

Women's Studies Seminar, Spring 2002

Art, Activism, and Academics: The Work of Audre Lorde

Prerequisite: Women's Studies 5A and/or Professor's Signature

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Wednesday 6:30 – 9:30

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Course Description

This seminar will examine the life, work, and critical contributions to feminist theory of the Black lesbian writer and activist Audre Lorde and her essential place in twentieth-century women's studies, American literature, and global feminism, with particular emphasis on the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality in her work and on her understanding of art as activism. Additionally students will study Lorde's primary influence on the development of Black feminist thought through readings by Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Smith, Barbara Christian, and Jewelle Gomez. The academic response to Lorde's writing spans multiple disciplines from health care to queer theory; from the aesthetics of poetry to political science; to her meteoric use of language -- all of which will be considered in the course.

Why focus on Audre Lorde? In many ways Lorde's work redefines, reconceptualizes, and redirects White, middleclass, feminist theory at its core. In her seminal essay "Poetry Is Not A Luxury," for example, Lorde delineates the necessary role of art in sustaining life and creating political theory. In the often cited "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House," Lorde theorizes how a profound shift in patriarchal, institutional power can occur; and in her groundbreaking essay "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," she confronts the severe ramifications of self-censorship.

Lorde's prose, poetry, and essays, consisting of over eighteen published books, contribute a fundamental body of work to Black feminist thought that remains unparalleled in significance. Defying categorization while claiming instead a multiplicity of subjectivities, Lorde adamantly demanded to be viewed by the whole of her being (mind, body, and spirit) rather than in the singularity of any one particular work or identity. Her writing crossed boundaries in terms of aesthetic form and literary analysis, including the creation of an original prose form, the biomythography, that is much imitated today. Lorde was the New York Poet Laureate (1991-1992) and a National Book Award winner for A Burst of Light

(1988). She was cofounder with Barbara Smith of Kitchen Table Press, the first publishing house for women of color, the author of the much taught Cancer Journals, Sister Outsider; and the biomythography Zami: A New Spelling of My Name. Before her death Lorde held the prestigious post of Thomas Hunter Chair of Literature of Hunter College. Additionally, she is seen as a founding matriarch of global feminism for her work in Africa, the Caribbean, and Germany, where she personally brought and taught her brand of radical feminism to villages and urban streets.

While studying the body of Lorde's work as well as the breadth of her influence in and outside the academy, we will also engage the critical response to Lorde's writing, and evaluate her place in the literary canon. For Lorde's work to be understood it must be viewed as a triumvirate of art, activism, and academics which are at the core of her identi(ties). On and off the literary page, Lorde represents a fluid self. For her, *praxis* is "perfection." She does not separate or qualitatively prioritize academics over activism and/or art. For her there is no gap between theory and action; there simply is no theory without activism and art. This literal/literary triumvirate will help structure the critical inquiry of the seminar.

Lorde's work merits a full semester's inquiry because of the scope and impact of her work. Her influence on Black feminism remains central; her work continues to be a significant challenge to more traditional feminist theory; while her three-pronged vision of art/activism/academics acts as a foundational force behind global feminism. A wide-ranging body of theory and scholarship has already been produced about Lorde's work, including a number of dissertations. In addition to the primary texts cited below, students will read critical studies that engage Lorde's written work.

Students will also view at least two films about the life and work of Audre Lorde: *A Litany of Survival* and *Before Stonewall*, which includes an interview with Lorde herself. Additionally, students will listen to a radio interview with Lorde in which she discusses and critiques the limitations of White western feminist theory. Students will read Lorde's poetry and prose including the now famous dialogue on race, class, and White privilege between Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde. In addition special attention will be placed on Lorde's radical vision as discussed in her prose essay "Poetry Is Not A Luxury."

Former Ambassador to the US from Grenada, Dessima Williams (Brandeis University, Women's Studies and Sociology) will give a guest lecture on the contribution of Audre Lorde as a cultural worker, Caribbean poet, and co-creator of a First World and international feminist movement. And University of Massachusetts, Amherst professors John Bracy (Afro-Am.) and Alexandrina Deschamps (Women's Studies) will discuss with the class the meaning/impact of Lorde's work in their lives.

Required Reading List

I. Works by Audre Lorde:

Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches

The Cancer Journals

A Burst of Light: Essays

Zami: A New Spelling of My Name

The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde

"Sisterhood and Survival." *Black Scholar* Vol. 17, No 2 (Mar.-Apr. 1986): 5-7.

"To The Poet Who Happens to Be Black and the Black Poet Who Happens To Be A Woman." *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and letters* Vol. 14, No. 1 (Winter 1991): 39-40.

