

Audre Lorde in Berlin: A Poet's Way Towards Justice

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In a complex world, we often discount simplicity. Sharing thoughts and experiences through poetry – phrases, images, and language charged with emotion – can create bridges that gap gender, race, class, sexuality, even across continents. These connections are critical truths we can reclaim each and every morning we wake.

Audre Lorde named a “poet’s way” as an evocation and a method to examine feelings and honor personal experience. The poet’s way is an elegant poetic vision of justice, a creative strategy for resistance, and a consistent practice of self-efficacy.

In the last weeks of October, I traveled to Berlin to better understand Audre Lorde’s legacy of creatively bridging differences. I wanted to better understand, as a working poet and intersectional feminist, how Lorde’s poetics could broaden a collective racial justice praxis, in addition to continuing to transform contested cultural territories of difference. When I began this poetics journey, I knew at least three things: having a writing practice saved my life; poems are creative structures where desire meets an experience that shows effort; and I write because I love.

In Berlin, I discovered poetic strategies for extending the boundaries of revolution¹.

shared memories

This formalized memory is woven from two main sources of material from the Audre Lorde Archive in Berlin². The digitized recordings of Audre Lorde’s three poetry seminars (“The Poet as Outsider,” “Black Women Poetry,” and “Creative Writing Workshop”) and the personal correspondence between Audre Lorde and Dr. Dagmar Schultz (friend of Audre Lorde and founder of the archive) from 1981-1992³.

The Audre Lorde Archive is a public testament to Audre’s poetic practice and an extension of Dagmar’s lifetime commitment to racial and gender justice. I remain grateful for my experiences at the Archive and the sunny afternoon I spent with Dagmar on Reformation Day.

I have chosen to engage with the seminar recordings because they are Audre’s voice, words, and vision – a direct connection to how she taught West Berlin students in the late spring/summer of 1984 to read and write poetry from a Black lesbian poetic aesthetic. The personal correspondence between Audre and Dagmar reflects commitment and love across race, time, culture, and place. They are tender evidence of the depth of devotion to a shared anti-racist future. Both the recordings and correspondence best illuminate what a poetic vision of justice looks like.

The rendering of these shared memories is an emotional blueprint. They reveal how a conscious and committed practice to engaging with poetry, both as poet and reader, is an effective strategy to expand a radical vision for social change.

In order to fully engage with this specific poetic method, you will need to read (or re-read) “Poetry is Not a Luxury.” You can find this essential essay online or in Audre Lorde’s collection of essays and speeches, [Sister](#)

¹ Audre Lorde defines revolution as: “we wish to bring about change from the way we are.”

² All sourced material is from the Freie Universität Berlin, University Archive, Lorde estate.

³ Over the period of three weeks, (Oct 16 – Nov 4, 2017) I curiously immersed myself in the poetics of Audre Lorde. I listened to over 40 hours of Lorde’s seminar lectures in addition to hours of recorded poetry readings, interviews, and conference speeches. I read over 80 personal correspondence exchanges between Dr. Dagmar Schultz and Audre Lorde from July 1981- July 1992.

Outsider. “Poetry is Not a Luxury” establishes a shared language for her poetics method and is the primary framework for the seminar recordings.

Do not skip this step.

Then ask yourself: *What is it that you want to come from this investment?*⁴

Because *what you want will help influence what you get.*⁵

In July 1981, Dagmar wrote an impassioned letter to Audre Lorde inviting her to teach at Freie Universität in West Berlin. Dagmar was called to action by Audre’s infamous speech, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” at that year’s National Women’s Studies Association conference. In the letter, Dagmar tells Audre she learned to move through the “collective guilt” of her German identity, her “white skin privilege,” and how to live up to that “responsibility” through her participation in the United States Civil Rights and Women’s Rights Movements:

I learned to be afraid, but I also learned about the power of facing fear and experiencing anger collectively, lessons which I had plenty of opportunity to make use of in later years and am still grateful for.

...

Only recently, however, have I realized that I have shirked my responsibility of making the struggle against anti-Semitism and racism an integral part of my personal life and political work, of getting in touch with my fear and anger in an active way.

