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Sonia Kiran Ghura April 10, 2018

Dismantling the "Master's House": Audre Lorde in Conversation with Critical Race Theory and Vulnerability Theory

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Abstract

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Audre Lorde was a mid to late 20th century American poet, essayist, and activist. Identifying as a black lesbian feminist, Lorde was strongly dedicated to advocating for her identities, their associated identity groups, and the social justice movements that they supported. She spent much of her life conceptualizing identitarian harms that marginalized people face, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Thus, Lorde has been credited with helping to create the intellectual climate out of which a contemporary legal theory known as critical race theory was born. Critical race theory examines the dynamics between race and power, rejecting the liberalism at the core of U.S. law, policy, and society.

While most of Lorde's writing represents her dedication to marginalized identities, I argue that her reflections on cancer, which she was diagnosed with in 1978 and passed away from in 1992, represent not just a heavy focus on identities and identitarian harms, but also a significant focus on institutions, especially healthcare entities, and their specific methods of harm causation. Better suited than critical race theory to analyzing Lorde's focus on institutional harms is another contemporary legal theory that rejects liberalism, vulnerability theory. Vulnerability theory conceptualizes how all people, as embodied creatures, are vulnerable to harm. Vulnerability theory notes that people are especially susceptible to institutionalized harms, due to lifelong reliance on institutions for resources and care. In Lorde's writing on cancer, one can see that institutional harms both overlap with, and exist separately from, identity-based harms. While institutions often cause specific kinds of marginalized identity-based harms, they also can and do harm people in general, even those with conspicuous privilege, due to the universality of human vulnerability.

Previous scholarship in a diverse array of fields has begun the task of tracing the linkages between Lorde's writing, particularly her essays, and critical race theory principles. I seek to build on this past work in my project. I also seek to begin filling a gap in scholarship by putting Lorde's writing on healthcare into conversation with vulnerability theory, which, to my knowledge, has not yet been done.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

American black lesbian feminist author-activist Audre Lorde (1934-1992) once famously declared: "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 138). Responding to the intellectual and activist climate created by American black social justice movements of the 1960s, which largely simplified understandings of blackness to fight for common causes, Lorde wished to show that difference and diversity are valuable tools that strengthen identity groups and their associated movements for justice. Lorde pointed out that one cannot look at "blackness" as a "single-issue struggle" because it does not exist independently of other factors, such as gender and sexuality. Instead of simplifying blackness to reflect mostly the experiences of the dominant group of black people—heterosexual men—and using black movements to respond to black heterosexual male needs, Lorde argued that black people and their movements must account for, and respond to, the notably different experiences and needs of black women and black queer people. Lorde asserted that it is possible and important to reach common goals without erasure of difference: "You do not have to be me in order for us to fight alongside each other. I do not have to be you to recognize that our wars are the same. What we must do is commit ourselves to some future that can include each other and to work toward that future" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 142). Lorde's nuanced thinking about the connections between race and other aspects of holistic identity contributed to the development of the intellectual climate out of which, around the 1970s and 1980s, a legal theory known as critical race theory was born. Critical race theory focuses on "studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" in numerous ways, but one of the most important ways is through conceptualizing holistic identity as the complex sum of many sub-identities and other factors (Delgado and Stefancic 2). Critical race theory focuses heavily on identity in order

to “reject the basic premises of American legal liberalism,” including the “neutral procedures” and “formal equality” at the heart of American antidiscrimination law (Lawrence xxvi). Critical race theory contends that “neutrality and objectivity are not just unattainable ideals, they are harmful fictions that obscure the normative supremacy of whiteness in American law and society” (Lawrence xxvi).

Indicative of Lorde’s resonance with critical race theory, prominent legal scholar and critical race theorist Angela P. Harris quotes Lorde’s discussions of identity several times in her formative critical race theory article: “Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory.” One of Harris’ quotes deals with Lorde’s understanding of the “ingredients of identity:”

> As a Black lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self’” (Lorde qtd. in Harris 586).

Here, Harris uses Lorde’s words to support her claim that law must eschew its neutral principles and adopt a framework that takes into account the complexities of identity and consciousness in order to responsibly comprehend and serve the individuals it governs:

> It is a premise of this article [“Race and Essentialism”] that we are not born with a ‘self,’ but rather are composed of a welter of partial, sometimes contradictory, or even antithetical ‘selves.’...Thus, consciousness is ‘never fixed, never attained once and for all;’ it is not a final outcome or a biological given, but a process, a constant contradictory state of becoming (Harris 584).

Even where Lorde is not explicitly quoted in critical race theory texts, her writing clearly

resonates with this school of thought. She advocates for her identities: blackness, womanhood, and lesbianism, and their associated identity groups: black communities, women's or feminist communities, and queer communities, fighting for their inclusion and valuation in areas where they had previously been excluded or ignored. In addition to conceptualizing the complex nature of identity and calling on identity groups to embrace diversity within them, Lorde took a deep interest in thinking about the harms that arise from identitarian prejudice, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. She also thought about how people could work to respond to and mitigate these harms. Thus, the vast majority of Lorde's writing fixates on the twin goals of combatting harm in forms such as exclusion and prejudice, and promoting justice in forms such as diversity valuation and inclusion.

While the complexity of identity, and discussion about identitarian harms, are absolutely critical elements of Lorde's work, I argue that scholars have spent time examining these issues while largely ignoring Lorde's exploration of institutions and their specific mechanisms of causing harm. Lorde's focus on institutional harms occurs most prominently in her written reflections on cancer, which she was diagnosed with in 1978 and eventually passed away from in 1992. Lorde's writing on institutions pertains mostly to those in the healthcare system, like hospitals and clinics. Perhaps this is because Lorde began to see in a new light the specific ways in which institutions perpetuate harm during her time as a cancer patient in the healthcare system. Institutional harms both overlap with, and exist separately from, identity-based harms. While institutions often harm marginalized people in specific ways, they also have the capacity to cause harm in general. Most institutional harms, Lorde believes, are connected to the financial incentives that drive corporate agendas. For example, Lorde discusses and criticizes the ways in which the American cancer treatment industry profits from supporting prosthetic breasts and

implants, often, she argues, at the expense of patient wellbeing.

Better suited than critical race theory to analyzing Lorde's focus on institutional harms is another legal theory, vulnerability theory, pioneered by American jurist, political philosopher, and legal scholar Martha Albertson Fineman. Vulnerability theory, like critical race theory, rejects liberalism, but it does so based on the premise that all people have vulnerable bodies, a reality that conflicts with "the dominant conception of the universal legal subject as an autonomous, independent and fully-functioning adult" (Fineman, "Introduction" 15). These vulnerable bodies are susceptible to all kinds of harm, but especially institutionalized harms, due to inevitable human dependence on institutions for resources: "As embodied beings, individual humans find themselves dependent upon, and embedded within, social relationships and institutions throughout the life-course" (Fineman, "Vulnerability and Inevitable Inequality" 134). In order to mitigate the potential for harm caused by embodied vulnerability, Fineman proposes that institutions must provide resources that facilitate resilience, while the state is responsible for ensuring that institutions fulfill this duty: the "state is theorized as the legitimate governing entity and is tasked with a responsibility to establish and monitor social institutions and relationships that facilitate the acquisition of individual and social resilience" (Fineman, "Vulnerability and Inevitable Inequality" 134). Though critical race theory, in its heavy identitarian focus, is a more seamless fit with Lorde's writing than vulnerability theory's focus on universal embodied vulnerability, vulnerability theory's specific language about the capacity of institutions to cause harm due to human reliance on them, and institutional responsibility to mitigate those harms under direction of the state, is very applicable to Lorde's discussion of institutions. Furthermore, the mixture of Lorde's focus on particular, identity-based issues for most of her writing career, combined with the hesitant steps she seems to take during illness at the end of her life towards

considering that vulnerability to embodied harm is a shared human characteristic, demonstrate that the universal and the particular are not as binary as they might initially seem.

In engaging with Lorde's writing, I am entering into a robust but relatively small community of critics. Several scholars from different fields, such as literature, poetry, and communications, have analyzed Lorde through an identitarian lens reflective of critical race theory, while a couple of legal academics have mentioned Lorde in their critical race theory scholarship. Of the scholars who have examined Lorde's writing on cancer, most focus on identity, the body, and experiences with illness, rather than Lorde's discussion of the healthcare system. I seek not only to build on past critical race theory analyses of Lorde's work, but also to begin filling a gap in scholarship by putting Lorde's writing on healthcare into conversation with vulnerability theory, which, to my knowledge, has not been done before.

In order to eventually put Lorde's writing into conversation with vulnerability theory, I will, in my first chapter, explain in more detail what liberalism, critical race theory, and vulnerability theory are, and how they are related and distinct. In my second chapter, I will explain how Lorde's non-cancer writing is very concerned with conceptualizing the complexities of identities and identity groups, as well as exploring how individuals and groups perpetuate identitarian harms. My second chapter will look at Lorde's work through a critical race theory lens as I build on the work of scholars who have linked Lorde with critical race theory previously. In my third chapter, I will explain how Lorde's writing on cancer represents a continuation of her interest in identities, but here she analyzes identitarian harms as at least partial products of institutional structures. My third chapter will examine Lorde's writing through a vulnerability theory lens, assessing where she agrees with and diverges from this theory. As I conclude, I will consider how critical race theory and vulnerability theory converse

with each other and with Lorde's writing to pose questions and propose tentative solutions that are helpful in theorizing alternatives to liberalism.

I primarily focus on analyzing Lorde's essays in this project, which represent a hybrid of critical writing and personal reflections. The essays I examine come from Lorde's four main essay collections: *The Cancer Journals* (1980), a short book-length essay, *Sister Outsider* (1984), *A Burst of Light: and Other Essays* (1988), and *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde* (2009). While the publication dates reflect when these essays were compiled into collections, it is important to note that the individual essays within these collections were all written at different times in Lorde's life. I also analyze one non-essay piece of writing from Lorde: "The American Cancer Society Or There Is More Than One Way To Skin A Coon," a lyric poem about black individuals and cancer published in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (1997). I include analysis of this poem because Lorde's collection of writing on cancer is smaller than her compilation of writing on other topics, and I want to maximize my ability to analyze her cancer writing.

Finally, my hope is that analyzing Lorde's work through critical race theory and vulnerability theory will have fruitful results that show how law and legal theory can converse in productive, interdisciplinary ways with literature. Legal theory, in seeking to develop abstract principles and thinking frameworks, often looses sight of realities, while literature, as evidenced by Lorde's work, is often based in concrete life experiences, whether real or imagined. Critical race theory and vulnerability theory give scholars useful thought frameworks with which to consider Lorde's work, while Lorde's work gives black, lesbian, feminist context to critical race theory and vulnerability theory, which can help scholars comprehend, explain, and evaluate the merits and faults of these theories.

Chapter 1

Eschewing the "Master's Tools": Critical Race Theory and Vulnerability Theory Propose Alternatives to Liberalism

> *We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America* (U.S. Constitution, Preamble).
>
> *When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bonds which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation* (U.S. Declaration of Independence).

Consider the speaker of the preamble to the U.S. Constitution: "We the People." To whom does this term refer? Who is included in this group, and who is excluded? According to American literary critic James Boyd White, as quoted by Angela Harris, this voice purports to speak for:

> …an entire and united nation and to do so directly and personally, not in the third person or by merely delegated authority…the instrument thus appears to issue from a single imaginary author, consisting of all the people of the United States, including the reader, merged into a single identity in this act of self-constitution. 'The People' are at once an author and the audience of this instrument (White qtd. in Harris 582).

White notes that the voice of the Declaration of Independence attempts to speak for everyone in a similarly presumptuous manner:

> It is not a person's voice, not even that of a committee, but the 'unanimous' voice of 'thirteen united States' and of their 'people.' It addresses a universal audience—nothing

> less than ‘mankind’ itself, located neither in space nor in time—and the voice is universal too, for it purports to know about the ‘Course of human events’ (all human events?) and to be able to discern what ‘becomes necessary’ as a result of changing circumstances (White qtd. in Harris 582).

