

“Poet as Outsider” seminar

Audre Lorde
Freie Universität Berlin
5 March–26 July 1984

5 March 1984 (1:14:30)

Reads “Howl” by Allen Ginsberg

A poem is a thing – a piece that was created to have some effect. How a reader feels about [a] poem is a legitimate piece of a poem’s work.

The rumor that you can’t fight city hall is circulated by city hall. It is a position that only serves the status quo.

Despair serves not only the purpose of giving us an image of reality within our own poems and within our lives, it also serves to make us tractable, to make us function in a way that is designated for us to function...to do what is expected of you because why should you bother doing anything else.

You need only to be a functionary, a piece of the machine, this is a dangerous and self-destructive position. It serves the force aligned against us. [forces are the structures that militate against what is most human]

Poet as outsider – what is the function not that you be loved but that you begin something.

Poets are not in fact god.

10 May 1984 (1:33:57)

Anytime you read a poem the first question you ask: How does the poem make you feel? the only valid way to approach a poem

Reads “Blues for Sister Sally” by Lenore Kandel

[a student interprets the literal use of the word “holy” is suffering]

[Audre writes “word play” on the chalkboard]

Reads “Necrophilia” and “Nightmare #12” by Diane di Prima

We have a tendency to curl into the words.

I read it like a man. Why is being cool associated with male? What is intrinsically masculine about cool, external, threatening, bitter...

Poetry is the most highly concentrated use of language. Every word really matters but also so does the grammar. Relationship interferences, layers/level
first level: language, entry into feeling from the poem

Language allows

When I ask you questions, nothing is ever theoretical. If I say to you, do you know what I'm asking you? There is one of two responses I'm expecting: yes or no.

Poems of protest – an anger with what is, poet is recording something that must change.

How do we move [from] not changing the particulars of our lives to changing the structures upon which those particulars are based?

Poems can transcend the particular temporal aspects of it – as in movement of time
this may or may not be true for every poem.

A poem basically deals with experience.

We experience the world not globally but in fact ultimately – as I continue to yell and scream over and over again – through ourselves, through the self, moving through experiences, moving through pieces of that world. What the poem does, what I believe ultimately and most tellingly, is to recreate a piece of experience that will somehow speak to us across that gap of difference.

All Beat poets were vitally concerned with change and involved in changing the status quo, in their own particular ways. How as poets they chose to see their power or to see this change coming about is in fact what is different.

I do not believe either in poetry or in actual fact of our living that we can deal externally, that change occurs externally. I think that it occurs both poetically as well as socially. Slowly and internally from the inside out so that in fact any larger movement and larger change must happen first of all within the people who are involved.

Institutional outsider is not a threat. What is the sense of threat that those who do not reach that level?

17 May 1984 (1:33:56)

Understanding is a handmaiden. It waits upon your essential knowledge.

We need to recognize the difference between strong emotion and hatred. It is not anger, it is neither my anger nor your anger which is destroying us. It is hatred, woman hatred, hatred of everything that is essentially human in our environment, and that is very cold. Hatred is a death wish, and it is very cold. It does not shout, and it does not get angry, but it does kill. And you must learn to recognize the difference to know, because I speak heatedly and directly to you, I am not killing you. I am telling you something that is 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 or my feelings interfere with the hearing, with what comes across

If you are waiting to decide if you speak it will be effective, the time will pass...if you do not speak, you will have no effect.

We become strong by doing whatever it is we need to be strong. We have to take one little step, one little piece at a time in speaking up. You speak up in the safest place possible and you find – well it wasn't so bad – maybe the next time you take more of a risk. You don't always make the major decisions of our lives immediately, but we have to be in training for speaking...none of us are always going to agree with each other...you're going to have to speak out there [outside classroom] because to remain silent will be death.

This is my work. [doing readings, being a poet]

We wait to speak either until we are not afraid, or we wait to speak until we are sure we are right. But that's an assurance we can never have. As long as we are also able to change, as long as we don't become wooed or wedded to the thing, it is important to have an interchange. It is important to be able to verbalize and exchange with each other and to move along with information that comes back.

