

"There is no Hierarchy of Oppressions"

By Audre Lorde

I was born Black and a woman. I am trying to become the strongest person I can become to live the life I have been given and to help effect change toward a livable future for this earth and for my children. As a Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, mother of two including one boy and member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself part of some group in which the majority defines me as deviant, difficult, inferior or just plain "wrong".

From my membership in all of these groups I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sizes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression. I have learned that sexism (a belief in the inherent superiority of one sex over all others and thereby its right to dominance) and heterosexism (a belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving over all others and thereby its right to dominance) both arise from the same source as racism - a belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby its right to dominance.

"Oh," says a voice from the Black community, "but being Black is normal!" Well, I and many Black people of my age can remember grimly the days when it didn't used to be!

I simply do not believe that one aspect of myself can possibly profit from the oppression of my other part of my identity. I know that my people cannot possibly profit from the oppression of any other group which seeks the right to peaceful existence. Rather, we diminish ourselves by denying to others what we have shed blood to obtain for our children. And those children need to learn that they do not have to become like each other in order to work together for a future they will all share.

The increasing attacks upon lesbians and gay men are only an introduction to the increasing attacks upon all Black people, for wherever oppression manifests itself in this country, Black people are potential victims. And it is a standard of right-wing cynicism to encourage members of oppressed groups to act against each other, and so long as we are divided because of our particular identities we cannot join together in effective political action.

Within the lesbian community I am Black, and within the Black community I am a lesbian. Any attack against Black people is a lesbian and gay issue, because I and thousands of other Black women are part of the lesbian community. Any attack against lesbians and gays is a Black issue, because thousands of lesbians and gay men are Black. There is no hierarchy of oppression.

It is not accidental that the Family Protection Act, which is virulently anti-woman and anti-Black, is also anti-gay. As a Black person, I know who my enemies are, and when the Ku Klux Klan goes to court in Detroit to try and force the Board of Education to remove books the Klan believes "hint at homosexuality," then I know I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the fronts upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination, wherever they appear to destroy me. And when they appear to destroy me, it will not be long before they appear to destroy you.

Who Said It Was Simple (1973)

BY AUDRE LORDE

There are so many roots to the tree of anger
that sometimes the branches shatter
before they bear.

Sitting in Nedicks

the women rally before they march
discussing the problematic girls
they hire to make them free.

An almost white counterman passes
a waiting brother to serve them first
and the ladies neither notice nor reject
the slighter pleasures of their slavery.

But I who am bound by my mirror
as well as my bed
see causes in colour
as well as sex

and sit here wondering
which me will survive
all these liberations.

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883): Ain't I A Woman?

Delivered 1851, Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must
be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes
of the South and the women at the North, all talking about
rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But
what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped
into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best
place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or
over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I
a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed
and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could
head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and
eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the
lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen
children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I
cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me!
And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they
call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's
it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or
negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours
holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my
little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't
have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman!
Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ
come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to
do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to
turn the world upside down all alone, these women
together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right
side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men
better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner
ain't got nothing more to say.