

**Exclusion and Prejudice From Within the "LGBTI Community" That  
Perpetuates Cycles of Discrimination and Violence**

Presented at Triangle/CGE workshop on Gender-Based Violence and Human Rights

10 March, 2010

By Yvette Abrahams

Commissioner For Gender Equality

Happy Pride Month, everybody! And thank you so much for inviting me to present this topic to you. I think it is one of the most important topics we can address. As the LGBTI community, although we are probably many more than we think, it would appear as if biology destines us to always be a minority. Because amongst the children of LGBTI people again, a minority are themselves LGBTI. This means that not only are we a minority community, but we are also a community that has to reproduce itself by means other than by birth. The way in which we bring new people into our community, and the way we teach them to be good LGBTI, has to in the main be through other than blood ties. This means that, although unity is important for any oppressed group of people, it is crucially important for us. We cannot hope to be strong as long as we are divided. When we act cruelly towards each other, we are not only weakening our own strength, but the very institutions and mechanisms which create and bind community. In these times, when LGBTI people are jailed in Kenya for daring to get married, when a bill in Uganda threatens to criminalize not only queer behaviour but LGBTI identity itself, and when our own Minister of Arts and Culture boycotts an exhibition of lesbian art on the basis that it is 'pornographic' and 'threatens the rights of children'; well in these times we shall clearly have to stand together or go down separately.

At first I thought I should do this paper about intersectionality (the way race, class, gender and ability divides us from each other and weakens us as a community). But on second thoughts I decided it was better to talk less about the structures in which we have to live our lives, and instead lay the emphasis on how we relate to those structures. So I am going to ask you to take the hierarchies on which this society is built rather for granted, to be aware of them but as a background against which our own personal dramas are played out. Instead I want to focus on the psychological aspect of LGBTI cruelties towards each other, and suggest that our cruel behaviour is

based on a hatred of self. Now this is not a very new idea, and I am going to expand on it based on the classics. I hope you don't mind me being so old-fashioned, I know there are lots of new and exciting things being written by young scholars in the field of "Queer studies". I wanted to present some of their work, but I doubt I will have the time tonight. So I thought why not start at the classics? And hopefully later on you can fill me in on what the young people are thinking.

My starting point, then, would be the work of Audre Lorde, and specifically her essay on hatred and anger published in 1984: "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger". Lorde in this essay argued that it is the hatred we meet from the outside world which causes us to hate ourselves, and we act out of that hatred to behave in cruel ways towards each other. She writes

"For each of us bears the face that hatred seeks, and we have each learned to be at home with the cruelty because we have survived so much of it within our own lives.

Before I can write about Black women's anger, I must write about the poisonous seepage of hatred that fuels that anger, and of the cruelty that is spawned when they meet. I have found this out by scrutinizing my own expectations of other Black women, by following the threads of my own rage at Black women, back into the hatred and despoliation that embroidered my life long before I knew where that hatred came from, or why it was being heaped on me. Children know only themselves as reasons for the happenings in their lives. So of course as a child I decided there must be something wrong with me that inspired such contempt."<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, Lorde is writing mainly about racism, and she takes us on a journey through many very painful episodes in her childhood where she was taught that her self and her skin colour<sup>2</sup> were an object of hatred. Now Lorde's logic is simple: children

---

<sup>1</sup> . Lorde, Audre *Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger* in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, The Crossing Press, Trumansburg, NY, 1984, pp. 146.

<sup>2</sup> . Because, as has often been said about Lorde, "...each part of the self she constructs is based on a sense of corporeal materiality that she attempts to render in both her prose and poetry... As a writer, Lorde is acutely aware of this indissolubility: She perceives her body as a text and is conscious of her texts as emerging from her body." Cf. Margaret Kissam Morris "Audre Lorde: Textual Authority and the Embodied Self" in *Frontiers - A Journal of Women's Studies* , January 1, 2002, pp.

learn by example, and if you expose a child to hatred on a daily basis, then you are teaching a child to hate. The child learns to hate first itself as obviously deserving of hatred, and then others because hatred becomes a legitimate mode of feeling and action. Lorde's biographer explains:

"She appreciated what internalizing all that hatred meant: every human interaction she had was tainted by the negative passions and intensity of its by products, namely anger and cruelty. She'd come to value the hatred of her enemies more than the love of her friends, because that hatred was the source of her anger, and that anger fueled great strength. Even more, anger alone, it seemed, kept her alive. But if that were true, Lorde reasoned, then ridding herself of the hatred of her enemies might also diminish the source of her power – which was anger. She saw anger as more useful than hatred, but limited."<sup>3</sup>

Of course, to a South African, this reasoning resonates with frightening intensity. I have seen comrades who have come through the struggle survive on hatred and anger, letting it motivate them and bring them through circumstances no human being should ever have to survive, to wage the liberation struggle which freed us. I have heard them say: "Do not take this hatred from me. It is what keeps me going". So I can understand why Lorde clung to her feelings. All the more reason, then, to admire her courage in writing "Eye To Eye". In this essay, Lorde trawled her psyche right down to its painful depths. In psychological terms one could say that she allowed herself to see herself fully and wholly, and insisted on being absolutely honest about those parts of her identity we are normally ashamed to show. She demonstrated an astonishing ability to accept those parts of herself we normally lie about – even to ourselves. In stepping away from her denial, Lorde made it possible for us to walk the same path towards self-acceptance and self-love.