It's sometimes better to be wrong because somebody else might take a piece of what you are saying and go on with it in their heads to some place that will be useful.

[when a student asked if Audre writes exclusively for women during a debrief of her all-women reading in West Berlin] I write for as many people as can use the words I speak. I write for whomever and for as many people as can use the words I write and speak whomever they are. I write of my particular experience. I am Black. I am a Lesbian. I am a feminist. I am a woman. I am a mother. I am a daughter. I am a Socialist. I am an Anarchist. I could go on and on. I write for whomever can use what I write. I write specifically for whoever can use and deal with the things I say.

There is no such thing as universal poetry – another rumor to destroy our art and culture. Poetry is an art. It comes out of the lives and experiences of the people who create it.

There is no such thing as a value-free culture. There is no such thing as a value-free art. There is no such thing as universal poetry.

I would love to be in a world where we could only read love poems. I have stacks of them.

Aesthetics comes from a Greek word which means pertaining to the senses. It means the study of and perception of what is beautiful, things perceptible to the senses, the first and deepest meaning of aesthetics. It pertains to things material as opposed to things thinkable; aesthetics: there is more than one approach to the beautiful. What we consider to be beautiful is formed by all our experiences and in which the ways we have been trained to see affects our concepts of the beautiful. There is not one aesthetic contrary to the Western European culture.

Can we separate objective beauty from the beauty in function of a piece of art, in function of a poem?

Study what is beauty. How do we form our judgements of beauty?

Black aesthetics is an authentic voice that no longer looked to a white audience for humanness.

We cannot consider any piece of art devoid from its effect upon those who experience it. The effect of a piece of art is part and parcel of the ways in which we measure it, how we consider its aesthetic. When you look at something you believe is beautiful you must remember you were schooled to think that is. Straight lines are beautiful. There are cultures where straight lines are anathema, alien to nature. You were raised to believe that creamy white skin is beautiful. There are cultures where to be white is to be dead. These are measurements, these are cultural things. Remember people make art. Power defines culture...because power writes the books.

It is within the true outsider, the poet, who visions, who attempts what has not been, who measures an aesthetic not by an objective standard but by what feels beautiful, that has an effect that is useful and makes us more than who we wish to be, that a piece of art or poem is measured and that is the outsider position. That is a position that will always by definition challenge what has been acceptable. i.e. what already exists, what is comfortable, what has been defined as acceptable within a culture that is...governments by definition are reactionary, codified definitions of aesthetics are reactionary. They must be because they came from what has already been established, accepted, that there is a place beyond that, that we must look to, must examine, and

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begin to formulate before we have been assured it is correct. Since there are no patterns, no laws, to guide us to say – hey that is beautiful! – has it led us somewhere, somehow, better within ourselves, has it taken us to a place where we have not been able to go before, threatening or otherwise. This is what we ask of our art, of our poetry.

[Audre references *The Black Aesthetic*, edited by Addison Gayle]

It is essential to filter out what is useful and what is not [when culture has been defined as white and male]. This is a skill to be honed for survival.

31 May 1984 (1:33:47)

[note: the location of this session is at her house and was an extra session]

Poetry is not a luxury. It is a visionary architecture.

I don't consider whiteness as a fact. We deal with our Blackness in terms of survival. Blackness is a reality. Most white people do not think of their whiteness as a reality. They take for granted ice cream will be white and Jesus Christ will be white and that the church angels will be white, and that the bunnies will be. It takes whiteness for granted. What will happen if this were turned around as an illuminating thing? As white women you probably get what would this really means to me.

Poetry goes for the alteration of consciousness.

Poets as reflectors of the future. that you may be left uncomfortable enough
that something new be added

Reads "Poem at 30" by Sonia Sanchez

[Audre recommends book: *Understanding the New Black Poetry* by Steven Henderson]

We [specifically Black women poets] were insisting on the right to experiment with these forms (i.e. Black rhythms) ... themes of revolution as seeing through our lines as women. This created a lot of conflict. Accusation that Black women poetry was inaccessible because they spoke of being a woman and Black consciousness. We fought a tremendous battle

[Audre quotes Barbara Smith:] 'All the Blacks were men, all the women were white, but some us still had to be brave.' That was the position of Black women poets in the 60s and by and large the 70s also.

