, where Lorde delivered “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” denouncing the entire conference as a racist and homophobic proceeding. These conflicts fueled Lorde’s anger by exemplifying white women’s organizationally ensconced racism, in her considered opinion. In this section, I will argue that such experiences with white women informed Lorde’s strategic decision to feature anger in her keynote.

In an open letter to Mary Daly written on May 6, 1979, Lorde commented that her letter broke a “silence” that she had imposed on herself before December 1977: “I had decided never again to speak to white women about racism. I felt it was wasted energy, because of their destructive guilt and defensiveness, and because whatever I had to say might better be said by white women to one another, at far less emotional cost to the speaker, and probably with a better hearing.” Note that, in Lorde’s comment, it was “guilt and defensiveness” which she portrayed as “destructive,” not her public expressions of anger as a response to racism. After her open letter’s initial circulation in *Top Ranking*, it was reprinted in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), and again in *Sister Outsider* (1984).⁴³

During the late 1970s and into the early 1980s, Lorde spoke regularly about racism at feminist organizations and forums dominated by white women. In 1980, for instance, she remarked at Amherst College, “There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist.”⁴⁴ One typed manuscript for this speech has multiple lines crosshatching a section that identified specific women’s magazines and authors whose work, in Lorde’s estimation, exemplified racism within women’s publishing and writing: *Savvy*, *Heresies*, *Chrysalis*, and Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology*, among them.⁴⁵ However, these specific names and publications were excised from a printed version of the speech in *Sister Outsider*, presumably because Lorde was more concerned with transforming practices than embarrassing particular people and groups. At present, I do not know whether Lorde named them during her remarks at Amherst.

The excised examples merit attention here nonetheless, because they shed light on Lorde’s perspective and illustrate practices which could be reconsidered by writers and editors. Regarding *Savvy*, Lorde wrote that the “straight white women’s media” had used her “article on breast cancer” and illustrated it “with pictures of a thin, young, white woman.” Invidious distortions arose from using a photograph to

encourage identification from majority readers. Consequently, *Savvy* appropriated a Black woman's prose for white audiences without attention to race as a factor impinging on Black women's disproportionate cancer risks. In 1982, Lorde speculated in *Zami*, which she called her "biomythography," that racism accounted for her securing and keeping a job that routinely exposed her to radiation.⁴⁶ But Lorde did not note such racial factors in her draft for the Amherst speech delivered a year earlier.

Lorde characterized *Heresies* as "a feminist publication on Arts & Politics," which, "in selecting all-white material for their special issue on Lesbian Art & Artists, declares that lesbian art and culture in america [sic] is, by definition, white." After noting a pattern of exclusion and non-recognition, she continued, "As an aside, I ask that you also consider the reasons why there is a need for special issues of the work of lesbians and third world women." Presumably, because Lorde's aside was within a list of negative examples, this comment encouraged her hearers to consider the "special issue" as segregation of materials through a familiar editorial practice, which can sometimes nonetheless be useful for spotlighting under-recognized work or emerging themes.

Lorde's excised examples indicated her awareness of how organizations sometimes actively enabled racism by how they presented materials accepted for publication. In Lorde's view, *Chrysalis*, another progressive women's magazine, had featured "without comment, the work of a white artist whose visuals are clearly racist." Presumably mindful of risks that attend censoring any artistic materials, Lorde concentrated precisely on the magazine's collusion with this racism by failing to offer any editorial comment concerning it. In framing these examples, she observed in a remark that she apparently did revise for her Amherst speech, "For as long as any difference between women means one of them must be inferior, then the recognition of any difference must be fraught with guilt. To allow us to step out of stereotypes therefore is too guilt-provoking, for it threatens the complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex, a righteous attitude that frees them of all responsibility for their own oppressive behavior."⁴⁷

In addition, throughout the late 1970s, especially in 1979, Lorde experienced a sustained in house conflict with the predominantly white editorial board of *Chrysalis* over what she viewed as their racist handling of poetry by minority women. *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.⁴⁸ Lorde had been the Poetry Editor of the magazine since its first issue in 1977. Two of her essays—"Poems Are Not Luxuries" and "Uses of the Erotic"—were published in the magazine.⁴⁹ However, Lorde's relationship with the editorial board deteriorated as conflicts concerning organizationally ensconced racism, in her judgment, recurred in the magazine's handling of poems by "Women of Color." In a typed letter to the editors on July 20, 1979, Lorde detailed her concerns about racism and concluded: "I want my name off the mast-head of *Chrysalis* as

Poetry Editor by the next issue, and I am quite prepared to take legal action to see that this is done.”⁵⁰

As intense and consequential as Lorde’s conflicts with *Chrysalis’s* editorial board were, more crucial to her decision to focus on anger in the NWSA keynote were her experiences at *The Second Sex Conference*, held in September 1979 at New York University. As a speaker and workshop leader, who had been credited on the program as a “consultant,” Lorde attended the 1979 conference, which honored the thirtieth anniversary of Simone De Beauvoir’s classic book. There, Lorde delivered her speech, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” which ranks among her most frequently engaged statements. Lorde denounced the conference organizers for neglecting differences of race, sexuality, and class, although their invitation to her promised to deal with these differences.

Afterward, Lorde received a lengthy letter from the conference’s organizers, eight of whom have their names typed on it, though only Jessica Benjamin signed it.⁵¹ Written on letterhead for “The New York Institute for the Humanities,” this letter criticized Lorde for her public remarks as “enormously painful to all of us.” Dated October 23, 1979, the letter—photocopies of which abound in Lorde’s papers—is worth consideration at length because Lorde quoted verbatim from it, though without attribution, during her NWSA keynote.

