The Disabled Form in Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals*

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This paper utilizes Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* to argue that the radical notion of self-love through disabilities and the vulnerability of visibility encompass the heart of disability studies and the foundation of its activism. *The Cancer Journals* incorporates Lorde’s thoughts and emotions of living through a mastectomy while still enveloping her famous passion as she experiences a rebirth as a warrior instead of a victim. Therefore, this paper examines how Lorde fights both her body and the society that attacks it, elaborating the tense dichotomy between the disabled body and the able-bodied world. Additionally, this paper examines the harsh line between disabled people loving their bodies for living and hating it for doing so in a disabled manner. Through her battle with breast cancer, Lorde fights to find love for her living body and acceptance from a society that causes her deadly isolation for her “specialness” (pg. 49; ch. 2). Lorde reconciles the harsh reality of trying to find value in herself when society tells her she is worthless through the love of women. However, she still exists in constant pain and illness, which creates a bitter relationship between mind and body. This paper explores the dichotomy between these intersectional living experiences and solidifies the argument that Lorde believes in the disabled body’s value to both the mind it belongs to and the society in which it lives.

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udre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* encompasses her personal thoughts and emotions while dealing with breast cancer and a mastectomy. The journals envelop her famed passion as she writes of her experience being reborn as a warrior instead of a victim. In short, this paper argues that the radical notion of self-love through disabilities and the vulnerability of visibility are the heart of disability studies and the foundation of its activism. Through examining how Lorde fights both her body and the society that attacks it, this paper illustrates the tense dichotomy between the disabled body and the able-bodied world. Additionally, this paper analyzes the harsh line between disabled people loving their bodies for living and hating it for doing so in a disabled manner. Through her battle with breast cancer, Lorde fights to find love for her living body and acceptance from a society that causes her deadly isolation for her “specialness” (pg. 49; ch. 2). Lorde reconciles the hard reality of trying to find value in herself when society tells you not to through the love of women while existing in constant pain and illness that creates a bitter relationship between mind and body. This paper explores the dichotomy between these intersectional living experiences and solidifies the argument that Lorde believes in the disabled body’s value to both the mind it belongs to and the society in which it lives.

Disability studies as a literary lens looks at disabilities from the perspective of political and cultural barriers in society. This literary lens “focuses on the social, cultural and political barriers that exist within society” (Brown). In other words, the goal of disability studies is not to look at the disability, but instead to examine how society deals with disability. Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* yields the perfect example of a text within the realm of disability studies. Lorde sees her work contributing to disability studies in its connections to the socio-political welfare of disabled persons:

“For as we open ourselves more and more to the genuine conditions of our lives, women become less and less willing to tolerate those conditions unaltered, or to passively accept external and destructive controls over our lives and our identities” (Lorde pg. 58; ch. 2).

Additionally, Lorde utilizes the lens’ activist component explicitly in the third part of *The Cancer Journals* in which she discusses the cancer industry as a whole. Lorde makes the strong claim that “We live in a profit economy and there is no profit in the prevention of cancer; there is only profit in the treatment of cancer” (71; ch. 3). Through exploring the roles of carcinogens and cancer research in our society, Lorde speaks against the use of hormones in meat and lack of non-chemotherapy options. All of these activism claims lead to *The Cancer Journals* fulfilling all of the goals of disability studies.

Through chronicling her journey with breast cancer, Lorde shows the stages of grief to acceptance of her new body. When she first received her diagnosis, Lorde experienced anger at her breast and felt “as if it had in some unexpected way betrayed [her], as if it had become already separate from [her] and had turned against [her] by creating this tumor which might be malignant” (33; ch. 2). This feeling of betrayal is common in the midst of disability. Many disabled persons feel as if their body is the enemy, instead of the soldier trying to keep them alive. Additionally, Lorde wrote the following entry in her diary, “I want to be the person I used to be, the real me. I feel sometimes that it’s all a dream and surely I’m about to wake up now” (25; ch. 2). Through creating a distinction between the person, she is with cancer to the “real me,” Lorde expresses the societally held belief that disability is the defining characteristic of any disabled person. In her article “Verbal and Visual Rhetorics of Cancer: Defying Silence in Margaret Edson, Audre Lorde and Jo Spence's Works,” Catalina Florescu examines this societal convention. In an attempt to combat this dichotomy between the person and the patient, Florescu focuses on studying literary works that personalize cancer patients instead of dehumanizing them, as is often done in the medical field (Florescu 271). Additionally, in her essay “Demilitarizing Disease: Ambivalent Warfare and Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*,” Robina Khalid uses Lorde’s journal as a reference throughout her essay to support her claims against the depersonalization and demonization of the body as a whole throughout the cancer experience (698). Indeed, focusing on the social situation of disability instead of the medical aspects is a goal of disability studies as a whole (Brown). Additionally, Florescu further explores the relationship between the “psychical” pain and physical pain of breast cancer (278). Florescu notes that both pains can be equally traumatizing and need to be dealt with in different manners (278). Lorde supports this point in her struggling with depression noting, “[...] how do I fight the despair born of fear and anger and powerlessness which is my greatest enemy?” (17; ch. 1). Overall, Lorde’s first stage of emotion after her diagnosis and mastectomy was intense anger and fear, which was only supported by the society in which she lived.

