In the 1970s, women of color and lesbians in the United States called on feminist scholars to recognize their own discriminatory practices and to analyze the intersections of racial, sexual, and gender hierarchies. At an academic feminist conference commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, the lesbian poet and literature professor Audre Lorde articulated the frustrations of women treated as tokens, the sole black or lesbian speaker invited to participate in a predominantly white movement. Her influential remarks impelled women’s studies courses, programs, and conferences to expand their vision and embrace, rather than fear, differences among women. Lorde knew firsthand the dilemmas of bridging cultures. Raised in Harlem by Caribbean immigrant parents, she had been one of the few black women within the lesbian bar culture that flourished in post–World War II New York City.

(From The Essential Feminist Reader edited by Estelle B. Freedman)

I agreed to take part in a New York University Institute for the Humanities conference a year ago, with the understanding that I would be commenting upon papers dealing with the role of difference within the lives of American women: difference of race, sexuality, class, and age. The absence of these considerations weakens any feminist discussion of the personal and the political.

It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians. And yet, I stand here as a Black lesbian feminist, having been invited to comment within the only panel at this conference where the input of Black feminists and lesbians is represented. What this says about the vision of this conference is sad, in a country where racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable. To read this program is to assume that lesbian and Black women have nothing to say about existentialism, the erotic, women’s culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power. And what does it mean in personal and political terms when even the two Black women who did present here were literally found at the last hour? What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the
loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.

fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable.

The absence of any consideration of lesbian consciousness or the consciousness of Third World women leaves a serious gap within this conference and within the papers presented here. For example, in a paper on material relationships between women, I was conscious of an either/or model of nurturing which totally dismissed my knowledge as a Black lesbian. In this paper there was no examination of mutuality between women, no systems of shared support, no interdependence as exists between lesbians and women-identified women. Yet it is only in the patriarchal model of nurturance that women “who attempt to emancipate themselves pay perhaps too high a price for the results,” as this paper states.

For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power I rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women.

Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive be and the active being.

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependence of difference strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.

Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos
of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with
the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring
that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connec-
tion from which our personal power is forged.

As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differ-
ences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather
than as forces for change. Without community there is no libera-
tion, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between
an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean
a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these
differences do not exist.

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s defi-
nition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in
the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are les-
bians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an
academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make
them strengths. *For the master’s tools will never dismantle the mas-
ter’s house.* They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own
game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.
And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define
the master’s house as their only source of support.

Poor women and women of Color know there is a difference be-
tween the daily manifestations of marital slavery and prostitution
because it is our daughters who line 42nd Street. If white Ameri-
can feminist theory need not deal with the differences between us,
and the resulting difference in our oppressions, then how do you
deal with the fact that the women who clean your houses and tend
your children while you attend conferences on feminist theory are,
for the most part, poor women and women of Color? What is the
theory behind racist feminism?

In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions help
lay the groundwork for political action. The failure of academic
feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength is a failure to
reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson. In our world, divide and
conquer must become define and empower.

Why weren’t other women of Color found to participate in this
conference? Why were two phone calls to me considered a consul-
tation? Am I the only possible source of names of Black feminists?
And although the Black panelist’s paper ends on an important and
powerful connection of love between women, what about interra-
cial cooperation between feminists who don’t love each other?

In academic feminist circles, the answer to these questions is
often, “We do not know who to ask.” But that is the same evasion
of responsibility, the same cop-out, that keeps Black women’s art
our of women’s exhibitions, Black women’s work our of most fem-
inist publications except for the occasional “Special Third World
Women’s Issue,” and Black women’s texts off your reading lists. But
as Adrienne Rich pointed out in a recent talk, which feminists have
educated themselves about such an enormous amount over the past
ten years, how come you haven’t also educated yourselves about
Black women and the differences between us—white and Black—
when it is key to our survival as a movement?

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across
the gap of male ignorance and to educated men as to our existence
and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors
to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns. Now
we hear that it is the task of women of Color to educate white
women—in the face of tremendous resistance—as to our existence,
our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a
diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal
thought.

Simone de Beauvoir once said: “It is in the knowledge of the
genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to
live and our reasons for acting.”

Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in
this place and time. *I urge each one of us here to reach down into
that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and*