

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Week- 02

Lecture- 04

Illness, Storytelling and Embodiment Reading - Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*

Welcome to the second session of illness storytelling and embodiment where we will be looking at Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*. Now, in the last session, we saw how illness can disrupt and transform a sick person's life. Now, this transformation depends, of course, upon whether the illness was a chronic illness, on the social context of the person or to what extent the sickness stigmatizes the ill person. Now, Foucault has coined the phrase "techniques of the self" to talk about a set of processes that help constitute and transform the subject.

Now, for ill people, this transformation of the subject or this crisis of subjectification can be read in various ways. It is in this crisis of subjectification that we place Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals*, a work that was published in 1980 by a relatively obscure feminist press called Spinsters Inc. Born to West Indian immigrant parents in New York City, Audre Lorde went on to start writing poetry at a very young age. She graduated from Hunter College and Columbia University and pedagogy and teaching have always played a large part in her writing as well. She contributed to feminist theory, to critical race theory, to queer theory as seen in canonical essays by her such as "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House".

A self-declared black lesbian woman warrior poet, we will look today at Audre Lorde's or what one might call Audre Lorde's magnum opus, *The Cancer Journals*, which was composed post mastectomy as a treatment option for breast cancer. Now Lisa Diedrich has observed that the year 1980 when *The Cancer Journals* was actually published is the year that saw the emergence of the politicized patient. The politicized patient's voice acted as a counter discourse to dominant medical discourse.

Now Lorde's objective in writing *The Cancer Journals* was to provide a reclamation of the patient's voice and to break the silence around breast cancer which was often seen as a stigmatizing and shameful disease for women to have. Now the questions that she asks at the beginning of *The Cancer Journals* to set the scene for the work not only talk about her own relationship to her ill body but also talk about her embodied racial identity which she uses then to form a community. She asks and I quote, "How do I give voice to my

quests so that other women can take what they need from my experiences? How do my experiences with cancer fit into the larger tapestry of my work as a Black woman into the history of all women? And most of all, how do I fight the despair born of fear and anger and powerlessness which is my greatest internal enemy?" She speaks for the black lesbian cancer patient in America through her questions. Now, before we look at *The Cancer Journals* in more detail, we must first place this work in the healthcare context of 20th century America. Now breast cancer activism around the time was inspired by two concurrent movements.

The first is the Women's Health Movement of the 1970s and the second is AIDS Activism in the 1980s. Now the Women's Health Movement by itself was inspired by the publication of a pamphlet by the Boston Women's Health Collective called "Women and Their Bodies". Now as the title of this pamphlet says, this was an initiative by the Boston Women's Health Collective to inspire women to think about their relationships and their rights over their bodies which they could then use, inhabit and enjoy. Now the Women's Health Collective espoused for alternative resources of medical knowledge as compared to traditional medical knowledge and traditional medical treatments as such. This led to grassroots advocacy work on their part about medical rights, reproductive rights and they specifically also confronted corporations that chose to form alliances with medical institutions in the production of the contraceptive pill.

Now, the rise of breast cancer as the most feared disease in America soon and more prevalent among women as well soon led to the proliferation of breast cancer memoirs. Now, most of the narratives that came up or were produced during this time were inspired by the feminist movements that were occurring simultaneously in America. However not all of these narratives were feminist in tone. In fact, Barbara Ehrenreich calls quite a few of them the reasons for the ultra-feminisation of the cancer marketplace where the tone of these and the endings of these narratives were quite upbeat and chirpy and positive. Now the autobiography scholar Thomas Couser espouses this and in the same vein of thought talks about how the master narrative of breast cancer soon became illness narratives that had as their ending a positive note or a positive ending.

Now the problem with these narratives was that they were often written retrospectively and hence the condition of the ill person in the narrative or the condition of the narrator was not the same as the condition of the author. This then led to a universalising of the narrative and an elation of individual life stories that might not have ended quite as happily. However, there were also several other narratives that had a public agenda or a political agenda to them. Now, the theorist and philosopher Linda Singer has spoken about how the politicisation of the patient, which is a phrase that she coins to talk about the narratives that came up at this point of time, how the politicisation of the patient was

something that she espoused to avoid the isolation of cancer patients and to encourage a sense of community and constituency among them. Now it was narratives like Rose Kushner's *Breast Cancer: A Personal History and Investigative Report*, Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* and Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* that questioned hegemonic practices, examined the political implications of treatments such as reconstruction surgery and mastectomies and rewrote illness's equation with femininity, which would lead to the production of counter-hegemonic literary treatments of cancer.