The eight conference organizers claimed, “Had we not felt such admiration for you as a poet and activist, we would not have felt so betrayed and disappointed. Because you are black and lesbian, you seemed to speak with the moral authority of suffering.” The authors explained, “But it was our purpose in organizing the conference to challenge not only authority but political moralizing, and especially moralizing and privilege that has until now been derived from victimization and suffering. For this is a problem endemic to all women, (and any oppressed people) because all women speak to varying degrees from the position of powerlessness, victimization, and suffering.” The organizers explained to Lorde, “We worked to push the discussion beyond the kind of vindictive and guilt-provoking politics that so often arise from powerlessness.” The letter charged, “Unwillingly or not, your commentary triggered off precisely the kind of discussion we hoped to avoid.” This comment could be interpreted as manifesting, however inadvertently, white women’s ownership of the “center” of feminist scholarship and an entitlement to define the rules of engagement that regularly frustrated many women of color, lesbians, and the working class in the 1970s and 1980s.

The eight writers continued, “It was not, as you suggested, our intention to suppress the issue of racism at the conference. Rather we hoped to provide an arena in which it could be discussed with the thoughtfulness and freedom from false emotions which an issue of such weight and with such complex psychological overtones requires.” Lorde underlined and placed two exclamation marks in the margins beside a subsequent sentence: “We failed to provide this arena in regard to racism because white women did not address the issue and black women did not choose to come.” The letter added, “You must know that this estrangement has two sides and that it is not a simple matter of white culpability.” Yet, that white women

did not attempt to “address the issue” could be interpreted as admitting a disturbing misuse of white privileges, while suggesting an extent to which racism was ensconced at the conference. To Lorde, the eight organizers wrote, “We thought that your mode of presenting and simplifying the problem created a mood of hopelessness about ever getting past guilt and recrimination into trusting communication and action.” It does not seem to have occurred to the eight writers that Lorde may have deliberately ruptured possibilities for engagement under the usual rules in which woman unmodified is presumptively white, heterosexual, or financially comfortable.

Lorde’s 1981 NWSA keynote can be understood as responding in public to every one of these charges without naming her interlocutors. Some passages Lorde quoted verbatim in her keynote as examples of racism. A few years later, when Susan Christian interviewed Lorde on September 24, 1983, concerning her experiences of anger and rage, the interview made explicit connections among *The Second Sex* Conference and the NWSA speech, as well as Lorde’s poem, “Power,”⁵² and her 1983 *Essence* article, with which this interview excerpt begins:

I had been wanting to write this thing since I gave a talk at NWSA two years ago on anger between black women and white women, because it’s so heavy. You see, I’d talked the year before at the Simone de Beauvoir conference and I gave a paper called *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House* . . . Well, you cannot imagine the flack I got after I delivered that paper. I got these letters from the organizers of the conference saying, “You seem to speak with the moral authority of suffering BUT . . .” And I’m reading these letters and I’m thinking “Oh Jesus! These ladies can’t deal!” The *Master’s Tools* was mild compared to what I could say. So, at NWSA I talked about anger between black women and white women, how they had to stop being afraid of black women’s anger, because I wasn’t interested in guilt, their guilt didn’t serve anyone. It’s not black women’s anger that’s corroding the earth. Obviously! But even when I gave this speech and I was writing about anger between black women and white women what I *really* wanted—as I’m *writing* this—what I really wanted to talk about is anger between black women . . . between women of color.

But I said to myself, I can’t begin to touch this, not in *this* speech. First almost all of these women there are going to be white. And sure enough . . .⁵³

Therefore, Lorde’s focus on anger in her NWSA keynote resulted from her experiences with white women’s guilt as a source of fracture in predominantly white women’s organizations and conferences, even though, as Lorde mentioned later in this interview, she was bothered by her niece’s recent death from asthma, believing as she did that “asthma is really in many respects dammed-up anger.”⁵⁴ Lorde realized that her audience at *The Second Sex* Conference heard her differently than she apparently expected. What rhetorical content and techniques did she employ in her subsequent endeavor to get a hearing from the NWSA in 1981? Let us turn next to her keynote in an effort to discern the rhetorical dynamics of her speech to another predominantly white and heterosexual audience of women and feminists, who were presumably open to hearing her views given the conference’s central theme: “Women Respond to Racism.”

Lorde's Keynote Speech to the NWSA

At the NWSA, Lorde's keynote examined emotional dynamics in unproductive exchanges among women feminists, especially focusing on anger and racism. Her remarks centered on the conference theme, which had been publicized through various outlets. In the spring 1981 *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Pat Miller invited participants to "examine the conjunction of racism and sexism from an interdisciplinary, multicultural perspective as well as in the context of, for example, community organizing, curriculum development, the media, and public policy." Miller mentioned, "Because racism, like sexism, is a personal as well as an institutional issue, we have also arranged a series of small group consciousness-raising sessions to be held daily throughout the Convention."⁵⁵ Estimates for conference attendance ranged from 1,300 to 1,500 women, a noticeable decrease from the previous NWSA conference. Some ascribed this lower attendance to the convention theme, which was considered not "scholarly," while others noted competition from a nearby Berkshire Conference on the History of Women at Vassar. Coverage of the NWSA conference in *off our backs*, which included a synopsis of Lorde's speech, generalized, "It was a difficult conference."⁵⁶

Lorde defined "*Racism*" as "The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance, manifest and implied" (124). On first appearance, Lorde's speech seems at odds with its genesis and keynote role, because both factors were systemic with regard to structure and organization. Lorde and Adrienne Rich had been approached by NWSA planners to be featured speakers at a previous conference at Bloomington, Indiana. Both women declined those invitations, believing as they did that one panel on racism would become tokenism. Subsequently, at Storrs, Connecticut, where NWSA featured racism as the central theme, the two women agreed to appear as keynote speakers together. Apparently, negotiations with Lorde and Rich were factors in this theme's emergence. Therefore, their eventual appearance at the conference reflected their conviction that systemic change at an organizational level was necessary to transform racism. Lorde had a previous history of speaking with attention to systemic factors such as structure, organization, and habitual social practices, as exemplified by her earlier, now classic speech, "The Master's Tools."

