

Audre Lorde

1934-1992

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(2020-22)



Poet and author Audre Lorde used her writing to shine light on her experience of the world as a Black lesbian woman and later, as a mother and person suffering from cancer. A prominent member of the women's and LGBTQ rights movements, her writings called attention to the multifaceted nature of identity and the ways in which people from different walks of life could grow stronger together.

Audrey Geraldine Lorde was born on February 18, 1934 to Frederic and Linda Belmar Lorde, immigrants from Grenada. She was the youngest of three sisters and grew up in Manhattan. As a child, Lorde dropped the “y” from her first name to become Audre.

Lorde connected with poetry from a young age. She once commented, “I used to speak in poetry...when I couldn't find the poems to express the things I was feeling, that's what started me writing poetry.” She was around 12 or 13 at the time. She graduated from Hunter High School, where she edited the literary magazine. After an English teacher rejected one of her poems, Lorde submitted it to *Seventeen* magazine – it became her first professional publication.

After working a variety of jobs in New York and Connecticut, Lorde studied for a year at the National University of Mexico in Cuernavaca. It was there that she grew confident in her identity as both a lesbian and a poet. Lorde then earned her bachelor's degree from Hunter College and a master's degree in library science from Columbia University. She worked as a librarian in New York City public schools from 1961-1968.

In 1962, Lorde married Edwin Rollins, a white, gay man, and they had two children, Elizabeth and Jonathan. Lorde and Rollins divorced in 1970.

During the 1960s, Lorde began publishing her poetry in magazines and anthologies, and also took part in the civil rights, antiwar, and women's liberation movements. Lorde published her first volume of poems, *The First Cities*, in 1968. That same year, she earned a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and became the writer-in-residence at Tougaloo College, a historically Black college in Mississippi. There, she discovered her love of teaching and met Frances Clayton, a professor of psychology and her partner until 1989.

Lorde's work was already notable for her strong expressions of African American identity, but her second anthology, *Cables to Rage* (1970), took on more overtly political themes, such as racism, sexism, and violence. It also included "Martha," a poem that acknowledged her lesbianism. Her third collection, *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973), was a finalist for a National Book Award for Poetry. Lorde's work is characterized by its emphasis on matters of social and racial justice, as well as its authentic portrayal of homosexuality and experience.

Diagnosed with breast cancer in 1977, Lorde found that the ordeals of cancer treatment and mastectomy were shrouded in silence for women, and found them even further isolating as a Black lesbian woman. Lorde felt that the narratives of coping and healing were designed solely for white, heterosexual women. In an effort to combat this silence and to foster connection with other lesbians and women of colour facing the same struggle, Lorde offered a raw portrait of her own pain, suffering, reflection, and hope in *The Cancer Journals* (1980). The book won the American Library Association's Gay Caucus Book of the Year Award for 1981 and became a classic work of illness narrative.

Lorde's cancer returned and she passed away in 1992. Shortly before her death, she participated in an African naming ceremony in which she took the name Gamba Adisa, it means "Warrior: She Who Makes Her Meaning Known."