In early 1984, Audre knowing she will be teaching in West Berlin⁶, responds:

I will be pleased to meet with women who are interested in what I have to say and with whom I can have dialogues that will somehow clarify our goals for the future, common or otherwise, but I am a poet and writer, not an academic, and I so I do it always in a poet’s way.

A poet’s way holds the center of this poetics inquiry. I entered this experience from a conscious positioning of being a working poet and committed intersectional feminist. Like Dagmar, I am actively learning how to sharpen my personal and political responsibility to dismantle white supremacy. This is a poetics inquiry across time, cultures, and place that weaves the lived experiences of many racialized identities – Audre, Dagmar, mine, and the German students who personally engaged with Black American women’s poetry in 1984.

⁴ Audre Lorde’s direct quotes are presented in italics.

⁵ This quote and one above is from the first session of the “Black Women Poetry” seminar.

⁶ In 1984, Berlin was still ideologically divided and heavily militarized by the Berlin Wall (which did not fall until 1989). In the first session of “Black Women Poetry,” Audre shares, “This is my first time in West Berlin. ... You are as mysterious to me, as I am to you. The only things we have to go on is a belief in each other’s good faith, and a kind of curiosity, and an excitement. I was scared walking in here but was also very excited to learn something new together.” She goes on to further explain why she is in West Berlin: “I came specifically to Berlin because Dagmar Schultz invited me to come to Berlin, to the Institute [...]. My opinion about Western Europe and its opposition to Black African, and I think of so much of what American civilization takes from Western Europe is a phrase I use frequently and I thought at some point I cannot continue to use that phrase without knowing first-hand what I’m talking about. I’ve traveled to so many other places in the world and I’ve lived in so many different areas. I thought it would be really interesting, that I owed it both to myself and to the work.” Please see Dagmar’s critically acclaimed documentary, “Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984-1992,” for more cultural context and to further illustrate Audre’s integrity to teach poetry in Berlin.

Anchoring personalized experience through the art of poetry and practicing an ethics of a shared future was a deep source of power – personal and political – for Audre Lorde. Through her dedicated praxis of living consciously, Audre co-created community with integrity and conviction. In Berlin, she transcended perceived gaps of difference with Afro-German women and white German women that inspired multiple generations to create their own art, tell their own stories, and collectively organize to expand racial justice practices in Germany and other Western European countries. Audre was creatively driven as a poet and warrior to find solutions that bridged complexity in order to disrupt complacency around race, sexuality, and gender norms.

Audre Lorde chose to use poetry as a weapon, a tool of survival, because:

Poetry, as I've said to some of you who were in an earlier class, is perhaps the most subversive art there is. And it is subversive because it is erected to change. Change in the deepest sense, which is concerned with feelings. Poetry comes out of feelings. It works with feelings, it grows from feelings, and is about altering the very essences of our lives.⁷

poets are reflectors of the future

Audre had two essential questions when approaching any poem and used this inquiry in each session:

1. *How does this poem make you feel?*
2. *What is the work of the poem / how is it going to function?*

She required her students to first recognize any feelings evoked from a poem in order to personally experience the work. Feelings must be your first entry, and then you may then move to intellectually engage with the energy of a poem's words and its images. Engaging with a poem in this way challenges the reader (you) to own those emotions and personal assumptions stimulated by an unknown other (the poet). The temporal space created by the poet's experience facilitated through the power of language and imagery, and in relationship with a now engaged reader, is the anchor of a poem.

A poem, a work of art, can speak to us across any number of perceived or particular differences. Bridging differences of race, sexuality, or gender shifts us away from the politics of scarcity:

We need to recognize the difference between strong emotion and hatred. It is not anger, it is neither my anger or your anger which is destroying us. [...] I am telling you something important about the connection between us. That I have to hear and you have to hear and perhaps we can use it. You must not let the intensity of your feelings interfere with the hearing of what [the poem's work] comes across.⁸

Audre believed poems are influenced by how culture defines beauty and affirmed that power defines culture. She did not believe in "universal poetry."

