Audre Lorde was, as she described, “a black woman warrior poet” who was born in Harlem and lived from 1934 until her death in 1992, after a 14-year struggle with breast cancer. Lorde was, in many ways, a survivor who worked to end the many silences in black women's history. As a mother, lesbian, feminist, African American, and a cancer survivor, Lorde reflects the multiplicity of black women's existence.

**Breaking the Silence**

It is the connection between the silence about black women's history and black women's continued oppression that Lorde's work examines. Dating from slavery, black women's sexuality was owned and used by white slave owners in two main ways: for the reproduction of wealth and labor through enforced pregnancies, and as an outlet for white men's desire in a system where white women were seen as chaste. Thus, enforced mating, pregnancy, childbearing, and rape were routine experiences for black women under slavery. Furthermore, marriages between black men and women were outlawed under slavery, making it impossible for black women to be “respectable.”

Even after slavery ended, the systematic lynching of black men, women, and children as well as Reconstruction prohibition of relations between whites and blacks contributed to the continuation of a daily pattern of social dominance. The enforced use of black women's sexuality under slavery, compounded by generations of sexual violence, together meant that black women must not only struggle against multiple oppressions from the exterior, but they must also contend with a legacy of silence from within. Lorde's writing shows a collective, institutionally enforced silence for black women that is accompanied by an individual, psychically enforced silence within black women themselves.

Audre Lorde's autobiographical narrative, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, tells the story of a black lesbian woman coming to consciousness through a history of traumatic violence toward black women. There are several instances of abuse in her narrative: from the white monsignor at her Catholic school, against her friend, Gennie; from her father; and from a man in a neighboring apartment when she is a young woman. The results of these incidents manifest themselves in the inability to feel or speak about them, or feel grief at her father's death. In telling her story, Lorde is also telling the collective history of African women under colonization and slavery, as well as the collective history of all women and girls, like Gennie, who suffer from sexual abuse. In speaking out about her silence, she intends to provide a model for collective and individual healing.

**Dreams of the Past and Future**

Lorde's entire life's work can be read as an attempt to learn and teach how to dream, learning how to remember the pasts that one would rather forget, and to speak of the dreams that scare one to silence. In poems such as “Suffer the Children,” “Rites of Passage (to MLK jr.),” “For Each of You,” and “Equinox,” Lorde teaches that learning to dream the future is only possible by learning to speak through the silence of the past.

Lorde's concern with silence shows that paradoxically, it is only through the very act of speech that there is any hope for the survivor. First, silence can only be overcome by speaking, and furthermore,
such speech must come even in the face of fear. Second, there is the silence that results from a history of collective, institutionalized sexual violence enforced upon black women, as well as individual and traumatic sexual violence. As Lorde writes in *Black Mother Woman*, “I learned from you / to define myself / through your denials.” These silences are both external and internal, both collective and individual, and the speech that overcomes it must occur at both levels.

**Silence Overcome by Speaking**

This is the third important aspect of Lorde's writing: silence can be overcome by speaking to someone, and that this act of speaking can lead to a regeneration on both the individual and collective levels to bring healing. Her essays are often given first as speeches that she writes for a specific audience. Her poems, likewise, are like letters, written to specific people.

In the poem “Chain,” from *The Black Unicorn* (1978), Lorde moves from assessing the effects of a violent, collective history coupled with a traumatic, individual history to suggesting that conscious motherhood can be a way to heal from these histories. The poem testifies to African American women's collective past as Americans and as survivors of a traumatic history through the story of little girls, sexually abused by their father and made pregnant, then forced to return home by the courts. These children in the poem exist as traumatic, dreamlike memories. However, this poem not only serves as a reminder of unresolved, unacknowledged trauma, but it also shows how to testify through oral, plain-speaking dialogue, with frequent repetition and discharged emotions that might otherwise overwhelm the speaker or listener.

The mother speaker not only addresses the daughter/children, but also the readers, as she commands twice in the first section to “look at the skeleton children / advancing against us.” The command is repeated by the children who ask their mother to “write me a poem” which can provide them with the language they need to speak “the lies” of what happened. The children of this poem look to the mother for language, just as children of trauma survivors need their parents to tell the story of the trauma. Beforehand, the silence of the trauma is like an elephant in the living room, which family members walk around but never discuss.

Speaking in this poem is presented not as an option but as an imperative for healing for the next generation, as the children ask the mother about other secrets the previous generations have survived; otherwise, the silence will cause the pattern will be repeated in subsequent generations. In the poems, parents also feel that they must tell what happened in order to heal themselves. The wound of a traumatic history that this silence represents then becomes a substitute for love. Lorde's work testifies that a mother's silence is indeed not love, and then goes on to pose the question: is it possible for a mother in our generation be able to love her daughter differently, or will she continue “to love her / as you have loved me?”

**Man Child**

In her 1979 essay *Man Child*, Lorde was among the first to discuss an issue that troubled many feminists and lesbians: how to raise male children and accept the roles they would take on as men. She argued that her job was to help the male child become the adult he is destined to be, and that she could both love him and let him go. She also spoke against excluding male children over a certain age from feminist separatist gatherings (a common practice at the time), because she was responsible for his education and he was just as necessarily a part of the future world as her daughter.
See Also:
African Diaspora, African American Mothers, Anti-Racist Mothering, Cancer and Motherhood, Intergenerational Trauma, Lesbian Mothering, Literature, Mothers in, Poetry, Mothers in

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