Now Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* and Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals* were just published three years apart, however, there is a difference in the way both approach illness. Now while Sontag's is a cultural discursive study that chooses to show the different cultural perceptions of illness through the ages, Audre Lorde's is an activist study or an activist rendering of her experience where she uses her racialised, gendered, embodied experience with recovery and with disease itself to reach out to more people. Now one of the major frames through which we look at the cancer journals is to look at the illness narrative as a reclamation of language. Lorde's intention behind writing the cancer journals is to talk about the transformation of silence into language and action. For Lorde, the post-mastectomy woman's voice is important because it helps the patient, to make the patient visible to others and reclaim an identity which is taken away or reclaim an identity from a different identity that is imposed upon her or him by a dominant medical culture.

Now Lorde begins the cancer journals by talking about how women are often afraid to talk about their breast cancer journeys because of the fear of being reduced to a victim. She declares outrightly that the intention of the cancer journals is to break the silence. Now her work is about her own confrontations with illness and mortality. However, it also contains her meditations about cancer and consumer culture, about solidarity and about the friendships of women as such. So what Lorde is doing is that she is identifying and acknowledging a shared sense of vulnerability among women who have undergone the trauma of breast cancer and who might want to reach out to each other and form a sociality as such where they acknowledge each other's vulnerability and they help each other through the situation.

Now Lorde's narrative can be looked upon as a "quest narrative". Now this is a phrase coined by sociologist Arthur Frank where he talks about how ill people can see beyond the biological deterrence of the deceased to go on a quest for a refashioned identity, not necessarily the same identity that they have left behind when cancer struck them but refashion a new sense of self. Now as much as transformation is a fact of the quest narrative so is contingency. Now Lorde adopts contingency as a way of her life. She no longer looks at death for example as an alien concept but looks at how she might

integrate death within her life.

She understands that what's happening to her body is not natural and calls herself an anachronism, an anachronism that can now integrate death within her life neither ignoring death nor giving into it. Lorde accepts also her body's role as a "communicative body". Now this is again a phrase coined by Arthur Frank where he is talking about the ill person's body having a dyadic relationship with other bodies that it chooses to reach out and touch and hence to tell them to tell these other bodies or to help them recognize their own senses of embodied contingency. This imperative to reach out to a collective also helps us to situate Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* as a manifesto. Sidonie Smith who is another life writing scholar has outlined a practice for women's autobiographies to be considered a manifesto where they reject the universal subject.

She says and I quote, purposeful, bold, contentious, the autobiographical manifesto contests the old inscriptions, the old histories, the old politics by working to dislodge the hold of the universal subject through the expressly political collocation of the new. The quest story is thus marked by both an idea of transformation and the idea of contingency. Now Lorde invokes the strong women she knew and she knows every time she seeks solace from her own loss and hurt. Now, Lorde craves the company of other lesbian women who have undergone a mastectomy so she might know how they are dealing with this sense of reconstituted self. Now the women who appear throughout *The Cancer Journals* are many but some of the more important characters that crop up are her partner Francis who serves as a source of encouragement throughout and a little sister, a relative who has also undergone a mastectomy but who has never spoken about the mastectomy to anybody except Lorde.

Now this is the very kind of silence that Lorde is talking about breaking through her cancer journals. Now Lorde also invokes some women from mythology like the Amazonian archers who cut off their right breasts purposefully so they might become better archers. Now in comparing herself to these Amazonian warriors, Lorde looks at this transformation from being a casualty of cancer to a warrior who's ready to take this on. Now, Lorde uses the profound strength from this transformation to reach out with an ethics of solidarity to other women. She asks "Because I am woman, because I am black, because I am a lesbian, because I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work, come to ask you are you doing yours?" Here, Lorde is also displaying an acute awareness because she is also has a marginalized identity.

She shows an acute awareness of passing for what one is not. Now this passing brings us to the idea of the private, the image of the private self and the public self of the breast cancer patient. Now the distinction between the perception of private and public selves

brings us to the public preoccupation with the idea of prosthesis during Audre Lorde's times. Now the prosthesis becomes a major source of contention in the cancer journals. It is advocated by some recovery groups like Reach for Recovery that offer the prosthesis as a means for the patient to feel like they did before the surgery.

