"I did not feel the same as before surgery" How Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* turned Disidentification into Reidentification

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (2020) and her journey post-mastectomy, in relation to José Muñoz's theory of disidentification, which he discusses in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). For Muñoz, disidentification is a survival strategy of stepping away from predominant societal ideologies. Muñoz's theory is particularly fruitful for analyzing Lorde's intersectional experiences and identity struggles of being a queer woman of color with breast cancer, but lacks an element of reidentification. This paper expands on the concept of disidentification and claims that Lorde does not take this passive stand Muñoz proposes but instead reidentifies herself in the face of prevailing gender norms.

KEYWORDS: Audre Lorde, Disidentification, Reidentification, *The Cancer Journals*, Memoir, José Muñoz

> I did not have to look down at the bandages on my chest to know that I did not feel the same as before surgery. But I still felt like myself, like Audre, and that encompassed so much more than simply the way my chest appeared.
>
> (Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* 50)

Introduction

In her memoir *The Cancer Journals* (1980), Audre Lorde looks back on and reappraises her personal struggle with breast cancer. Spanning from her cancer diagnosis to her mastectomy, and the aftermath, the book entails the author's inner workings during that time. It is her primary goal to share her own issues and encourage other women in their journey of self-acceptance as they adjust to the changes in their bodies that a mastectomy brings forth (Lorde 1). Lorde, as a Black and queer feminist, criticizes the sexualization of the female body, especially the breasts. It is imperative to understand the procedure Lorde underwent because the loss of her breast re-shaped her perception of not only her own body but also of bodily standards in US and Western societies. In 1978, the female writer was diagnosed with breast cancer which soon resulted in a unilateral[1] mastectomy (8). A mastectomy is the surgical removal of one or both breasts, in the case of breast cancer, to remove the affected area. It is

[1] A unilateral mastectomy—also called a single mastectomy—describes the removal of one breast, whereas the removal of both breasts is a bilateral mastectomy.

primarily women who go through this surgery, and it has tremendous implications for their post-mastectomy life.[2] Many women suffer not merely physically but also mentally from the loss of this glandular organ, especially in terms of their female identity. In *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde writes about this inner disequilibrium she felt between her altered body and the societal norms that govern feminine beauty ideals.

A feeling Lorde describes throughout her journey is one of alienation—not because of her altered physicality after the surgery, but rather the alienation precipitated by societal bias. This social bias regarding women's bodies is a predominant one, which reduces female bodies to sexualized ones. Through the chapters, Lorde builds her commentary on the interconnectivity between her own experience and activism. In her first chapter "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," Lorde underlines the importance of civil activism as a means of changing societal norms. What makes this chapter especially important for the ensuing analysis is that Lorde shares her own experiences with these societal gender and beauty norms and shares how her cancer journey changed not only her perception but also ultimately paved the way for her process of reidentification. The second chapter "Breast Cancer: A Black Lesbian Feminist Experience" focuses on her own experience as a woman of color and how she perceived the time after her surgery. In this chapter, Lorde shares the ways in which her self-perception clashed with the ideals of society with regard to the female body and how she had to learn to accept her altered body and embrace it without giving in to societal pressure. Her final chapter "Breast Cancer: Power vs. Prosthesis," is an appeal to the reader in an effort to change their perspective in the way Lorde's has been changed.

A core aspect of my analysis is the concept of disidentification, which was put forth by the Cuban American scholar José Esteban Muñoz in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). His monograph focuses on the idea that minority groups disidentify themselves with the standards of society around them. Muñoz calls this a "disidentification with mainstream representation" (3). I will apply his theory to Lorde's experiences through close reading the parts of her memoir that focus on her thoughts on identification. This paper shall first introduce the two opposing ideas that influence Lorde's self-reflection and writing: certain prevailing beauty standards and gender norms of US society and her feminist ideals. Afterwards, applicable feminist theories and concepts pertaining to sex and gender will be discussed. The contrast between inherent societal standards and feminist ideals often lead to an inner conflict. This conflict, also present in Lorde's memoir, is thoroughly described and analyzed by applying Muñoz's theory of disidentification, which is based on the idea that an individual who cannot fit into societal standards extract themselves from these norms. This paper aims to assess Lorde's struggle with her own femininity following her mastectomy and elucidate how, from a space of stigmatization, disidentification