Harris criticizes this voice, noting that it does not, and, more importantly, it *cannot*, speak for everyone: “Despite its claims, however, this voice does not speak for everyone, but for a political faction trying to constitute itself as a unit of many disparate voices; its power lasts only as long as the contradictory voices remain silenced” (Harris 583). The “contradictory voices” are those of traditionally disenfranchised groups that deviate from the historic ideal U.S. citizen: a white, heterosexual, able-bodied, property-owning man. Thus, “We the People” seems to speak mostly, if not entirely, for and based on the experiences of this idealized person, leaving out the perspectives and needs of marginalized groups, including, but not necessarily limited to, women, people of color, the queer community, the poor, and people with disabilities. The idealized person represented by “We the People” is often referred to as the “liberal subject,” and he represents the liberal political ideology that has always been, and still is, at the core of U.S. law and policy. This liberal political ideology, or “liberalism,” comes out of social contract theory, which is “nearly as old as philosophy itself,” and which is concerned with “the view that persons’ moral and/or political obligations are dependent upon a contract or agreement among them to form the society in which they live” (Friend).

Several philosophers, all of white European origin, male, and privileged through means such as wealth, opportunity, and power, contributed to the development of the social contract theories that influence core U.S. laws and policies, but some of the most widely recognized key figures are Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau

(1712-1778). These men created political theories that address the relationships between the individual, society, and authority. Hobbes argues that people are all equally inherently self-interested and willing to do whatever it takes to fulfill their personal desires, and yet they are also rational and interested in efficiency. Thus, according to Hobbes, the state of nature, or the state that precedes the formation of society, is a state of perpetual war. Nevertheless, because people are rational, they have the power to avoid war by creating a social contract and gathering under a "Power," or a sovereign leader, who enforces that contract: "…during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called War; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man" (Hobbes 56). Without the natural state of war, Hobbes thought, men could enjoy freedoms, such as the right to own goods and create contractual agreements with other men. Locke, like Hobbes, creates his political theory based on ideas of what the state of nature might be like. However, Locke has a more optimistic view of human nature than Hobbes, viewing all people as inherently equal moral creatures of God rather than selfish above all else. Thus, Locke's state of nature can be described as relatively peaceful and free: man's natural state is "…a state of perfect freedom…a state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another" (Locke Kindle Locations 1753-1755). Nonetheless, Locke's state of nature could become violent over property disputes, such as when a man steals from another man. Therefore, Locke believed that men must create and live under a social contract to protect their property. Rousseau, like Locke, believed that the state of nature is a relatively peaceful and free place, but he was concerned that the acquisition of property leads to social inequalities, which violates man's natural state of freedom and equality: "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains" (Rousseau Kindle Location 47). Despite Rousseau's notice that property possession could create inequalities, he still believed

strongly in the right to own goods. Thus, Rousseau theorized that the best solution to ameliorate conditions of inequality while allowing for property ownership would be the establishment of democratic government in small and intimate nation-states where people hold common values.

These men's theories all have similar ideas about the importance of justice, articulated as "equality," "ownership" over "property," and the right to "contract" with fellow men. Their interest in these concepts stems from their similar perceptions of harm: they view "oppression" as a lack of "equality" between men, an inability to designate concrete "ownership" of goods, and an incapability to secure "freedoms" through contractual agreements. However, perhaps the most important similarity in their theories is that they all have a common basis in in simplistic ideas about "human nature" that assume everyone is similarly situated in life, showing their limited understanding of the different forms that human life can and does take. Their mutual assumption that people are inherently "free" and "equal" with the ability to "own property" and "contract," for example, ignores common conceptions of women, who have historically been, and often still are, viewed as subservient to men, both in the nuclear family unit, and also in other societal constructs. Their assumptions about "freedom," "equality," "ownership," and "contracting" also ignore enslaved people, who are viewed as lesser beings that can be "owned" without the same natural rights to liberty and equity that other people have. Thus, Hobbesian, Lockean, and Rousseauian perceptions of human nature and human rights apply not to everyone, as they claim to, but only to a specific subset of people. As summarized by political theorist Celeste Friend, "The liberal individual is purported to be universal: raceless, sexless, classless, disembodied, and is taken to represent an abstract, generalized model of humanity" (Friend). However, reality holds that "the liberal individual is a particular, historical, and embodied person" (Friend). Specifically, Friend draws on feminist criticism and criticism from scholars of

color to support her claim:

> We continue to believe…in the myths that social contract theory tells us - that everyone is equal, that all will be treated the same before the law, that the Founding Fathers were committed to equality and freedom for all persons, etc. One of the very purposes of social contract theory, then, is to keep hidden from view the true political reality – some persons will be accorded the rights and freedoms of full persons, and the rest will be treated as sub-persons (Friend).

Many contemporary scholars representing minority populations agree that the liberal individual is gendered as male, raced as white European, and classed as bourgeois. Liberalism pretends to represent the experiences of everyone, but it cannot do so in this very limited scope of knowledge.

The liberal subject is perhaps, then, the ultimate manifestation of the "master's tools," a term Lorde coined upon reflecting on a feminist conference she attended at the New York University Institute for the Humanities in the mid-1970s (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 112). Lorde condemned the growing field of feminist academia for having a strong heterosexual white bias, famously declaring that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 112). Through this statement, Lorde called on feminist academics to include the viewpoints and opinions of women of color, lesbians, and other marginalized feminists, rather than "merely tolerating" them and pushing them to the periphery of feminist scholarship (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 111). Lorde notes that, when diversity is incorporated, feminist academia has great potential to "fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 111). Referencing the "master's tools," Lorde asks: "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same

patriarchy?" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 110). She responds: "It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 111). It follows that, if the liberal subject represents only a very small privileged sub-class of people, and if the liberal subject is perhaps the ultimate expression of the "tools of the racist patriarchy," or the "master's tools," people must work to rethink and propose alternatives to liberalism as a basis for U.S. law and policy. Otherwise, our legal and political systems fail to represent, and effectively ignore the existence of, many people, particularly those living at the margins of society. Two contemporary legal theories, critical race theory and vulnerability theory, provide important possible frameworks for reconsidering liberalism and the liberal subject. Critical race theory and vulnerability theory both address, in particular, different conceptions of harm and justice that challenge the liberal notions of those ideals. Thus, they are both complimentary to Lorde's work, especially her own significant interest in promoting justice and decreasing harm. These two theories are both useful tools of analysis to further examine Lorde's work, albeit in distinctive ways.

Critical race theory is focused on "studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" (Delgado and Stefancic 2). It sprung up in the mid-1970s, "as a number of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars across the country realized, more or less simultaneously, that the heady advances of the civil rights era of the 1960s had stalled and, in many respects, were being rolled back," and they also realized that "new theories and strategies were needed to combat the subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground" (Delgado and Stefancic 4). Though critical race theory began as a legal theory, it quickly grew to influence other areas of academic thought, especially the humanities and social sciences. Similarly, although critical race theory began as a method of thinking about race and racism, it rapidly expanded as a tool for

thinking about and addressing many different kinds of harm perpetuated against traditionally marginalized groups. While critical race theory is interested in exploring many of the same issues presented in conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses, it deviates from previous civil rights work by placing "[these issues] in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious" (Delgado and Stefancic 3).

Perhaps more importantly, critical race theory also deviates from previous civil rights work by rejecting prior approaches to seeking justice for minorities, which focused on "incrementalism and step-by-step progress," such as the antidiscrimination approach (Delgado and Stefancic 3). Some of the main limitations of the antidiscrimination approach are exposed in scholarly critique of the liberal subject. This makes sense because critical race theory questions "the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law" (Delgado and Stefancic 3). An antidiscrimination framework is inherently comparative, because it juxtaposes those facing discrimination with a baseline of "nondiscrimination" or "normal treatment," which is represented, in this case, by the liberal subject. In being comparative, antidiscrimination law is based on the principles of formal equality, or the "notion that the law shall only provide treatment and opportunity that are the same for all [similarly situated people]," which is currently at the heart of our legal systems that address discriminatory harms (Delgado and Stefancic 147). Formal equality works to guarantee equality of opportunity, but this often does not translate to equality of access and benefits. For example, the right for the accused to undergo a fair trial and the right to access public education do not change the fact that "the prison population is largely black and brown," while most educated professionals, such as "chief executive officers,

surgeons, and university presidents," are "almost all white" (Delgado and Stefancic 10). Because people, even those in what the law deems as "similarly situated" groups, are not usually alike enough in circumstances, treating them "alike" and giving them "similar" opportunities often does not result in true justice. For example, racism in law enforcement and the courts system, as well as many other complex "pipeline to prison" mechanisms, such as the school-to-prison-pipeline well documented by the American Civil Liberties Union, often work against black individuals and lead to higher rates of incarceration, while many white individuals do not face these same pressures and are, in numerous ways, freer to achieve their full potential ("School-to-Prison Pipeline").

A large portion of critical race theory's skepticism regarding antidiscrimination comes from its questioning of this baseline's value. The baseline, critical race theorists argue, is largely informed by the supremacy of white individuals and other dominant groups, which is maintained through "colorblindness" and "neutral principles" in law (Delgado and Stefancic 21). These principles are neither colorblind nor neutral at all, because their definition of neutrality holds white and other dominant group experiences as definers of normal and neutral. While "neutrality" might help us address some "extremely egregious" harms against minority populations, ones that any reasonable person would "notice and condemn," harms to minority people that are more facially neutral and less conspicuous usually go unaddressed: "if racism is embedded in our thought processes and social structures as deeply as many critical race theorists believe, then the 'ordinary business' of society—the routines, practices, and institutions that we rely on to effect the world's work—will keep minorities in subordinate positions" (Delgado and Stefancic 22). If the antidiscrimination baseline standard is grounded in the realities, needs, and experiences of privileged people closest to embodying the liberal subject, then the baseline is

unlikely to represent the realities and needs of those with much less privilege.

Thus, instead of helping minorities meet this baseline standard through antidiscrimination work, many critical race theory scholars propose a radical reimagining and restructuring of the baseline based on a wider set of realities that includes far fewer privileged perspectives. Alternatively, some critical race theory scholars propose an abolishment of the baseline standard, to be replaced by even more radical new systems of equality conceptualization and anti-oppression work. For instance, in stark contrast to the current standards of "neutrality" in antidiscrimination law and formal equality, critical race theorists contend that "only aggressive, color-conscious efforts to change the way things are will do much to ameliorate misery" (Delgado and Stefancic 22). These "color-conscious" efforts are a form of substantive equality, a notion of equality that takes into account and addresses people's specific circumstances in order to work towards more equal access and just outcomes, rather than just the equal opportunity of formal equality. Many critical race theorists today are working to promote the inclusion of more substantive equality principles in U.S. law, because there are currently not very many, but a good example of one might be affirmative action in college admissions. Critical race theorists end up traveling down many different intellectual avenues to achieve their goal of rethinking race and power dynamics.

As one can see through most of critical race theory's interests, such as its focuses on rethinking antidiscrimination, formal versus substantive equality, and rejection of legal "neutrality" and "colorblindness" in favor of "aggressive, color-conscious efforts," critical race theory is mostly focused on understanding and addressing harm through comprehension of identity characteristics and categories, both marginalized and dominant ones. Critical race theory recognizes that race, and many other marginalized identity characteristics, are "social

constructions," or the "products of social thought and relations" rather than "objective, inherent, or fixed" biological or genetic realities that determine higher-order aspects of personhood such as "personality, intelligence, and moral behavior" (Delgado and Stefancic 7, 8). However, critical race theory still must centralize identity characteristics in its analysis of injuries due to the reality that specific harms are often perpetuated against certain groups—for example, statistics show that black individuals are often the victims of police brutality (Cooper, "Against Bipolar Black Masculinity"). In understanding critical race theory's identitarian focus, it is vital to recognize that the theory is a response to the essentialist tendencies of earlier critical legal theories. This anti-essentialist framework within critical race theory specifically developed in the mid to late 1980s (Levit and Verchick 24). Essentialism refers to the idea that "a unitary, 'essential' experience" about one identity group, for example, women, "can be isolated and described independently of race, class, sexual orientation, and other realities of experience," and it stifles the voices of marginalized people within the group "in the name of commonality," highlighting and organizing around the experiences of those in the group with the most privilege (Levit and Verchick 24). As articulated by Harris, "in feminist legal theory, as in the dominant culture, it is mostly white, straight, and socio-economically privileged people who claim to speak for all of us" (Harris 588). Critical Race Theory develops as an anti-essentialist framework by arguing that "discrimination is best understood not from the center of an oppressed group's membership (meaning, for women, white, middle-class, and heterosexual), but from the margins" (Levit and Verchick 24). In other words, "discrimination functions differently depending on a person's combination of personal characteristics. Sexism surely affects all women…but it is the intersection of characteristics like sex, race, wealth, and sexual orientation that really suggest how people will treat you" (Levit and Verchick 24).