Initially, Lorde's speech concerning anger contrasts oddly against this emphasis on systems in that its entire first section details merely interpersonal examples listed one after another after another in what seems like a litany of racist wrongs committed by individual white women against Black women at academic conferences and women's studies programs. Lorde framed these examples by saying, "Because I do not want this to become a theoretical discussion, I am going to give a few examples of interchanges between women that illustrate these points" (124–25). There ensued an extensive series of anecdotes illustrating white women's racism, in Lorde's judgment. These instances are powerful in that they exemplify what Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca have referred to as "presence" in public argument.⁵⁷ Yet they are so relentlessly negative in their depictions of white women's conduct that they could

seem an indictment of her predominantly white audience. Of course, by their presence at the conference, these white women had enacted openness to engaging racism.

In at least three ways, Lorde's analysis remained nonetheless systemic in its overall focus. The first of these was the knowledge among many feminists that the personal is the political in that an examination of individual experiences can illuminate structural and institutional concerns. The speech's organization progresses from several, inter-personal examples to broader, more general and abstract considerations of anger as social norms. At the time, a relatively basic insight would have been that these specific white women felt entitled to make harmful remarks to Black women precisely because of unexamined privileges ensconced by and within the organization. Second, Lorde's examples focused on interpersonal manifestations of racism to forestall or reduce the risks of unproductive exchanges among the women attending the conference by calling all participants' awareness to how habitual, social conduct toward others could precipitate them. Anticipating a reproduction of useless or damaging transactions, Lorde sought to circumvent their recurrence at the conference. Finally, Lorde articulated a way of understanding anger as potentially a generative, creative and empowering resource for women to grow beyond their current views. She sought to change social understandings of a key term and recurrent experience, by reformulating norms to recognize it as a resource for rhetorical invention.

Most of Lorde's initial comments concerning how racism evoked her anger were well adapted to the audience of predominantly white feminists in that all but one of them were already familiar to women who had endeavored to transform patriarchy, regardless of race. Here was her list: "the anger of exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal, and co-optation" (124).⁵⁸ With the probable exception of "racial distortions," all of these would have been experientially familiar to these attendees, white and Black, who had tried to transform patriarchy. So her list would have skillfully promoted identifications among women at the outset before her subsequent, detailed examples concentrating on white women's conduct toward Black women. In those examples, some of these same practices recurred. So the sequencing, which translated Freire's insights concerning oppression into a specific communication practice that I have named *shifting subjectivities*, enhanced white women's ease of understanding concerns pertaining to racism, even though such analogies are oftentimes problematic and can be misleading.⁵⁹

The first example in Lorde's litany called white women's awareness to a double bind that confronts Black advocates who express their emotions (recall *The Second Sex Conference* organizers' reference to "false emotions"). Lorde's example was a white woman, who remarked, "Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you" (125). The white woman could be interpreted as asking Lorde to speak in an inauthentic voice because her comfort as a listener was more important to her than Lorde's insights concerning systems. Lorde asked, "But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?" (125). Presumably, this first example preempted to some extent audience responses of

discomfort or fear from experiencing her as another angry Black woman.⁶⁰ Brenda R. Silver commented concerning Lorde's example, "Most important is the question whether mainstream feminism can respond to the angers coming from those women perceived to be on the 'margins' without replicating the politics of authority and tone practiced by those in power when their position is threatened."⁶¹ Lorde's example would, moreover, have reminded her audience to focus on substance more than style or delivery, while raising difficult concerns about the ethical responsibilities that relatively dominant groups have to listen to marginalized speakers.

Lorde's handwritten revisions on a typed manuscript evidence that she felt compelled to spell out for her audience specifically how each of her examples was racist by adding an explanation to each of them. She was not certain that the white women could discern her perspective from each example without her explicit gloss. In her second example, Lorde commented, "The Women's Studies Program of a southern university invites a Black woman to read following a week-long forum on Black and white women. 'What has this week given to you?' I ask. The most vocal white woman says, 'I think I've gotten a lot. I feel Black women really understand me a lot better now; they have a better idea of where I'm coming from'" (125). Lorde's typed manuscript has a handwritten insert, which appears as printed text in *Sister Outsider*, to amplify this example for her audience: "As if understanding her lay at the core of the racist problem" (125). Lorde demanded that listeners of relatively privileged positions endeavor to center on the lives and perspectives of those different from themselves, not thoughtlessly reproduce dominance by expecting central attention.

Other examples illustrate how white women assign Black women responsibility for discussing racism, how it is a "Black women's problem" rather than one for dominant groups to acknowledge and redress, and how white women sometimes depend on Black women to do emotional labor for them. To illustrate the last, Lorde recalled when a white woman had used possessives, "we" and "our," in a question, "Are you going to do anything with how we can deal directly with *our* anger?" (125). In reply, Lorde asked the white woman, "How do you use *your* rage?" (125). Lorde's handwritten insert, which appeared in printed versions, explained, "I do not exist to feel her anger for her" (125). Further, these possessives obfuscated differences in their sources of anger or, for that matter, how white women's organizationally ensconced and enabled racism might warrant Black women's anger. Still another example suggested that white women were only comfortable dealing "with little colored children across the roads of childhood, the beloved nursemaid, the occasional second-grade classmate" (125), an illustration which encouraged reflection on misusing white privilege selectively to engage Black women's voices. In this regard, the example reiterated the woman who wanted to hear only comforting, not "harsh," Black women's voices.

Superficially, one later example is perhaps disturbing in appearing to bait the audience to participate unwittingly in public acknowledgment of racial biases, because the story was amusing and, it would appear, deliberately so. Alluding to Beth, Lorde said, "I wheel my two-year-old daughter in a shopping cart through a

supermarket in Eastchester in 1967, and a little white girl riding past in her mother's cart calls out excitedly, "Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid!" (126). The audience members could have laughed at the white child's exclamation for varied reasons, including the white child's ignorance and naïveté or the speaker's manner of delivery. Yet Lorde continued, "And your mother shushes you, but she does not correct you. And so fifteen years later, at a conference on racism, you can still find that story humorous. But I hear your laughter is full of terror and dis-ease" (126). Lorde's use of "your" and "you" replaces the "white girl" in the cart with the audience members, individually and collectively, "you," not "her."