I believe there is a Black feminist aesthetic. I believe there is a Black aesthetic. I believe that these crossover in many ways. It has been said over and over again that the way you recognize a society, the way you really take the pulse of a society or group is through women and women's poetry.⁹

⁷ 1984, "Creative Writing Workshop," session one

⁸ May 17, 1984, "Poet as Outsider," session three

⁹ 1984, "Black Women Poetry," session one

In practice with community, making conscious our connections and honoring our differences is a creative way to scale radical work. When understood in context as an organizing strategy, commonly experienced feelings like love, gratitude, fear, and righteous anger can then become our collectively sourced testimonies to break isolation and constructed divisions.

To make this strategy concrete, Audre structured her “Poet as Outsider” seminar as a co-created dialogue between American outsider poets and her West Berlin German students. Outsider poets are poets who can envision what does not yet exist – what must change – while reflecting the contemporary history, politics, and social cultures of their time¹⁰.

Audre used Sonia Sanchez’s “Love Poem #7” in reference to Black outsider poet’s aesthetics, an aesthetics that no longer looked to white audiences to define Black humanity. “Love Poem #7” challenged the students to question heterosexual politics in context of implicitly centering whiteness. This poem elicited the most multifaceted and personal meanings around violence, even when confessed as beautiful:

Poetry can sometimes lead us in inextricably to positions that we even ourselves may not want to take but there they are. That’s what happens. Remember, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” when I talk about illumination. If you read this work [“Love Poem #7”], you cannot escape from what it is making us feel if it comes out of an internal place. This poem is an example of it. This is an indictment. This is a kind of indictment of a heterosexual relationship that no lesbian would ever dare to make simply because we’re not involved in that particular kind [of relationship]. This is something that only a heterosexual woman could have written. How she deals with that as a position is something that of course can cause a great deal of pain but she is an honest poet and here is her poem¹¹.

Poems create visceral connections with a reader illuminating empathy, vulnerability, and mutual visibility. Poetry is embodied and visceral. Poetry is a tool of compassion.

Poetry helps shape a vision of a future, whether that concept of the future is the same as mine is less important than that we have a concept of the future, and if we were to have that it must be of something that has not yet been, because obviously what has been has not gotten us very far.¹²

Throughout each seminar, Audre expanded a vision of racial justice that centered sharing power. She repeatedly articulated that difference was a value and strength:

...any kind of vision that doesn’t allow for us both is very dangerous, because they are limited. They leave out living.¹³

Audre asked her students to learn to filter out what is useful and what is not. She gave the students, as the audience, agency to actively determine what personally resonated with them in the poem and what did not.

As a process of engagement, personal reflection with a poem’s work can add texture and nuance to your own understanding of the complexities of your social world. You may not personally know what it feels like to survive extreme poverty and rural isolation but a poem may help ground that unique experience in familiar

¹⁰ Audre curated poems from Denise Levertov, Lenore Kandel, Haki Madhubuti (Don Lee), Leslie Marmon Silko, Fay Chaing, Patricia Spears Jones, Joan Larkin, and Sonia Sanchez to name but a few.

¹¹ May 31, 1984, “Poet as Outsider,” session six

¹² 1984, “Black Women Poetry,” session one

¹³ June 28, 1984, “Black Women Poetry,” session six

desires such as needing community to survive. You may not have experienced a hunger so deep that you'd eat flour delighted that the paste formed from your saliva tastes like a pastry, but now that image is connected to an emotional response – an embodied understanding. The distance between the poet's experience and reader's experience is shortened which affords possibility for deeper connection.

Audre openly examined creative solutions against competition and scarcity, a driving energy of division through perpetuating difference:

We are raised to believe that if I assert my identity and define myself that somehow, I am lessening you. That there is one little pie called identity and I take a quarter of it that leaves less for you. This is not true. My ability to identify myself, to explore my definition for use does not lessen you. It does not take away from your power but we are trained to believe in fact it does.¹⁴

Sharing power, confronting scarcity as form of competition, and critical self-identification are grounding elements in Lorde's theory of change.

Audre believed poetry, when approached honestly, alters perceptions. A poetics lens has the potential to shape a deeper and broader collective imagination.