Critical race theory has led to the development of several responses to essentialism, but two stand out as especially influential: the related principles of intersectionality and multiple consciousness. “Intersectionality” was coined by legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who hoped to combat the “tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis,” as perpetuated by the “single-axis framework that is dominant in antidiscrimination law and that is also reflected in feminist theory and antiracist politics” (Crenshaw 139). Crenshaw reveals the existence of this single-axis framework by centering the “multidimensionality of the Black women's experience” in her critique, which not only reveals “how Black women are theoretically erased” in past dominant legal critical theories, but it also illustrates “how [the single-axis] framework imports its own theoretical limitations that undermine efforts to broaden feminist and antiracist analyses” (Crenshaw 139-140). Intersectionality can be imagined as a traffic intersection, where discrimination and other harms can travel through many different avenues to reach those with intersecting marginalized identities, such as blackness and womanhood:

> Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination (Crenshaw 149).

Similar to the concept of intersectionality is that of “multiple consciousness,” coined by legal scholar and critical race theorist Mari Matsuda. Matsuda supports the need for “multiple consciousness as jurisprudential method” in law, meaning that lawyers must somewhat move

away from conventional legal training, which teaches them to "narrow issues and delineate the scope of relevant evidence," in order to "tap" into "history and consciousness" to see the multiple perspectives converging in any given legal situation (Matsuda 7, 8). Specifically, Matsuda encourages lawyers to adjust their consciousness to see the world through the lens of oppressed people: "the multiple consciousness I urge lawyers to attain is not a random ability to see all points of view, but a deliberate choice to see the world from the standpoint of the oppressed" (Matsuda 9).

Besides critical race theory, another significant legal theory began developing in the 1970s and 1980s that also rejects the tenets of liberalism: vulnerability theory, pioneered by American jurist, political philosopher, and legal theorist Martha Albertson Fineman. Vulnerability theory "challenges the dominant conception of the universal legal subject as an autonomous, independent and fully-functioning adult" and comes to the conclusion that, "rather than building our systems of law and justice upon this static figment of the liberal imagination," people should instead recognize the reality of "a socially and materially dynamic vulnerable legal subject, based on a richer account of how actual peoples' lives are shaped by an inherent and constant state of vulnerability across the life-course" (Fineman, "Introduction" 15). In other words, Fineman "claim[s] the term 'vulnerable' for its potential in describing a universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human condition that must be at the heart of our concept of social and state responsibility" (Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition" 2). Fineman came to reject liberalism through her work as a family law scholar, in which she realized that the liberal subject represents an impossible level of independence given that all people are involved in, and dependent on, institutionalized care throughout their lives. Furthermore, Fineman grew to recognize that the family, and other

institutions, lack satisfactory legal structures and regulations to address the harms that occur in them. Fineman also came to understand that, unlike the specific, identity-based harms that critical race theory addresses, everyone is involved in institutions, and thus everyone is at risk for the harms that institutions can perpetuate through their specific methods of wielding power. Fineman's focus on institutions and their ability to cause harm led her to hypothesize that everyone is vulnerable due to their embodied nature and inevitable positioning within institutionalized structures:

> As embodied beings, individual humans find themselves dependent upon, and embedded within, social relationships and institutions throughout the life-course. While the institutions and relationships upon which any individual relies will vary over time and in response to changes in embodiment and social contexts, the fact that we require some set of social relationships and institutional structure remains constant (Fineman, "Vulnerability and Inevitable Inequality" 134).

In order to mitigate the harms that arise from universal human vulnerability, Fineman argues that institutions must lessen the potential for harm by providing resources that create resilience, while the state must oversee that institutions carry out this duty: "[Vulnerability theory is] a theory based on human vulnerability in which the state is theorized as the legitimate governing entity and is tasked with a responsibility to establish and monitor social institutions and relationships that facilitate the acquisition of individual and social resilience" (Fineman, "Vulnerability and Inevitable Inequality" 134). "Vulnerability" and "resilience" are broadly defined terms in Fineman's theory, but they can be generally understood by the following definitions: vulnerability arises "from our embodiment, which carries with it the ever-present possibility of harm, injury, and misfortune from mildly adverse to catastrophically devastating events, whether

accidental, intentional, or otherwise," while resilience is "produced within and through institutions and relationships that confer privilege and power" (Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition" 9, Fineman, "Introduction" 16). Resilience can also be thought of as "assets" or "resources" that are the products of institutions and relationships (Fineman, "Definitions"). The term "institution," too, is broadly, though never explicitly, defined in Fineman's scholarship: "Although Fineman does not explicitly define the term 'societal institution,' she has used the term to broadly refer to a wide variety of legally-recognized arrangements" (Kohn 3).

Despite their similar rejections of the liberal subject, critical race theory and vulnerability theory have major theoretical differences, primarily based in their respective identitarian and institutional focuses. Perhaps the most significant difference is that, while critical race theory contends that only marginalized people can suffer from the specific identity-based harms it addresses, vulnerability theory asserts that everyone is at risk for the harms perpetuated by institutions. Nevertheless, vulnerability theory does recognize that certain people have resilience in the forms of privileges and resources, usually conferred by institutions and relationships, to ameliorate their vulnerability, and these people are usually from majority groups. Another difference is that, while critical race theory rejects liberalism and the liberal subject by aiming to address interpersonal harm through methods of comprehending and valuing holistic identity, such as intersectionality and multiple consciousness, vulnerability theory rejects liberalism and the liberal subject through focus on institutional capacity to cause harm and institutional responsibility to mitigate those harms. Though vulnerability theory, like critical race theory, begins its analysis by recognizing the capacity for individuals to suffer from harm, in this case due to the shared human characteristic of being vulnerable, which makes people susceptible to

harm, it arrives at solutions to address this susceptibility by realizing that institutions have a responsibility to mitigate the potential for harm by providing resilience-creating resources. Institutions have an ethical obligation not only to confer resilience to those from majority groups with financial means and social clout, but also to those who live at the margins. Institutions usually fail this ethical obligation due to the rewards they receive, such as financial compensation and useful social connections, from helping those with clout. Thus, the way institutions confer resources usually helps powerful people maintain their status at the expense of the disenfranchised, which is highly problematic and results in drastic stratification of social classes rather than equity: there is a "widening income gap…Recent figures indicate that during the Great Recession following the 2008 global financial crisis, the typical middle class family's median net worth declined by 43.3%, while the wealthiest 10% of the population experienced only a 6.4% decrease in median net worth" (Fineman, "Beyond Identities" 1715).

Vulnerability theory, like critical race theory, shuns liberal principles such as antidiscrimination, formal equality, and colorblindness or neutrality in law as mechanisms for attaining justice. However, vulnerability theory shuns these equality-driven measures for different reasons based on its theoretical centering of institutions and the universality of vulnerability rather than individuals and identity-specific harms. Where critical race theory rejects liberal equality-driven measures due to their capacity to obscure and undermine the experiences of people of color and other minorities by creating baseline standards that only reflect the realities of white people and other majority groups, vulnerability theory rejects these equality-driven measures not only due to their majority-supremacist tendencies, but also due to the fact that they are not helpful when "applied in situations of inescapable or inevitable inequality where differing levels of authority and power are appropriate, such as in defining the

legal relationship between parent and child or employer and employee" (Fineman, "Vulnerability and Inevitable Inequality" 135). These inevitable inequality measures usually occur within institutional settings, such as the family or the workplace. Thus, within institutional settings, very different frameworks of thinking about and working towards justice are needed to respond to interpersonal harms. Fineman notes that institutionalized harms have historically "been relegated to the 'private' sphere of life, away from state regulation," and thus there are few adequate structures in place within U.S. law for dealing with harms that occur in institutional settings (Fineman, "Vulnerability and Inevitable Inequality" 135). Describing this lack of adequate structures, Fineman states that, "when explicitly addressed, situations of inevitable inequality are typically handled in law and policy either by imposing a fabricated equivalence between the individuals or by declaring that an equality mandate does not apply because the individuals to be compared are positioned differently" (Fineman, "Vulnerability and Inevitable Inequality" 135). Both these fabricated equivalencies and false notions that equality, in a true sense rather than a liberal sense, does not apply, lead to a minimization of "state [and other institutional] responsibility for ensuring equitable treatment for differently positioned individuals" (Fineman, "Vulnerability and Inevitable Inequality" 135).

The fact that vulnerability theory looks at interpersonal harms mostly through an institutional lens, while critical race theory examines these harms primarily through an identitarian lens, makes them complimentary, but very different, tools of analysis for Lorde's writing. There are some exceptions to, and complications of, vulnerability theory's institutional focus—for instance, vulnerability theory recognizes that certain people are, in some circumstances, more susceptible to harm than others: "because we are positioned differently within a web of economic and institutional relationships, our vulnerabilities range in magnitude

and potential at the individual level" (Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition" 10). In the same vein, critical race theory performs identitarian analysis of harm while keeping in mind the inevitable institutional factors at play: critical race theorists have "located racism and its everyday operation in the various structures within which the guilty and the innocent were to be identified:...[for example] not bigoted school-board members, but the structures of segregation and wealth transmission" (Valdes et al. 2). Nevertheless, vulnerability theory remains predominantly institutional in its analysis of harm causation, while critical race theory remains chiefly identitarian, because the way that institutions wield power to create, and mitigate, harm is at the heart of vulnerability theory, while an interest in theorizing about harms related to identity categories and their intersections lies at the core of critical race theory. Overall, Lorde's writing dossier has many more prominent connections to critical race theory than it does to vulnerability theory. According to African American Studies scholar Rudolph P. Byrd, Lorde's work of "theorizing oppression in a complex and nuanced manner" in her writing led her to "prepare the ground for the emergence, some years later, of…Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality" (Byrd 29). Due to Lorde's indirect, albeit notable, role in creating the intellectual climate out of which critical race theory was born, her conspicuous connections to the theory make sense. Thus, several scholars have analyzed Lorde through a critical race theory lens already. I wish to build on their work by pointing out specific links to anti-liberal sentiment in Lorde's writing and by highlighting her resonance with the intersectionality and multiple consciousness frameworks of understanding holistic identity. Lorde's work is, indeed, very identitarian in nature, but she makes a significant effort to push back against simplistic understandings of identity, showing deep resonance with critical race theory's anti-essentialist thinking.

In addition to her identitarian focus, Lorde shows an increasing interest in how institutions, such as healthcare facilities, perpetuate harm and confer resilience in her writing on cancer. Perhaps this is because, as Lorde fell ill, she grew keenly aware of her embodied vulnerability and her inevitable dependence on healthcare facilities for institutionalized assistance. Lorde's embodied vulnerability is both implicated in, and distinct from, her identities, because each person has a body that is vulnerable to harm, but bodies can experience particular kinds of harms based on social constructions of the identities that they are associated with. Furthermore, in Lorde's battles with the healthcare system, she also became aware of how institutions, such as hospitals and clinics, wield power. Despite this shift in focus, Lorde does not give up her emphasis on identities in her writing on cancer. However, her identitarian focus does change as she learns to navigate the new identity of cancer patient alongside her everlasting identities of blackness, womanhood, and lesbianism. Because Lorde's writing on cancer is so rich in its mixture of identitarian and institutional focus, it lends itself well to analysis through a vulnerability theory lens in addition to a critical race theory one.

Despite vulnerability theory's utility in analyzing at least some of Lorde's work, Lorde's fit with vulnerability theory is not nearly as seamless as her fit with critical race theory. While Lorde, a lifelong black lesbian, always expressed the ardent appreciation of diversity and the aggressive rejection of simplistic identity comprehension that set the stage for critical race theory, Lorde did not necessarily share Fineman's close proximity to institutionalized harms until after her health battles with cancer. This fact perhaps explains why Lorde's non-cancer writing has a much less institutional focus than her writing on cancer. Additionally, Lorde never goes as far as Fineman does in understanding the *universal* nature of human vulnerability. Lorde never outright acknowledges that *all* people are vulnerable, even powerful people from majority

groups. In fact, Lorde actively denies universality: “there is no such thing as universal...” (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 164). Instead, Lorde prefers to focus on how vulnerability specifically affects minorities, although she does acknowledge that some people are vulnerable in certain circumstances despite having conspicuous privilege. Nonetheless, Fineman’s understanding of how institutions perpetuate harm, and the language that she uses to describe institutional responsibility to mitigate vulnerability through resource conferral, resonate profoundly with Lorde’s writing. Ultimately, even the areas of legal theory that do not effortlessly align with Lorde’s writing provide interesting lenses to examine her language and the scenarios she describes. On the other hand, just as legal theory can help scholars illuminate new issues in Lorde’s work, her writing sheds light on legal theory as well, proposing new ways to help scholars comprehend, evaluate, and explain a wide spectrum of theoretical ideas.

