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## American Society: A Thriving Structure for Negative Responses to Difference

**Jo Grode**

George Washington University

In writing about the concept of the “mythical norm”, Audre Lorde examines the human struggle with ineptitude. She poignantly identifies that feeling of “that is not me” where the collection of our identities, more often than not, fail to fit the societal ideal. Further, she asserts that society’s conceptualization of “normal” is unachievable by the majority of the population.<sup>1</sup> In her words, the mythical norm is “usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure”.<sup>2</sup> Those who fall outside of these narrow categorizations are unequivocally labeled as being different and, often, “less than” others. This projection of deviance, however, is not only an internalized experience. Rather, society as whole responds to those outside the mythical norm by attempting to ignore, to copy, or to destroy that which makes them different. In building off of Lorde’s argument, I argue that Americans are so unwilling to engage in difference in a positive way in part because the mythical norm is intrinsically tied to an American framework that prioritizes the maintenance of a patriarchal hierarchy.

Before examining why the three negative reactions to difference persist, it is first important to understand how they operate in society. Lorde particularly engages with the tendency to ignore difference in the context of feminism. For instance, she criticizes the absence of literature written by women of color in gender studies classes.<sup>3</sup> In disregarding non-white authors, teachers are effectively excluding the experiences, thoughts, and voices of women of color from the general feminist discourse. Further, failing to provide a diverse breadth of work to students inadvertently communicates that literature from women of color is not valuable. At the same time, it establishes white women as the only legitimate, accepted voice of all women. This kind of behavior exists beyond the classroom walls and seeps its way into the Fem-

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inist movements in the United States, where a small subset of people incorrectly speak for the experiences of the masses. Feminism and classrooms alike become epicenters of wealthy, white, cisgender and heterosexual female thought. In ignoring the differences amongst women, we allow for the “complacency of those women who view oppression only in terms of sex” to continue to exist and, in turn, hinder the advancement of all women.<sup>4</sup>

Although Lorde does not delve deeply into copying, this is an issue that functions very visibly in American culture. Most notably, minority communities can witness this phenomenon in the form of cultural appropriation. The wearing of bindis as a fashion statement at music festivals or styling dreads as a white person are examples of this particularly contentious issue. In both instances, a practice that is regularly condemned on people of color (like bindis and dreads) is transported onto a white body that blissfully partakes in these practices without the fear of oppression. Instead, they are worn as exotic and colorful explorations of personal fashion choices with little to no understanding of their cultural importance. This behavior illustrates what David Haekwon Kim calls the “white polity legitimation process” by which white people pick and choose which differences are to be integrated into society and on whom it is acceptable.<sup>5</sup> In other words, those who fit the mythical norm are effectively able to dictate how others live their lives. In doing so, individual agency that is theoretically afforded to all humans is taken away. Instead of being fully accepted as members of society, the powerful few position those who are “othered” as partial human beings. These people are not treated as human beings with the basic rights to life but rather human beings with limitations attached to their day to day behaviors. Lorde expands on this issue by asserting that copying occurs when practices or cultural norms from oppressed communities are viewed as dominant.<sup>6</sup> Strong cultural practices in these communities are seen as dominant because of the potential threat that their presence implies. Having something that binds and is exclusive to a minority community strengthens their power and ability to congregate as a collective. When non-dominant groups organize and find strength in each other, they jeopardize the stability of an imbalanced social structure. In adopting the practices of others, the oppressor is attempting to

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monopolize and reallocate power back to its “rightful place”. More specifically, by introducing minorities’ cultural practices into mainstream norms, those in power are diluting minorities’ cultures. This attempts to take away the very cultural devices that create and maintain the community. Copying, then, becomes a tool for preventing strong minority communities and asserting imbalanced power dynamics.

The final response to difference – destruction - usually operates in a more explicitly violent framework than the former responses. For instance, we witness destruction in the prevalence of sexual violence against women. For the black community, we witness destruction in the relentless cycle of police brutality. For the Jewish community, we witness destruction in a targeted shooting in a synagogue. A recognition of difference from the norm in each of these cases led to the attempt to destroy their difference. However, the destruction requires the eradication of their existence as a whole. While these are certainly pertinent instances of destruction, the act of destroying does not always involve a violent act against another human being. In a less violent context, the push for sameness can also be considered as a destruction of difference. For instance, when communities of color participate in bleaching practices, the lightening of one’s skin becomes a tactic for the destruction of difference (i.e. any identity outside of whiteness). Those individuals outside of the mythical norm are encouraged to assimilate to their likeness in attempt to become the societal ideal. In turn, this can also be used as a method of escape from the negative responses to difference. By becoming more white, people of color are given the opportunity to have no difference to respond to – at least, in regard to their skin color. In the pursuit of the mythical norm, society encourages sameness at the price of the individual.

