

In whom can you trust?

On the memory of Josef Kahout, Jason Dewessenar, Eudy Simelane, Audre Lorde and other sister outsiders, some of whom look nothing like me

"To go to bed and to wake up again day after day besides a woman, to lie in bed with our arms around each other and drift in and out of sleep, to be with each other not as a quick stolen pleasure, nor as a wild treat but like sunlight, day after day in the regular course of our lives. I was discovering all the ways that love creeps into life when two selves exist closely, when two women meet."

— Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

I read these lines when I was in college and immediately connected with the beauty of her words. I have always been a sucker for good prose, for a well-crafted sentence, for the sticky heart stuff rendered clean and simple. And these words for me did all of that. And of course there was something deliciously radical for me in the idea of lesbian love – a straight feminist African girl living in America I thrilled at the notion of women falling in love. It seemed subversive and cool.

That sensibility of course is precisely the problem of hetero-normativity. Straight people like me think that being gay is a fun and quirky choice; or think that being gay is dangerous and twisted; a set of behaviours that can be unlearned, or that it's a phase that people will grow out of, or – as the exhibit we are here to view attests – something that we can torture out of people.

In many ways, Audre Lorde provided me with the steps towards liberation in this regard. She extended the idea of sisterhood to me but she cast the net wider than I thought was possible, so that today the concept of sisterhood for me is both metaphorical but also broad. I count James Baldwin, and Desmond Lesejeane, and Barbara Klugman and Steve Letsike, and many others as 'sisters' because of the solidarity I read in their and in their actions.

So although I initially fell in love with Audre Lorde words twenty years ago when I myself was a student, and was entranced by the superficial idea that her sexuality was a 'novelty,' I quickly realized that her real power was in exposing the intricate ways in which homophobia and racism and sexism and classism intersect.

So I turned immediately to Lorde's words when I was asked to speak today. It seemed fitting that she guide our thinking in honouring the memories of men for whom, "the mere suspicion of homosexuality was grounds for arrest." Men who, if charged, "could lose everything: their jobs, their homes, their honour, their freedom."

I am particularly struck by the fact that these men left behind their stories. That we have the privilege to hear about their bravery, their resilience and their anguish as we stand here on another continent, seventy years later. And this is a testament to the power of storytelling and resistance. I am also struck, as I look at their pictures, as I think about the holocaust and its

attempt to extinguish Jews, of Lorde's reminder that the fight against one form of oppression necessarily includes a fight against all forms of oppression. In her own words,

"I cannot afford the luxury of fighting one form of oppression only. I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group. And I cannot afford to choose between the fronts upon which I must battle these forces of discrimination, wherever they appear to destroy me. And when they appear to destroy me, it will not be long before they appear to destroy you."

So, I want to focus my comments today on this idea, on the notion that our struggles as human beings are interconnected, that oppressions interlock and that those of us who fight for justice cannot do so piecemeal, arguing only for our small group, our small patch. When we do that, we diminish our own credibility and we weaken the strength of our forces.

Lorde was remarkable because she was an academic and an activist – in equal parts. And she often spoke about "that piece in each of us that refuses to be silent." Indeed that refusal to be silent is the most important instinct that we have as humans. When a baby is born, one of the first signs of health doctors look for, is the infant's 'refusal to be silent.'

We are here today to open this important exhibit because once upon a time, when the Nazis thought that they could run the world, men were tortured for loving other men. They were tortured because they failed to live up to the Aryan ideal and that ideal excluded gays and Jews and blacks and so-called gypsies and many, many others.

We are here because those men lived through what was done to them, and they spoke its name. The refusal to be silent, it seems to me, in these dangerous times everywhere in the world from Russia to Nigeria to South Africa to Brunei to Uganda, is the only thing that will save us. And I say save here in both the moral or existential sense, and in the physical sense. The fight for the rights of lesbian, gay, and transgender people, is a fight against oppression in all its forms and it is a fight that is integrally connected to the struggles against racism and sexism that many of us belong to.