[2] According to the National Breast Cancer Foundation, INC. For more information see: www.nationalbreastcancer.org.

is evoked. Furthermore, I argue that Lorde's experiences do not only mirror the idea of disidentification, as she does not simply take a passive stance to protect herself but also openly challenges societal gender norms and beauty standards, thus forming a new identity for herself and her altered body. She puts a stronger emphasis on the activistic side of disidentification and raises questions about her new and altered identity turning disidentification as proposed by Muñoz into what I term *reidentification*—forming a new identity for herself in the face of the prevailing gender norms.

The Reception Antithesis of the Female Body

To interpret Lorde's work and its relevance to Muñoz's theory of disidentification, it is fundamental to first provide an overview on how inherent societal gender norms are at odds with the core principles of feminism. One of those gender stereotypes/norms Lorde discusses in detail is the sexualization of female breasts. For individuals like Lorde, who do not fit into societal standards, their altered body and the prevailing image of society—namely that a woman has to fulfill certain physical characteristics regarding her weight and physical appearance—are not in accord, which can resultantly cause an inner disequilibrium. This incompatibility of perception and social conception that Lorde experiences leads to feelings of self-doubt and a self-image that crumbles under these societal expectations.

According to gender researcher and women's studies scholar Gabriele Griffin, "[g]ender norms are sociocultural prescriptions of how people should act and behave in accordance with their gender." Gender norms are often based on stereotypes which underline a binary view of gender, and this binary view pushes the idea of typical 'male' and 'female' behaviors and attributes, which is why feminists such as Judith Butler put an emphasis on femaleness as being a "performative act" (526) rather than a simple derivation from physiological traits. Although Griffin discusses only a single category of gender norms, I find it useful to divide the mentioned stereotypes into two different categories: Personality-related gender norms and body-related gender norms as they comprise complementary ideals of a being: their behavior and looks. While there are many social and cultural constraints for women's characteristics, "such as the notion that women should be quietly spoken and that they are 'naturally' more nurturant than men" (Griffin)—which promotes the idea that women are restricted to the home, taking on roles of mothers and caregivers—these aspects shall not be the focal point in this paper. Rather, this paper addresses the bodily restrictions on female bodies like those Lorde had to deal with after her mastectomy.

Body-related gender norms include all prevailing ideas of Western society about what women should look like. The one most applicable to this paper is perfectly shaped breasts as a sign of femininity. Lorde mentions this societal norm as having influenced her own identity after her mastectomy. She calls her amputation a "physical and psychic reality that must be integrated into a new sense of self" and further adds that she believes a "socially sanctioned prosthesis

is merely another way of keeping women with breast cancer silent and separate from each other" (9). Female breasts have a complex social reception not only because of their over-sexualization but also because of their ability to nurture. Lorde's inner struggle after her mastectomy is heavily influenced by the stigmatization of women's breasts because they are seen in society as a main component of femininity. Lorde—in her breastlessness state—thus finds her self-perception at odds with that of society, which influences her identification process.

Stereotypical female beauty ideals are often promoted on social media, in advertisements, or in various other media such as movies and comic books. These unrealistic expectations for the female body are solidified in the media and thus in the consumer's mind, with Griffin (inspired by the work of Judith Butler) claiming that "gender norms can become so ingrained that people are not even conscious of them." As Stefanie Gilbert and Joel Thompson emphasize, the ideal female body "has flawless skin, a thin waist, long legs, and well-developed breasts" (qtd. in Groesz et al. 2). Especially through the proliferation of such stereotypical images through media, these almost unobtainable goals become normalized and are assumed to be the standard. Joan Jacobs Brumberg even argues that "[t]hrough the flashy images of 'perfect' female beauty promoted ubiquitously in magazines, television, and films, female and male viewers alike may quickly infer that a female's body is her most important attribute and thus a lifelong project" (qtd. in Goesz et al. 2). This idea of the female body needing to be maintained is one of the major points Lorde discusses in her memoir. Due to her mastectomy, Lorde's body no longer conforms with these sociocultural ideals of the perfect female figure. She lost one of her breasts, which altered her physical appearance, creating what she calls "a loneliness of difference" (2). Lorde no longer fits into the ideal of women with perfect breasts which leads to a feeling of disequilibrium, or in her words, a "concert of voices from inside [herself]" (23). Due to this disequilibrium, Lorde has to "learn to love [herself] in a different way" (27). Devoting herself to the notions of feminism helps her with this process as she started to advocate for a society where women are not reduced to their physical appearances.

