

DEFINITIONS OF DIFFERENCE IN AUDRE LORDE'S "AGE, RACE, CLASS, AND SEX"

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In "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," Audre Lorde brings her readers' attention to the cost—both individually and communally—of ignoring the complexity of overlapping identities. In writing about the women's movement of the later twentieth century, Lorde spotlights the phenomenon of white women who "focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class and age" (116). Later in the essay, Lorde narrows her focus even further with the declaration, "Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power" (117). As an example of "ignoring the differences of race between women," Lorde then cites women's studies courses that shy away from discussing the intersectionality of race and gender, with their instructors instead choosing to read only literature written by white women.

Yet, this example has a surprising feature. We might expect that, if pressed, the creators of these courses would justify their decision by saying, "Women are women; why does it matter if we read literature by white women or women of color?"—a response that would be consistent with Lorde's objection that these women are ignoring the differences of race. However, according to Lorde, the opposite excuse is given: those whom she accuses of ignoring racial differences are said to argue "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 experiences that are 'too different'" (117). Presented with this contrast, readers may ask whether the real problem presented by Lorde is white women *ignoring* racial differences, or white women *magnifying* racial differences.

The key to understanding this tension is realizing that in this passage, Lorde uses the word "difference" to refer both to her own conception of difference as people's "actual complexities" and to a racist understanding of difference through "problematic but familiar stereotypes" (118). These two conceptions of difference could be called 'actual difference' and 'stereotypical difference.' Moreover, careful examination of Lorde's use of "difference" shows that recognizing actual difference requires a balancing act—seeing diversity in the context of a shared experience—whereas appeals to stereotypical difference deny all commonalities, even the shared experience of being human.

Early in the passage, Lorde signals the dual use of the word "difference" by flagging her reference to stereotypical difference with quotation marks. She signals stereotypical difference when describing how reading lists that lack women of color are defended, in part, because the teachers of those classes believe they "cannot 'get

into” writing by women of color because those literatures “come out of experiences that are ‘too different’” (117). In their most standard use, quotation marks literally indicate another voice than the author’s; they can also characterize a phrase as non-standard or incorrect. Here, Lorde works with both of these uses of quotation marks to highlight the falsity of stereotypical difference and separate it from actual difference.

What, then, are the characteristics that define actual and stereotypical difference? Paradoxically, one of the distinguishing features of actual difference, according to Lorde, is that it encompasses a simultaneous recognition of points of similarity; every mention of actual difference in this passage is paired with a reference to some shared experience. In the first sentence, Lorde refers to “the differences of race between women,” not simply “the differences of race” (117); her phrase balances a sense of actual differences with a reference to the shared state of being female. Later on, Lorde is yet more explicit about the necessity of this simultaneous awareness of similarity and difference, lamenting white women’s “reluctance to see Black women as women and different from themselves” (118). Here, by joining “women” and “different” with the conjunction “and,” Lorde places the need to be seen as fellow women on an equal footing with the need to be seen as different. Moreover, by making “women” the first conjunct, Lorde’s phrasing suggests that recognizing the shared experience of womanhood is a prerequisite to understanding actual difference. Finally, Lorde deploys first-person plural pronouns to make the sense of a shared experience more visceral; she refers to the difference between women of color and white women as “the difference between us,” a wording that adds emotional emphasis to the pattern of mentioning actual difference only in the context of a shared experience (118).

Ultimately, Lorde broadens the possibilities of shared experience to include any human commonality when she writes, “To examine Black women’s literature effectively requires that we be seen as whole people in our actual complexities—as individuals, as women, as human—” (118). Two rhetorical features in this sentence particularly emphasize the inseparability of actual difference from similarity: the use of dashes and of not one, but four words signaling shared experience (“people,” “individuals,” “women,” and “human”). The list of points of similarity “as individuals, as women, as human” is surrounded by dashes, and since this is the only use of dashes on the page, it creates a particularly striking visual effect which draws the reader’s eye to this list. Elsewhere in the passage, Lorde has focused on shared womanhood as a basic similarity; here, she embeds the word “women” between the more general terms “individuals” and “human.” This configuration evokes a Venn diagram wherein the set of “women” is completely surrounded by the larger set of “individuals/humans,” thus visually encouraging readers to look for the most fundamental shared experience when confronting actual difference. Moreover, the sentence as a whole features multiple terms whose denotations overlap considerably, especially “people,” “individuals,” and “human”; thus, Lorde is using parallelism to underscore the pervasiveness of shared experiences. Each reprise of a word that signals common

humanity, like “people” or “individuals,” renews the readers’ awareness of this essential shared experience. Despite all this language of similarity, though, the sentence is in fact discussing how to grapple with actual difference, with people’s “actual complexities”; thus, Lorde’s careful phrasing reveals that actual difference can only be understood from the perspective of a basic shared experience.

By contrast, Lorde uncovers the lie of stereotypical difference, which presents a difference so absolute that it even denies shared humanity. In one of the most powerful logical appeals of the essay, Lorde contrasts “the vastly different experiences of Shakespeare, Moliere, Dostoyefsky [sic], and Aristophanes” with the claim that literatures of women of color “come out of experiences that are ‘too different’” (117). In the first sentence, those who talk of “experiences that are ‘too different’” are presumably referring to cultural differences, not explicitly denying shared human experience. Then, Lorde’s logical rebuttal takes this language of “different experiences”—she even strengthens it to “vastly different experiences”—and shows that no one complains about the chasm of cultural differences between Aristophanes and a woman in 1980s America. Thus, Lorde uses *logos* to show that the complaint of stereotypical difference is not about mere cultural differences, but about something more insidious. Lorde reveals the real dogma of stereotypical difference when she prefaces the excuse of “experiences that are ‘too different’” with the belief in “the outsider whose experience and tradition is too ‘alien’” to comprehend (117). The use of both “too different” and “too alien” is devastating. The denotations of both words overlap considerably—“alien” and “of a different nationality” are, strictly speaking, synonymous—but “alien” is heavy with the connotations of a non-human being, filling the reader’s mind with images of expressionless Martians. This shift from “different” to “alien” reveals that the rhetoric of stereotypical difference is not about differences between fellow humans, but about supposed differences between dehumanized minority groups and the human believers in stereotypical difference. Believing in stereotypical difference is not recognizing diversity—it is denying humanity.

Thus, Lorde uses the same word—“difference”—to name two divergent understandings of difference: understanding actual difference means recognizing diversity alongside a basic shared experience such as shared womanhood or shared humanity, while appeals to stereotypical difference deny the humanity of marginalized groups. Recognizing the two uses of difference inherent in this passage leads to a new understanding of the problem Lorde diagnoses—it is neither simply ignoring difference nor simply magnifying difference, but an insidious combination of ignoring actual difference and believing in stereotypical difference. She writes, “As white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone, then women of Color become ‘other,’ the outsider whose experience and tradition is too ‘alien’ to comprehend” (177). Thus, ignoring actual difference (in this case, white privilege) leads to believing in stereotypical difference. Lorde has also described how stereotypical difference is cited as an excuse to avoid

Black women's literature, which has the result of shielding white women from examining actual difference. Consequently, the framework of actual and stereotypical difference allows us to see that Lorde is revealing a vicious cycle: ignoring actual difference leads to belief in stereotypical difference, and belief in stereotypical difference then provides an excuse to ignore actual difference. Once readers understand this cycle, one wonders—can we do things differently?

WORKS CITED

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