It is also a struggle that cuts both ways – I fight alongside those who are prepared to fight with and for me. The recent racist incidents at the Joburg Pride event raise serious questions about the extent to which some within the LGBT community understand the urgency of the fight against racism and class oppression which is such an important part of African LGBT activism.

In one of her most powerful essays, 'Sister Outsider,' Lorde wrote that "Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable (women - and you can substitute here men or blacks or whites); those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference -- those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, 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 master'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."

The masters tools will never dismantle the master's house. What does this mean in today's context of communities that are under siege? Whether that is in Marikana where a long and bloody fight that is mistakenly called a strike but is much much more is underway. Or in Tembisa where scores of lesbians have been killed in the last five years. Or in Diepsloot where two toddler cousins were found dead in a communal toilet. In all of these places, "of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable," must learn to recognize the connections between us. We must begin to understand that the net has been drawn very tightly around the definition of who will be protected, and who will be left to fend for themselves in the new South Africa, despite our good Constitution.

Gay folk may have Constitutional protections, but their murders will not disturb the government. Women may have constitutional protections, but their murders too seem not to mean anything to the powers that be. The poor may have their rights 'progressively realised,' but when they are angry because of that poverty, they are deemed to be enemies of the state.

So understanding that the masters tools will not be sufficient to liberate us is crucial. For us, living in a constitutional democracy, in which gay and black and poor and women people are killed with impunity and with a frequency that is breathtaking, it must mean that the legal strategies we have chosen to lean heavily on are an insufficient response to the terrorism waged against us. It means that we are using the master's tools and they are not working.

In Uganda, where the Anti-homosexuality Act has widespread support from ordinary people, the tool of calling for international outrage is important but totally insufficient. We are using the master's tools; we are using the polite language of human rights that rests on the rule of law. What does the rule of law mean when men make laws to oppress us? Surely then, we must recognize that the masters tools will never liberate us.

What then do we do? How do we begin to imagine using our own tools? Do we fashion them ourselves and if we do, how do we know that they will work?

In some ways, the answers are not new. The struggle is to remember that across the ages there has always been oppression, and this oppression has always been resisted. Today, because of the moment we find ourselves in – in a globalized world in which our cultures and histories and ways of living and being are condensed into a mainstream Western soup, it is easy to forget that the tools lie within our remembering. They do not lie only in court cases and street protests alone. These are important. But the key to fighting oppression lies where it always has, in the telling of our stories.

The older I get, the more I realize that resistance rests on the forging of communities. I understand more and more that the communities that we create comprise people who look like us, and those who don't. Those who don't look like us but become our brothers and sisters in struggle often do so because they understand that the circle of outsiders is one of solidarity. Sometimes they are simply there because they care – because they fell in love with one of us, or see something in themselves that doesn't fit inside the 'circle.'

Tonight we put ourselves in the shoes of men who lived fabulous lives in Berlin long before our parents were born, on a different continent and in a totally different context. We understand their lives because we recognize in them – through it all - a "refusal to be silent."

And this is where I want to end, with a lengthy but I think important quote from Lorde, on the importance of resisting silence. Reflecting on her breast cancer and the end of her life, Lorde wrote,

"I was going to die, sooner or later, whether or not I had even spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you.... What are the words you do not yet have? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own need for language."

I began to ask each time: "What's the worst that could happen to me if I tell this truth?"...Our speaking out will irritate some people, get us called bitchy or hypersensitive and disrupt some dinner parties. And then our speaking out will permit other women to speak, until laws are changed and lives are saved and the world is altered forever.

Next time, ask: What's the worst that will happen? Then push yourself a little further than you dare. Once you start to speak, people will yell at you. They will interrupt you, put you down and suggest it's personal. And the world won't end.

And the speaking will get easier and easier. And you will find you have fallen in love with your own vision, which you may never have realized you had. And you will lose some friends and lovers, and realize you don't miss them. And new ones will find you and cherish you. And you will still flirt and paint your nails, dress up and party, because, as I think Emma Goldman said, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." And at last you'll know with surpassing certainty that only one thing is more frightening than speaking your truth. And that is not speaking."

I thank you for listening and for being here.

References:

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