Now Lorde was talking about racism, but I do not see why the same argument cannot be applied to homophobia as well. I have spoken elsewhere about my experiences growing up a lesbian child, who learnt very early on to keep a secret. When you as a child feel things which are to you perfectly normal and natural, like love for the same sex, but at the same time you are given a powerful message by society that these feelings are unnatural, disgusting, against God, destructive of the family and counter to the laws of Creation, you very quickly learn to keep your natural feelings to yourself.

---

..

<sup>3</sup> . De Veaux, Alexis Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde. W.W. Norton, NY, 2004, pp. 320.

You learn very young to hide your true self, to live a lie, and to manufacture an acceptable personality to the outside world. Relaxing, in the sense of being happy about who you are and how you love, becomes an unknown luxury to the LGBTI child. With time, all that worrying and hiding weakens you, and next thing you know, you have bought into society's values about you. You begin to believe there is something wrong with you, and that you are worthy of hate. The step from there to hatred and anger of others; to hatred and anger as a normalized, legitimate way of being, is not long. And if we do not take the journey Lorde took - from self-knowledge to self-love – we can easily end up being life-long abusers of each other.

There are differences, of course, between racial hatred and homophobia which must be emphasized. Because the Black community does increase by birth, and has access to the family and church as community-building institutions, it is able to be stronger and more resilient to self-hatred. In the LGBTI community it is often the family and the church which undermines us. Also the Black community must, by and large, of necessity lead a public existence. Most Black people cannot live in a racial closet. Again this gives it a "self-evident", or seemingly unconstructed status that serves to strengthen it. We, on the other hand, are often forced to build community with people who can not, or will not, identify themselves with us.

Finally, although we are like the Black community in that rejection from one of your own is ten times worse, and so we tend to be internally rather homogenous, as well as intolerant of diverse ways of thinking and being (yes! Just think of our internal prejudice against bisexuals.); still I would say that precisely because the forces holding our community together are so weak, this factor is ten times stronger for homophobia than it is for race. In other words, while racism out there may make Black people stick together and stifle dissent, this force is weaker in the Black community. So it became possible to develop, for instance, a strong Black feminist/womanist movement. The community was strong enough to tolerate dissent. In the LGBTI community, by contrast, homophobia out there still often makes acceptance and support of your own a matter of life and death. When children are thrown out of home and deprived of a right to education because of their sexual orientation, all they have is us. So we become afraid of disagreeing with respect, of enjoying open debates, and appreciating our truly kooky diverse selves. Of course that will breed resentment and misery eventually, which then will come out in fighting 9hatred as a way of life), and that in turn serves to weaken our struggle.

All of these factors, I would say, make the impact of homophobia much more devastating than racism in legitimizing hatred and anger as a way of life. Our job in creating a resilient community is simply that much harder.

But I have no doubt we can do it. It is hard work, slow and exhausting. My contribution is to remind us that a strong and loving community must begin in strong and loving selves. I want to end by reiterating the values I think are crucial:

- that hatred and anger cannot, must not, be accepted as a way of life. We need to remember the love of our Great Creator who made us, and constantly remind ourselves that when we begin to internalize the ways of the oppressor we are acting counter to Creation. We need to choose life, not a living hell.
- That we have to act continually to avoid the related values of the structures we live in: racism, sexism, and classism. In fact, like the KhoeSan of old, I think that any form of hierarchy is not acceptable. The principle of hierarchy itself is inimical and anti-life. It is also immoral.
- Lastly, that this work of self-discovery and self-redemption which we undertake is not for ourselves alone, but as I began by saying, is for the purpose of freeing ourselves from all hierarchies. In other words, I am not recommending navel-gazing for its own sake. I am saying 'put hatred, anger and violence behind you because between climate change and the need to put food on tables we really should not be wasting time or energy'. Again, this is just going back to our organizational roots. As Barbara Smith reminds us:

"Nobody sane would want any part of the established order. It was the system – white supremacist, misogynistic, capitalist, and homophobic – that had made our lives so hard to begin with. We wanted something entirely new. Our movement was called lesbian and gay *liberation*, and more than a few of us, especially women and people of color, were working for a *revolution*."<sup>4</sup>

Thank you!

---

<sup>4</sup>. Smith, Barbara The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 1999, pp. 180.