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Your Silence Will Not Protect You

A Tribute to Audre Lorde

Barbara Christian†

The phone rings. It is Lisa, one of the graduate students with whom I work. “Barbara, I have bad news.” Silence. “Audre Lorde just died in St. Croix.” I am stunned, unprepared, though I should not be. Audre has had breast cancer for many years. I know she now lives in St. Croix, my ancestral home, where the sun and the sea is invigorating her. The islands, her mother’s islands, would save her body, I had hoped. Lisa repeats again: “Audre died in St. Croix.” Silence. Then I say, “I will never see her again.”

I will always hear her though. For Audre left for us her work—words that many of us had been too afraid to speak. We had been taught that silence was golden, that it could protect you. Yet, as our daily lives and statistics proclaimed, we were steadily being attacked from within our homes, as well as from without. Audre Lorde refused to be silenced, refused to be limited to any one category, insisted on being all that she was: poet, black, mother, lesbian, feminist, warrior, activist, woman.

As I grieve her passing on, I cannot help but think of the irony that we split her into her separate parts: So many white feminist/lesbians respond only to her lesbianism; blacks to her race activism; literary critics to her poetic craft; mother goddess followers to her African goddesses.

Ah—Audre—if there is any tribute we can give you, it is to acknowledge all those parts of yourself without which you would not be you.

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In accordance with my cultural tradition, I light a candle, a gold-green one becoming black.

Love is a word, another kind of open.
As the diamond comes
into a knot of flame
I am Black
because I come from the earth's inside
take my word for jewel
in the open light.
—Coal

I remember the first time I met Audre. It was 1968. Both of us were then working in the SEEK program at City College, New York, a program designed to teach apparently uneducable Blacks and Puerto Ricans so that they may enter college. We were demanding our rights, insisting on structural transformation. I'd read some of her poems and was inspired by their sound and strength. In love with language, we talked about poetry, about protest, about social change.

I was just beginning to realize the sexism within the Black Power Movement and was grappling for the words to express it. Unity was the call word of the day, even if it was a false unity. The black revolutionaries we thought ourselves to be could not be fragmented by such trivia. I did not then know that Audre was a lesbian. In 1968, to be a black person and to be a homosexual (James Baldwin notwithstanding) was to be against the revolution, to be tainted by white evil.

An activist in the Movements, Audre insisted that she be accepted in her totality. She paid for that insistence; she was sometimes ostracized from social protest groups, or, if included, was regarded with fear or disapproval. She tells us in one of her essays:

Over and over again in the 60's I was asked to justify my existence and my work. . . . Not because of my work but because of my identity. I had to learn to hold on to all the parts of me that served me in spite of the pressure to express only one to the exclusion of all others.2

By the time I'd moved to California in 1971, Audre had published "Love Poem," which was clearly about sexual love between women. Like Martin Luther at Wittenberg, where he'd seceded from the powerful Catholic Church by tacking up precepts up on a wall, Audre, the librarian, had tacked her poem up on her office door for all to see. I heard the reverberations from coast to coast. Her insistence on speaking, whatever the consequences, became a model for many women, who had begun to realize that when the words "Black Liberation" were spoken, they were not referring to us, precisely because we were women. Like

other women, I had been mute, silenced by the black rhetoric of the period. Audre’s courage, her honesty, reminded us that we could not act for ourselves or others, if we could not transform our silence into speech.

if we speak we are afraid
that our words will be used
against us
And if we do not speak
we are still afraid
So, it is better to speak
knowing we were never meant
to survive.

—A Litany for Survival

It is 1978. I am listening to the radio on a Saturday as I clean the house. I have a child, am married, yet might as well be a single mother. I am writing a book on black women novelists and am known as a Feminist, yet feel troubled about European/American Feminism. Its puritanical tendencies do not relate closely enough to many people’s lives, our need to feel the connection between the pleasure we desire in our everyday life and the political activity necessary to change our lives. I hear a voice I think I recognize, a voice from the “Take Back the Night” feminist rally in San Francisco. It is Audre’s voice, articulating for us how the erotic energizes our lives, her words analyzing precisely how political struggle is connected to our understanding of our desires.

When we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.

In her works published during the 1980’s—her biomythography, Zami (1982), her two collections of essays, Sister Outsider (1984) and Burst of Light (1988), her nonfiction, The Cancer Journals (1980), her poetry collection, Our Dead Behind Us (1986)—Audre emphasized the intersections of oppressions—that racism, sexism, and homophobia, stem from the same source, from the inability to recognize the notion of difference as a dynamic human force which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self. Even those in search of social change tend to be intolerant of differences among their own constituents and thus recreate the societal pattern to which they are apparently opposed. Audre criti-

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4 Audre Lorde, The Uses of the Erotic, in Sister Outsider, supra note 2, at 53, 58.
5 See Audre Lorde, Age, Race, Class, and Sex, in Sister Outsider, supra note 2, at 114.
qued the racism of white women in the Women's Movement, the sexism in the Black Movement, and the homophobia amongst black women themselves. What she learned from her outsider position in society is that real change cannot occur unless we

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\text{stop killing}
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\[
\text{the other}
\]
\[
\text{in ourselves}
\]
\[
\text{the self that we hate in others.}\]

Her analysis of this fear has had ramifications for our thinking on just about every area of life, from sexuality to education, from the meaning of identity to political coalitioning. A poet-thinker, Audre's work enlarged the race and feminist theory of that period, so much so that the concept of Difference as a creative force, is today, as "natural" a part of our analyses of the world as the concept that oppressions exist.

The last time I saw Audre was at the peak of the Divestment Movement at UC Berkeley. On May 14, 1985, Sisters Against Apartheid put together a Poetry Meeting to honor our sisters in South Africa. Together with the Native American poet, Paula Gunn Allen, the Japanese American poet, Janice Mirikitani, and the Chicana poet, Cherrie Moraga, Audre Lorde commemorated the significance of women in the anti-apartheid movement, as well as the life-sustaining force of poetry in social change movements. It was an event that symbolizes so much of who Audre was. As she rose to speak with women from all over the world about an issue to which she had been unstintingly committed, she stressed the gift of learning to use one's own power:

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\text{It is important for black South Africans to know they are not alone. To know that our voices are being raised. It is a very lesson, too, to know that learning to use your power is not a free lesson; but an invaluable one, because to be able to know what it feels like to put all of who you are behind something you believe is a priceless present.}\]

In 1978, Audre learned that she had breast cancer. She could not be silent, as so many women had been. She wrote *The Cancer Journals*, some ten years before the media would acknowledge that breast cancer is virtually an epidemic in the U.S. I last heard her voice in 1988, when she spoke at Stanford University. By then, she knew that the cancer had metastized to her liver. She spoke not of loss but of blessing: That she had been "blessed to believe passionately, to love deeply and to be able to work out of those loves and beliefs." In working out of those loves and beliefs, Audre Lorde clarified for us the many that each of us is. Rejecting the false myth of homogeneity, she championed the complex

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sensuality of life in her poetry, her essays, her activism, her loves, named it a blessing, and gave that blessing to us.

I began this tribute with the words of a young woman student, for I believe it is this generation that has most felt Audre’s power as a visionary, a soul changer. Her work is working in them.

Black mother goddess, salt dragon of chaos, Seboulisa, Mawu. Attend me, hold me in your muscular flowering arms, protect me from throwing any part of myself away.

—A Burst of Light

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9 Id. at 110-11.