Of course, Lorde's story is racist and especially disconcerting in its childhood manifestation. But the audience's laughter is less certainly so. Lorde's interpretation of the public laughter as evidence of an admission—a self-acknowledgment of internalized racism by replacing the "white girl" with "you"—raised racism's specter among white women allies consciously concerned enough about racism as to attend the conference. Many manifestations of racism are unconscious, and this may have been Lorde's point. Laughter, which ordinarily bonds an audience together, could have become, in the aftermath of Lorde's interpretation, a collective self-recognition, possibly a communal acknowledgment of the auditors' guilt or shame.

Then, Lorde faulted the conference planners for not waiving the "registration fee for poor women and women of Color" (126) and for the deficiencies of consciousness raising groups, which, in the past, were "made up of white women who shared the terms of their oppressions" (130). Because, in CR groups, "no tools were developed to deal with other women's anger except to avoid it, deflect it, or flee from it under a blanket of guilt" (130), in later years Lorde's "eye to eye" sessions sought to change such CR practices into occasions for women to confront each other concerning differences among women. These two examples illustrated how difficult it can be from positions of relative privilege to recognize how familiar practices, however well intended, can reproduce those privileged positions and how differences in material resources, as racism's symptomatic consequences, can contribute cyclically to absences, silences, and exclusions from conferences and organizations. Without eliminating or adjusting fees to reflect income, the conference reproduced racism's harms.

Lorde's subsequent comments to the NWSA sketched an emotionology, to which she turned with a personal, intimate revelation: "I want to speak about anger, my anger, and what I have learned from my travels through its dominions" (127). What follows, however, are oftentimes generalizations concerning anger in the abstract. For example, she observed "Any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and the use of anger. This discussion must be direct and creative because it is crucial" (128). Likewise, when she distinguished "anger" and "hatred," her comments were general: "Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change" (129). To Lorde, anger "implies peers meeting upon a common basis to examine difference, and to alter those distortions which history has created around our difference" (129). As this remark illustrates, Lorde used distinctions

between “anger” and “hatred” to build and to reinforce identifications among women through their opposition to widespread misogyny among men, even as she examined chasms separating white and Black women. This was a powerful unification device that featured women’s communal opposition to men’s hatred. Her references to “peers” might have mitigated habitual perceptions of anger as authoritarian, intimidating, or domineering, since this word implies an exchange among equals.

To be sure, certain elements of Lorde’s subsequent commentary was drawn from personal experience. For instance, she quoted certain passages from *The Second Sex* Conference organizers’ letter to illustrate white women’s incomprehension, misunderstanding, and blindness. Without attribution, Lorde quoted, “Because you are Black and Lesbian, you seem to speak with the moral authority of suffering” (132). In public reply to distant correspondence, Lorde commented, “Yes, I am Black and Lesbian, and what you hear in my voice is fury, not suffering. Anger, not moral authority. There is a difference” (132).⁶² But the predominant feature of the section nonetheless is its detailing of normative responses to anger, which were neither useful nor helpful to minority women. Concerning displacement, Lorde commented, “I have seen situations where white women hear a racist remark, resent what has been said, become filled with fury, and remain silent because they are afraid. That unexpressed anger lies within them like an undetonated device, usually to be hurled at the first woman of Color who talks about racism” (127). Whereas the eight organizers of *The Second Sex* Conference had given Lorde responsibility for the destructiveness brought about by her anger, Lorde gave back to such white women responsibility for misuses of anger, such as guilt and defensiveness, as more precisely the source of any destructiveness: “It is not the anger of other women that will destroy us but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment” (130). Such comments called participants’ awareness to dichotomous potentialities for misusing or reclaiming anger.

“Guilt” recurred as an “evasion” throughout Lorde’s treatment of anger: “Guilt is only another way of avoiding informed action, of buying time out of the pressing need to make clear choices” (130). Lorde portrayed guilt and defensiveness as impediments, employing metaphors for them as “bricks in a wall against which we all flounder” (124). In Lorde’s view, so habitual were the impediments to using anger well that she asserted, “for Black women and white women to face each other’s angers without denial or immobility or silence or guilt is in itself a heretical and generative idea” (129). Yet Lorde acknowledged that some women’s experiences of anger within certain men’s conduct had habituated women to view anger as hazardous, perhaps life-threatening. White women’s defensiveness was warranted under specific circumstances. “For women raised to fear, too often anger threatens annihilation. In the male construct of brute force, we were taught that our lives depended upon the good will of patriarchal power” (131). This remark alluded to a long, devastating history of violence against women in ways that encouraged reflection on anger’s destructive, sometimes deadly history. Yet it ignored women’s capacity for abuse, brute force, and violence, making the world tidy in ways that it could never be. This rhetorical move

could be interpreted as sexist in its depictions of men, who appeared only as embodiments of brute force, not potential allies who used anger creatively and generatively to enhance people's lives. Even so, when Lorde unified all women as the oppressed, she was logically entitled to do so on the basis of which group has greater institutional power.

In her keynote, Lorde's central point was that the white women could deal with Black women's feelings in ways that ultimately deflected attention from systemic arrangements of racial power. The white women at the NWSA conference may have endured hurt feelings and diminished *ethos*, but they would have lost little, if any, of their organizationally ensconced privilege and power. In this respect, they were perhaps not so different with regard to race from the men with regard to sex. While listening to Lorde's angry voice, what listeners may be tempted to dismiss as hyperbolic, sweeping, and simplistic generalizations—whether it concerns men's misogyny or white women's racism—could signal a need to adjust listening practices to situate the advocacy as commentary on systems, not individuals, and to recognize generalizations as having exceptions and complexities. Further, for listeners who feel unable to do much substantive to intervene—indeed, one can be dominant within a system without dominating the system—listening may enact a transformative practice which raises awareness that subsequently could inform political actions.

