

# The Power of Voice

by Stephaine Novak

*"Perhaps for some of you here today, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am Black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself: a Black woman warrior poet doing my work? come to ask you, are you doing yours?"*

Though she isn't nearly as widely recognized as Martin Luther King or Sojourner Truth, the importance of Audre Lorde's life and writings are undeniable.

Lorde, as she described herself, was "Black, lesbian, feminist, mother, warrior, poet" and most of all, a visionary. Through her writings she put into words the problems that had no names and suggested ways of overcoming those problems.

Audrey Geraldine Lorde was born on February 18, 1934 in Harlem, New York City. She was a precocious child and, upon discovering books, began devouring them quickly. The youngest of three, Lorde was willful from the beginning. She dropped the 'y' from her name when, during penmanship practice, she decided that the letter was not aesthetically pleasing.

Lorde crossed racial boundaries by becoming friends with white people, much to the dismay of the black poets who, with her, were members of the Harlem Writers' Guild.

Despite being somewhat familiar with the lesbian scene, Lorde married Edward Rollins in 1962 and with him, had two children. In 1968, she was given a grant by the National Foundation of the Arts to act as a poet in residence at Tougaloo College, a historically black college in Mississippi. It was there that she met Frances Clayton, a blonde haired and blue eyed woman. The connection was immediate, and it was with Clayton that Lorde found her life partner. The marriage with Rollins ended in 1970.

As a black, lesbian woman, Audre encountered and fought racism, sexism, and heterosexism. She also fought those 'progressives' who excluded others. As a black woman, she noticed when black men tried to keep superiority over their women,

causing a division within the community. And as a feminist, she noticed when the white feminists of academia left out the experiences of non-white women. When Mary Daly published the book *Gyn/Ecology* and focused her arguments on the experiences of the white woman, Lorde responded.

In a letter sent to Daly, Lorde wrote: "The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences? To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our differences."

Lorde emphasized that there were distinct differences between people and argued that the differences must not be forgotten, nor should they be merely tolerated. It is through understanding differences that bridges begin to form between people, be they black/white, lesbian/straight/bi, or male/female.

Lorde, who died in 1992 of cancer, but racism, sexism and heterosexism still exist today. The battle is ongoing. Change won't happen by sitting back and waiting for it to come. Change isn't easy. As Lorde told the poet Adrienne Rich, "Putting yourself on the

line is like killing a piece of yourself, in the sense that you have to kill, end, destroy something familiar and dependable, so that something new can come, in ourselves, in our world."

It is, Lorde argued, from the visibility which makes us most vulnerable that we draw our greatest strength. This February, as you celebrate and reflect on the African-Americans who have worked to effect change, I want you to consider what you can do to help pave the road towards equality. Talk to people, share your stories, write down your experiences and share them.

But don't stay silent. Question your motives, look at the world around you and where you see injustice? Fight it.