Chapter 2

"Sister Outsider": Identitarian Focus in Lorde's Non-Cancer Writing

The vast majority of Audre Lorde's essays, and much of her other writing, was identitarian in nature. In discussing Lorde's identitarian focus, it is important to have a comprehensive language of identities. When I talk about "identities," I am referring to Lorde's conceptualization of the socially constructed categories that make up her individual character, such as blackness, womanhood, and lesbianism. When I say "identity groups," I am referring to the faction of people who identify with an identity, such as black people or African-Americans, biological females or women-identifying people, and the queer or LGBTQ+ community. When I discuss "identity categories," I am talking about the categories defined by shared characteristics associated with each identity, such as race, sex, and sexuality. When I say "identity," I am referring to a singular sub-identity, while I use "holistic identity" to refer to Lorde's whole self, or her entire set of identities together. Due to Lorde's interest in identities, the groups and categories associated with them, and the complexities that they present, she fixated on the twin goals of combatting harm in forms such as exclusion and prejudice, and promoting justice in forms such as inclusion and diversity valuation: "diversity can be a generative force, a source of energy fueling our visions of action for the future. We must not let diversity be used to tear us apart from each other, nor from our communities" (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 209). Though Lorde's work has these continual focuses, the way in which she went about theorizing these topics changes from her non-cancer writing to her writing on cancer. In her non-cancer writing, Lorde's conceptions of exclusion and prejudice primarily relate to different overt and subtle manifestations of identity-based harms such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Her conception of justice is principally related to fighting these forces by promoting inclusion and diversity

valuation through thinking frameworks that reflect the critical race theory principles of intersectionality and multiple consciousness. Additionally, in Lorde's non-cancer writing, she reflects on how difference and diversity strengthen identity group social justice movements, and how lack of difference and diversity can create exclusion and prejudice, harming the identity groups and their members. In her writing on cancer, on the other hand, Lorde continues her identitarian focus, but navigating the new identity of cancer patient in the healthcare system while being a black lesbian gives her a unique perspective on the way identitarian and institutional harms comingle. Lorde's portrayal in her non-cancer writing of how individuals and groups cause identity-based harms exposes in a visceral way the gaping holes in liberalism's confident rhetoric. Instead of focusing on abstractions such as liberal "equality," she reframes notions of harm and justice to encompass specific black lesbian feminist subjectivities: "The white fathers have told us: I think, therefore I am. But the Black mother within each of us…whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free" (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 218). In Lorde's writing, readers encounter genuine anger, pain, passion, and affection. Her work is remarkably sentiment-driven, personal, and raw, rather than full of detached generalizations that pretend to speak for all from the perspective of few, like liberalist writing. In her reconceptualization of harm and justice, Lorde shows us the pitfalls of liberal thinking and portrays the urgent need for law and society to develop and implement alternatives to liberalist thinking that notice and respond to the concerns of those living outside of liberalism's very narrow paradigms.

From just a surface examination of Lorde's work, one can readily see that she is very interested in how her holistic identity is the complex sum of many sub-identities. Lorde lived within, and constantly advocated for, the identity groups of which she was a part. Lorde

describes herself as a "Black feminist lesbian warrior," naming many of her identities and indicating the identitarian focus of her writing, though she mostly focuses in her writing on blackness, womanhood, and lesbianism (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 214). Lorde's focus on these three identities makes sense, because, as critical race theorist and legal scholar Trina Grillo explains, "Each of us in the world sits at the intersection of many [identities]: [For example, someone might be]…Latina, woman, short, mother, lesbian, daughter, brown-eyed, long-haired, quick-witted, short-tempered, worker, stubborn. Some categories, such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, are important most of the time. Others are rarely important" (Grillo 17). Blackness, womanhood, and lesbianism, as major lifelong aspects of Lorde's existence, were important to her virtually all the time. Furthermore, while some people might be able to separate their identities from politics, for Lorde, identity, which she explored through her writing, was deeply political: "the question of social protest and art [writing] is inseparable for me" (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 164). According to literary critic Elizabeth Alexander, analyzing Lorde through an identitarian lens reflective of critical race theory, Lorde's focus on holistic identity can be described as "simultaneously multiple and integrated:"

> Each of us, says Lorde, needs each of those myriad pieces [of holistic identity, for example, black, woman, and lesbian] to make us who we are and whole…The implications of this thinking for questions of [holistic] identity are broad. For the self to remain simultaneously multiple and integrated, embracing the definitive boundaries of each category—race, gender, class, et cetera—while dissembling their static limitations, assumes a depth and complexity of [holistic] identity construction that refutes a history of limitation. For the self to be fundamentally collaged-overlapping…is to break free from diminishing concepts of [holistic] identity (Alexander 695).

Alexander's assertion that, in order to "break free from diminishing concepts of [holistic] identity," one can both "embrace definitive boundaries of each category—race, gender, class, et cetera," while also "dissembling their static limitations" is very similar to my own discussion of the tensions present in Lorde's identitarian approach to writing. In "embracing the definitive boundaries" of each identity category, Lorde does not misrepresent or misunderstand any category, allowing her to maintain accurate separate conceptions of the unique characteristics of race, sex, and sexuality. However, Lorde is able to do away with identity category "static limitations" by demonstrating the need for inclusion and diversity-valuation frameworks within identity groups, which are often mistakenly conceptualized as fixed and homogenous entities.

The dichotomy in Lorde's writing between working to be part of identity groups and the social justice movements they support, while also shying away from categorization due to its inadequacy in capturing a full picture of her, is well represented in Lorde's pronouncement that she is a "sister outsider," as she called her most famous essay collection (Lorde, *Sister Outsider*). The description of Lorde as a "sister outsider" applies to the author's self-portrayal in her writing well beyond just this one essay collection. In fact, elements of being a "sister outsider" emerge in Lorde's work throughout her entire lifetime. One interpretation of Lorde's "sister outsider" title is that she is both simultaneously a "sister" and an "outsider." Being both a "sister," and also an "outsider," Lorde sits at the intersection of belonging and feeling like a stranger within identity groups. In a speech to the students of Medgar Evers College, a predominantly black institution, on the subject of black organizing, Lorde calls herself a "sister" of black people: "I am a Black Lesbian, and I am your sister" (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 63). However, Lorde also mentions in the speech her feelings of alienation within the black community. Lorde discusses the place of black lesbians in black circles and black social justice movements, arguing against the exclusion

they often incur as a result of their womanhood and homosexuality:

> Whenever I come to Medgar Evers College I always feel a thrill of anticipation and delight because it feels like coming home, like talking to family, having a chance to speak about things that are very important to me with people who matter the most…But, as with all families, we sometimes find it difficult to deal constructively with the genuine differences between us and to recognize that unity does not require that we be identical to each other…[Black people] are not one great vat of homogenized chocolate milk. We have many different faces, and we do not have to become each other in order to work together (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 57).

Lorde's mention of "family" connotes the term's significance in identity groups. Family members often feel affection for one another, and Lorde shares these feelings here and elsewhere in her writing, saying that her black family includes "people who matter the most" to her. Identity groups often have a tight familial bond held together by the glue of shared qualities and feelings of similarity to other people. Thus, when there are major differences among people in identity groups, Lorde notes that these families can "sometimes find it difficult to deal constructively with genuine differences." However, as Lorde notes, the reality is that nobody is the same as any other person, despite shared identities: black people "are not one great vat of homogenized chocolate milk." Thus, Lorde declares that it is possible to have family without homogeneity, saying that black people "have many different faces" and that they "do not have to become each other in order to work together." However, she provides a more radical message about difference within family in the following lines of her speech:

> It is not easy for me to speak here with you as a Black Lesbian feminist, recognizing that some of the ways in which I identify myself make it difficult for you to hear me. But

> meeting across difference always requires mutual stretching, and until you *can* hear me as a Black Lesbian feminist, our strengths will not be truly available to each other… I do not want you to ignore my [holistic] identity, nor do I want you to make it an insurmountable barrier between our sharing of strengths. (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 58).

Here, Lorde discusses not only the fact that it is possible to accommodate and tolerate difference within families, but she also suggests that it is of *great importance* to do so. She notes that, though it is "not easy" for her to present herself as a black lesbian feminist, because she realizes that drawing attention to each of those separate identities in tandem might cause her not to be "heard," or to be overlooked in any one individual identity group, she does it anyway. Her reasoning is that, until people within identity groups can participate in "mutual stretching," their strengths "will not be truly available to each other." Diverse "strengths" are valuable in organizing identity group social justice movements and in promoting honest representation of members in identity categories: "I do not want you to ignore my [holistic] identity," Lorde says, referring to her status as a "black lesbian feminist." Similar to her discussion of difference and family within the speech at Medgar Evers College, "sister outsider" implies both a connection to a family-like group and difference within it. Though a "sister" is part of a family unit, she might be radically different from her mother, father, siblings, and other family members. This difference should not be concealed or swept under the rug, and it should also not make the sister any less part of the family, because difference is valuable in making families stronger, and exclusion of difference causes harms. Due to its emphasis on acknowledging the honest intertwining of identities in real people, and its valuation of diversity within identity-based family units, "sister outsider" is remarkably reflective of intersectionality in critical race theory.

In addition to reflecting simultaneous feelings of belonging and estrangement, "sister

outsider" also reflects Lorde's celebration of kinship with other people who are outsiders. Lorde is not only a "sister" and also an "outsider" within identity-based family groups, but she is also a "sister" to other "outsiders" like her. Her kinship with other outsiders is made apparent through her continual advocacy for those living at the margins like she did due to her compounded disenfranchisements. Thanks to Lorde's complex understanding of holistic identity, her identitarian advocacy and conversations about identitarian harms take two distinct forms. In the first form, she recognizes and condemns harm perpetuated by the majority—namely, white heterosexual men—against minorities. Though white heterosexual men, particularly ones with a lot of power and privilege, might not always be the numerical majority in different areas of the U.S., Lorde asserts that their prejudiced ideas, in part through liberalism, have taken root and spread widely all over the country. She declares that she lives in a "white racist sexist homophobic america" (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 75). While Lorde briefly mentions extremist acts of violence perpetuated by white individuals in her larger conversations about racism, such as pointing out that, "in California…the Aryan Brotherhood, the Posse Comitatus, and other white racist and anti-Semitic survivalist groups flourish rampant and poisonous," she is more interested in discussing everyday instances of racist violence, such as the police brutality that occurs right in the open (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 67). Throughout her writing, Lorde angrily lists numerous instances of police violence, such as "white america's not-so silent applause for the smiling white vigilante who coolly guns down four Black youths in the New York City subway," "Eleanor Bumpurs, sixty-six, Black grandmother, evicted from her Bronx Housing Authority apartment with two fatal shotgun blasts from New York City housing police," and "Yvonne Smallwood, a young Black woman arguing her husband's traffic ticket, kicked to death by police in Manhattan" (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 66, 67). Through her repetitive mentioning of the

victims' races and genders, Lorde argues that these acts of violence are all fueled by deep-rooted racism, sexism, or both. Through her graphic descriptions of harm, readers viscerally feel Lorde's rage and pain on behalf of the victims. In her intentional de-capitalization of the "a" in America, here and elsewhere in her writing, readers can see that Lorde has either lost faith in the United States, due at least in part to its inability to protect minorities, or perhaps she was never able to develop this kind of faith in her country in the first place. On the other hand, in her purposeful capitalization of "Black" and "Lesbian" throughout her writing, Lorde portrays respect for and confidence in blackness and queer womanhood. Where American law is perhaps "colorblind" and "neutral," pretending not to see identities and yet allowing police targeting of black people, Lorde insists on recognition of identities as a way to truly understand harm and work towards justice.