Tacitly drawing on Freire's insights concerning how oppressed people can internalize, embody, or host oppressive practices across other differences, Lorde asked her audience of predominantly white feminists, whom she addressed as allies in ongoing efforts to transform patriarchal culture: "What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heel print upon another woman's face? What woman's terms of oppression have become precious and necessary to her as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny?" (132). These were not rhetorical questions. Rather they encouraged women to contemplate how they were misusing their privileges across social differences, how righteousness positions people as judge and jury above others, and what Lorde described as the "contradictions of self, woman as oppressor" (130). Although she affirmed, "No woman is responsible for altering the psyche of her oppressor, even when that psyche is embodied in another woman" (133), Lorde's keynote devoted itself most fundamentally to this task, as did her other speeches during this period from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s.

Lorde concluded: "We welcome all women who can meet us, face to face, beyond objectification and beyond guilt" (133). The positive language nonetheless challenged her audience to consider whether they were, in fact, her allies. Were they, instead, accomplices of overtly hostile racists, because white women's evasions implicated them for colluding with the harms?⁶³ Judith Kegan Gardiner generalized in 1994 that Lorde's keynote remarks "certainly also challenge today's white feminist readers, as they were intended to challenge her original NWSA audience, to ask on what basis they consider themselves 'allies' rather than 'enemies.'"⁶⁴ Now nearly two decades after Gardiner's observation, the challenge abides. At times, allies in

certain movements for social justice may be adversaries in others, though not antagonistic enemies.

Conclusion

Lorde's speech fulfilled the generic expectations of a keynote in that it amplified the conference's theme, raised awareness of concerns that could have derailed the conference's intellectual labor, and inoculated her audience against destructive responses to anger. Worthy of notice is Lorde's rhetorical artistry in what I have named *shifting subjectivities*. Lorde translated Freire's insights concerning the combined roles of oppressor and oppressed in many people's experiences into a powerful communication technique in Lorde's rhetorical artistry. To my knowledge, this communication technique does not appear in rhetorical theories or standard public address accounts, though it adapts to the experiences of relatively dominant members of various marginalized communities—at a cost of adapting to a dominant audience's consciousness in ways that can tacitly reproduce dominance. In this technique, attention to Lorde's speech nonetheless has a potential to transform inherited ideas in rhetoric and public address.

Moreover, Lorde's speech is rich in insights concerning the ethical responsibilities of dominant audiences to listen to marginalized groups. Moving beyond familiar advice to listeners to be mindful of stereotypes, or distraction by delivery rather than substance, Lorde called on her audiences, as active listeners, to notice systems of power pertaining to such factors as access to the forum, the taken for granted practices and rules of engagement within it, as well as the pitfalls that can attend attention to feelings rather than the systemic circumstances that warrant them as legitimate. In this regard, Lorde's story about her daughter had to have been painful for her to recount because it dramatized her inability to shield her child from pervasive racism harming Beth's prospects for accurate recognition and her future. In a culture wherein individualism holds sway as a powerful myth sustaining an uncritical meritocracy, listeners can easily misplace the political as the personal, the public as the private, and the systemic as an attitude or feeling. In contrast with a rhetoric of true believers, in which a speaker can depend on audiences easily to supply omitted ideas, Lorde's keynote amplified her examples in detail, precisely because privileged listeners' habitual inattention to the lives of others had made it necessary. Above all, Lorde's keynote demanded that listeners of relatively privileged positions center on the lives and perspectives of marginalized groups different from themselves to understand and transform systems, not reproduce dominance by expecting central attention.

That Lorde and Rich appeared together for the NWSA keynote enacted cooperation between accomplished Black and white women poets, both of whom were lesbian feminists: "Their very presence testified to women's ability to transcend the barriers of race," observed Berenice Fisher. Yet Fisher's narrative suggests that racism and guilt nonetheless characterized NWSA conference experiences: "At one point, a group of Black and Third World women stood condemning the conference

for its racist structure (the cost and location excluded many women) and the racism of many of the presentations. Like the conference itself, most of the women at this meeting were white, and many, I suspect, reacted in the same 'guilty' way that Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde had described in their keynote addresses."⁶⁵ The ideological inheritance concerning Lorde's topic was so entrenched and human agency so circumscribed by systems that reactions characterized by discomfort, defensiveness, and guilt probably contributed both to ensuing confrontations during the NWSA conference and to the relatively slight attention to Lorde's keynote in subsequent decades. Habitual responses to anger in US culture are such that, predictably, Lorde's efforts to transform it were met with circumscribed, limited success.

One pattern of response to both keynote speeches was for participants to lament the examination of anger among women allies as ill timed. "Some were disheartened by the speeches" by Lorde and Rich, wrote Deborah S. Rosenfelt in an NWSA conference overview, "feeling that in these days of the primacy of the New Right and the Moral Majority, anger among women who are essentially allies is a luxury we can little afford." She added, "Others saw the speeches as essential renderings of the complexity of relations between women of color and white women."⁶⁶ She apparently meant that the speakers had failed to individuate sufficiently in their attention to systems and groups. Biographer Alexis De Veaux observed, "The reactions to Rich's and Lorde's addresses were mixed," because participants felt that a show of "feminist solidarity" was crucial in the broad, historical moment.⁶⁷ However, Lorde endeavored to make such solidarity more dependable in practice than merely apparent, by rupturing presumptions that white women's experiences, practices, and privileges could continue unmodified to encompass other women in ways responsive to their lives.