[students discuss translation of language versus the energy of the words and their associations with the number 30: disillusion, "life is finished," turning point, Saturn Returns]

In journalism, 30 is the symbol for end.

What all of the things you feel in a poem, don't try to make them all lie down together and become the same. They are very different.

"Poem at 30" is a poem of affirmation.

Black men and women rediscovering selves in 60s, lots of superficial writing of Black women as goddess. There was a false concept of the Black matriarchy.

Sociological belief that Black women had it really very good in Black families because they held power and that Black families were basically Black matriarchies. This was a total distortion of the realities within our communities and gave merely another out so that very frequently it was said that – well Black women work and that Black men can't get jobs so therefore – [tape break] their position in the revolution was prone, that is to say on their backs [tape break] and that this was something to be fought against within the context of any revolutionary movement.

It takes a while with any movement to see the enemies and attend to the threads.

There is always a kind of defensiveness between members who share a common oppression when they come to fight, have to work out differences between themselves.

"Poem at 30" is a passionate poem. It pulls for joining within the Black community which was not something easily seen in those days.

In America, Black people are about 11% of the population and we are a conquered people. If we speak of Black liberation in the context of the American society, to begin with I would say that disenfranchised peoples of the American society will turn it around. We must turn it around. We need, as within any revolutionary, and I use revolutionary meaning that we wish to bring about change from the way things are. Any revolutionary group must realize the differences of the groups within it but also their similar goals. As Black people we cannot afford the kinds of strictures that separate and divide us. The situation within the Black community is very, between men and women, within any disenfranchised community, is very different from the situation between white men and women, with the exception of the Jewish community because they are also within America, there is a tradition of joined struggle. White men and women have never had to join together against a common oppressor. What that does and certainly in the 60s there was a perhaps a much more naïve belief that it could be done on a direct one-to-one level but what is really necessary is that we recognize

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each other and be able to work together. What in fact that does mean, of course, is that Black women and Black men be able to recognize the things that have pulled us apart. But in the 60s and the beginning it appeared, well there were Black women who felt we can do this connection, let's reassess this connection, look at it clearly. It is not of course a question of self-rejection or self-abjection but so frequently Black women, as all women, have been schooled to believe if they try hard enough, we'll be able to bridge the gap. That's always a position of minority people. I think women believe we can educate men. Black women believe we can educate Black men, Lesbians and Gay men believe we can educate the straight world, and to a certain degree there is an amount of education that is possible, also there is a greater work that has to be done by whoever is defined as the dominant group. The ability to reach out and connect is a very real one and we MUST do it. We must do it within the Black community. It is not the job of Black women only, by any means. I think Sonia Sanchez and many of the better known Black women poets of the 60s believed that our power was best served only by reaching out. And they were in a terrible, terrible position. They were very brave, very strong, very magnificent women. They spent an enormous amount of their energy attempting to make contact with Black men who were not prepared to deal with them. I think that his poem [Love Poem #7] is an example of it. I think this poem is a step beyond [recording unclear]. I think it is a more realistic assessment of some of the realities that were happening in heterosexual relationships within the Black community. I think it reflects an enormous amount of pain and I think this is a very honest poem because Sonia Sanchez, no matter how heterosexual she is, is an honest poet. And this is one of the functions – this is what happens with poetry. Poetry can sometimes lead us inexorably 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 poetry as illumination. If you read this work, 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 causes a great deal of pain, but she is an honest poet and here is her poem. She is an honest poet because she has examined honestly her feelings and the situations of her life.