Because these aforementioned gender stereotypes are a major concern within scholarly discussions around feminism, I will provide a foundational discussion of feminism that will aide in determining the dominant role it plays in Lorde's memoir. Feminism, in layman's terms is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) as the "[a]dvocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex" ("Feminism, n."). This desire for equality is pursued by the socio-political movements of feminists, with the first wave of feminism in the nineteenth century—in the form of the Women's Suffrage movement—calling for a society which provides genderless possibilities, particularly with the demand for female voting rights ("Feminism, n."). Here, it is important to note that sources such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* only provide a broad overview of this subject field, wherefore definitions by feminist and womanist scholars must be implemented to broaden the applicability of feminist theories to my analysis of Lorde's work. Definitions like the one of

the *OED* firstly do not include a discussion of the different living realities of women and their positions in society. Due to the fact that white and Black women were oppressed in different ways/for different reasons and stood up for their rights in separate ways, in 1981 African American author Alice Walker coined the term "womanism" to give women of color, as Aleksandra Izgarjan and Slobodanka Markov put it, "a space to formulate their policy" (305). Walker defined a womanist as a "black feminist or feminist of color" (xi). It is a form of feminism among Black women that Walker calls an appreciation and preference of "women's culture, women's emotional flexibility […], and women's strength" (Walker xi).

The *OED*'s definition further lacks what Kimberlé Crenshaw coined as "intersectionality." Intersectionality, she argues, comes about when "systems of race, gender, and class domination converge" (K. Crenshaw 1246). This convergence means that there is an interaction between multiple domains of subordination (1249) and oppression (1246) that shape the reality of people who identify themselves within several categories, "such as women of color" (K. Crenshaw 1243). Patricia Hill Collins raises the point that there seems to be no standard definition of intersectionality, but that the mutual construction and interconnectedness of "systems of oppression" push "configurations of social inequalities," which she frames as the "Matrix of Domination" (*The Difference That Power Makes* 20). According to Cirila Limpangog, the Matrix of Domination and Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality are often used interchangeably "because of their identical aims of unmasking cultures of oppression" (1). Carrie Crenshaw further argues that the term "feminism" reduces it to a "single, monolithic, theoretical and pragmatic entity" and feminists as "women with identical motivations, methods, and goals" (73). She critiques the transformation of *feminisms* into a single feminism and the identity of patriarchy "as the *sole* cause of all oppression" (C. Krenshaw 47) that leads to "[t]he relegation of struggles against racism and class exploitation to offspring status" (C. Krenshaw 76). Within the broader spectrum of feminism(s), then, a more intersectional definition is essential.

Lorde, as a Black queer advocate for women's rights, is often deemed a womanist, for example by scholars like Patricia Collins in "What's in a Name" (1996) or Joan M. Martin in "The Notion of Difference" (1993). In her memoir, however, Lorde refers to herself as a "feminist," instead of a womanist, although her ideals are the same: "to give voice to [her] quests so that other women can take what they need from [her] experiences" (9) and thus, to fight gender and social norms. Since Walker published her book after Lorde, it is assumable that Lorde at the time had no other term available to refer to herself than "feminist." Furthermore, as Justine Tally, a professor of American literature, observes, Alice Walker puts special emphasis on the importance of womanism as an "instinctively pro-woman" (215) movement, meaning that for both feminists and womanists, gender is still at the core of the movements. In this sense, the inclusivity of the womanist movement inherently includes feminist concerns.