Lorde was astute in assessing her performances and growing beyond their limitations. After the conference she likewise was troubled by what others had viewed as "essential renderings of the complexity of relations" among women, but Lorde was concerned by her failure to appreciate differences among "women of Color." During her keynote, she apparently commented, "The woman of Color who is not Black and who charges me with rendering her invisible by assuming that her struggles with racism are identical with my own has something to tell me that I had better learn from, lest we both waste ourselves fighting the truths between us" (127–28).⁶⁸ Afterward, in her journal, she noted, "June 1, 1981 The anger talk went well, fraught with the emotions of my other lives." Yet she added, "I must amend it to make the connections between this anger and the W of C [Women of Color] pain with each other."⁶⁹

In a later essay in *Essence* during October 1983, Lorde commented on anger's limitations. Although she affirmed that "sometimes it seems that anger alone keeps me alive; it burns with a bright and undiminished flame," she stressed that "anger, like guilt, is an incomplete form of human knowledge."⁷⁰ That Lorde compared "anger" to "guilt" suggests the magnitude of her reservations. Lorde observed that anger can corrode the self (like "a pool of acid"), can mask pain and fear, and always

focuses on past hate and harms, not a future vision. Anger concerning injustice tends not to be pro-active in setting a forward-looking agenda and shaping visionary actions, because anger is typically a reaction to another's wrongful deeds, enabled by systems of power. Consequently, a familiar double bind attends recognizing a particular source of a slight or injury as worthy of any response in that another has defined the terrain for a confrontation. Lorde wrote in her 1983 essay that "strength that is bred by anger alone is a blind force which cannot create the future. It can only demolish the past. Such strength does not focus upon what lies ahead, but upon what lies behind, upon what created it—hatred." In addition, she worried, "one can eventually come to value the hatred of one's enemies more than one values the love of friends, for that hatred becomes the source of anger, and anger is a powerful fuel."⁷¹ Her 1981 keynote speech, in contrast, alluded only cryptically to anger's "limitations" (131). Lorde observed in a poem, "There are so many roots to the tree of anger/that sometimes the branches shatter/before they bear."⁷²

Yet some who commend Lorde's speech concerning "The Uses of Anger" seem not to notice Lorde's recognition of anger's limitations, though she incrementally revised her views. For example, in an exceptional orientation to scholarship concerning women's anger, Linda M. Grasso mentions a distinction between corrosive and generative anger before commenting, "At the same time, however, Audre Lorde and other feminist theorists convince me that anger named, understood, and directed at the root cause of grievances fosters growth, alliance, and a radical re-conception of self, world, and political agency."⁷³ To be sure, Lorde did not, to my knowledge, repudiate the idea that anger can manifest a healthy self-respect in the presence of injustice. But she did spell out how anger alone was insufficient to sustain a movement, because anger does not provide a vision of an inhabitable future. In subsequent years, Lorde spoke less often of "anger" and more typically of using one's energy, power, and privilege creatively in the service of one's vision.

Despite George Will's declaration that anger is "democratic" because it is a universal human experience and one of the seven deadly sins, his assertions about anger's intrinsically democratic character do not bear inspection for a few reasons. First, there are profound differences in how anger can be expressed and interpreted as symbolic or communicative during intergroup and intragroup conflicts. Members of certain marginalized groups cannot display anger without negotiating intricate, entwined double binds that stem from entrenched stereotypes of the social group as angry or emotional, while, at the same time, they risk deflecting political concerns about systems into mere feelings in ways that usually undermine *ethos*. Consider, for instance, recent election campaigns between Barack Obama and John McCain for the Presidency of the United States. Obama's much exploited guilt-by-association with minister Jeremiah Wright, whose rants were characterized as "America-hating," elicited concerns that Obama himself might be an angry Black male. Despite his campaign's characterization of him as "No Drama Obama," it became necessary for Obama to speak about race and to distance himself from Wright to circumvent the "hemorrhaging" of his campaign. In contrast, allegations concerning John McCain's temper as "volcanic,"—a temper which he had acknowledged in 2002 as "a matter of

public speculation and personal concern,” did not evoke any corresponding worries about his whiteness.⁷⁴ That this discrepancy in media coverage surfaced in accounts of elite heterosexual, male power across a difference of race indicates that such discrepancies would probably be magnified by interacting factors of sexuality, class, age, disability, sex, and the like.

Furthermore, inasmuch as democratic processes depend on active information seeking, anger stands in stark contrast to anxiety in that the latter tends to enhance information seeking, while anger “actually depresses total information seeking.”⁷⁵ Finally, anger expressed from social positions of inherited privilege and entitlement can be interpreted as intimidating, authoritarian demands for control that can erode democratic processes. Therefore, under current cultural conditions, anger cannot plausibly be said to be either intrinsically democratic or to enhance democratic processes with one crucial caveat: Peter Lyman has generalized regarding “the anger of the powerless” that “The benefit of taking anger seriously is that listening to those who feel they have lost their right to be heard reduces social suffering, enriches political dialogue, and enhances the ability of politics to redress injustice.”⁷⁶

What might one have in place of anger, however warranted by injustice’s magnitude? This is not an easy question. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt suggested that, to her, forgiveness holds promise as an extraordinary human action that moves beyond the victim-perpetrator cycle.⁷⁷ But forgiveness, however admirable, is not always possible or even desirable, especially when the harms are irreparable or when perpetrators and indifferent bystanders refuse any responsibility for their deeds. In the absence of an apology, an act of contrition or atonement, or some gesture toward life-enhancing institutional changes and reparations, not always necessarily materialistic, forgiveness may be elusive, if not premature in the absence of justice and equality. Some harms are unforgivable. As another alternative, Black feminist bell hooks has underscored the power of love to transform social relations characterized by past injustices.⁷⁸ Yet, both self-love, despite easily internalized self-loathing within hate-filled environments that hooks contemplated, as well as loving one’s enemies as oneself, however well enshrined in religious traditions, are not realistic either. Even conditional amnesty for abusers in the interest of advancing reconciliation poses perils and pitfalls.⁷⁹ Though this matter is too complex to resolve here, perhaps another possibility resides in determination suffused with an ethic of care, compassion, and mercy for others, not only because of the altruism that such actions can practice, but also because such conduct enacts a desirable sense of oneself and projects a livable future for whomever performs it and their allies.⁸⁰ Moreover, such sustained conduct by individuals and communities might have a long-term potential to change entire systems.