While there are many explanations for these responses to difference, I argue that the American economy, socio-political structure, and social norms provide a suitable framework for its continued longevity. For instance, successful American capitalism requires socioeconomic fractures and a plentiful labor force that maintains the negative responses to difference. In American society, the very few “at the top” monetarily benefit from the work of the masses. In the United States in 2017, the top 1 per-

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cent owned 40 percent of the nation's wealth, casting those in lower socioeconomic circumstances into the bottom rungs of an unequal class structure.<sup>7</sup> By having an economic system that benefits some and disregards others, society is incentivized to compete for benefits at the expense of others. Further, the existence of this socioeconomic hierarchy allows for and reinforces dominant-subordinate human relationships. The system of capitalism, then, establishes an income inequality that then translates into social repercussions like negative responses to difference. As Lorde comments, an "institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy" because it requires the "outsiders as surplus people".<sup>8</sup> In other words, capitalism separates the few from the masses by utilizing the responses to difference. In turn, this separation creates a large supply of workers (the so-called "surplus people") that can drive capitalist productions and then participate in capitalism through consumption. Those at the top – who more often than not fit the described mythical norm – benefit from using difference as a tool to win at the game of capitalism. The American drive to monetize and consume forms a system of circumstances that awards those within the mythical norm and allows for the continued disdain for difference in the United States.

Though economics are a contributing factor to society's response to difference, the socio-political structure and social norms in the United States also play a major role. As society relegates minority citizens to positions of subordination and the mythical norm (i.e. the white man) maintains economic, political, and social power, a negative response to difference becomes an established tenet of American culture. This is especially witnessed in the criminal justice system (CJS). Although wealthy, white Americans and the like participate in illegal activity, prisons are inundated with an overrepresentation of men and women of color.<sup>9</sup> When the institutions of the United States suppress non-white citizens (CJS or otherwise), it directly teaches Americans that the response to those outside of the mythical norm should be negative. In this way, socio-political structures and social norms operate alongside one another as learned racism informs those who create and enforce policy. To continue with this example, stereotypes that black men are violent or inherently suspicious are

taught to us from a young age in media, the make-up of the CJS, and everyday micro and macro aggressions. David Polizzi explores this concern with stereotypes of black men under the concept of the black body as the “ontology of threat”; he argues that the black man, specifically, is considered a potential criminal regardless of what the person does or does not do and says or does not say.<sup>10</sup> Further, Franz Fanon writes on this same idea by discussing the black body as a phobogenic object.<sup>11</sup> The body is then received and returned back as something different and dangerous; this irrational fear of the black body is inscribed into people from a young age. Lorde asserts that this fear of the black community aids in the “need for homogeneity” or, in other words, the rejection of difference.<sup>12</sup> This widespread education in racism constructs an endless cycle where those in power believe in the false, “inherent maliciousness” of the black man and then create institutions that are constructed to reflect this belief (i.e. the CJS). When the social norms and social structure inform each other, the strength of “othering” increases and those outside of the mythical norm are forced to play along to survive. In the words of Lorde, “the oppressed must recognize the masters’ difference in order to survive”.<sup>13</sup>

Though Wittig subscribes to the notion that difference is the source of inequality, Lorde argues that a recognition of difference is not the source but rather the cure to it.<sup>14</sup> In other words, embracing what makes each of us different is necessary in combatting the response to ignore, to copy, and to destroy difference. In making the decision to value that which is different, we can hope to alter the very systems around us that call for universal sameness. If we begin to respond to difference by acknowledging each other’s realities, respecting each other’s cultures, and promoting each other’s longevity, perhaps we can see the complex cooperation between our economic system, our social structures, and our social norms begin to fracture. Perhaps we will see an economy of with more dispersed benefits, a social structure rooted in fairness, and social norms that allow for personhood to be the only judge of character. If we can eradicate the “blueprints of expectation and response”, perhaps the blueprints of our society can alter too.<sup>15</sup>

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1. Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Edited by Ferguson et al. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990. (p.282)
2. Ibid, p.282.
3. Ibid, p.283.
4. Ibid, p.283.
5. Kim, David Haekwon. "Shame and Self-Revision in Asian-American Assimilation," in *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*. Edited by Lee, Emily. New York: SUNY Press, 2014. (p.106)
6. Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Edited by Ferguson et al. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990. (p.281)
7. Ingraham, C. (2017, December 06). The richest 1 percent now owns more of the country's wealth than at any time in the past 50 years. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/12/06/the-richest-1-percent-now-owns-more-of-the-countrys-wealth-than-at-any-time-in-the-past-50-years/?utm\\_term=.363e6ef5c9eb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/12/06/the-richest-1-percent-now-owns-more-of-the-countrys-wealth-than-at-any-time-in-the-past-50-years/?utm_term=.363e6ef5c9eb)
8. Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Edited by Ferguson et al. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990 (p.281)
9. Hagler, J. (2015, October 20). 8 Facts You Should Know About the Criminal Justice System and People of Color. [news/2015/05/28/113436/8-facts-you-should-know-about-the-criminal-justice-system-and-people-of-color/](https://www.renewsonline.com/news/2015/05/28/113436/8-facts-you-should-know-about-the-criminal-justice-system-and-people-of-color/)
10. Palazzi, "Social Presence, Visibility, and the Eye of the Beholder: A Phenomenology of Social Embodiment," in *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013.
11. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 2008.

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12. Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Edited by Ferguson et al. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990. (p.284)
  13. Ibid, p.286.
  14. Ibid, p.287; Wittig, Monique. "The Straight Mind" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Edited by Ferguson et al. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990. (p. 55)
  15. Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Edited by Ferguson et al. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990. (p.287)

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