[short discussion about how the "Bogeyman" is translated as "Black man" in Germany]

[Audre sighs] I consider the whole question of what is politically correct and politically incorrect yet another whip that's frequently used to beat any particular person at any particular time into walking a particular road, not that the ideas are not very necessary, I think that in terms of personal concepts but the minute we develop a structure to which we demand the people adhere, what we do is cut down the possibilities of the kind of constructive envisioning, the kind of new creativity that is so necessary in any people, in any group, in any movement, in any time, in other words we have not yet arrived so long as we have not yet arrived. We cannot afford the kind of waste that

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happens when we demand that stricture within our heads, within our hearts, within our emotions.

[discussion moves into 1970s – working class women, Native American, Chicana “pre-feminist poets” and the essay “Teaching Lesbian Poetry In the Classroom,” concepts of aesthetics and the resistance]

The function of the poet is to make everyone uncomfortable, including ourselves.

[when asked by a student if she can smoke, Audre replies, “please dear” followed by “there’s a red squirrel on the window!”]

[when asked if anyone has ever compared male and female poets like Audre has, she wishes someone else would, her energy pulls elsewhere, wants to do more examination of dynamics between Black women. She did it with her “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” essay. She says, “That anger is so hidden and silenced.” She wants to do many other things.]

[discussion moves back to Bogeyman is coded as a Black man in Germany and the student’s childhood ideas]

In America, even among Black children racism is so endemic. Racism has been so thoroughly institutionalized that Black children are afraid of dark people also, that there is a gradation, the whole aspect of color has been one that has become really fraught with danger and that is something we have to consciously recognize and turn around. That’s one of the things that began in the 60s recognizing how so much of our children’s minds had been polluted against themselves too.

[Audre makes a reference to *This Bridge Called My Back*]

The terror of racism is how much is internalized among all the people themselves, in other words, one of the first mechanisms of destroying the people is getting them to testify against themselves. Getting Black people to testify against their own blackness, getting Jews to put down Jews, getting women to testify against themselves and their womanhood. There’s divide and conquer, then there’s testify against yourself, and those two things go hand in hand to keep people repressing themselves because you can’t police a whole nation. You can’t police a whole people. You can’t police a whole sex. What you do is build into the oppressed mechanisms that will make them police themselves and then you can go on off and run your country or bowl or golf or whatever it is they do and this in fact happens.

[in reference to Sonia Sanchez making homophobic remarks and her inflammatory poems that challenge heterosexuality] I go to poets that give me something that is real.

Poets with whom I can identify. Poets whose honesty I respect and admire and whose importance I recognize. We need to tolerate a lot of difference.

[Audre recalls personally spoke to Sanchez calling out her highly divisive statements against Lesbians and Gays in the Black community. She had hoped to help Sanchez develop a consciousness.] And basically, since we need each other, certainly as Black women, we can't afford that kind of destructiveness...we must meet on a lot of different levels, first of all because both of us have suffered a great deal from our positions, our insistence on speaking opposition, speaking very different positions. Sonia was, for about six years, a member of the Black Muslims [tape ends]

21 June 1984 (1:33:47)

Black aesthetic – the source of power, art that comes out of the experience of the Black community and comes out of the experience who create this art, not that it only functions for Black people alone but that the primary focus and power of it grows out of the experience of the writer who is Black, a consideration of what is beautiful and its effect on those who create art and those that experience it.

All poetry, when it is powerful, when it is used as a part of art and culture, must, of course, come out of the experience. It must speak from the position of a person who creates it. This does not limit poetry. This does not limit art. The concept that art does not exist in a vacuum is of course very, very old. It has been lost a great deal in the late 19th and 20th century but essentially our art is a function of our culture, and our culture, of course, seeks to improve itself. So, to the extent that the de-Americanization [reference to Stephen Henderson quote in *The Black Aesthetics*] of the Black people lies in the heart of the Black aesthetic. We can say the de-maleization, which is a coined word, lies at the heart of feminist poetry, lies at the heart of so much poetry. It's coming out of disenfranchised groups in North America.