Notes

- [1] Worldcat lists an audio recording of Audre Lorde’s speech under the plenary session title “Racism, Homophobia, and the Power of Women” (OCLC 23951607). That entry’s whereabouts is not known. Audre Lorde, “Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,”

Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde (Freedom, CA: Crossing, 1984), 124–33. Subsequent citations from this version will be in the main essay within parenthesis.

- [2] “About NWSA,” <http://www.nwsa.org>.
- [3] For Chantal Mouffe’s sense of “agonism,” see “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,” *Art & Research* 1, no. 2 (2007), <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>.
- [4] Lorde mentioned Freire in ways that I foreground in this essay, see Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” *Sister Outsider*, 123.
- [5] Audre Lorde, “Learning from the 60s,” *Sister Outsider*, 139.
- [6] Angela Davis as quoted by Beverly Guy-Sheftall in Rudolf P. Byrd, Johnnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, eds., *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings by Audre Lorde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 256.
- [7] Audre Lorde, “There is No Hierarchy of Oppression,” repr. in *I Am Your Sister* 219–20.
- [8] Audre Lorde as quoted in *Gay Community News* (January 21–27, 1990), 17: 5.
- [9] Elizabeth V. Spelman, “Changing the Subject: On Making Your Suffering Mine,” *Fruits of Sorrow* (Boston: Beacon, 1997), 113–32.
- [10] Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991–2): 5–32.
- [11] Deborah S. Rosenfelt, “An Overview of the Third Annual NWSA Convention,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1981): 10.
- [12] Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” *Sister Outsider*, 117.
- [13] Audre Lorde, “Keynote Address: The NWSA Convention. The Uses of Anger,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1981): 7–10.
- [14] Audre Lorde, *Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force Bulletin* 4, no. 4 (1982): 7. A letter from Rita Addressa to Lorde, December 3, 1981, concerns its condensation, Audre Lorde Papers (henceforth, AL Papers), Box 3, f. 5, The Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, NY (henceforth, LHA).
- [15] The LHA holds a copy from the *Women’s Studies Quarterly* with Lorde’s handwritten changes on it; AL Papers, Box 3, f. 23, LHA. Additional, typed draft copies are at the LHA in Box 1, f. 9 and Box 3, f. 26. The latter had the title “The Anger Papers: The Uses of Anger.” More handwritten and typed draft copies are among AL Papers held at the Spelman College Archives, Spelman College, Atlanta, Georgia (henceforth, SA), where a typed manuscript is located in a file “women & racism” with other manuscripts for essays and speeches. Additional typed and handwritten drafts of her NSWA keynote are in a file labeled “Anger.” These papers are unprocessed.
- [16] Audiotape of Lorde’s remarks at Eugene, Oregon, Nov. 12, 1984, AL Papers, SA; another audiotape at the University of Oregon (OCLC 3802226).
- [17] Dagmar Schultz to Lorde, letters dated July 17, 1981 and September 12, 1981, AL Papers, SA; Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet* (New York: Norton, 2004), 295–96.
- [18] Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” *Women and Language* 11, no. 1 (1987): 4; Mary F. Rogers, ed., *Multicultural Experiences, Multicultural Theories* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1996), 274–78; Bart Schneider, ed., *Race, An Anthology in the First Person* (New York: Crown, 1997), 99–109; *Looking Back, Moving Forward*, a special anniversary issue of *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 1–2 (1997): 278–85; Anne Minas, ed., *Gender Basics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2000), 39–44.
- [19] George F. Will, “Anger is All the Rage,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 26, 2007.
- [20] “Anger: How We Became the United States of Fury,” *The Chronicle Review*, with essays by Sasha Abramsky, David P. Barash, and Elaine Tyler May, July 16, 2010, B6–12, quote on B3.
- [21] Pamela Annas, “A Poetry of Survival: Unnaming and Renaming in the Poetry of Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich,” *Colby Library Quarterly* 18 (1982): 21, n. 16.
- [22] Elaine Maria Upton, “Audre Lorde, 1934–1992,” *Contemporary Lesbian Writers of the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993), 319.

- [23] Carol Zisowitz Stearns and Peter N. Stearns, *Anger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 14, 4.
- [24] Mari J. Matsuda, "Beside My Sister, Facing the Enemy: Legal Theory Out of Coalition," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1185.
- [25] Robert Ariss, "Performing Anger: Emotion in Strategic Responses to AIDS," *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 4 (1993): 19; Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 267–348.
- [26] Marilyn Frye, "A Note on Anger," *The Politics of Reality* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing, 1983), 84–94.
- [27] Peter Lyman, "The Politics of Anger: On Silence, Ressentiment, and Political Speech," *Socialist Review* 11, no. 3 (1981): 55–74. For psychology's and psychiatry's role in the systematic abuse of gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans-gender, and queer populations, see Kaiser, *Gay Metropolis*, 235–40. On race, William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Basic, 1968), which has been criticized for colluding with the psychological move, see bell hooks, *Killing Rage* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 12. On sex and gender, Carol Tavris, *Anger* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982); Christa Reiser, *Reflections on Anger* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999).
- [28] Ronald T. Potter-Efron, *Angry All the Time*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2004).
- [29] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, "Anger," *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 50–81.
- [30] This line is from a seven page, handwritten draft, AL Papers, SA. This line is not in any printed versions of her speech.
- [31] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 20, 90–100.
- [32] Frederick George Bailey, *The Tactical Uses of Passion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 11.
- [33] Linda M. Grasso, *The Artistry of Anger* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 4.
- [34] Barbara Deming, "On Anger," *We Cannot Live Without Our Lives* (New York: Grossman, 1974), 48.
- [35] These lines are from a seven page, handwritten draft, AL Papers, SA.
- [36] Tavris, *Anger*, 237.
- [37] For examples, Audre Lorde, "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving," *Sister Outsider*, 48; Audre Lorde, "Learning from the 60s," *Sister Outsider*, 136.
- [38] hooks, *Killing Rage*, 26, see also 16.
- [39] bell hooks, "Talking Back," *Talking Back* (Boston: South End, 1989), 5.
- [40] Matsuda, "Beside," 1189.
- [41] Evelyn C. White, *Alice Walker* (New York: Norton, 1984), 298–300. "I am a Renegade, an Outlaw, a Pagan"—Author, Poet, and Activist Alice Walker in Her Own Words," [radio interview on "Democracy Now!" by Amy Goodman, February 13, 2006], http://democracynow.org/2006/2/13/i_am_a_renegade_an_outlaw.
- [42] These minutes from The Sisterhood are held in AL Papers, SA.
- [43] Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," *This Bridge Called My Back*, eds. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, MA: Persephone, 1981; repr., New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983), 97; repr. in *Sister Outsider*, 66–71.
- [44] Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," *Sister Outsider*, 116.
- [45] A manuscript without crosshatches is in a file, "Women and Racism," AL Papers, SA. The quotations in the next few paragraphs are from this manuscript. Similar content can be found on a typed manuscript with crosshatches at AL Papers, Box 3, f. 23, LHA.
- [46] Audre Lorde, *Zami* (Watertown, MA: Persephone, 1982), 125–27.
- [47] Quotation is from the typed manuscript at AL Papers, SA, but similar phrasing can be found in Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," *Sister Outsider*, 118.