Interestingly, Lorde's advocacy for minorities who suffer from harm at the hands of the most dominant majority group—heterosexual white men—was not the kind of advocacy that she wrote most about. Perhaps this is because dominant majority group harm against minorities is quite conspicuous and a common conversation topic. Instead, in her second and more widely discussed form of advocacy, Lorde takes a significant interest in exposing and exploring more covert forms of harm occurring within minority groups. Here, Lorde acts as a "sister" to not only the "outsiders" who are generally marginalized, but also to the "outsiders" that are further marginalized within groups of marginalized people. She talks not just about her own alienation in identity groups due to her multiple marginalized identities, represented by her status as a "sister" and as an "outsider," but also about feeling affectionate kinship with other marginalized people, or being a "sister" to other "outsiders." Communications scholar Lester C. Olson, analyzing Lorde through an identitarian lens reflective of critical race theory, sums up Lorde's

devotion to advocacy for those who are marginalized in multiple ways: "[Lorde] devoted herself to challenging the ironies, paradoxes, and oxymora - to use euphemisms for hypocrisy, dishonesty, and collusion with others' [majority] oppression - resulting from dominating those who are different " (Olson 260). Lorde committed herself to pointing out and combatting harm wherever she found it, even within minority groups where members participate in "collusion with others' [majority] oppression." Lorde notices how minorities often absorb majority-group rhetoric and thought patterns, ultimately internalizing intolerance against one other, and the complications that this presents when trying to create solidarity among minorities: "What is that internalized and self-destructive barrier that keeps us from moving, that keeps us from coming together?"…"It is easier to deal with the external manifestations of racism and sexism than it is to deal with the results of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 141, 147). This absorption is reflective of the way in which liberalism does not apply to all, or even to most people, and yet many people end up internalizing and accepting its false messages. Lorde reveals minority prejudice against minorities by discussing the ways in which marginalized identity groups practice intolerance and enforce exclusion towards their most marginalized members, who exist at the intersections of multiple disenfranchised identities. Lorde denounces black prejudice against women and queer people, feminist prejudice against people of color and queer people, and queer prejudice against people of color and lesbians. Lorde's discussion of the harms that people with more than one marginalized identity face is reminiscent of the analogy that critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw draws between the compounded harms that black women face and traffic in an intersection: accidents in intersections "can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them…[similarly,] if a Black woman is harmed…her

injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination" (Crenshaw 149). Those with many disenfranchised identities are liable to experience complex and layered harms within identity groups that can result from intolerance towards or exclusion of any of their identities.

Lorde draws particular attention to black prejudice against women and queer people in a speech delivered at the Malcolm X Weekend at Harvard University, about what present-day black organizers can learn from black organizing in the 60s. However, in order to solidify her "sister" status before delving into criticism that casts her as an "outsider," she first mentions her pride in the successes of historic black rights movements: "The raw energy of Black determination released in the 60s powered changes in Black awareness and self-concepts and expectations. This energy is still being felt in movements for change among women, other peoples of Color, gays, the handicapped—among all the disenfranchised peoples of this society" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 138). Nevertheless, Lorde spends the bulk of her speech criticizing both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement for their exclusion of women and queer folk, which led them to essentialize blackness to include only the perspectives of heterosexual black men in the same way that liberalism essentializes the human experience to reflect only the concerns of privileged white men. Lorde encourages advocates in present-day black rights movements not to relive mistakes made in the 60s by focusing their energy on fighting real evils rather than practicing prejudice against minorities within the movement: "In the 1960s, the awakened anger of the Black community was often expressed, not vertically against the corruption of power and true sources of control over our lives, but horizontally toward those closest to us" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 135-136). Instead of fighting the real, "vertical" evils of "power corruption" and "sources of control," Lorde notes that 1960s black movements became fragmented though "horizontal" expressions of "awakened anger." This

"horizontal anger" excluded and undermined so many marginalized people in the black community, including "Black women [who] were told that our only useful position in the Black Power movement was prone," and "Black lesbian and gay people" whose existence was "not even allowed to cross the public consciousness of Black america" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 137). Heterosexual men in 1960s black movements hyper-sexualized black women, "only" using them "prone," or for sexual relations, rather than making a serious effort to incorporate their needs and perspectives. In the same vein, black queer people were excluded from 1960s black organizing altogether because their existence was too radical to publicly acknowledge.

Lorde gives other examples of black individuals facing erasure from, and prejudice within, black communities: she comments on the sexist attitude of a black scholar, sociologist Robert Staples, in an article that he wrote in *The Black Scholar,* and she observes the homophobic attitude of a student body president at Howard University, a historically black college. Lorde notes Staples' "compassion for misguided black men," referring to black male anger, and his corresponding lack of empathy for black women's anger: Staples says black women have "a collective appetite for black male blood" (Staples 26). In calling black male anger "misguided" and portraying black female anger as an "appetite for blood," Staples makes black men seem justifiably frustrated and black women seem unreasonably and violently enraged. Lorde responds by questioning why black women's anger is so pathologized: "Is [black male] rage any more legitimate than the rage of Black women?" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 61). Lorde notes that intolerance of black women's anger probably stems from history: "In this country, Black women traditionally have had compassion for everybody else except ourselves. We have cared for whites because we had to for pay or survival; we have cared for our children and our fathers and our brothers and our lovers" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 62). Because many

people grew to expect and rely on selfless services from black women, including white individuals, black children, and black men, people now have difficulty accepting and understanding the validity of black female anger, which Lorde notes is distinct from black male anger: "Black women have particular and legitimate issues which affect our lives as Black women" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 60). In addition to discussing how black women face erasure from and prejudice within black movements, Lorde comments on queer black folk facing these same issues by observing the homophobic attitude of a student body president at Howard University. In response to the "occasion of a Gay Student Charter on campus," Lorde reports that the president stated: "'The Black community has nothing to do with such filth — we will have to abandon these people" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 142). The student body president's claim that gay issues are "filth" and that he would like to "abandon" the gay community exemplifies his blatant homophobia. Lorde, of course, challenges the president's stance: "…Abandon? Often without noticing, we absorb the racist belief that Black people are fitting targets for everybody's anger. We are closest to each other, and it is easier to vent fury upon each other than upon our enemies" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 142). In Lorde's opinion, the president's assertion that Howard should "abandon" queer individuals reflects his own "absorbed" internalization of the same forces that oppress him.

In addition to pointing out and criticizing essentialism within black communities and black movements, Lorde mentions her feelings of kinship with the most marginalized members of the black identity group. In her speech on what black organizers can learn from the 1960s, Lorde develops this kinship by identifying on a personal level with the struggles of those who are marginalized in multiple ways within identity groups: "…the 60s for me…was a time of isolation and frustration from within…Either I denied or chose between various aspects of my identity, or

my work and my Blackness would be unacceptable. As a Black lesbian mother in an interracial marriage, there was usually some part of me guaranteed to offend everybody's comfortable prejudices of who I should be" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 137). In the 60s, Lorde was a mother in an interracial marriage to a white gay man, though she was still openly lesbian. Her womanhood was on display through her motherhood, and her lesbianism was highlighted by her racially and sexually non-normative marriage and public lesbian conquests. Thus, Lorde felt that she must "chose between various aspects of [her] identity" or risk exclusion from the black community by way of her "blackness" being deemed "unacceptable." She empowers black women and queer individuals by stating what she learned from her own compounded marginalization: "I learned that if I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 137). In order to avoid being "crunched into other people's fantasies" and "eaten alive," she "defines herself for herself," rather than holding herself accountable to arbitrary standards set by majority members within black identity groups. Her insistence on self-definition based on understanding of one's own marginalizations is another way in which Lorde redefines justice in contrast to its liberal notions. Since harm, to Lorde, is based on complicated and overlapping forces of exclusion and prejudice, one form of justice can be avoidance of such harm through self-definition.

Just as Lorde draws special attention to and critiques black prejudice against women and queer individuals, she does the same for feminist prejudice against women of color and lesbians. However, she again emphasizes her "sister" status before providing the criticism that marks her as an "outsider," by speaking about her feelings of camaraderie and connection with other women. Lorde very often refers to other women as "sisters," and she feels a deep sense of community with them: "I grew up in largely female environments, and I know how crucial that

has been to my own development. I feel the want and need often for the society of women, exclusively. I recognize that our own spaces are essential for developing and recharging" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 78). Nevertheless, Lorde spends the bulk of her writing condemning the feminist movement's tendency to essentialize the category of women by its exclusion women who are not heterosexual and white. Even as she uses the term "sister" to express her deep affinity with other women, Lorde realizes the term's potential to essentialize: "There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 116). The term "sister," then, simultaneously reflects authentic bonding and community building alongside the power of homogenous language to exclude certain people, in the same way that "We the People" does. Discussing a specific instance of essentialism and exclusion within the feminist movement, Lorde criticizes Mary Daly, a white lesbian feminist philosopher, for her book entitled *Gyn/Ecology* on the "metaethics of radical feminism" (Daly). Lorde asserts that Daly misrepresents the experiences of black women in *Gyn/Ecology*, because Daly does not sufficiently consult black literature and culture to inform the black issues that she discusses. Additionally, Lorde concludes that Daly's book elevates white women at black women's expense. For example, Daly, interested in how scriptures and myths entrench patriarchy, uplifts white women through praise of Eurocentric Goddesses, while degrading black women through corresponding exclusion of African Goddesses and deities from other minority religious traditions. One of Daly's Goddess mentions is a reference to the "Tree of Life, the Sacred Tree, which is the Goddess," which she says later becomes the "torture cross" on which Jesus was crucified (Daly Kindle Locations 2038-2039). In reply to Daly's Eurocentric goddess references, Lorde questions: "…Why are [Daly's] goddess images only white, western european, judeo-christian? Where was Afrekete, Yemanje, Oyo, and Mawulisa? Where were the warrior

goddesses of the Vodun, the Dahomeian Amazons and the warrior-women of Dan?" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 67). In the same vein, Lorde states that Daly paints black women "only as victims and preyers-upon each other" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 67). Indeed, *Gyn/Ecology* only speaks at length about black women a small handful of times, in sections such as "*Chapter Five* African Genital Mutilation: The Unspeakable Atrocities," which does seem to paint black women as especially prone to victimization without acknowledging the ways in which black women can and do lead empowered lives (Daly). In a letter to Daly, later published as an essay, Lorde implores the philosopher to "be aware of how [*Gyn/Ecology*] serves the destructive forces of racism and separation between women" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 69). Lorde describes these "destructive forces" as "the assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background, and that nonwhite women and our herstories are noteworthy only as decorations, or examples of female victimization" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 69). Lorde calls on Daly to eschew the essentialist narrative that the white female experience is reflective of all female experiences. In other words, Lorde points out that white women do not represent the "sole herstory," and black women's narratives have more substance than just "decorations, or examples of female victimization." In addition to her critique of feminism for erasing and devaluing black women, Lorde also calls out feminist majorities for their unwillingness to include lesbians: "In the white women's communities, heterosexism is sometimes a result of identifying with the white patriarchy, a rejection of that interdependence between women-identified women which allows the self to be, rather than to be used in the service of men" (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 121). Lorde once again makes connections between liberalism and oppression by noting the internalized nature of feminist homophobia: heterosexism can come out of "identifying with the white patriarchy." She

also implies the potential for heterosexual sexual relationships to promote sexism by allowing women to be used "in the service of men," underscoring lesbianism as a unique form of feminist activism, which further supports lesbian inclusion in feminist circles.

Finally, in the same vein as her criticism of the black and feminist communities, Lorde also contests the privileging of white gay male experience over the experiences of lesbians and people of color in queer circles. Lorde cherishes her queer "sister" status, always emphasizing her black and lesbian identities together despite the potential cost of inviting her own alienation: "I am a Black Lesbian, and I *am* your sister" (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 63). However, she challenges the queer community to avoid essentialism by practicing inclusion: "There are voices in the lesbian and gay community…[that] term racism and classism and sexism as a 'collection of peripheral issues'…Yet after we exclude Black, working class, ethnic and religious minority concerns from gay politics, who will be left to define 'our' [queer] considerations?" ("Audre Lorde Papers"). Here, Lorde not only critiques queer people for exclusion of blackness and womanhood, through "racism" and "sexism," but also for exclusion of people based on a wide variety of other identities, including the "working class" and "religious minorities." Though Lorde was neither part of the working class nor was she a religious minority, her advocacy for these identity groups portrays striking resonance with multiple consciousness in critical race theory, because she exercises a "deliberate choice to see the world from the standpoint of the oppressed," even those who are oppressed in ways that she does not personally identify with (Matsuda 9).