[Audre defines disenfranchised] Those people who are not allowed to take full part in the decision-making of the group or society. I do not believe in the use of the term minority. So often when we speak of the American Indian, when we speak of Lesbian and Gay writers, when we speak of Black writers, when we speak of poor working-class artists, when we speak of these people, very often it is 'minority.' When we are not in the minority, as are very clearly all together in the majority. And the thinking that says Black people, colored people of the world, are a minority, working class people are a minority, keeps us always on the defensive. We are not so much a minority. We are disenfranchised and that is why that is a term I use. It is hard to speak of women, for instance in Switzerland for example, a minority. They are not. They are a majority. But they are disenfranchised. So are women in most Western cultures.

How does this [art] affect the beauty of the lives? How does this make us who created those who take it in, more who we wish to be, not an idea of what we are expected to be but what we individually wish to be?

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Establishment poets hold particular positions within the structure, a safe position, limited.

We bring about change by altering the old patterns.

I do not take issue with a vision that is different from my own. But as an artist who speaks from that vision, I want something that I can sink my teeth into, no matter how knotty or difficult it may be for me to deal with...or how difficult from where I am coming from. At least it is a communication that I can learn from. When I find an artist trapped in what he or she has done over and over again and yet that person says – I have a new vision, I have a new life – I must suspect it. I have to suspect it in myself. I find as an artist, as a poet, if I find myself repeating myself over and over again, over a period of years, I have to ask what am I lacking that I cannot speak from where I am? It's not the difference I argue with, it is the inability to speak from it.

[short discussion of Diane di Prima: Audre wouldn't call her a "feminist poet" but finds the process of her work fascinating]

Reads "Drank From a Cool Place" by Diane di Prima

There's always both sides of every coin. There is nothing that we cannot deal with either positively or negatively.

Because there are truths does not mean there are absolutes. The fact that absolutes do not exist does not relieve us of decision, it only makes decisions a little more difficult and a little more crucial I think.

Cool, a Beat term, was taken from a Black language/speech/slang (hip hop too). Cool is an old African concept. The moon is old and therefore wise. The concept of coolness is connected with wisdom and age, with the earth and the moon. This is a constellation out of Dahomean mythology (West African). Melville and Nancy Herskovits did a lot of research on this [African religion and mythology].

[in reference to Native American poets Audre admits material is hard to find, "non-existent," silenced]

Poetry is about revolution, the essential revolutions which are change of self, and no structure, no society is going to underwrite its own destruction. You must seek your own intellectual and spiritual nourishment. It will not be handed to you easily.

Reads "Deer Song" by Leslie Marmon Silko [Audre shares Leslie's background: Lakota Sioux, father's side, lived on Pueblo reservation (mother), filmmaker, won MacArthur fellowship, tells students to try to find Leslie's collection of stories: *Ceremony*]

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[The] United States of America has a way of destroying its artists in two ways:

- 1) By totally ignoring them and grinding them into dust
- 2) By taking them out of context and pushing them to a place where there is neither support nor contact and so we die literally from lack of nourishment

You must always be aware there are two ways to destroy an artist. And of course, we are worried about each other than not to be destroyed.

There's a difference between loving and being in love.

Non-Indian people speak of 'cruel nature.' That is a totally impossible concept to the American Indian, that nature be cruel. Nature is harsh and very painful. Cruelty is the infliction of pain without meaning. ... The American Indian says I recognize and play out in its appointed way and therefore learn to accept, not not-fight against it. The struggle is the ritual. The concept of cruel nature is not one that exists for American Indians. That's very, very important for instance when you look at the Sun Dance, when you look at what you call cruelty in their rituals, the ability to deal with pain as a part of living, as a part of a whole constellation of interchange, as part of nature is very, very real and it is part of nature. It is a place I don't think us get to very often to recognize it. Once again, in poetry to recognize perhaps its use [pain as a part of living] I think it is very important.