However Lorde's point is that the cancer patient will always know that they are not the same despite the fact that they are wearing a prosthetic device. Lorde's argument here is that the prosthetic device is only a means to put off full recuperation for the cancer patient to put off the acknowledgement of the loss that they have undergone and hence, to also delay the kind of important work that they should be putting into the reconstitution of a refashioned self. Now she is forced to wear a prosthesis when she leaves the hospital for the first time and it leaves her in tears. She refuses to wear one when she comes back to the hospital for a checkup and a nurse who had been very warm with her before disparagingly looks at her and condemns her as having brought down the morale of the other women in the hospital. Now this is something that Lorde does not understand but slowly begins to comprehend.

Lorde focuses on how every cancer patient post-surgery yearns for a self that was whole and that was unimpinged by cancer or untouched by cancer before the surgery. Now it is this yearning that recovery groups who are pro-prosthesis capitalize on, this yearning for an old self. Now feminist disability theorists can help us understand this better because of the comparison that they draw between the politics of appearance and the medicalization of subjugated bodies. Now Rosemary Garland Thompson has spoken about how western culture has always imposed certain norms of appearance upon women. This might be the Victorian manner of wearing corseted clothes in order to appear slim.

This may be the imposition of certain braces that women had to wear to prevent scoliosis which was a postural disease of the spine or it might be modern media's emphasis or modern media's espousal of cosmetic surgery itself. Now Thompson goes on to say that this politics of appearance converts the women's bodies not just into a spectacle, a spectacle that is subject to the onlookers gaze but also to a body that is pliable according to western cultures standards and norms of appearance and of beauty. Now when the nurse condemns Lorde for not having worn a prosthesis, she is actually condemning Lorde's refusal to confirm with these standards of beauty. Now Lorde ruminates about the image that society has always imposed upon women, especially upon women with breast cancer which defers them from thinking about the reconstitution of the self and doing the work of recovery. She says to imply to a woman that yes, she can be the same as before surgery with the skillful application of a little puff of lamb's wool and/or silicone gel is to place an emphasis upon prosthesis which encourages her not to deal with herself as

physically and emotionally real even though altered and traumatized.

This emphasis upon the cosmetic after surgery reinforces the society's stereotype of women that we are only what we look or appear so this is the only aspect of our existence we need to address. Any woman who has had a breast removed because of cancer knows she does not feel the same but we are allowed no psychic time or space to examine what our true feelings are to make them our own. With quick cosmetic reassurance we are told that our feelings are not important our appearance is all the sum total of self. Thus, the prosthesis encourages the black woman to only think of mastectomy as a cosmetic procedure thereby overshadowing all the other elements in disease and recuperation that can overturn the patient's sense of self. Now Lorde also notices some of the sexist language that creeps into advertisements about prosthetics where these advertisements claim that women can now go back to looking normal or go back to wearing bikinis.

Lorde understands that women are only looked upon as sexual objects or as objects that are meant to look pretty. This ties in with the larger notion of how women have systematically also been encouraged to feel shame or feel like they are the oppressors in situations where they are actually the victims. Lorde says "I must also separate those external demands about how I look and feel to others from what I really want of my own body and how I feel to my selves. As women we have been taught to respond with a guilty twitch at any mention of the particulars of our own oppression as if we are ultimately guilty of what-ever has been done with us. The rape victim is accused of enticing the rapist. The battered wife is accused of having angered her husband. A mastectomy is not a guilty act that must be hidden in order for me to regain acceptance or protect the sensibilities of others. Pretense has never brought about any lasting change or progress". Lorde also brings the reader's attention to the commercialization of cancer. She picks on the American Cancer Society which was the voice for cancer health care in America and which according to her while making a lot of profit spends only about or spends less than 15% of its profits on looking after cancer patients. Now Lorde posits that this is because cancer is a profit economy where profit lies not in prevention of cancer but in the treatment of cancer.

Besides, Lorde soon begins to hold her post mastectomy body as a larger symbol of a war waged by patients such as her against various different causes of cancer, including carcinogens or that are environmentally or socially caused and she says that her scars are and I quote "an honorable reminder that I may be a casualty in the cosmic war against radiation, animal fat, air pollution, McDonald's, hamburgers and Red Dye No. 2 but the fight is still going on and I am still part of it". She realizes that not wearing a prosthesis helps her defy the social norms that impose a certain identity upon the medicalized bodies

of women with breast cancer. She is also very different from Susan Sontag in the manner in which she has now adopted two metaphors. Sontag of course rallied against the use of metaphor to describe ill people. Now Lorde adopts these two metaphors that of the Amazonian warrior women and that of a war against cancer and war for cancer patients to engender her transformation from silence into language and action.