II. Feminist thought important for studying Lorde:

Black Feminist Thought, by Patricia Hill Collins.

Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, edited by Barbara Smith.

Black Feminist Criticism, by Barbara Christian.

"A Black Feminist Statement" Combahee River Collective.

Blood, Bread, and Poetry, by Adrienne Rich.

"Audre Lorde and the Development of a Black Feminist Ideology," Sharon-Patricia Holland.

"Well Water: On Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*," Nikky Finney.

Showing Our Colors: Afro German Women Speak Out, edited by May Opitz and Katharina Oguntoye.

III. Works about Lorde:

Dissertation excerpts by Doris Davenport

Dissertation excerpts by Angela Bowen.

The historic dialogue between Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich.

Standards: The International Journal of Multicultural Studies, Fall 1995.

Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde.

Reflections on a 'Black, Militant, Lesbian Poet' from *Essence*, March 1, 1991, by Catherine M. Brown.

Excerpts from "Soy Tu Hermana/I Am Your Sister," international feminist conference on the life and work of Audre Lorde.

Course Requirements

Syllabus/

1. **Students are expected to come to class having carefully read the material assigned for that day and to engage in serious discussion. Students will be required to develop three questions for weekly in-class discussion. Attendance is required. There are no unexcused absences.**

In addition, students will be asked to present a topic of their choice (based on the readings) and to lead a class discussion on the relevant issues.

Class participation counts for 15% of the final grade.

2. **Weekly five-page papers will be required as well as in class writing.**

****This written work will be graded on a scale of one to ten points with written comments. This is a writing intensive course and rewrites will be requested when appropriate.****

Weekly work counts for 30% of the final grade.

3. **The midterm will be a take-home essay exam.**

Midterm counts for 25% of the final grade.

4. **There are two options for the final exam:**

a) a small group presentation/performance of twenty-five to thirty minutes in length on a topic related to the issues studied in class and a five-page paper, individually written by each member of the group, elaborating on the performance and its function as feminist theory; or

b) a fifteen-page paper on a topic related to the material discussed in class.

Final exam counts for 30% of the final grade.

Absolutely No Late Papers Will Be Accepted.

Art, Activism, and Academics: The Work of Audre Lorde

Part One: Art

Syllabus/

Week One: **Introduction: Who is Audre Lorde?**
Jan. 23 **Competing or Coexisting Identities**

Read: First half of Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, a biomythography by Audre Lorde.

Handout: Reflections on a 'Black, Militant, Lesbian Poet' from *Essence*

Write: A five-page reaction paper to the reading discussing the questions of Black female identity Lorde poses and how/why/when she comes to see herself as a Black feminist.

Based on the reading bring three questions to class for discussion.

Week Two: **Why Does the Work of Audre Lorde Matter?**
Jan. 30

A. What is the nature, form, and context of her contribution(s):

a. Literature

b. Culture

B. Creating new literary forms.

a. Biomythography

C. Navigating Multiple Coexisting Identities

Read: Finish Zami.

Handout: "To The Poet Who Happens to Be Black and the Black Poet Who Happens To Be A Woman." *Callaloo* Vol. 14, No. 1 pages 39-40.

Write: Five pages on the nonlinear form of Zami. Does it work? Why or Why not? How does the non linearity function within the text function and what is its purpose?

Week Three: **B. Creating New Literary Forms, continued.**
Feb. 6 **Guest Speaker: Alexandrina Deschamps, UMass, Amherst.**

a. Medical Writing: The journal as health and

healing guide.

b. Art as Activism

c. Art as Feminist Theory

Read: **The Cancer Journals** by Audre Lorde.

Handout: "Well Water: On Audre Lorde's The Cancer Journals," Nikky Finney.

Write: Five-page paper on The Cancer Journals.
Discuss the following questions.

1. What makes this literature as opposed to merely a personal journal or private diary?
2. Is this work feminist theory? Why or Why not?
3. What is significant about this work?
4. What questions did this work bring up for you?

Week Four:
Feb. 13

Politics and/in the Poetry of Audre Lorde

A. Potent mixes

B. Toxic mixing

C. Textural Hybridity and Boundary Crossing

Read: Selections from The Collected Poems by Audre Lorde.

Handout: Excerpts from Blood, Bread, and Poetry, by Adrienne Rich.

Write: Pick three poems and discuss in a five-page paper whether/how they work as poetry, politics, and/or feminist theory. Pick three poems for class discussion that work both as feminist theory and as poetry and one poem that works as literature but not as feminist theory.

Performance: Pick one poem to read out-loud to the class individually or in groups.