In addition to discussing identity-based harms perpetuated by majority individuals and groups, and identity-based harms perpetuated by minority individuals and groups, Lorde acknowledges that these two kinds of harm are not always separate. For example, she inculpates

a black mayor of Philadelphia for his complicity in white-led police brutality against black individuals. Her analysis of harm focuses on the victims' races, the mayor's race, and the police chief's race, and how they interact in a violent situation:

> …the Black mayor [of Philadelphia] allows a white police chief to bomb a houseful of Black people into submission, killing eleven people and burning down a whole Black neighborhood to do it…Five of those killed were children. Police pinned them down with gunfire when the occupants sought to escape the flames, making sure these Black people died. Because they were dirty and Black and obnoxious and Black and arrogant and Black and poor and Black and Black and Black and Black. And the mayor who allowed this to happen says he accepts full responsibility, and he is Black, too. How are we persuaded to participate in our own destruction by maintaining our silences? (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 68).

Lorde gives an in-depth account of the violence in this occurrence, describing graphically that the white police chief and his officers not only bombed black individuals and set fire to their homes, but they also actively prevented the black victims from escaping impending death by "pinning them down with gunfire." Her fury, pain, and passion in writing about this instance drives her to create a race-based mantra about the difficulties that black people encounter not only due to white racism against black individuals, but also due to black racism against their own people: "Black people died" because "they were dirty and Black and obnoxious and Black and arrogant and Black and poor and Black and Black and Black and Black." As the mantra emphasizes, the victims' common denominator in this situation was blackness, which Lorde asserts is not a coincidence. Despite the white-led police force's profound brutality, it is the black mayor that Lorde seems to feel most disappointed in: "the mayor who allowed this to

happen says he accepts full responsibility, and he is Black, too. How are we [black people] persuaded to participate in our own destruction by maintaining our silences?" Her tone in discussing the mayor is somewhat different from that which she uses to discuss the police officers' cruelty. Where Lorde expresses conspicuous anger at the policemen, her fury reflected in her long and visceral description of the violence they enacted, Lorde seems to feel anger towards the mayor, but a quieter and more deep-seated rage in light of his hypocrisy: he is a black man, and he is complicit in his "own destruction"—the killing of black lives. Lorde's focus on the racialized nature of this situation is evidence pointing to the false "neutrality" and "colorblindness" of American law and policy.

Through her interest in theorizing about the complexities of identities and identity groups, and the equally as complicated ways in which individuals and groups can cause identity-based harms, Lorde portrays the falsity and dangerousness of liberalist thinking. In her reconceptualization of harm, Lorde shows that liberalist notions of harm, such as lack of "equality," do not encompass marginalized people's needs. Liberalist notions of "equality," based on fabricated notions of "neutrality," stem from thinking of minorities as subhuman. For example, John Locke theorized that, because people are supposed to be equal, enslaving another person is wrong and should righteously result in war: "he who makes an attempt to enslave me, thereby puts himself into a state of war with me" (Locke Kindle Location 1858). Nevertheless, the Founding Fathers, who were profoundly influenced by Locke, "owned" African enslaved people, and slavery continued to exist in the United States for a century after the country's founding. Similarly, Locke believed that men living under a social contract are free to overthrow their sovereign leader if he is tyrannical: "But if a long train of abuses, prevarications, and artifices, all tending the same way, make the design visible to the people, and they cannot but

feel what they lie under...they should then rouse themselves, and endeavour to put the rule into such hands which may secure to them the ends for which government was at first erected" (Locke Kindle Locations 3361-3364). Nevertheless, that right did not apply to enslaved people nor women, who, for so much of American history, lived under oppressive regimes. Lorde depicts that the belief in minorities as subhuman is not necessarily an issue of the past, as evidenced by majority harms against minorities and minority harm against other minorities. Lorde also shows that liberalist thinking is not only obviously harmful, but also particularly powerful, due to how deeply it is ingrained in American consciousness. Liberalist thinking is so influential that even marginalized people internalize it and use it use it to perpetuate harm against each other. In conceptualizing justice, Lorde encourages thought about what good alternatives to liberalism might look like. Though she, like critical race theory, does not offer concrete solutions, she makes it apparent that viable solutions must take into account the existence of identities and identity-based harms.

Chapter 3

"A Burst of Light": Identitarian and Institutional Focuses in Lorde's Writing on Cancer

Though Audre Lorde focuses on the complexities of identities and identity-based harms throughout her entire writing career, she expands her focus into a distinct alternative perspective, a focus on how identitarian and institutional harms overlap, in her later writing, particularly in her written reflections on living with cancer. Upon falling ill, Lorde finds herself having to navigate the new identity of cancer patient in the healthcare system while being a black lesbian, and this experience gives her a unique perspective on the ways identitarian and institutional harms crisscross and build on each other. In her writing on cancer, Lorde continues working towards her dual goals of combatting harm, in forms such as exclusion and prejudice, and promoting justice, in forms such as diversity valuation and inclusion. However, Lorde's experiences as a patient inform the development of new conceptions of harm, now rooted in how institutions, rather just than individuals and groups, perpetuate racist, sexist, and classist practices, as well as generally harmful practices. Lorde's writing on cancer suggests that, while institutions can and do perpetuate identity-based harms, institutional harms have elements that are distinct products of institutional structures and agendas. Lorde's main works of writing on cancer include: *The Cancer Journals*, a short book-length essay spanning her breast cancer diagnosis and mastectomy, and "A Burst of Light," an extended essay comprised almost entirely of journal entries about her experience with liver cancer, metastasized from breast cancer, which was eventually fatal. Because Lorde's collection of writing on cancer is smaller than her compilation of writing on other topics, I also include analysis of "The American Cancer Society Or There Is More Than One Way To Skin A Coon," one of Lorde's lyric poems, about how cancer specifically affects black individuals.

Lorde mostly focuses on healthcare entities in her discussion of institutions, such as hospitals and clinics, and she unpacks how their financial agendas drive them to perpetuate harm. She refers to the group of institutions, and their partner establishments, that are involved in and profit from American cancer treatment as "Cancer Inc.," indicting her criticism of healthcare as a corporate entity (Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* 64). Lorde recognizes the power of these institutions to create, preserve, and mitigate harm, and their unequal systems of patient treatment, which are deeply racialized, sexed, and classed. In thinking about justice, Lorde remarks on the ethical consequences of such unequal resilience promotion. In a surprising deviation from her focus on how minorities experience identity-based harms, Lorde also seems to notice that even those with conspicuous privilege are susceptible to harm due to their inevitable bodily vulnerability. Lorde's writing on cancer continues to reveal the pitfalls of liberalism's abstract "equality" rhetoric, but these holes now reflect black lesbian feminist concerns as they relate to institutional power structures. Furthermore, Lorde's writing on cancer critiques liberalist notions of "ownership" and "property," which are very connected to money and purchasing power, by examining their roles in corporate harm perpetuation. Lorde's cancer writing continues to be full of authentic raw emotions, and she continues to use her feelings to portray in a visceral way the deleterious nature of harms.

Though the shift in Lorde's perception of harm causation that occurs from her non-cancer writing to her cancer writing does not represent a definitive divide in her writing career, many scholars do acknowledge the existence of change in Lorde's writing catalyzed by her experiences with cancer. In the most comprehensive biography of Lorde to date, *Warrior Poet*, author Alexis De Veaux hypothesizes that Lorde lived two lives, one before her first cancer diagnosis and the other after the fact:

> Lorde lived two lives…in her first life the themes of escape, freedom, and self-actualization were crucial determinants…Lorde's second life began after she was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy in 1978. That life was defined by four related themes: her experiences with breast cancer; fear of a cancer recurrence; denial of the diagnosis of secondary liver cancer; and finally acceptance that she had metastatic cancer of the liver and that it was incurable (De Veaux xi).

The themes that De Veaux highlights in Lorde's first life are very consistent with her identitarian focus. In attempting to "escape" societal prescriptions and confines in order to find the "freedom" necessary to "self-actualize," or unapologetically be herself and reach her full potential, Lorde challenged simplistic understandings of identity. In Lorde's second life, her constant fear, which, for a period, manifested as denial, made the writer very keenly aware of her own embodied vulnerability. This awareness was new for Lorde, who had struggled to come to terms with her vulnerability for much of her life: she had a "fear of vulnerability" (De Veaux 120). Brought face to face with her own mortality, Lorde's viewpoint of herself as a "warrior" was shaken.

Once Lorde accepted her embodied vulnerability, and her inability to shed or deny that vulnerability, her writing takes on a different tone. She still focuses on identitarian harms such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, but she now sees them at least partially as products of institutional harm. While identitarian harms, like racism, sexism, and homophobia, arise from social constructions of corresponding characteristics, like race, sex, and queerness, embodied vulnerability does not arise from social constructions, but rather comes from the material reality of having a body. Therefore, pointing out and addressing the harms attributed to embodied vulnerability does not necessitate the presence of identitarian harms. Nevertheless, embodied

vulnerability can and does interact with identitarian harms to produce particularly oppressive forces against disenfranchised people, and this is what Lorde is particularly interested in exploring. In accepting her fatal diagnosis of liver cancer after a long period of denial where she refused to believe in her bodily vulnerability, Lorde notes that she feels a "burst of light:" "It is a time for the real work's urgencies. It is a time enhanced by an iron reclamation of what I call the burst of light—that inescapable knowledge, in the bone, of my own physical limitation…I [want] as much good time as possible" (Lorde, *A Burst of Light* Kindle Locations 1556-1558). In this journal entry, because Lorde finally accepts her cancer diagnosis, she becomes aware of her "own physical limitation"—or her inevitable embodied vulnerability. This "burst of light" moment, for which she names an entire essay collection, represents a turning point, and an accompanying cognitive shift, in Lorde's life. This shift leads Lorde to focus on "real work's urgencies," which she "wants as much good time as possible" to address.

Lorde's "real work urgencies," I argue, include her attention to embodied vulnerability and the institutional capacity to cause complex harms. In the medical industry, Lorde notices, these harms are largely driven by desire for financial gain. Lorde notices that many institutions promote resilience in certain people through resource provision, while diminishing resilience in other people by providing them with few, or inadequate, resources to address their vulnerability to harm. This divide leads to, on the one hand, the preservation of privileged status in society for those with access to resilience-building mechanisms, and, on the other hand, oppression, subjugation, and hardship for those without. This institutionally-minded side of Lorde's work is often overshadowed and obscured by the wealth of scholarly interest in explicating her focus on identities, particularly her affinity with the critical race theory principles of anti-essentialism, intersectionality, and multiple consciousness. Though identitarian analysis will always be

indispensable to comprehension of Lorde's scholarship, to understand her work thoroughly and responsibly, one must look to see what else Lorde says. Vulnerability theory, while not as closely aligned with Lorde's writing as critical race theory, provides language describing institutional capacity to cause specific types of harms that is very relevant to analyzing Lorde's discussion of "Cancer Inc." Though Lorde never goes as far as Martha Fineman, vulnerability theory's creator, in suggesting that *all* people are vulnerable, she would agree with Fineman's assessment that "Certain social situations may reveal our vulnerability in ways that are hard to ignore" (Fineman, "Introducing Vulnerability" 9). To Lorde, these "social situations" include living with marginalized identity characteristics. Furthermore, even though Lorde might not immediately agree with Fineman's theory of universal human vulnerability, weary of universalities for their capacity to erase marginalized individuals: "I, Audre Lorde...[deal] with the particular instead of the 'UNIVERSAL.' My power as a person...comes from who I am. I am a particular person," Lorde does, surprisingly, seem to notice that even those with conspicuous privilege are susceptible to harm based on their inevitable bodily vulnerability (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 164). In realizing that privilege does not eliminate embodied vulnerability, Lorde moves in the same intellectual direction as Fineman. The mixture of Lorde's focus on particular, identity-based issues for most of her life, combined with the hesitant steps she seems to take during illness at the end of her life towards considering that vulnerability to embodied harm is a shared human characteristic, demonstrate that the universal and the particular are perhaps not as binary as they might initially seem. Thus, Lorde ends up contradicting her fear-based assertion that "there is no such thing as universal..." (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 164). One can have particular qualities while sharing universal ones, and the universal does not necessarily have to erase the particular or vice versa.

Lorde offers a searing institutional critique of domestic healthcare. Throughout her treatment, Lorde made comments expressing a lack of faith in American treatment facilities and medical professionals. In one journal entry from the earlier portion of her liver cancer treatment, Lorde says that she feels "that there is absolutely nothing they can do for me at Sloane Kettering except cut me open and then sew me back up with their condemnations inside me" (Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* 75-76). Due to her doubting of Sloane Kettering and other large American corporate institutions of cancer treatment, she ultimately chooses to pursue alternative medicine routes in Europe, such as homeopathic care, herbal remedies, and anthroposophic medical treatment. Lorde uses her focus on American medical establishments as institutions to reveal the ways in which healthcare delivery is profoundly informed by sexism, racism, and classism. Her evidence of this lies in her observation of the medical establishment's structures that discourage or prevent healthcare professionals from putting patient wellbeing first in a variety of ways. For example, the healthcare system seems to minimize patient choice and maximize cost barriers to treatment.

