Audre Lorde on "The Book Show"
Interviewed by Tom Smith, Director of the NYS Writers Institute
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**Smith:** Welcome to *The Book Show.* I'm your host, Tom Smith, of the New York State Writers Institute, which is located at the University at Albany and part of the New York State University system. My guest today is a poet of compelling power and honesty, Audre Lorde.

**Lorde:** Thank you, Tom. I'm very pleased to be here in Albany. "The Black Unicorn."
(reads poem)

**Smith:** Thank you, Audre. It has been said of Audre Lorde, and I'm quoting, "Refusing to be circumscribed by any simple identity, Audre Lorde writes as a black woman, a mother, a daughter, a lesbian, a feminist, a visionary, poems of elemental wildness and hewing nightmare and lucidity."

which chronicle her struggle with breast cancer and her mastectomy, published in 1980, and then *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, a novel which was published in 1982 and *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 1984.

She was a co-founder of Kitchen Table Women of Color Press and Audre Lorde has just been designated as the official New York State Poet for the next two years by Governor Mario Cuomo. Audre Lorde, welcome to the Book Show, and congratulations. We in New York state are proud and privileged to have you as our state poet. Audre, I'd like to ask you, going back to the beginning, going back to your roots as a child growing up in New York City, you read poetry, you recited poetry, I think you've said you communicated really in poetry. When and how did you know you were a poet? That the vocation of poetry was your true vocation? How did that happen?

**Lorde:** While I was in high school, Tom, I knew that writing poetry was a lifeline for me. I think I did not really begin to think of myself as a poet until I went to Mexico, which was shortly after I graduated from high school. I was about 19. Up to that point, from the time I was about 15 on, I knew that writing poetry was something I would do all of my life. I didn't know whether it was going to be central or not. While I was in Mexico... I really made the connection between things I felt most strongly and a real urge to express them in words that could make something happen, and that's the closest that I could formulate this process at that time. It happened there, and I knew that it was something I had to do. Knew it was something I had to do. In the same way that in 1968 when I came back from Tugaloo and Martin Luther King was killed, I knew that teaching was something I had to do also.

**Smith:** You're a teacher in your poetry and prose, and of course you have been a teacher in the classroom over the years. In my introduction, I quoted from Adrienne Rich, another very powerful poet. What that quote indicates is that you have written from a number of angles of vision. Yet your own poet's voice, your own persona, is very distinctive. How did that develop as a voice? I mean the unmistakable Audre Lorde
voice. All these other guises of you, all these other parts of your life, and yet it's heard. Do you hear a poem before you start to write it, or what?

Lorde: Tom, you know I went to high school and we read a lot of poetry. I had a feeling of what I wanted poetry to be. I knew the poets who really spoke to me. I remember Pablo Neruda, Edna St. Vincent Millay, T.S. Eliot. They made me feel a certain way. Their words did something to me, and that was the kind of poetry I wanted to write. But I was not them. So the stories that I had to tell, things that I wanted to do were very different. I remember reading acres, reams of poetry that I felt, "Well, other people say that this is poetry, but this isn't what I think is poetry." In many respects, I defined what poetry was in the absence of it for a long time.

Smith: Your poems have always communicated an eloquent anger, an indignation at injustice and oppression of all kinds, be it racism, sexism, homophobia. Oppression all over the world, whether South Africa or South Bronx, or where. But they are controlled poems. Your rhetoric is highly controlled. It's hard, in other words. How do you shape poems like that? Because I think a lot of us, including me, when I feel exercised by something, I sputter. I write it down in my notebook and then I'm embarrassed the next day. But you have that wonderful capacity, so that the savage indignation is there yet the poems are beautifully shaped. How do you do that?