As Lorde begins to mentally transition from a state of despair to one of resilience, she starts to use militarized language to compare her body to a war zone. Lorde states that she has “been to war, and still [is]” (60; ch. 3). Additionally, Lorde begins to regard herself as a warrior instead of a “casualty” (21; ch. 1). In an active effort to combat her previously enveloping despair, Lorde notes, “teaching, surviving, fighting with the most important resource I have, myself, and taking joy in the battle” as her best weapons (17; ch. 1). In her article, “Marked Bodies, Marking Time: Reclaiming the Warrior in Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*,” Cynthia Wu supports this point by using Lorde as an example of utilizing militarized language in what was a new manner for cancer patients, one that empowers rather than degrades the patient. Wu points out that Lorde reclaims herself as a warrior instead of the enemy and society’s lack of acceptance towards disabilities as the enemy instead of the cancer, therefore further connecting *The Cancer Journals* to the field of disability studies (246). Furthermore, in her transition into a stance of fighting her cancer, Lorde begins to see the power of choice in patient treatment. In a journal entry reflecting on her decision to have a mastectomy, Lorde states:

“I think now what was most important was not what I chose to do so much as that I was conscious of being able to choose, and having chosen, was empowered from having made a decision, done a strike for myself, moved” (33; ch. 2).

This entry further emphasizes Lorde’s transition from victim to a warrior, a stance that is not supported by a society that sees disability as something to be pitied. Lorde goes on to discuss the power of her changed state of mind concerning her mortality: “If I do what I need to do because I want to do it, it will matter less when death comes, because it will have been an ally that spurred me on” (34; ch. 2). In her essay “Marvelous Arithmetics: Prosthesis, Speech, and Death in the Late Work of Audre Lorde,” Sharon Barnes notes that, through accepting that her life has been altered post-mastectomy, Lorde is able to enact a transformation and live her life with “her full power and strength as a person” (771). Additionally, Barnes notes, “exploring death is as much a part of [Lorde’s] power and political responsibility as is her experience of great joy” (775). Barnes views *The Cancer Journals* as a work of mental transformation that shows the impact of Lorde’s intimate relationship with death on her life and writing.

In her final stage of dealing with cancer, Lorde accepts her disabled body and loves it despite the negative societal predispositions of disability, therefore further connecting *The Cancer Journals* to the disability lens in literature. After dealing with the initial shock and terror of her mastectomy, Lorde notes she would either “love [her] body one-breasted now, or remain forever alien to [herself]” (44; ch. 2). To begin the process of feeling love for her body in its new state, Lorde “wept and wept and wept, finally. And made love to [herself], endlessly and repetitively, until it was no longer tentative” (49; ch.2). This act of sexuality stands in stark contrast to the societal view of desexualizing disabled persons. In fact, in her study, “Sexual Orientation, Body Image, and Age as Predictors of Sexual Self-Schema for Women with Physical Disabilities,” Kristin Sweeney further disputes these societal beliefs by finding that women with disabilities do not differ from those without in their sexual desires (315). Additionally, Lorde finds “in the process of losing a breast [she] had become a more whole person” (55; ch.3). This claim directly refutes the belief that disabled persons lose their humanity in the act of becoming disabled. Lastly, Lorde challenges ableism not only through loving her disabled body but by also finding perks in her disability. In a journal entry reflecting on the weeks after her mastectomy Lorde notes:

“I pretty much functioned automatically, except to cry. Every once in a while I would think, “What do I eat? How do I act to announce or preserve my new status as temporary upon this earth?” and then I’d remember that we have always been temporary, and that I had just never underlined it before, or acted out of it so completely before” (52; ch. 2).

Through finding a renewed stance on life through her disability, Lorde confronts ableism head-on to show that disabled lives not only matter but can provide the disabled person with more fulfillment than they would have realized being able-bodied.