Perhaps Lorde's most comprehensive criticism of a medical institution for its denial of choice-making power to minority patients is located within a single lengthy journal entry from November 1986 in "A Burst of Light," where she considers her experience of seeing a liver tumor specialist at a leading cancer hospital in New York City. When presented with a tumor that the doctor identifies as "most likely malignant," due to the presence of blood vessels, the doctor attempts to deny Lorde the opportunity to decide her own course of treatment: "Let's cut you open right now [said the doctor]...Wait a minute [said Lorde]...I need to feel this thing out and see what's going on inside myself first...Not one of [the medical staff] said, I can respect that, but don't take too long about it. Instead, that simple claim to my body's own processes

elicited such an attack response" (Lorde, *A Burst of Light* Kindle Locations 1434-1439). Lorde explains that she thinks racism and sexism influenced the "attack response" she received from the doctor:

> From the moment I was ushered into the doctor's office and he saw my x-rays, he proceeded to infantilize me with an obviously well-practiced technique. When I told him I was having second thoughts about a liver biopsy, he glanced at my chart. Racism and Sexism joined hands across his table as he saw I taught at a university. 'Well, you look like an intelligent girl,' he said, staring at my one breast all the time he was speaking. 'Not to have this biopsy immediately is like sticking your head in the sand.' Then he went on to say that he would not be responsible when I wound up one day screaming in agony in the corner of his office! (Lorde, *A Burst of Light* Kindle Locations 1447-1452).

Though, according to Lorde, racism and sexism play a major role in this exchange, compelling the doctor to "infantilize" her and threaten that she would end up "screaming in agony" if she did not accept his advice, these harms cannot be viewed only as identitarian issues because they are deeply ingrained in structural aspects of the medical system. One major structural issue at play in this situation is the power differential between doctor and patient. While, at least in theory, cognitively sound adult patients have the final say on their treatment plan, Lorde depicts that doctors wield an enormous amount of influence and power in medical decision-making. Even when patients successfully resist doctors' influence, they are often belittled for doing so, just as the doctor infantilizes and threatens Lorde. In this case, Lorde's womanhood and race exacerbate the doctor's condescension, perhaps because the doctor sees her as further beneath him than he might see a patient who better fits the ideal standard of personhood set by the liberal subject. Commenting further on the episode at the liver specialist's office, Lorde notes that he "dismissed

[her] concerns" about "the dangers of a liver biopsy spreading an existing malignancy, or even encouraging it in a borderline tumor" by saying that she "really did not have any other sensible choice [but to get a liver biopsy]" (Lorde, *A Burst of Light* Kindle Locations 1452-1453). Lorde's emphasis on the words "sensible choice" here is highly significant. Historian Rickie Solinger selects the same words to describe how institutions have always particularly mistrusted disenfranchised women with choice-making power. Solinger mentions this discrimination through discussion of dependency on institutions to provide resources that create resilience: "Today, of course, the personal trait of dependency is roundly condemned in any adult, especially in...poor women and many women of color...[and] the core, essential attribute of a person in the state of dependency is [seen as] the absence of the capacity to make sensible choices" (Solinger 2). Despite Fineman's stated reality that everyone is "dependent upon, and embedded within...institutions throughout the life-course," Solinger notes that dependency is "roundly condemned," but it is especially denounced in "poor women and many women of color" (Fineman, "Vulnerability and Inevitable Inequality" 134). Solinger's points provide evidence to support the systematic nature of the medical establishment's race and sex based harms against Lorde. Vulnerability theory might respond to the issue of minimal patient choice-making power within the medical institution by suggesting that the state should have a more active role in placing checks on physician power. Vulnerability theory, while not identitarian in focus, would likely recognize the specific "social situation" of minority patients, perhaps placing additional checks on physician power in cases involving marginalized patients. However, vulnerability theory would also take into account the needs of doctors, realizing that, as human employees, they are just as vulnerable to medical institutional harm as patients. Where Lorde, understandably, lacked sympathy for her doctor, vulnerability theory might see his harsh and

condescending attitude towards Lorde as the product of institutional pressure on him to sell medical services or otherwise meet institutional goals. Perhaps, then, vulnerability theory would propose not only increased governmental checks on physician power, but also increased checks on institutional pressures put on doctors.

In addition to criticizing the ways in which medical establishments deny patient choice, Lorde, in reflecting on her sojourn through breast cancer, condemns institutionalized encouragement of wearing breast prostheses. This encouragement, Lorde points out, is largely driven by corporate financial incentives, and other selfish reasons, and it actively hurts breast cancer survivors by obscuring real pain and suffering beneath superficial cosmetic products. Medical emphasis on prioritization of obtaining and wearing prosthetic breasts harms survivors in two conspicuous ways according to Lorde: "1. [It prevents a woman] from coming to terms with the changed planes of her own body...buried under prosthetic devices, she must mourn the loss of her breast in secret" and "2. It encourages a woman to focus her energies upon the mastectomy as a cosmetic occurrence, to the exclusion of other factors in a constellation that could include her own death" (Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* 58-59). Breast cancer can be a life threatening illness and mastectomy is a sobering procedure. In Lorde's opinion, cosmeticizing these issues undermines the fact that women's lives and women's issues should be taken seriously. In *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde has an entire section, taking up about a third of the novel, criticizing the medical establishment for its stance on prosthetic breasts. Illustrating this stance, Lorde mentions a conversation with a nurse who cares for her when she goes to get her surgical stitches taken out post-mastectomy:

> You're not wearing a prosthesis,' [the nurse] said, a little anxiously, and not at all like a question. 'No,' I said, thrown off my guard for a minute. 'It really doesn't feel

> right'…the nurse now looked at me urgently and disapprovingly as she told me that even if it didn't look exactly right it was 'better than nothing,' and that as soon as my stitches were out I could be fitted for a 'real form.' 'You will feel so much better with it on,' she said. 'And besides, we really like you to wear something, at least when you come in. Otherwise it's bad for the morale of the office.' (Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* 60).

The nurse's assertion that not wearing a prosthesis is "bad for the morale of the office" depicts the institutional stake in having women wear prosthetic breasts. Medical practices, as businesses, have financial and other selfish incentives to keep up the "good morale" in their offices, so that they can increase customer satisfaction rates and draw clients away from competing practices. The nurse attempts to disguise the self-centered motivation behind her plea for Lorde to wear a prosthesis by saying that Lorde would "feel so much better with it on." However, if the nurse was genuinely interested in what might make Lorde "feel better," she would ask Lorde about her needs rather than pushing normative assumptions upon her. While Lorde, justifiably, has little sympathy for the nurse, vulnerability theory allows one to see the nurse as both perpetuating harm against Lorde and potentially receiving it herself in the form of institutional pressure to carry out a corporate agenda. Lorde seems to have a slightly more sympathetic stance towards the nurse than the liver specialist, remarking that the nurse was usually a "charmingly bright and steady woman...who had always given me a feeling of quiet no-nonsense support," perhaps indicating that Lorde sees some of the nurse's vulnerability, or humanity, even as she carries out the medical office's agenda (Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* 60).

Further revealing the medical establishment's corporate financial incentives, Lorde discusses the extreme monetary costs associated with getting a prosthesis or having breast reconstruction surgery. The medical establishment has shown encouragement and enthusiasm for

both of these courses of action, and Lorde concludes that this encouragement and enthusiasm stem from their moneymaking business agendas. For example, the American Cancer Society's Reach for Recovery program encourages wearing breast prostheses: "Lambswool now, then a good prosthesis as soon as possible, and nobody'll ever know the difference," Lorde reports that a representative from Reach for Recovery told her after her surgery (Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* 42). Similarly, Lorde finds encouragement of breast implants to reflect enforcement of unhealthy and superficial beauty standards while reading a doctor's article in a medical journal for breast cancer scholarship: "'remember,'" the physician writes in the article, "'that what we are doing in the reconstruction of the female breast is by no means a cosmetic triumph. What we are aiming for is to allow women to look decent in clothes'" (Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* 71). The doctor implies that women might not "look decent in clothes" without implants, thereby using fashion to incentivize women to get implants. Selfishly-motivated encouragement from the medical establishment is quite successful in influencing women to spend significant amounts of money on prostheses and implants. Lorde remarks that, regarding prosthetic breasts, "it is reported that in some cases, women paid up to $600" per prosthetic, while, regarding breast reconstruction, women pay "an approximate cost of $1500 to $3000" per implant (Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* 69, 70). Lorde also scrutinizes the financial interests of the American Cancer Society, which she describes as the "the loudest voice of the Cancer Establishment," reporting that "during the past decade, the ACS collected over $1 billion from the American public. In 1977 it had a $176 million fund balance, yet less than 15% of its budget was spent on assisting cancer patients" (Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* 73).

Evidently, medical establishments are business institutions with financial goals to meet, and they are compelled to wield power and influence in ways that prioritize these goals. Lorde

suggests that these financial goals are so deeply built into medical practices that they can even restrict patient care, which should be medicine's priority: "[At first the hospital was] only interested in my health-care benefits and proposed method of payment. Those crucial facts determined what kind of plastic ID card I would be given, and without a plastic ID card, no one at all was allowed upstairs to see any doctor, as I was told by the uniformed, pistoled guards at all the stairwells" (Lorde, *A Burst of Light* Kindle Locations 1444-1447) This hospital's militant interest in payment, enforced by armed security guards, implies an interest first and foremost in getting paid and a secondary interest in patient care. Thus, Lorde exposes the reality that corporatizing medicine leads medical establishments to practice selfish agendas, often at the expense of patient wellbeing. Vulnerability theory would blame the hyper-corporatization of medicine, and the ensuing development of selfish agendas and other problems, on lack of state regulation of and support for medicine. Fineman would argue that this lack of regulation and support stems from, at least in part, liberalism's prioritizing of individual rights, such as "ownership" of "property" and the ability to privately "contract," over universal access to social goods, such as healthcare: "[Liberal] approach to equality is particularly problematic since in the United States there is no constitutional guarantee to basic social goods, such as housing, education, or health care" (Fineman, "The Vulnerable Subject and the Responsive State" 254). While, in the instance of post-mastectomy encouragement of prostheses and implants, the medical corporate agenda mostly hurts women, vulnerability theory would acknowledge the potential for this agenda to harm all kinds of patients in other scenarios. Vulnerability theory would also likely recognize, as Lorde does, that certain patients are especially susceptible to the harms of medical corporate agendas due to their "social situations." These patients would include poor women and black women: while just half of women stricken with breast cancer survive

more than three years, Lorde notes that "this figure drops to 30% if you are poor, or Black or in any other way part of the underside of this society" (Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* 63). Lorde realizes, and vulnerability theory would agree, that perhaps medical prioritization of money, and the potential misuse of this money, as evidenced by the American Cancer Society spending less than 15% of its budget on services for cancer patients and survivors, contribute to low survival rates for women overall and decreased survival rates for those on the "underside of this society."

Lorde suggests that these differences in statistical survival rates are a result of institutional failure to confer resilience to marginalized populations, and institutional willingness to actively harm minority individuals if the institutions can profit off of such measures. Lorde explores medical harm of black people in-depth in one of her poems: "The American Cancer Society Or There Is More Than One Way To Skin A Coon." Lorde only directly mentions cancer in her published poetry a small handful of times, with this poem being the only one where cancer is an explicitly stated principle focus. "The American Cancer Society Or There Is More Than One Way To Skin A Coon" is a lyric poem, driven by emotions, feelings, and a strong sense of the "I." Thus, it reveals Lorde's thoughts on "Cancer Inc.," informed by her subjective experiences as a black lesbian feminist, in a manner just as frank as in her essays. Lorde's use of "coon" in the title is a reference to a derogatory term for black individuals. In titling the piece both "The American Cancer Society" and "There Is More Than One Way To Skin A Coon," Lorde calls upon readers to notice The American Cancer Society's culpability for not just failing to provide resources to the African-American community, but also for actively harming them through corporate partnerships with cancer-causing industries and targeted advertisement of products to black people. The poem's first stanza states: "Of all the ways in which this country / Prints its death upon me / Selling me cigarettes is one of the most certain" (Lorde, *Collected*

Poems 107). Lorde begins the poem with an obvious link to cancer: cigarettes. However, soon after, she clarifies "For it is not by cigarettes / That you intend to destroy my children" (Lorde, *Collected Poems* 107). By pointing out an obvious link to cancer, cigarettes, then suggesting that cigarettes are not the primary cause of cancer in "her children," other black individuals, Lorde implies that black individuals often develop cancer due to more covert sinister forces: "No, the american cancer destroys / By seductive and reluctant admission" (Lorde, *Collected Poems* 107). Later in the poem, Lorde lists a less conspicuous grouping of carcinogenic items, noting their pervasive presence in African-American people's lives:

> For instance
>
> Our Pearly teeth are *not* racially insured
>
> And therefore must be Gleemed For Fewer
>
> Cavities:
>
> For instance...
>
> Perhaps Black People *can* develop
>
> Some of those human attributes
>
> Requiring
>
> Dried dog food frozen coffee instant oatmeal
>
> Depilatories deodorants detergents
>
> And other assorted plastic (Lorde, *Collected Poems* 107).