Many feminists, including Lorde, fight against the aforementioned societal stereotypes and norms for female bodies because they are not compatible with feminist ideals. These norms

may make women feel like sex objects, lower their perceptions of self-worth, and lead to self-dissatisfaction (Murnen et al. 428). Returning to the topic of female breasts, according to societal standards, breasts are seen, together with the vulva, as defining traits of the physical female body. Even in dictionaries such as the *OED*, the breast is defined as "a round protuberance surmounted by a nipple, located on each side of the upper chest of a *woman*" ("breast"; emphasis added). Although men also have breast tissue and can suffer from breast cancer—albeit at a lower percentage than women ("Breast Cancer")—society stigmatizes breasts as a predominantly female feature. In the case of women, as mentioned before, breasts are often sexualized—especially in the media—and therefore, they often succumb to the almost unobtainable standards society has established. As reiterated by Basil G. Englis et al., female beauty does not only imply the existence of breasts, but also the idea that they shall fulfill a certain set of criteria such as being equally sized, firm, and large (50).

This section took a close look at the concepts of sociocultural stereotypes pertaining to female breasts as well as some basic notions of feminism and how these two premises clash—not only in the grand scheme but also on an individual level—in their understanding of female worth. Building on that, the next section will elucidate on how this clash can lead to a sense of disidentification, as conceptualized by Muñoz. Societal standards and stereotypes put women into a place where their physical appearance is of the utmost importance, but when they can no longer fit into this ideal, they face a crisis of identification—what Muñoz essentially labels disidentification.

From Disequilibrium to Disidentification

When an individual's personal convictions do not align with the dominant ideologies of society, this can lead to an inner feeling of disequilibrium. The sudden chasm between the individual's inner workings and the social network they are a part of can lead to doubts about identity and belonging. Muñoz's theory of disidentification is based on the desire to distance oneself from one's inherent social identity to "negotiate historical trauma and systemic violence" (161). He calls it a process of "self-actualization […] as a response to ideologies that […] attempt to destroy components of subjectivity" (161). Because this "heuristic approach" (Morrissey 3) is focused on the marginalization of queer people of color—as the title of Muñoz's book indicates—it allows for an application to scholars such as Lorde, who focuses on her identity not only as a woman but also as a queer Black woman. Due to its intersectional nature, Muñoz's theory offers valuable insight into a subject's discontent with, or inability to adapt to, their surroundings. In a first step, this section will explain key concepts used by Muñoz, namely: identification, counteridentification, and disidentification (97). Muñoz's three terms fit into the broader picture of disconnection as they pertain to an individual's struggle with the feeling that they need to distance themselves from whatever social, personal, political, technological, etc. connection they are experiencing.

To understand Muñoz's concept of disidentification one must first understand what he means by identification. He utilizes the definition from Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis that identification is a process in which "the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute […] and is transformed […] after the model the other provides" (qtd. in Muñoz 7). Laplanche and Pontalis suggest that with the loss of identity comes a loss of personhood. Muñoz, however, does not refer to a process in which one completely loses their identity. While he defines counteridentification as a process of consciously refusing to assimilate into a predominant group (97), the concept of disidentification is not merely a form of dissociation, but is rather a process of "recognizing the oppression to which they [minority groups] are subject and vindicating an attitude of resistance" (Medina 675). While counteridentification merely describes a passive refusal to assimilate, disidentification is a slightly more active choice because it "would involve the refusal to take a submissive role" (Medina 675).[3] Disidentification is not a loss of identity but rather a non-identification with the standards of society and an ongoing dispute with the oppression that is being pushed by societal stereotypes. Muñoz calls it a "reformatting of self within the social", as a "third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification" (97). It is a question of "cultural, material, and psychic survival" in a world that "employs systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation" (161). Since minority groups are often endangered in society, liberating themselves from its ideologies is often the only way to stay true to themselves (6).

