

THE PHILOSOPHY OF AUDRE LORDE: SURVIVAL AND SELF-SCRUTINY

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Course developed as an advanced BA seminar

Taught Winter 2022/23 at University of Hamburg Institute of Philosophy

Course Description

The US black feminist theorist and poet Audre Lorde is widely referenced and revered as a founding mother of contemporary feminism, queer theory, and anti-racist activism. However, she is rarely read as a distinctive and rigorous philosopher. In this seminar, we will read Lorde as a theorist who demands intensive study and deep philosophical reflection. Through close reading and discussion of Lorde's essays, poetry, speeches, interviews, and long-form writing, we will examine the cohesive philosophical commitments undergirding Lorde's thought. The seminar will examine Lorde's theories about selfhood and identity, the role of feelings in knowledge, obstacles and strategies for political coalition, "the erotic" as an epistemic and political resource, and the role of inheritance, trauma, and pedagogy in long-term societal change.

Central to Lorde's life and thought are the project of **survival** and the work of **self-scrutiny**. Lorde articulates a dynamic account of the survival necessary for anyone living "in the teeth" of antiblackness, homophobia, and misogyny. On the other hand, facing "the cold winds of self-scrutiny"—examining deep feelings and beliefs—is a prerequisite for building coalitions for resistance, especially when we benefit from oppressive social arrangements and find ourselves seduced into complicity. Across four units, this course will trace these two overarching themes through her work, while assessing how Lorde's insights retain vitality and relevance in the face of contemporary challenges.

This seminar values students' many different backgrounds and interests, and participants will be encouraged to identify strands in Lorde's work—both in her theory and her method—that can productively disrupt your own work in philosophy and in other disciplines. These Lordean interventions will be developed in writing assignments.

Reading Schedule

All readings by Audre Lorde unless otherwise marked.

- Week 1 Theme: Seminar introduction
 Readings: [1] Syllabus
 [2] "A Litany for Survival" (poem), in *The Black Unicorn* (1978)

Unit 1—Lorde as a sister outsider: "Which me will survive all these liberations?"

- Week 2 Theme: Anger and failures of solidarity in the feminist movement
 Primary Readings: [1] "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism"
 (1981), in *Sister Outsider*, 124–133
 [2] "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" (1979), in *Sister Outsider*, 66–71

[3] Kristie Dotson and Ayanna De’Vante Spencer, “Another Letter Long Delayed: On Unsound Epistemological Practices and Reductive Inclusion,” *Philosophical Topics* 46, no. 2 (2018): 51–69

Secondary Reading: Serene Khader, “Civility, Silence, and Epistemic Labor in Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*,” in *Neglected Classics of Philosophy, Vol. 2*, ed. E. Schliesser (2022), 239–59

- Week 3 Theme: Internalized oppression and the Black liberation movement
Primary Readings: [1] “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving” (1978), in *Sister Outsider*, 45–52
[2] “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger” (1984), in *Sister Outsider*, 145–175
[3] “Between Ourselves” (poem), in *The Black Unicorn* (1978)
Secondary Reading: Peace Kiguwa, “Training Anger with Accuracy: Audre Lorde’s Invitation to Black Women,” *Feminist Formations* 33, no. 3 (2021): 199–223

Unit 2—Knowing through feeling deeply

- Week 4 Theme: Self-definition and the power of naming
Primary Readings: [1] “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” (1977), in *Sister Outsider*, 36–39
[2] “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (1978), in *Sister Outsider*, 40–44
[3] *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name—A Biomythography* (1982), 1–48
Secondary Reading: Patricia Hill Collins, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images,” in *Black Feminist Thought*, rev. edition (1990/2000), 69–96
- Week 5 Theme: Feeling and knowing, the erotic as epistemic resource
Primary Readings: [1] “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (1978), in *Sister Outsider*, 53–59
[2] “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich” (1979), in *Sister Outsider*, 81–109
[3] Continue reading *Zami* from page 68
Secondary Reading: Amber Musser, “Re-Membering Audre: Adding Lesbian Feminist Mother Poet to Black,” in *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, ed. E. Johnson (2016), 346–361
- Week 6 Theme: Self-definition, feeling, and knowing (continued)
Primary Reading: *Zami*, through page 147
Secondary Reading: Patricia Hill Collins, “The Power of Self-Definition,” in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990/2000), 97–121

Unit 3—Lorde’s political philosophy and model of change

- Week 7 Theme: Difference as an engine for coalition and solidarity
Readings: [1] “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” (1980), in *Sister Outsider*, 114–123
[2] “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1979), in *Sister Outsider*, 110–113
[3] “I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities” (1985), in *I Am Your Sister*, 57–63
[4] SaraEllen Strongman, “‘Creating Justice between Us’: Audre Lorde’s Theory of the Erotic as Coalitional Politics in the Women’s Movement,” *Feminist Theory* 19, no. 1 (2018): 41–59
- Week 8 Theme: Lorde and the Black German movement
Primary Readings: [1] “The Dream of Europe—Remarks” (1988), in *Audre Lorde’s Transnational Legacies*, ed. S. Bolaki and S. Broeck, 23–26
[2] “Foreword to the English version of *Farbe Bekennen*” (1988/1992), in *I Am Your Sister*, 169–176
[3] “Black Women’s Poetry Seminar” (1984), in *Audre Lorde: Dream of Europe*, 19–74 (pages are small)
Secondary Reading: Watch “Audre Lorde Reading at Amerika Haus, 1984”:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZdlJcwgMuk> (33 minutes)
- Week 9 Theme: Internationalism and political action
Readings: [1] “Apartheid, USA” (1985), in *I Am Your Sister*, 64–72
[2] “Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report” (1984), in *Sister Outsider*, 176–189
[3] “Equal Opportunity” (poem), in *Our Dead Behind Us* (1986)
[4] Jack Turner, “Audre Lorde’s Anti-Imperial Consciousness,” *Political Theory* 49 (2021): 243–71

Unit 4—Survival and doing your work

- Week 10 Theme: Metabolizing fear and pain, claiming the body
Reading: [1] *The Cancer Journals* (1980)
[2] Re-read “Litany for Survival” (poem)
- Week 11 Theme: Self-care as an act of political warfare, capitalism, time
Primary Reading: [1] Jina Kim and Sami Schalk, “Reclaiming the Radical Politics of Self-Care,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (2021): 325–40
[2] “A Burst of Light” (1988), in *I Am Your Sister*, 81–100
Secondary Reading: “A Burst of Light” (1988), in *I Am Your Sister*, 100–130
- Week 12 Theme: The planetary scale of survival
[1] “Of Generators and Survival – Hugo Letter 12/89,” in *Hell Under God’s Orders* (1990), 202–215

[2] Angela Hume, “The Queer Restoration Poetics of Audre Lorde,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Literature and the Environment*, ed. S. Ensor and S. S. Parrish (2022), 204–21

[3] Alexis Pauline Gumbs (interview with Caleb Ward), “Audre Lorde on the Sacred Scale of Livability” (2024)

- Week 13 Theme: Inheritance and handing down tools for resistance across generations
Primary Readings: [1] Poems: “Prologue” (1973), “Sacrifice” (1974), “Generation” (1976), “Sequelae” (1978), “Timing” (1978), “Outside” (1978), “Dear Toni” (1973)
[2] “Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986,” in *I Am Your Sister*, 73–80
[3] “Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist’s Response” (1979), in *Sister Outsider*, 72–80
- Secondary Reading: Interview with Karla M. Hammond (1980), in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, 26–43

- Week 14 Workshop on student final paper exposés