In her second and third sections of *The Cancer Journals*, Audre Lorde picks up another aspect of disability studies in discussing the importance of the disabled voice. When she first began her fight against cancer, Lorde spoke of the isolating effects of disease and how ableism led to the silencing of the disabled voice. While looking for support in her journey with breast cancer, Lorde found a harsh reality of loneliness. In her journal, Lorde questioned, “Where are the models for what I’m supposed to be in this situation? But there were none. This is it, Audre. You’re on your own” (29; ch.2). Later on, speaking of her isolation from her able-bodied friends, Lorde notes, “You can die of that specialness, of the cold, the isolation” (49; ch.2). Disability studies acknowledge this potentially fatal consequence of silence and try to counteract it through giving disabled voices a platform to be heard. Additionally, Lorde discovers the power of sisterhood amidst disability. Lorde often notes the extraordinary healing potential of sisterhood and woman love, stating that the “love of women healed [her]” and that “If it hadn’t been for a lot of women in [her] lifetime [she’d] have been long dead” (39-40; ch.2). In her essay, “ ‘Coming out Blackened and Whole:’ Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde's Zami and *The Cancer Journals*,” Elizabeth Alexander notes “sexual and spiritual woman-love are what the body performs and how it heals as well as the means by which Lorde finds voice and self-expression” (697). Lorde takes it upon herself to provide a voice for breast cancer, therefore becoming a prime example of the positive potential of disability theory. Lorde claims, “survival is only part of the task. The other part is teaching. I had been in training for a long time” (40; ch. 2). Through teaching other women about the effects of cancer and coaching fellow patients throughout their treatment, Lorde combats ableism and the isolation of disabilities.

Another critical aspect of providing a voice to the disabled involves the vocalization of problems faced by the disabled community. As Lorde notes, “I am a post-mastectomy woman who believes our feelings need voice in order to be recognized, respected, and of use” (9; ch. 1). A recurring theme in *The Cancer Journals* involves the danger of silence. Lorde repeatedly states that there are no benefits to remaining silent in people's struggles with disability as she notes, “I was going to die, if not sooner than later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you” (20; ch. 1). Additionally, Lorde finds silence in the American healthcare system to be particularly dangerous. In her journals, Lorde states:

“For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson - that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. And neither were most of you here today, black or not. And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which is also the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak” (21-22; ch. 1).

Through listing visibility as the disabled community’s greatest strength, Lorde empowers those with disabilities, “For silence and invisibility go hand in hand with powerlessness” (61; ch. 3). This empowerment connects to disability studies through calling out society on its harmful, ablest views instead of letting society continue undeterred due to fear of judgment.

*The Cancer Journals* ends with a call to action for the disabled and able-bodied communities to stand up against the societal systems that promote ableism and the industries that exploit disabled bodies. Lorde begins this section through discussing “the concentration upon breast cancer as a cosmetic problem” (55; ch.3). After her mastectomy, Lorde repeatedly refuses to wear a prosthetic, stating that it did not matter if other people could tell the difference between a breast and a prosthetic, since “[she] knew sure as hell [she’d] know the difference” (42; ch. 2). After her mastectomy, Lorde experiences discrimination based off her refusal to wear a prosthetic as she is told that she must wear it to the oncologist to avoid lowering the “morale” of the office (59; ch. 3). Lorde reflects that this comment outraged her and that it “was to be only the first such assault on [her] right to define and to claim [her] own body” (59; ch. 3). Lorde views the societal pressure to wear a prosthetic to be a further issue of sexism, stating “This emphasis upon the cosmetic after surgery reinforces this society’s stereotype of women, that we are only what we look or appear, so this is the only aspect of our existence we need to address” (57; ch. 3). Additionally, Lorde recognizes the destructive potential of the internalization of these sexist ideas noting, “american women must become free enough from social stereotypes concerning their appearance to realize that losing a breast is infinitely preferable to losing one’s life” (62; ch.3). Florescu further evaluates this point through examining the “fetishism of the female breast” concerning breast cancer (278). Through making a woman believe that her breasts are more valuable than her life, ableism can kill disabled people. These points underline the importance of activism in disability studies as one of the study’s core values. Additionally, Lorde argues that the reason society is so against women not wearing prosthetics is that it would force women to be visible and share their journeys with breast cancer, therefore becoming more self-actualized. Lorde writes:

“Since the supposed threat of self-actualized women is one that our society seeks constantly to protect itself against, it is not coincidental that the sharing of this knowledge among women is diverted, in the case by the invisibility imposed on the insistence upon prosthesis as a norm for post-mastectomy women” (63; ch. 3).

Additionally, through finding love for her life with a disability, Lorde performs a radical action against the ablest society in which she lives. In her later work *A Burst of Light*, Lorde makes the famous statement, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (131). On this point, Barnes argues that Lorde’s acclimation to life with a disability and her fight to continue living said life provides significant messages about political and personal resilience (769). Wu further elucidates on *The Cancer Journals* political power as a text due to “its inclusion of both her private responses […] and her political analysis” (246). Overall, Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* fully encompasses the activist nature of disability studies and utilizes these skills to improve her own life.

Through reading *The Cancer Journals* through the lens of disability studies, the groundbreaking political and social nature of the text is elucidated. Lorde focuses not only on giving voice to her disability but also on giving everyone a voice through disability. Lorde speaks of the power of love and the need for community in the face of disability, a community which needs a united voice to be created. Additionally, through calling out cancer-inducing industries and the potentially deadly nature of sexism in breast cancer, Lorde supports disability studies’ emphasis on activism and change in society. Overall, reading *The Cancer Journals* through the disability lens provides the best analysis and understanding of the text as a whole.

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