Poet uses forum for a message

Applause is common in the meeting rooms of the state government complex.

Aides are quick to show appreciation for their bosses, and advocates are eager to show their approval for people advancing their points of view at the endless hearings that take place.

And just about anytime the governor of New York enters a room there is some degree of recognition, even if it is purely out of respect for the office.

But that applause and recognition usually goes to men-white men as a rule—who enjoy some modicum of power.

Wednesday the applause was different.

It showered on a small black woman, a lesbian, a feminist, a mother, daughter and visionary, who writes poems of “elemental wildness and healing, nightmare and lucidity,” according to one critic.

Andre Lorde was honored with the Walt Whitman Citation of Merit, making her the state poet for 1991-93.

The outpouring of affection for Lorde was different than the usual fare served up in the hearing rooms of the Legislative Office Building.

There were two heartfelt standing ovations that- unlike the rowdy receptions given to pop stars—were respectful.

What made the appreciation of the poet even more interesting is that Lorde was supposed to be little more than the opening act to the main event: Norman Mailer and Mario Cuomo.

Mailer was honored as the state author. For 43 years he has taped on the cutting edge of American literature, and his 1,310-page novel, “Harlot’s Ghost,” was published recently. But Mailer has become a caricature of himself—

Yeah, I know Cuomo. I met him once at Jimmy Breslin’s wife’s funeral. Good guy. If he runs, I’ll support him. I think I met him one other time."

And the governor lately walks through these ceremonies like a man who has other things on his mind.

It was not, however, by default that Lorde rose above the occasion.

A 57-year-old New York City native with 17 books to her credit, she managed to add dignity to the occasion.

There was an elegance and eloquence about the woman that seemed out of place in a government building.

Most important, when Audre Lorde rose to accept her award and say a few words, she had something to say.

While Mailer talked about himself, and Cuomo talked mostly about Mailer, Lorde used the opportunity to talk about apartheid and the work that still needs to be done, here and abroad.

"The price of one Stealth bomber, already outdated, is more than the entire federal appropriation for all the arts," she said.

"We live in a world full of intense contradiction."

She reminded people that—from Bonn to Baton Rouge—racism and religious intolerance has become the order of the day.

"The fall of the Berlin Wall was supposed to represent a new era of peace in Europe," said Lorde. "Yet not since fascism have the streets of Berlin been so unsafe and horrifying for Jews, black Germans, foreigners, people of color."

She talked of a Ku Klux Klan leader recently returning from Bonn, terming successful his efforts to whip up anti-black sentiment.

And a former Klan leader who may soon enjoy one of the highest honors he can achieve in his home state of Louisiana.

"So I accept this award in the name of all the poets, the oppressed, the disenfranchised, silent people of this state.

"For the poets who write on scraps of newspaper in homeless shelters, in prisons, in mental wards, on squad cars and after grueling hours of work.

"I accept this award in the name of those folks who see and experience the enormity of the forces aligned against all that is human in all of us... the ones who see all of this and still refuse to give in to despair."

"It’s not that what she said hasn’t been said before.

It’s just that it doesn’t get said often enough, particularly in the halls of government.