Reads "Hawk Nail to a Barn Door" by [unclear who the poet was]

5 July 1984 (1:33:30)

Within every group there is a subgroup. As we think of the poet as visionary, in every circumstance, there will be those people who have begun to see beyond what has been defined as the place from where they must write from. [Audre names this as an authentic power for the poet]

'Ordinary Women' poems are from working class, NYC multi-ethnic collective. Fay Chiang is one poet. *Yerba Buena, Poems and Drawings*. Extend level of individual horizon and group consciousness. Reading Chinese American poetry is infusion of Chinese history.

The position of the housewife is a white Western European construct originally because what it presupposes is a certain kind of security, a certain kind of structure that allow, that defines for instance a woman's place in the home, that allows enough financial security for one person to work and not two. It's a very economically secure concept. [references pioneer women who had "rough equality" i.e. women herding cattle]

[Audre makes a reference to Patricia Spears Jones poet, book *Black Sister: Poetry by Black American Women*]

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[last section of this recording is in German]

12 July 1984 (1:00:31)

Cannot dismiss the particular poet's experience which is the illumination of the poem – there is no such thing as a universal poem.

Lesbian poets are outsiders in another way.

Reads "Rhyme of My Inheritance" by Joan Larkin [from collection *Housework*, published 1976]

19 July 1984 (1:30:17)

Reads "Woman is Talking to Death #3" by Judy Grahn

[students want to discuss her women-only reading] It may sound hackneyed at this point to say it but the personal is the 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. ... We are always acting on the edge of someone else's time...in other words we are borrowing our power from the society, power from our family, power from the structures, power from city hall, but we never use those things that we have, we never learn to use what we have, and for me it is very affirming because I never feel more powerful, I never feel more in touch with the power of the women to who I read then when we are able to touch emotionally, when we are able to recognize that there are things we share and there are things we do not share.

If I had my druthers, I'd have a poetry course with 5 readings.

[When asked by a student: "What do you mean by power?"] When I speak of empowerment, when I speak of touching my power, or when I speak to you about having to do work to touch your power, what I mean is examining those places within ourselves that we have lived through, some of which are painful, some of which we are afraid of, but in other words, knowing for oneself what you want, what you love, what you don't like. How do you feel? What are some of the things you are capable of, and what are some of the things you are not capable of? I find, for me, that armed with those things I am more able, for instance, to act in any given moment in small ways and being able to act in a small way, I always use the example of being able to object to a cab driver who makes offensive remarks. There's an example because...cab drivers in New York always feel like they have a captive audience and when you are in their cab, they are then free to tell you their philosophy of life usually which is racist, sexist, homophobic, and for the most part you're sitting there, they're driving, and you may not deal. ... The ability to challenge a cab driver or a bus driver or someone in a

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store who has made a remark that may not be against you but against someone else that's the kind of training I'm talking about. That is empowering. That makes you able to stand when the important things come along. We can't do that out of a clear blue sky. We do it out of a constant self-scrutiny, a self-conscious approach to living. That's what I mean by developing personal power.

[students have been hearing Audre ask them "How does this make you feel?" for 13 weeks and still have silence] Who is going to ask you this question in a month? How will you integrate this into your arsenal?

Love, with a capital L, the abstract, the perfect, that somehow that it will make us safe and beautiful and protected and we come to lovers and it doesn't happen and we leave and we go on and on but the real loving, which is what really passes between human beings, which really passes between women, the responsibility, the recognition, the little pieces of strength, when they happen, using them does not get done. We leave much too soon to get the real loving done.

Love is one of those abstract words in that in general we keep away from in poetry because it is so abstract. Love is a name for something, and we have to make it real. When a poet as accomplished and is expert as Judy Grahn [author of "A Woman is Talking to Death"] uses an abstraction in the same way another poet uses cliché, it has a tremendous amount of energy because she's doing it consciously.

How do we love? What are the ways in which we touch real work of loving?

We are manipulated into silence. We are manipulated into impotence.

[in context to ending class on "A Woman is Talking to Death"] ...gridwork of power, gridwork of possibility, gridwork of strength that is called upon from that really sometimes wonderful, sometimes always difficult position of outsider.

26 July 1984 (7:03)

Reads poem by Joan Larkin ["Stop" ? – unclear from tape]