Muñoz further explores what this process of disidentification means for minority groups and their environment. In his book, he defines it as:

> a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology. Disidentification resists the interpellating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of self within the social. It is a third term that resists the binary of identification and counteridentification. (97)

Muñoz's definition of disidentification entails a very nuanced conception of an individual's struggle against systemic oppression. Disidentification is a strategy of non-conformism. However, Muñoz also argues that it "is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects" (5). According to him, queer people of color often have to compromise their convictions in order to survive, which ultimately means that their resistance cannot always be pronounced and direct (Muñoz 5). As Nick Hopkins also notes in "Social Psychology of Identity and Identification," "[t]he benefits of a shared social identification should not be underestimated," especially in terms of people's well-being and sense of belonging. People who are part of a group and identify themselves with it "are more likely to respect each other, cooperate with each other, and help each other" (Hopkins 527). Leaving

[3] Nevertheless, in comparison to the process of reidentification, which I will discuss later, disidentification can still be assessed as being rather passive.

this social network for one's own convictions, however, often leads to a sense of isolation and especially in the case of minority groups like queer people and people of color, disassimilation may lead to verbal or physical attacks (Muñoz 200).

Faced with these prejudices, Muñoz stresses the importance of activism. By providing examples of several activists such as Pedro Zamora or the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Muñoz proves that disidentification is a process of resistance that requires an individual to stand up for their convictions because they are "*not* content merely to survive" (200). Standing up for one's own convictions can be a substantial hurdle, especially for minority groups who have to consider the possibility of persecution. The theory of disidentification is limited due to its totality as it represents only the possibility for minority groups to distance themselves from the prevailing societal standards and live within this state of non-identity. However, as mentioned before, Muñoz's disidentification theory is still a rather passive one, which is where the importance for a quaternary term: 'reidentification' becomes visible. Before discussing the concept of reidentification and its applicability to Lorde's memoir, I will first explore where disidentification is present and look at how Lorde's shift in identification in light of the aforementioned gender norms and her feminist background align with Muñoz's theory.

Disidentification in *The Cancer Journals*

In this section, I argue that Lorde's experiences with cancer and her mastectomy and their effect on her perceptions and identity—particularly in light of the prominent beauty standards of Western society—led her to a feeling of disequilibrium which then resulted in disidentification. This leads us to the question: What parts of Muñoz's theory can be found in Lorde's memoir and how does Lorde transcend the rigid structures set by society and also partially by Muñoz's concept of disidentification? Beauty standards have always perpetuated the idea that any physical appearance that is out of the norm must be eliminated. This mindset was and still is pushed on men and women alike and shapes their perception of beauty and worth by manufacturing a dependency between beauty and body modification. Calogero et al. argue that "[t]he beauty industry renders women even more vulnerable by portraying real women's bodies as deficient and in constant need of alteration" (32). As was already thematized before, women are often left in a position of "oppression" (Calogero et al. 31) due to the societal emphasis on their appearance.

Regardless of the kind of mastectomy a cis-gendered person with breasts goes through, their post-operative physical body will no longer fit into societal standards.[4] Lorde writes about the physical and psychological torment she went through after her surgery, describing the process as protracted as she "had no real emotional contact yet with the reality of the loss" (30).

[4] There are, of course, also cases of post-operative bodily changes regarding transgender and non-binary people, but they shall not be included here as they differ regarding experiences and social expectations.

However, no matter how much she was hurting physically and mentally under the strain of having lost a breast, she emphasizes in her memoir how important it is to come to terms with this new reality and embrace it. Lorde writes:

> […] many patterns and networks are started for women after breast surgery that encourage us to deny the realities of our bodies which have just been driven home to us so graphically, and these old and stereotyped patterns of response pressure us to reject the adventure and exploration of our own experiences, difficult and painful as those experiences may be. (33)

