

AUDRE LORDE

b. February 18, 1934 – d. November 17, 1992

“When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”

A self-proclaimed “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,” Audre Lorde dedicated her life to combating social injustice. She helped found Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, the world’s first publishing company run by women of color.

Lorde was the third daughter of immigrant parents from Grenada. She began writing poetry at age 12 and published her first poem in Seventeen magazine at age 15. Lorde was strongly influenced by her West Indian heritage, which she explored in her autobiography, “Zami: A New Spelling of My Name.”

In 1954, Lorde attended the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), where she solidified her identity as both a poet and a lesbian. She entered the Greenwich Village gay scene after her return to New York in 1955. She continued her studies, receiving a bachelor’s degree from Hunter College in 1959 and a master’s degree in Library Science from Columbia University in 1961.

Lorde worked as a librarian while continuing to write and publish poetry. In 1962, she married Edwin Rollins. The couple had two children before their marriage dissolved. Much of Lorde’s poetry written during these years explores themes of motherhood and love’s impermanence.

In 1968, Lorde received a National Endowment for the Arts grant and published her first volume of poetry, “The First Cities,” as a poet-in-residence at Tougaloo College in Mississippi. That same year, she began a romantic relationship with Frances Clayton that lasted until Lorde’s death in 1992.

Rich with introspection, Lorde’s work contains extensive sociopolitical commentary. As a lesbian woman of color, Lorde asserts, “I have a duty to speak the truth as I see it and to share not just my triumphs, not just the things that felt good, but the pain, the intense, often unmitigating pain.”

Lorde explored her long battle with cancer in her last work, “The Cancer Journals” (1980). In an African naming ceremony shortly before her death, Lorde took the name Gamba Adisa (Warrior: She Who Makes Her Meaning Known).

Audre Lorde confronted racism, sexism and homophobia with a direct and unrestricted literary voice.