Now, these different forms of subjectification that of an intellectual feminist author, that of a black woman, that as a post mastectomy patient examining her own relationship with illness and that as a singular sick person standing in for the collective all help us to see that Lorde is actually enacting what Lisa Diedrich has called “the arts of being ill” or “the arts of doing illness”. Now this leads us to a discussion of the cancer journals as an assemblage. Lorde's *Cancer Journals* is a patchwork quilt of records from different media that Lorde brings together in her memories or through her memories. We have Lorde's diary entries interspersed with audio recordings that she makes and transcribes into the cancer journals interspersed with media reports that she pulls out to make a point, interspersed with her own observations in the form of an essay.

Now this blending of the journal and the essay form brings to us brings forth a particular point that Lorde wants to make about the private selves of women which do not come to the public fore and she adopts the traditional or the confessional form of writing when she does this, the autobiographical confessional form when she does this, but then she also intersperses it with public writing to bring together both private and public writing in *The Cancer Journals*. Now, not only is Lorde's work intra-textual but it also the influence of Lorde's work also extends beyond the memoir and makes us take into consideration another memoir that she published a couple of years after the cancer journals called *Zami- A New Spelling of My Name*. Now it is only in *Zami* that we get to hear of possible causalities of Lorde's cancer. Now, Lorde recounts her days as a 20-year-old working in a crystal reading or crystal cutting factory in Connecticut in Stamford, Connecticut. Lorde describes the whole situation thus:

“Most local people would not work under such conditions, so the cutting crew was composed of Puerto Ricans who were recruited in New York City and who commuted every morning up to Stamford on company - paid tickets. Women read the crystals on a variety of X - ray machines, or washed the thousands and thousands of crystals processed daily in huge vats of carbon tetrachloride. All the help in the plant, with the exception of the foreman and forewomen, were Black or Puerto Rican, and all the women were local, from the Stamford area. Nobody mentioned that carbon tet destroys the liver and causes cancer of the kidneys. Nobody mentioned that the X- ray machines, when used unshielded, delivered doses of constant low radiation far in excess of what was considered safe even in those days. Keystone Electronics hired Black women and didn't fire them after three weeks. We even got to join the union.”

Now, while Lorde does not talk about her own cancer in *Zami* after that and she does not talk about the factory in *The Cancer Journals* either we see how in *Zami* because of their social and racial positioning women are not able to read the cancer that would follow from their unprotected use of or from their unprotected exposure to these x-rays. Now we just place the cancer journals and *Zami* in a continuum here where we tend to read one in the light of the other. The literary form of *The Cancer Journals* also plays an important role in Lorde's success as a communicative body that exists so it may reach out to other bodies and give them a voice. The autobiography scholar Thomas Couser calls the cancer journals an edited personal essay from which she distills lessons that can be used of to others. Now as I've spoken about this form recapitulates Lorde's point about hiding away women's personal lives from public view.

She draws from both traditions to make her work outrightly public and to establish her voice in the public domain of publishing. Now I end by emphasizing how Lorde's work thus contains several inscribed identities that together form an identity assemblage exposing the various vulnerabilities of being a black lesbian woman with cancer but also paving a way for resilience among other women. Now the life writing scholar Sidonie Smith has spoken about the different or multiple identities that can exist in women's life writing. She talks and all of these can be seen in the cancer journals as well. So, Smith talks about the multiple narrating eyes and we can look at these in the retrospective accounts, the essays, the diary entries and Sidonie Smith also talks about the different cultures of production and dissemination.

Now this we can see in how Lorde actually weaves in a lecture that she delivered at a lesbian and literature conference and we also look at the fact that the book was published by a feminist press. Now, both of these agencies of production and dispersal bring in different identities of Lorde into the picture. We also see that these agencies can include cultures of storytelling. Now, this we see of course in Lorde's insistence that a narrative must exist for women to no longer be suppressed because women silencing is often associated with powerlessness or the imposition of power upon them and we see that there are finally agencies of reception, circulation, interpretation and afterlives which we see in how Lorde's legacy lives on and has influenced several other works after her. Now thus we see that Lorde's transformation of silence into language and action is one that is engendered by a form of the narrative itself, not closed into itself but one which opens the ill, vulnerable self out to others in a bid to move the larger community into action.