The mastectomy changed Lorde's reality tremendously, but at the same time she recognizes the possibilities for exploration of her own identity. Being confronted with her altered body enables her to question the ideals of society that surrounded her. Lorde's major focal point in her memoir is how after her mastectomy, she was immediately confronted with the gender norms presented previously in this paper. Shortly after her operation, an organization called 'Reach to Recovery'[5] contacted her. This organization provides help in a way that pushes the aforementioned issue of breasts being sexualized and women being victim to disproportionate beauty standards. In a way, Reach to Recovery promotes a societal influence on women's lives post-mastectomy and how their altered physical state is seen as something that needs to be fixed. Lorde mentions how a woman from the organization came to her after her operation and immediately offered a prosthesis, claiming "[she] can look exactly the same" and that even Lorde would not be able to tell the difference (34). Rachel Calogero et al. allude to several cultural examples that "clearly reflect the absolute rejection of women's natural body parts and sizes, and the eroticization of artificially modified (mutilated) body parts which become necessary to obtain in order to attain social and economic rewards" (34). This rejection of "natural body parts" is an example of "disidentification" and is what further drives Lorde to further reflect on her own identification.

Lorde describes her first look in the mirror with a piece of lambswool replacing her breast as alienizing, "askew," "lifeless," and "grotesque," perhaps especially so because she was presented with a prosthesis tailored to white women (36). Her being confronted with a prosthesis that was only available in one color underlines the importance of womanism. Furthermore, her dogma resembles Muñoz's idea of non-conformism. Lorde refuses to compromise her identity to fit into societal standards and like Muñoz, she urges for more versatile representation of minority groups that do not fit into what Félix Guattari calls binary "representations and restrains on the 'social body'" (qtd. in Muñoz 100). Lorde describes herself as a "[b]lack lesbian feminist poet" (21) and thus fits in to Muñoz's category of

[5] Reach to Recovery is an organization that offers help to breast cancer patients. The organization provides them not only with emotional support but also with booklets, bras, and pads. The Reach to Recovery Program is sponsored by the American Cancer Society and is a part of Reach to Recovery International. Lorde, in contrast, refers to the organization as "Reach for Recovery" (*Reach to Recovery*).

minoritarian subjects. The account of her thoughts and feelings about her altered body after the unilateral mastectomy is typically Muñoz-esque in her search for an identification outside of the boundaries of societal standards:

> I refuse to have my scars hidden or trivialized behind lambswool or silicone gel. I refuse to be reduced in my own eyes or in the eyes of others from warrior to mere victim, simply because it might render me a fraction more acceptable or less dangerous to the still complacent, those who believe if you cover up a problem it ceases to exist. I refuse to hide my body simply because it might make a woman-phobic world more comfortable. (53)

Lorde soon realized that she did not feel the need for any cosmetic alterations or to hide her true self. She had reached a state of disidentification. Lorde did not want to succumb to these beauty standards but rather to transform her experiences into activism. The disequilibrium she was feeling as her own perception opposed the standards of society, triggered this state of disidentification. Like Muñoz, she wrote about the "state power apparatus" (Muñoz 97), or in her words "society's stereotype of women" (Lorde 50) and its influence on oppressed minority groups. The state pushes certain ideas about individuals and their appearances, especially through mainstream media (Muñoz 33). According to Muñoz, the state power apparatus builds a society on the basis of "heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny" (5). The binary ideals pushed onto the population eventually influence the social reception of gender identity. Lorde, confronted with her altered body and the fact that she did not fit into these ideals anymore, dedicated herself to actively fighting these gender norms.

Reidentification and the Transformation of Silence into Language and Action

Lorde elaborates on the importance of speaking up about societal issues regarding gender and emphasizes how only activism can lead to a change from society's restricted ideals to a more open and individual identification and thus a change in our self-obtained gender norms. Lorde especially dedicates her first chapter "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" to her thoughts on activism, an integral aspect of feminisms, which Desiree Lewis refers to as "feminist intellectual activism" (7). According to Lewis, this form of activism "seeks to explore threatened or denied existential freedoms" (7). Ideas and rules for gender norms are formed and pushed onto people by "the state power apparatus" (Muñoz 97), or what Collins calls the "Hegemonic Domain of Power". Feminism aims to oppose this intersectional oppression and correct existing biases, therefore slowly re-structuring the societal ideas of sex and gender.