- [48] *Chrysalis* no. 1 (1977): n.p. [3].
- [49] *Chrysalis* nos. 3 and 9 respectively.
- [50] Audre Lorde, to the editors of *Chrysalis*, July 20, 1979, AL Papers, SA.
- [51] The Oct. 23, 1979 letter to Lorde has these names typed on it: "Jessica Benjamin, Margaret Honey, Serafina Bathrick, Kate Ellis, Carol Ascher, Muriel Dimen, Harriet Cohen, and Sara Ruddick." The letter recurs in the AL Papers at SA, including a file labeled "Replies" and another file labeled "Face to Face[:] Black Women's Anger." Sara Ruddick wrote an apology to Audre Lorde, April 3, [no year], AL Papers, SA.
- [52] Audre Lorde, "Power," *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: Norton, 1997), 215–16, 319–20.
- [53] "Using the Destruction Within Us: An Interview with Audre Lorde," Susan Christian, September 24, 1983, AL Papers, SA.
- [54] "Using the Destruction."
- [55] Pat Miller, "Third NWSA Convention To Be Held in Connecticut," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 9, no. 1 (1981): 30.
- [56] On attendance and factors impinging on it, *Women's Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Fall, 1981): 2, and Alice Henry, "Women Respond to Racism," *off our backs*, 11, no. 7 (July 31, 1981): 3.
- [57] Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 116–20.
- [58] For comment on this line, Grasso, *Artistry*, 3–4.
- [59] Spelman, *Fruits*, 131–32.
- [60] For commentary on these lines, Patricia Sharpe, F. E. Mascia-Lees and C. B. Cohen, "White Women and Black Men: Differential Responses to Reading Black Women's Texts," *College English* 52 (1990): 142.
- [61] Brenda R. Silver, "The Authority of Anger: *Three Guineas* as Case Study," *Signs* 16 (1991): 370.
- [62] For commentary concerning these lines, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Critical Response: Tide and Trust," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 747, n. 1; Linda Garber, *Identity Poetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 99.
- [63] Mark McPhail, "Complicity: The Theory of Negative Difference," *Howard Journal of Communications* 3 (1991): 1–13; Maureen Mathison, Mark McPhail, and Mary Strine, "Forum," *Communication Theory* 7 (1997): 149–85.
- [64] Judith Kegan Gardiner, "Empathic Ways of Reading: Narcissism, Cultural Politics, and Russ's *Female Man*," *Feminist Studies* 20 (1994): 105.
- [65] See Berenice Fisher, "Guilt and Shame in the Women's Movement: The Radical Ideal of Action and Its Meaning for Feminist Intellectuals," *Feminist Studies* 10 (1984): 185–86.
- [66] Rosenfelt, "Overview," 10.
- [67] De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 294.
- [68] In Susan Christian's interview, cited above, Lorde stressed how "workshops" after the NWSA keynote precipitated a shift for her by focusing on angers among women of color: "a Latina woman of color was furious with me—because at one point [in the speech] I had spoken of women of color—and she said 'You know, you talk about women of color but what you really mean is black women.' And I said 'No what I really mean is women of color.' So she said, 'well just once, I want to hear my name—my name. I'm Chicana!' And she really got through to me." Without a recording, I have been unable to determine whether the passage in printed texts was a revision of Lorde's keynote.
- [69] For this journal, AL Papers, SA.
- [70] Audre Lorde, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," *Sister Outsider*, 152.
- [71] Lorde, "Eye to Eye," *Sister Outsider*, 152.
- [72] Audre Lorde, "Who Said It Was Simple?" *Collected Poems*, 92
- [73] Grasso, *Artistry*, 11.

- [74] Kate Kenski, Bruce W. Hardy, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *The Obama Victory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 65–66 on McCain and 71, 82–89 on Obama. Quotes from 71, 82, 86, and 65.
- [75] Nicholas A. Valentino, Vincent L. Hutchings, Antoine J. Banks, and Anne K. Davis, “Is a Worried Citizen a Good Citizen? Emotions, Political Information Seeking, and Learning via the Internet,” *Political Psychology* 29 (2008) 247. On memory and recall, see Andrew J. W. Civettini and David P. Redlawsk, “Voters, Emotions, and Memory,” *Political Psychology* 30 (2009): 125–51.
- [76] Peter Lyman, “The Domestication of Anger: The Use and Abuse of Anger in Politics,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 7 (2004): 133.
- [77] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
- [78] bell hooks, *Salvation* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), xxiv.
- [79] For example, see *Long Night’s Journey into Day [videorecording]*. Directed by Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffmann. (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 2000).
- [80] To Peter Lyman, care “domesticates anger by redirecting its self-righteous concern for the self to service on behalf of others,” though care “can be grounded in love as well,” “The Domestication of Anger, 137.