In this section of the poem, Lorde discusses the media's portrayal of black individuals as consumers: "'The American Cancer Society Or There Is More Than One Way To Skin A Coon'...talks about the new commercials on television which show black people as consumers" (Hall 6). Lorde seems to imply that corporations take a special interest in marketing and selling

certain carcinogenic products to black consumers. Lorde suggests that iron might be a carcinogen marketed to black expectant mothers, and the remaining items, including tooth-whitener, dried dog food, frozen coffee, instant oatmeal, depilatories, deodorants, detergents, and assorted plastics might be cancer-causing agents specifically marketed towards black individuals for various reasons as well. When Lorde discusses black consumption of cancer-causing products, it highlights her suspicion of institutions, particularly their profit driven nature, and reflects vulnerability theory's perception that liberalism tends to prioritize "property" and "ownership" over social goods and societal wellbeing.

Alongside Lorde's focus on "social situations" that create unique conditions for institutionalized harm, such as blackness, womanhood, and poorness, is Lorde's notice that even those with conspicuous privilege are susceptible to harm due to their inevitable bodily vulnerability. Nevertheless, Lorde does note stark differences between the ways in which marginalized people suffer from embodied harms and the ways in which more socially dominant people suffer. Lorde describes these differences as she reflects on seeing the movie *Terms of Endearment*, about a young wealthy white woman with terminal cancer, whose "[high] standard of living, taken for granted in the film…made the expression of her tragedy possible" (Lorde, *A Burst of Light* Kindle Locations 1676-1677). Lorde describes the woman's upper-class status, noticing "unremarked but very tangible money so evident through its effects:" the "maid and the manicured garden," the "white-shingled house with trees" (Lorde, *A Burst of Light* Kindle Location 1677). Moving from the film's fictional scenario back to her observation of real-world concerns, Lorde acknowledges the very different conditions that might inform the cancer experience of someone with fewer resources: a "rack-ass tenement on the Lower East Side or in Harlem," for example (Lorde, *A Burst of Light* Kindle Locations 1678-1679). Because the young

woman in the movie holds extensive privilege, in the forms of whiteness and great financial resources, the medical establishment promotes her resilience during her course of treatment: for example, she receives care in very upscale hospital accommodations: a "private room in Lincoln Memorial Hospital [with] mama's Renoir on the wall" (Lorde, *A Burst of Light* Kindle Locations 1679-1680). In exchange for money, and perhaps connections or clout, the hospital gives the young white woman special treatment. Lorde notes that treatment of this high caliber is largely inaccessible to black individuals: "There are never any Black people at all visible in that hospital [in the movie] in Lincoln, Nebraska, not even in the background" (Lorde, *A Burst of Light* Kindle Locations 1680-1681). This example shows an unequal system of patient treatment that is racialized and classed—if the woman was not white, and was not wealthy, she would likely have a much less glamorous experience with the healthcare system. However, Lorde does empathize with the young white woman's situation, saying that her privilege does "not make her death scenes any less touching" (Lorde, *A Burst of Light* Kindle Location 1681). This is one of the few times in Lorde's writing dossier that she clearly identifies and empathizes with someone of great privilege. Her identification and empathy make sense, however. During the time period when she wrote about *Terms of Endearment*, Lorde feared greatly for her own life, and thus seeing someone with conspicuous privilege pass away due to cancer reminded her that no amount of privilege can eliminate bodily vulnerability. It is true that hospital provision of exceptional care to some patients and not others is unethical, but Lorde still empathizes with the white woman's vulnerability and her attempts to gain resilience. Lorde also seemed to understand and empathize with the fact that, sometimes, even an abundance of resources is not enough to combat embodied vulnerability, as evidenced by the young white woman's eventual death in the movie.

Putting Lorde's discussion of healthcare into conversation with vulnerability theory illuminates the ways in which Lorde's writing about cancer treatment can help scholars rethink institutional harm and justice. Institutions do perpetuate identity-based harms, as Lorde demonstrates through conversations about exclusion and prejudice in medical treatment based on race, sex, and class. Nevertheless, institutional structures, particularly financial agendas, and other issues such as restricted patient choice-making power, have the potential to harm all patients, and also healthcare employees and stakeholders, due to embodied vulnerability and inevitable need for resources. Lorde's discussion of harm continues to reveal gaping holes in liberalist rhetoric, which, as Fineman notes, hinges on the impossible existence of the liberal subject as an always "autonomous, independent and fully-functioning adult" (Fineman, "Introduction" 15). Human need for medical treatment and other kinds of care throughout life depicts the impossibility that one can be continuously "autonomous," "independent" and "fully-functioning." Though neither Lorde nor vulnerability theory offer concrete solutions for reconceptualizing institutional justice, their pairing does underscore the need for viable solutions to acknowledge the realities of embodied vulnerability, both in minorities and in the general population. This pairing also throws into bold relief the idea that perhaps the particular and the universal are not as binary as they initially seem. Lorde's empathy with the young white woman in *Terms of Endearment* shows that one can have and honor particular, identity-based qualities, such as blackness, womanhood, and lesbianism, while understanding the existence of shared embodied vulnerability.

Conclusion

In understanding harm through a primarily identitarian framework, critical race theory is interested in particular human experiences. In contrast, vulnerability theory understands harm by theorizing about embodied vulnerability, and thus it is concerned with universal human experiences. If analyzing Lorde's work through a critical race theory lens helps one see the reality of particular identities, and analyzing Lorde's work through a vulnerability theory lens allows one to see the inevitability of universal embodied vulnerability, how can scholars reconcile these two readings? Though the particular and the universal are often viewed as binary and contradictory, even by Lorde herself: "there is no such thing as universal...I, Audre Lorde...[deal] with the particular instead of the 'UNIVERSAL,'" analyzing Lorde's work through critical race theory and vulnerability theory together demonstrates that perhaps this dichotomy is not as absolute as it seems (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 164). Lorde is intimately familiar with harms that are particular to her black lesbian feminist identity, but she also knows all too well the inevitable harms of embodied vulnerability. Furthermore, Lorde's reflections make apparent that privilege does not eliminate vulnerability, although it does often allow people who have it to obtain special resources that promote resilience. Thus, both particulars and universal vulnerability are important considerations when thinking about interpersonal harm and justice.

Both of these considerations, however, also have downsides, which critical race theory and vulnerability theory foreground. Critical race theory anticipates the problem of obscuring particularities by giving attention to universalities, and Lorde depicts the validity of this problem through her discussion of identity-based harms, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. Liberalism and the liberal subject are purported to speak for all in a universal manner,

and yet they clearly cannot fulfill this goal due to their limited scope of knowledge. Nonetheless, the fact that liberalism is so deeply ingrained in American consciousness allows for the existence in society of "colorblindness" and "neutrality"—falsities that can have real, deleterious effects on marginalized people, for example, black victims of police brutality. On the other hand, vulnerability theory anticipates the fear that a continued interest in individual identities obscures the reality of a shared vulnerable human condition, which it argues should be the basis of legal and societal organization in order to avoid institutionalized perpetuation of harm, and to promote institutional conferral of resilience-building resources to all.

Critical race theory and vulnerability theory also foreground questions about the role of language and rhetoric in perpetuating harms. While critical race theory critiques vulnerability theory's interest in the term "universal," weary that it will lead people away from important consideration of particulars, vulnerability theory points out that critical race theory's focus on the individual is a continuation of liberalist rhetoric. Liberalism is very focused on the "I." Its interest in individual rights, such as the right to liberal "equality," "property," "ownership," and "contracting," all place the individual at the center of harm production and justice creation. Similarly, critical race theory also focuses on the "I," though in this case the focus is to give a voice to marginalized people who have historically been ignored. Vulnerability theory, on the other hand, tries to move away from the use of "I," and corresponding focus on the individual, in favor of imagining collective, systematic solutions to problems. While vulnerability theory does acknowledge that certain "social situations" reveal the presence of embodied vulnerability in heightened ways, it focuses on collective solutions to mitigate all embodied vulnerability, not just minority embodied vulnerability. Vulnerability theory believes that explicit focus on the "I" is inherently tied to the dangers represented by liberalism—the potential to encompass, and

speak for, only one kind of person or only certain identities.

Though there is not much scholarship yet that puts critical race theory and vulnerability theory in direct conversation, critical race theorists and legal scholars Osamudia James and Frank Rudy Cooper provide some examples of what these conversations might look like. Criticizing vulnerability theory's ability to promote "pluralism anxiety," James states:

> ...vulnerability theory is laudably responsive to the pluralism anxiety [or 'the social backlash to increased recognition of identity groups in the United States'] that has precluded [legal] protection for additional suspect classes [of identities], and the social backlash to racial identity that undergirds calls for an end to race-conscious remedial measures (James 502).

James' concerns about vulnerability theory are very reflective of critical race theory's interest in ensuring that universals do not obscure important particularities, such as marginalized identities, grouped by law into "suspect classes," which James argues are in need of additional legal protections. Vulnerability theory might respond to James' concerns by explaining that it takes a more radical approach to imagining justice—instead of offering additional legal protections for just suspect classes, vulnerability theory would consider the ways in which everyone is vulnerable due to embodiment, and the ways in which people are harmed due to lack of resources to address their vulnerabilities. Then, vulnerability theory would propose collectivist solutions of justice. In some ways, because vulnerability theory does not rely on the overt presence of harms against minorities, and harms against minorities are often difficult to provide evidence for within legal frameworks, vulnerability theory is better suited to addressing the harms that minorities incur than critical race theory and other identitarian frameworks.

Cooper, perhaps more sympathetic towards vulnerability theory than James, provides the

following compromise between the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and vulnerability theory: "I believe that we are all vulnerable and that this theory [vulnerability theory] does the best job of elaborating the ways that is so...While there is a shared human condition of being vulnerable, however, people remain differentially privileged" (Cooper, "Always Already Suspect" 1370-1371). From the observation that, despite shared vulnerability, "people remain differentially privileged," Cooper offers a proposal to make critical race theory and vulnerability theory more compatible: "revise vulnerability theory so that it acknowledges relative privilege" (Cooper, "Always Already Suspect" 1373). While Cooper's solution is insightful, and it agrees with Lorde's portrayal that identitarian analysis of harms is important, one might wonder if vulnerability theory's explicit recognition of privilege would force it to acknowledge the "I" in ways that it deems dangerously liberalist.

Ultimately, analyzing Lorde through critical race theory and vulnerability theory allows one to see the importance of acknowledging both particular identity-based harms and the universality of embodied vulnerability. It also allows one to grapple with some of the tensions in attempting to put critical race theory and vulnerability theory into conversation. Although there are no concrete solutions to the questions that these theories, in combination with Lorde's writing, bring up, Lorde's visceral description of harms depicts the current absence of, and necessity for, thinking frameworks that value everyone in the United States. Lorde conveys that minorities, constantly pushed to live at the margins of groups, are often excluded and prejudiced against. Thus, one could make the argument that, before people can imagine collectivist solutions to harm, it is essential to acknowledge the inherent worth of every person. After all, one of liberalism's paramount reasons for failure is that it purports to speak for all, but it does not recognize the inherent worth of so many people, treating them as sub-human, and thus not

deserving of the benefits that liberalism offers. Perhaps collectivist solutions are meaningful goals to strive towards in the future, but, in the present, people must focus on ensuring that everyone's worth is recognized. The question remains whether critical race theory, vulnerability theory, a hybrid, or another theory altogether, is the best way to conceptualize human worth.

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