Calogero et al. note that many women have been conditioned to value "how they look more than how they feel or what they can do" (21). This is also a point Lorde raises in her work. She writes: "every woman there [the office of a breast cancer surgeon in New York City] could

have used a reminder that having one breast did not mean her life was over, nor that she was less a woman, nor that she was condemned to the use of a placebo on [sic] order to feel good about herself and the way she looked" (52). While experiencing the changes to her own body, Lorde questions these practices and how they do not seem to align with her experiences. Especially with regard to Reach to Recovery, which also pushes this ideal onto her, Lorde makes the deliberate choice to distance herself from these ideas and focus on her own path of reidentification. The final section of Lorde's first chapter engages with the same issues that Calogero et al. raise when they state that women are conditioned to value their appearance above their feelings and abilities (21). Lorde argues:

> Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and our selves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned, we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we still will be no less afraid. (15)

Lorde, in contrast to Muñoz, does not only see disidentification as a survival tactic but also as a necessity to elicit change and a new form of identification. Only an active opposition to these gender norms can lead to a changed collective mindset.

While Muñoz's theory shows a mode of resistance against systemic oppression, it fails to account for the idea of not only not-identifying with "the social," as Muñoz calls it, but finding a new identity that is independent from social constraint. Muñoz mentions that queer people and people of color will identify themselves differently within the social framework (97), but his rigid fragmentation does not take into account the individual's differing state of mind, which might lead them to a form of identification that no longer fits into "the social" (8). He describes "the social" as "socially encoded roles" (6) within "the social and psychic world," which he calls "monocausal" and "monothematic" (8). Disidentification then stresses the idea of distancing oneself from dominant social or political norms, but it does not offer a comprehensive perspective on the possibility of forming a new identification, what I call reidentification. This concept represents the possibility for an individual to find a new way of identifying that lies outside the scope of both identification with the mainstream and Muñoz's idea of non-identification.

The form of activism that Lord pushes is an outcry for not only a non-identification, but a new way to identify herself in the face of social stigma. Muñoz mentions a "reformatting of self within the social" (97), but his theory revolves around the idea of an active opposition to society's norms by not identifying with them, instead of focusing on the individual's desire for a new form of identification. Lorde, who arguably went through the process of disidentification herself, however, addresses this arising issue. Dismissing one kind of identity leaves the question of what that means for the individual. Lorde expresses it as a feeling of both losing control and gaining freedom to choose (26). In her battle posed by the disequilibrium between her altered body and society's standards, Lorde declines this societal identity "to preserve that self that was not merely physically defined" (25).

Lorde has a particular perspective on this issue as a woman who went through a mastectomy and bases her convictions on the ideals of feminism as they have been discussed prior. She emphasizes the importance of "the decision to define ourselves, name ourselves, and speak for ourselves, instead of being defined and spoken for by others" (Lorde 15). Throughout her book, she underscores the importance of not being seen as a mere victim of breast cancer, the mastectomy that followed, and the importance of not hiding her altered self, but as being just as valuable of a person as before (Lorde 53). While she starts her journey at a place of disidentification as described by Muñoz, she soon trespasses this idea of rigid categories of identification and shifts the focus. Instead of further talking about her resistance, Lorde also raises the question of how this break with her traditional way of identification leads her to re-evaluate herself–this reevaluation being a core aspect of reidentification.

As was previously argued, Lorde takes the idea of disidentification a step further by raising questions about her own new and altered identity, for example she writes: "My concerns were about my chances of survival […]. So my concerns were quite different from those spoken to by the Reach for Recovery volunteer" (49). After many re-evaluations of herself, she comes to the conclusion that she "did not feel the same as before surgery" (50). It was no longer possible for her to identify with the prevailing societal norms; rather, she embraced her altered appearance and dedicated herself to her cause. Lorde reidentified herself by focusing on her feelings as opposed to her physical appearance and actively choosing for herself how to identify and what her identity entails (26), namely that her existence as a woman is not dependent on her body image. Instead of succumbing to what society deems a necessary body modification, Lorde changes her own form of identification to one that is not dependent on superficial societal standards. As proven by her statements under consideration of the dominant societal norms and her feminist views, Lorde not only underlines the importance of activism, but also her book is a cry for a different form of identification—not just for herself but for every woman who struggles with their body and body image. As mentioned before, Muñoz's theory leaves out the aspect of exactly what Lorde describes: re-evaluating herself and finding a new identity for herself, what I label reidentification.

