

Audre Lorde: remembering our sister outsider

by Adrian Harewood

MONTREAL (CUP) — A very special person in my life passed away on Tuesday, Nov. 17th, 1992. Audre Lorde died of liver cancer at her home on the island of St. Croix after a decade-long struggle with the disease. She was 58 years old.

I never had the privilege of meeting Audre in person. I never had the opportunity of squeezing her hand or giving her a warm embrace.... but I must tell you that she still managed to touch my soul.

It might seem curious that I call her Audre rather than Ms. Lorde, when I respected her as much as I do. She was a friend I could turn to for guidance, support and inspiration.

I could open up *Sister Outsider* or *Burst of Light* and consistently feel I was being challenged and educated. She possessed that special quality Malcolm did, to constantly stretch the imagination, alert you to the endless possibilities available if you only scrutinized your sensibilities.

She alerted us to our power. I realize now how she was such an anchor for so many. I am certain she would have wanted me to call her Audre.

How to describe her? She was truly a sage — a sage in the tradition of Maya Angelou or Toni Morrison, James Baldwin or June Jordan.

As a Black Lesbian mother of two children, in an inter-racial relationship, she was constantly struggling to combat the hostile forces that preyed on her family's vulnerability. She was a crusader for the human rights of all African people in the diaspora and at home.

Indeed, Audre Lorde stood up for all oppressed peoples of the world.

"Lorde stood up for all oppressed peoples"

She called herself a Lesbian and Black African Caribbean American woman staked out in a white racist homophobic America.

While there was a wonderful lyricism and fluidity to her poetry and prose, her work retained the type of poignancy and incisiveness that always made it fresh, powerful and relevant. She used language with the

kind of economy and force that commanded your attention.

There is a tremendous void left, now that she is gone, and I am unsure who will assume the responsibility and mantle for progressive leadership she so deftly carried for three decades. I am desperately searching for someone capable of unifying the diverse audience that Audre was able to touch during her lifetime.

But she would quickly warn me against hero-worship, especially of herself. It is our duty to continue working for positive change. The idea must not die with the messenger. We don't have time to put our fate in the hands of some future messiah.

I can finally understand though why Dad felt so lost when James Baldwin died. I can now relate to the footage of the distraught faces of the women and men of Harlem right after learning that Malcolm had been murdered — it was the type of pain and despair that comes with the realization that a sincere, decent person had been lost. Audre exuded a serenity that affected all those who came into contact with her.

The woman had dignity. She was soulful to the brim.

Audre demonstrated how necessary it was that we come together to fight oppression at all levels. "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle," she said in *Sister Outsider*.

No form of subordination ever stands alone. Racism must be fought at the same time as homophobia, sexism and

own vices, yet she admonished us to remain accountable for our actions. No one is immune from oppressive tendencies.

Audre Lorde never ran away, like so many of us, from difference. Difference represents a tremendous creative force for change. It is a resource best used to provide us with energy, life-force.

Audre never cajoled, but she did urge, coax us out of our silence.

She understood that silence is often caused by "our fear of censure, contempt, annihilation", yet she recognized our silence is ultimately futile. It is imperative that we transform our silence into language and action. Only then can we grow, liberate ourselves from the shackles of our oppression.

Her own struggle with the breast cancer ultimately leading to her death was not a silent one. Her journals documenting the fight for survival millions of women have endured introduced many of us to the pernicious politics of breast cancer.

In a world saturated with hate, betrayal, resignation and apathy, she was a symbol of what we could be. She was not a saint, very few of us are. Audre Lorde was very human.

If Malcolm was our "shining Black Prince" as Ossie Davis so eloquently put it, then Audre truly was us all.

This is not a "me first" kind of revolution

classism. We have no excuse to postpone genuine emancipation. Black liberation is just that: Liberation of all Black people. This is not a "me-first" kind of revolution. This is definitely a "we" revolution. Yeah.

Audre was a woman deeply committed to her people, despite often being shunned by her loved ones because of ignorance. Many of us were not prepared for what Audre had to tell us.

She would never argue that all oppressions were equal. The extent of your oppression is defined by the number of choices you have at your disposal. But at some level we all have options available to us. Audre never condemned or chided us. She was never afraid of displaying her

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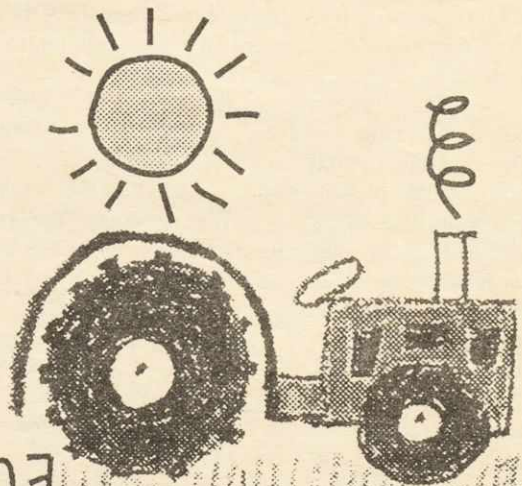
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