The first step around difference: the parts within us learn to sit down together so that each of us can come to our work, as we define it, whole within ourselves – and then by extension reach out so we can do the work that we must share. That is a very long process. It must begin inside if it is to go out, and that knowledge, that examination is what fuels the power of this poem, because all the different pieces come together in me as all of us must come together for our joint work.¹⁵

When we move from poetic vision to personal action to active community practice, formerly liminal political spaces now have a multi-dimensional focus and clearer purpose. Integration of different perceptions is an offer of a new path. It is up to you to claim that curiosity and awareness.

When used consistently and systemically, I believe these are the tools that can dismantle the master's house.

How will you integrate this into your arsenal?¹⁶

engagement strategies

I believe in the function of poetry for every one of your lives. And I also believe that my survival is tied up with yours. I recognize that it is. I think that those who do not recognize that this is so are in a bad place and that we are all in a very crucial place in our lives. I'm in a different place that you are but we share a common Earth and we are commonly in danger.¹⁷

Investment in social and political change, by way of personal invitation, is strategic. Our liberation, yours and mine, cannot be separated. Establishing mutual visibility – *we are commonly in danger* – by honoring our relational complexities creates a shared awareness, an opening, while strengthening and sustaining our

¹⁴ May 10, 1984, "Black Women Poetry," session three

¹⁵ July 15, 1984, recording of Audre Lorde poetry reading in Amsterdam

¹⁶ July 19, 1984, "Poet as Outsider," session eleven

¹⁷ 1984, "Black Women Poetry," session two

relationships to each other. Healthy and authentic relationship building requires this level of participation – from self to the critical work of actively contributing to a just society.

You will never find the bridge until first you recognize what is different. Plumb that difference. Examine it. And examine the feelings that go with that. You will find in those feelings that there are very much feelings you have also. You may have them out of different experiences but you have the feelings. If you try to have an easy connection of similarity it's not going to work.¹⁸

Poetry allows you to ask questions about your life in new ways:

...that until we can conceive of what has not yet been, until we can conceive of the shape of what is not there, we cannot fill it. Until we can feel beyond what we have been given, what we have found, what we have been told is right, until we feel a need, a desire, a sense of what does not exist, how then can we decide or even think of how to provide it? This is the function of poetry. This is the function of dreaming. Our ideas follow. Our ideas follow our needs and our desires. Our ideas follow vision.¹⁹

Poems are creative structures that illuminate particular voices, ideas, and visions of change we can make real if we are brave enough. Poet's experiences are unique, and poems can arouse emotions across time, place, gender, race, or other markers of identity. This both/and approach is a critical element when using poetry as a weapon to creatively validate difference.

To question what influences us is revolutionary practice.

epilogue

I can still hear Audre's voice in my head. She is demanding that I use my personal experiences to anchor these memories.

Post jet lag, I sat at my kitchen table convinced my decision to take this adventure while unemployed was a terrible, if not utterly selfish, decision. I was overwhelmed with the sheer magnitude of what I had absorbed at the archive and what I witnessed living in the Neukölln neighborhood in Berlin for three weeks – a length of time that was full of indulgent curiosity and conflicted privilege. My working-poor survival instincts were howling through childhood memories, present day economic anxieties, and an intimate awareness of no longer feeling brave.

Then I started to read the letters Audre and Dagmar sent to each other over the course of eight years.

In a letter Audre sent to Dagmar after her return back to the United States in 1984, Audre wrote:

Dagmar, I wish I could tell you in some way that you could REALLY hear how important who you are is, how important your work is that you do. For instance, without you this book and the literary really [sic] of Afro-German women writers, would not be coming into existence. ... but deep down you know what I mean, and it is your vision that glistens. It is that importance that I find you fleeing. Poor Baby. I hear the selfed bitterness with which you look back upon [...]. That is a habit you can rehearse yourself out of. Most of all, when you have a better sense of your own worth, you won't have to play the fool. Because you won't have to pay your way like that, and you won't be so scared they won't bother with you otherwise. You will be able just to sit quietly among them, and be, and

¹⁸ May 17, 1984, "Black Women Poetry," session four

¹⁹ May 10, 1984, "Black Women Poetry" session three

eventually they will come to you with what they want from you that you can truly give. Out of who you are, rather than out of who you think you must be in order for them not to take you seriously, or else they might destroy you.