Reidentification then, as proposed in this paper, describes a process in which an individual changes the way they identify themselves in the face of social standards which do not align with their self-perception. Based on the prior definition of identification and in the light of Muñoz's theory of disidentification, reidentification must entail the aspects of building a new identity free from social restrictions. While disidentification focuses on the facet of alienation, reidentification puts a stronger emphasis on the switch to another form of identification that is not predetermined by society. Muñoz too considers that a turn from a socially accepted identity implies the need for a new form of identification, but his work does not focus on this issue. He emphasizes that disidentification is a "crucial practice of contesting social subordination through the project of worldmaking" (200). Muñoz advocates for a world where "[q]ueers of color and other minoritarians" are not denied their identification, where they are

not "scapegoated, targeted, and assaulted in all manner of ways" and disidentification is the way to this ideal (200). Reidentification, then, as I define it, is the step after Muñoz's disidentification. It is the question of how an individual will identify once they are no longer under the oppression of a society marked with stigmata.

An individual who went through the process of disidentification is inevitably confronted by the question of how to reconstruct their self while embracing their adversities. In Lorde's case, after her procedure, she had to learn how to align her altered physical state with her sense of self. While before, her physical body fit into societal standards, her post-mastectomy body did not. As a result, she had to re-evaluate her understanding of female features which led to a process of reidentification in which she rejected the idea of femaleness proposed by society and accepted the changes of her identity due to her altered physical features.

Conclusion

Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* addresses the sexualization of women due to society's norms and stereotypes—among other important issues such as grief and activism. From the perspective of a Black and queer feminist, she writes about her own experiences and how they triggered a disconnection between her own thoughts and the societal stereotypes that surrounded her. By first introducing the issue of Western societal norms dictating that women have to fit into certain standards such as having large, perfectly shaped breasts, this paper laid its foundation. These norms were then opposed to the values of feminisms, which are shared by Lorde and elaborated on in her memoir. Having explained this dichotomy, Muñoz's theory of disidentification was established. Muñoz's idea of disidentification is of major importance for understanding how minority groups are influenced by the often-rigid standards and norms a society generates. The author puts forth three different types of identification, namely identification, counteridentification, and disidentification. For the purpose of my analysis, the concept of disidentification is of core value to the comparison of Muñoz's and Lorde's advocacy, because it is a process of consciously excluding oneself from the prevalent norms and resisting society's heteronormativity and gender stereotypes. Furthermore, I expanded on Muñoz's three terms, by discussing the concept of reidentification, which is most present in Lorde's work.

It is vital for the understanding of Lorde's reidentification to see her memoir in light of the larger picture of disidentification. As this paper has elaborated, Lorde does not merely write about her experiences but sheds light on the question of self-evaluation, especially post-mastectomy and post-disidentification. Reidentification, as proposed by this paper, puts a stronger focus on an individual's desire to find a new form of identification (and perhaps connection) apart from the one society offers. Moreover, disconnection, in the context of this special issue, happens in many realms of life and can be linked to broader systems of societal norms displayed in multimedia, nature, interpersonal connections, or personal struggles. In

Lorde's case, she experienced a disconnection between her inner values as a womanist/feminist and expected societal standards. When people do not fit into the Western standards of beauty—whether physically, emotionally, or sexually—they look elsewhere for another sense of self and another way of identifying and connecting in a society which does not take differences into consideration. For Lorde, it was not simply enough to distance herself from the prevalent societal norms, she desired a new form of identification, one that helped her accept her altered body. As this paper has shown, what Lorde experienced and describes in her memoir does not only align with Muñoz's theory of disidentification but puts the focus more so on the attempt to find a new identity—to reidentify herself.

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