Week Five:
Feb. 20

Audre Lorde the Poet and Finding Your Voice

Syllabus/

No Class

Read: Selections from **The Collected Poems.**

Write: Two to Three poems in the tradition and form of Audre Lorde.
Work in Partners and plan to perform one poem in class.

Part Two: Activism

Week Six: **Feminist Theory: Activism and The Academy**
Feb. 27

Class Discussion will focus on the following essays by Audre Lorde:

- A. "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action"
- B. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"
- C. "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving"

Read: **Sister Outsider** by Audre Lorde: pages 7 through 52.

Handout: "Audre Lorde and the Development of a Black Feminist Ideology," Sharon-Patricia Holland.

Write: Pick one essay (from the above cited essays) to discuss in a five page paper. What issues might be controversial in "The Academy?" Why? What does the essay you've chosen contribute, if anything, to feminist theory? What significant questions, if any, does Lorde fail to consider in the essay you have selected.

Week Seven: **Intersections in the Work of Audre Lorde:**
March 6 **Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality**

Class Discussion will focus on the following essays by Audre Lorde:

- A. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power"
- B. "Sexism: American Disease in Blackface"

Syllabus/

- C. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House"
- D. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference"

Read: Sister Outsider: pages 53 through 123.

Handout: "Sisterhood and Survival." *Black Scholar* Vol. 17, No 2 (Mar.-Apr. 1986): 5-7. "A Classroom Named Desire." from Never A Dull Moment by Jyl Lynn Felman.

Write: In the tradition of Audre Lorde write a five-page essay on some aspect of feminist theory that you haven't written on before.

Bring one question to class on each of the above-cited essays.

Week Eight:
March 13
Midterm

Intersections, continued
 Domestic, Global, and "Sistah to Sistah"

Class Discussion will focus on the following essays by Audre Lorde:

- A. "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism"
- B. "Learning from the 60s"
- C. "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger"
- D. "Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report"

Read: Sister Outsider, pages 123 through 189.

Showing Our Colors: Afro German Women Speak Out, edited by May Oritz and Katharina Oguntoye.

Handout: "A Black Feminist Statement" Combahee River Collective.

"Soy Tu Hermana/I Am Your Sister," international feminist conference on the life and work of Audre Lorde.

Write: Midterm

Part Three: Academics

Week Nine:
March 20

Audre Lorde as Radical Scholar

Guest Speaker: Professor Dessima Williams

Syllabus/

Brandeis University

Read: First three chapters from Black Feminist Criticism, Barbara Christian.

Write: Five-page analysis of Audre Lorde's contribution to feminist scholarship generally and to academic feminism in particular.

Week Ten: **Audre Lorde as Cultural Worker**
March 27 The founding of Kitchen Table Women of Color Press
Brandeis Friday

Video: "A Litany For Survival"

Read: Pages 73 through 144 from Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, edited by Barbara Smith.

Write: Free Writing Assignment To Be Generated From the Class.

Week Eleven: **Black Feminist Thought**
April 3
No Class

Read: Pages 3 through 42 from Black Feminist Thought, by Patricia Hill Collins.

Week Twelve: **Audre Lorde: Academic Amazon**
April 10

Read: A Burst of Light by Audre Lorde.

Write: A five-page letter to Audre Lorde discussing the impact of her life and work on you and how you understand feminist theory after studying the body of Lorde's work.

Week Thirteen: **Audre Lorde and the Next Generation**
April 17

Listen: Radio Profile of Audre Lorde reading and discussing her work.

Read: Excerpts from dissertations on Audre Lorde on reserve in the library.

Syllabus/

Write: Five-page paper analyzing the main issues these scholars discuss concerning the strength, weakness, and impact of Lorde's work.

Week Fourteen: **Writer to Writer: Audre Lorde in Conversation**
April 24

Guest Speaker: Professor John Bracey
Afro-American Studies, U Mass., Amherst

Read: Pages 91 through 114, and 201 through 238 from **Black Feminist Thought**, by Patricia Hill Collins.

Handout: *Standards: The International Journal of Multicultural Studies*, Fall 1995.

Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde.

Video: James Baldwin (on reserve, watch in pairs)

Write: Five-page reaction paper to the video including a discussion of the tensions between Baldwin and Lorde.

Week Fifteen: **Audre Lorde: Poetry, Practice, and Performance**
May 1

A. Class Presentations and Discussion

Presentations: Pick one or two primary theories of Lorde to illustrate in an original performance. Work in groups.

Write: An individually five-page paper discussing the theories in your performance accompanying your presentation.

Or, write a fifteen-page paper on some aspect Lorde's work.

Week Sixteen: **Audre Lorde: Poetry, Practice, and Performance, continued**

May 8

Last Class

A. Conclude Presentations

B. Summary