My heart cracked open. I realized I had been sliding into a habitual feeling of wanting desperately to flee from trusting my self-worth.

The letters wove personal and heart-felt details about a mutual love for full moons and healing ocean sounds. Audre and Dagmar shared complexities from their respective and evolving personal, political, and professional relationships. They demonstrated the power and simplicity of acknowledging women who love women. Many letters were weighted by deep concerns to find a cure for the cancers ravaging Audre's body.

I felt a shift, an integration, of what I knew and what I had curiously discovered.

In the same letter from above, Audre continues:

Suggestion: Pick one specific and not tremendous thing you want to change, reminding yourself of your wonderful ongoing victories in not smoking a cigarette today, and yesterday, and last Sunday evening when you were low, and last Thursday morning. Pick one specific thing you want to change (I will be at TU every day at this particular time, and in order to do that I must walk out of the house at this specific time every day and I will let nothing interfere with that come what may.) Plan the whole scenario and act it out a few times consciously. See if you don't feel better gradually. But don't lacerate yourself. Evaluate what you set yourself to do, over a specific period of time, and see how you accomplished it, and when you didn't why, specifically, you didn't. I'm talking about behaviour [sic] modification towards order for those of us for whom order has some interior threat. In the absence of dealing with the core threat, I found I could learn something about the periphery and make some changes by picking out or two particular areas and making up a schedule for change, literally writing it out and sticking it up on my door.

Here was another lived and caring example of a poet's way where practice of self-efficacy advances a desired change!

The initial focus of this poetics inquiry focus was on finding strategies to make connections across differences. In Berlin, I thought about gaps of difference that seemed too much to bridge. How my lack of understanding German kept me isolated from the full spectrum of daily commuter conversations and when I finally accepted the truth that I was incapable of efficiently ordering my morning coffee at the train station. How fuzzy childhood memories of my German-speaking step-grandmother haunted my perceptions as I attempted to look comfortable moving through Berlin's sprawling neighborhoods. And always hyper-processing experiences of othering through the razor thin line of difference and sameness from an intimate and primary identity of being an identical twin.

We are the same and foreign to each other.

I think often about the cumulative effects of having worked over a decade inside ivory philanthropic towers and how that warped, for better and worse, my self-worth, self-efficacy, and pride in my work – paid and unpaid. My truth is that surviving poverty, abusive family patterns, sexual violence, and geographic isolation are structural roots that continue to influence what I believe is possible. I feel nothing but desire to pull the most invasive roots out and cultivate revolution in their place.

I know poetry can reduce the distance that analysis and rhetoric portend to bridge. That thought is quickly followed by another stubborn truth that my poetry still tends to feel most comfortable when it is coded to oblivion. Every poem I've written since returning from this poetics inquiry has attempted to expand a horizon of emotional connection.

I feel armed with an elegant plan.

It may sound hackneyed at this point to say it but the personal is political, and that there is nothing more political than being able to examine those things that we feel and learn how to use them. Because in the absence of that use, in the absence of that being able to touch those places within ourselves, we are always operating on the edge – as women, as human beings, as activists, as revolutionaries.²⁰

The outcomes from this poetics inquiry are many. I transcribed all three seminars into two notebooks that are filled to the edges of their margins. I dedicated a page and wrote five posts on cacheculture.com that unravel this poetics inquiry, with future posts infused with what I learned. I took hundreds of photos at the archive and of Berlin's expressive streets.

I carry memories of the way Audre's voice tilted towards redemption when she required conscious examination of one's culture and one's life. I can still feel that keen sense of awareness and how those revelations are now entangled in my dreams. I felt invited into her process, even 33 years later and 25 years after her death.

My hope is that you find your own invitation in this poetics inquiry and you take those feelings into your own conscious and expressed lives. Find your poet's way.

I wish you good luck in your living. I wish you power in your lives.²¹

²⁰ July 19, 1984, "Poet as Outsider," session eleven

²¹ July 26, 1984, "Black Women Poetry," session ten