

PROFILE OF RESISTANCE

AUDRE LORDE

teacher, writer

*“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed.
But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.”*

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Background Information

Born February 18, 1934; Died June 24, 2015

Audre Lorde was born and raised in New York City. Her parents emigrated from Grenada. She received her bachelor's degree from Hunter College and a master's degree from Columbia University. She later taught at John Jay College, Hunter College and Tougaloo College. She is known as one of the most influential poets, essayists and writers of the 20th century. She gave voice to issues of race, gender and sexuality. Her work included a focus on the intersection of her experiences being a Black woman, lesbian and feminist.

Lorde's Resistance

Lorde became frustrated by the fact that none of the work she was reading in school reflected her own identities. She was inspired from a young age to start writing, and while she was still in high school, her first poem was published in *Seventeen* magazine. Later, she worked as a librarian for several years until she rose to fame with her first volume of poetry, *First Cities* (1968). She then moved to teach writing workshops in Mississippi, where she encountered the deep racial tensions in the South. These experiences inspired her second work, *Cables of Rage* (1970).ⁱ Within the poetry collection, she addressed issues of love, deceit and family and wrote about her sexuality in the poem, “Martha.”

Much of her work also had broader political aims, and in the poem “Power” she described her feelings after a police officer was acquitted in the shooting of a 10-year-old black child.ⁱⁱ Lorde's writing has inspired and empowered millions of people around the world. She is known for the passion and depth of emotion in her poetry and for discussing topics like social and racial justice.

Achievements

Lorde wrote many works, including *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973) and *The Black Unicorn* (1976). She co-founded, with Barbara Smith, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press to empower black women writers, as well as Sisters in Support of Sisters in South Africa to raise concerns about women oppressed by apartheid. Her many accolades include winning the National Book Award, receiving a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and being named New York's poet laureate from 1991-1992. She died from breast cancer in 1992, which she was able to write about before her passing in *The Cancer Journal* (1980), a renowned narrative confronting the silence surrounding cancer and illness.ⁱⁱⁱ

Essential Questions

1. When Lorde couldn't find poems that represented her experiences with her various identities, she decided to write her own. What identities do you hold that need more representation? What can you do to bring it to the spotlight?

2. Lorde wrote about a variety of topics she was passionate about: feminism, queer theory, race theory and more. What social issues are you passionate about, and what is your role in telling others about it?

3. *"When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak."*
 - a. What issues of injustice have you spoken out about even though it may have been scary? How can you inspire others to do the same?

ⁱ Editors, Biography.com (2019). "Audre Lorde Biography." Biography.com. Retrieved from <https://www.biography.com/scholar/audre-lorde>.

ⁱⁱ Editors, Poetry Foundation (2019). "Audre Lorde." Poetry Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/audre-lorde>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Editors, Poets.org (2019). "Audre Lorde." Academy of American Poets. Retrieved from <https://poets.org/poet/audre-lorde>.