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ACADEMIC INTERESTS AND GOALS

My primary goal is to teach black feminist literature and theory as well as to advise black women college students. There are too few black lesbians out on college campuses, and these times are ripe for a testing of the waters. For several years, as a black lesbian feminist organizer, I have been traveling to speak at campuses all over the country. The dearth of "out" role models and advisers who can speak to young women of color is pitifully small. They clamor for us, and want to write and stay in touch.

I would also like to be in a position to take part in designing curriculum to make sure lesbians of diverse color, ethnicity and class are included in the canon when Lesbian and Gay Studies becomes legitimized within the Academy, as we all know will happen before much longer. My Ph.D. pursuit is to make sure that voices of lesbians of color are not struggling to be included once it's already too late.

In October, 1991, Audre Lorde, self-proclaimed "black lesbian poet feminist mother woman warrior," was named poet laureate of New York State. This was the latest in a long line of honors, including the naming of a poetry center after her at Hunter College, receiving an honorary doctorate from Oberlin, being named the first Thomas Hunter Professor at Hunter, and being honored by over 1100 women, men and activist youth from 23 countries in Boston in 1990.

Yet, in spite of all the accolades accruing to her; in spite of her 13 books of poetry and prose; in spite of indigenous people on several continents who praise her name because of her championing of their cause, Audre Lorde could end up going down in history without being named a lesbian by mainstream publications and press. To those of us who have been reading and teaching Audre Lorde for two decades, it may seem a fantastic statement. However, when one takes note of recent history, it has already begun happening to prominent black writers and activists who were well known as gay in their not-very-long-ago day.

All my life I had heard of Bayard Rustin, in addition to other great black leaders admired by the black community, such as W.E.B. DuBois, A. Philip Randolph and Paul Robeson. When I was a child, my older brothers belonged to the Young Progressives, and recruited us younger siblings to help them leaflet our Roxbury community and go door to door collecting money for the defense of the Scottsboro Boys. Bayard Rustin, a young man at the time, was my brothers' hero, so it was no surprise to me that throughout the years of the civil rights movement, Rustin would be out in the forefront along with Randolph and Martin Luther King, Jr. Nor was it a surprise that he would emerge as the strategist and organizer for the 1963 quintessential March on Washington, the one to which all other marches will evermore be compared.
However, it was my entry into the politics of the lesbian/gay movement, via the women's movement, that first brought me to awareness of Rustin’s gay identity. This welcome information helped me to hold on to the integrity of my position as a black woman who was also a lesbian with a need to feel equal validation in my struggle for social, civil and economic justice on all fronts.

Although his career as strategist, organizer and master theoritician of movement struggles spans many decades and has influenced millions of people, Rustin has a peculiar invisibility to the public at large. No one disputes his accomplishments. However, historians and journalists have systematically erased Rustin’s gay identity in spite of his own openness about it. His was a courageous stance during a time when there was no gay movement to support such a life.

Another courageous man and the first openly acknowledged black homosexual of the 50s that I was conscious of as a young woman was author James Baldwin. Yet, when he died in 1987, he was buried without acknowledgement of his sexuality in one of the hugest celebrations of a man’s life that has ever taken place in Harlem. The African drum procession was led by Nigerian drummer Babatunde Olatunji; his dearest friend Maya Angelou was in attendance, as was Toni Morrison, June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara and countless other celebrities. In a truly ironic twist, the master of ceremonies was none other than Imiri Baraka who, in the 50s when he was LeRoi Jones, had denounced Baldwin publicly for being a homosexual. Incredibly, not one word on his sexuality was uttered throughout a celebration of his life that took four hours. Black lesbian feminist publisher Barbara Smith, outraged, wrote an article in Gay Community News on the subject.

It is, therefore, not too fantastic a notion to posit that such a thing could happen to Audre Lorde who, although she is a giant in the feminist community, is not a mainstream artist, as Baldwin was. Before she became poet laureate of New York State, receiving her citation from the hands of Governor Mario Cuomo, I’m not sure I would have considered the possibility of any historian caring to wipe out her lesbianism. On reflection however, two points come to mind:

1) About a year ago, an article citing outstanding black women was published in Essence Magazine, a mainstream monthly for black women. (Essence had published Lorde’s article, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger," in the early 80s, in which she wrote openly about her sexuality.) In last year’s article, the small pictures and brief biographies on each woman included Audre Lorde. Neither in the statement about her nor in her words was there a mention that she is a lesbian, although she had been saying it for 20 years by then. (The same is true of Barbara Smith.)

2) Lorde was one of three women whom Senator Jesse Helms denounced in order to attack the National Endowment for the Arts for awarding grants to lesbians (The other 2 were Chrystos and Minnie Bruce Pratt.).
One would think that the public furor over being denounced by Jesse Helms would assure that history would not forget Lorde’s lesbianism. However, Helms also denounced Bayard Rustin on the floor of the Senate in a very public way in 1963 just before the March on Washington; newspapers all over the country wrote about his denunciation. Yet, journalist Nat Hentoff, in an article published in the New York Herald Tribune in 1964, writes of Rustin’s many arrests and jailings because of his pacifism, conscientious objector status, and testing of anti-discrimination laws without once mentioning, throughout a five page article, Rustin’s sexuality. In addition, in the 1987 Who’s Who in Black America, Rustin’s accomplishments commanded three times the amount of space that Martin Luther King’s did, yet there was no mention of the fact that his homosexuality brought him arrest and conviction on morals charges in 1954. The historians decide what’s important; and what makes them uncomfortable they simply ignore.

Standing, as does Lorde, as did Rustin, as did Baldwin, at the intersection of race, sex, class and sexuality, I feel a particular urgency to keep alive and out front Lorde’s self acknowledged sexuality as a central part of her existence. I have always intended to do a major piece of work on Audre Lorde, but for the aforementioned reasons, I have lately decided to focus on Lorde’s lesbianism as a positive force in her life and her work, and make that my Ph.D. project. She has been my major inspiration and influence since the mid 1970s, changing the entire course of my life. I can think of no more compelling project in which to immerse myself over the next few years. And I intend to publish it, doing my small part to keep alive not only Lorde’s work, but work about the openly acknowledged lesbian in Lorde’s work.

Lorde’s writing, published interviews with her, critical writings about her work, audio and video cassettes, a film now in progress, and personal interviews with and about her will constitute my research on "Audre Lorde, Lesbian in Life and Literature," which is my working title. I have all 13 of her books, many articles, and am constantly collecting more. We stay in touch with one another, so she is fairly accessible to me.