Lorde: A scream is an expression. I scream a lot. But a scream is not a poem. As I say to my students all the time, in the same way a poem is not life, it's a use of living. A poem is a use of emotion. What I'm interested in doing is not merely having you, reader, hear my scream of anguish. I want you to feel my anguish. In order to do that, I have to go into that anguish and take the pieces of which it is made and somehow arrange them in a way that they will grab you and not let you go. That's how I do it: by trial and error. By continuing to do it over and over again until I can make you feel what I'm feeling. It's not only a question of expressing what I'm feeling, it's making you feel it.
Smith: What you're describing is certainly the strategies of art. The trick is to make it feel to the reader as if it's spontaneous, that you just thought of it and there it is. Yet at the same time it has to be something that's very artful.

Lorde: But a part of it is being able to get into you. To know what makes you run, what makes you tick, what makes you respond. I have to be inside of me, knowing what it is I'm feeling and wanting to communicate, and I have to somehow be inside of you, too, knowing what will make you respond.

Smith: That brings up a number of things about your poems that I've particularly been moved by over the years. You also write, in addition to the poems of angry injustice, you also write tender and very honest love poems. Whether it's between parents and children, mothers and daughters, those poems speak to many people. You also write wonderful love poems to women. Do you feel that writing as a lesbian, as you do, gives you a very special perspective of human love in general?

Lorde: Oh, well yes. Yes, I do. Loving women has given me a very special view of life and of the world, as well as of love. Also the opposition to my loving women has also taught me a great deal. I write love poems the way I write poems of protest, the way I write all of my poems. As I said, being able to get into as many people as possible who I hope will be able to respond and be able to feel what I want them to feel.

Smith: You certainly do that.

Lorde: Poetry, as you know, we're in the business of altering feeling. That's what makes poetry so subversive.

Smith: Bridging, bridging chasms between people.

Lorde: Bridging and subversive, yes.
Smith: Do you think you could read another short poem, maybe one of the tender ones? There are a lot of ones that I would select. "Sister Outsider" is one, but any one that you might like, or "Who Said It Was Simple."

Lorde: "Who Said It Was Simple."

Smith: Why don't you . . "Who Said It Was Simple."

Lorde: (reads poem)

Smith: Thank you, Audre. Let me tell our listeners that my guest today is poet Audre Lorde, author of *The Black Unicorn, Chosen Poems Old and New* and *Our Dead Behind Us*. All of those books are available by W.W. Norton and should be in bookstores or all libraries. Audre, people, particularly women, have been moved and helped by your *Cancer Journals*, which were first published back in 1980. How did those journals come about? What did you want to accomplish with them?

Lorde: There's a little secret line in the *Cancer Journals* somewhere, I think I remember putting it down, where I say, "I can't be going through all of this just for myself. I've got to be able to make something of it." That's how the *Cancer Journals* came about. I knew when I found out that I had cancer, I knew that I needed help dealing with it. I went looking, and there were some things written by women, but not very much. There was nothing written by black women. There was nothing written by a black feminist. There was nothing written by lesbians. So in some respects I felt that I was doing it alone. I knew that I could either look away from it and pretend it wasn't happening and let it happen anyway, or I could really do what had become native to me by that point in my life, which was go deeply into any experience to find out what the core of it is, what the truth of that is, what there is for me to learn in it. Once I did that, I realized this can't be just for myself. I've got to put it down. Somehow, there are other women who will want
to know what I'm feeling. They may be feeling something entirely different, but they need to know that this is legitimate.

It is legitimate for us to speak out of our pain, out of our terror, and out of the strength that comes from dealing with that pain and terror. It is legitimate and we have a right to do that. I hoped, as I said in the Cancer Journals, that that would be a beginning of a whole Dewey Decimal System new number of books that deal with women's experience with cancer.

**Smith:** A number of people I've heard say that the Cancer Journals exorcised a kind of fear of cancer, didn't speak particularly to their fear. I'm a gray-haired, white, 60-year-old grandfather, and I think we all have this sense that cancer is a lonely and shameful experience. I've heard people say, black and white, men and women, the Cancer Journals opened that up.

**Lorde:** Really opened. I'm so glad. That's what I wanted to happen. I wanted to say, "We who suffer experiences need to talk about them." We need to talk about them not only for ourselves, but for other people. We need to say, "This is what is happening to me, and this is how I feel about it." I think that it's a very empowering act for anybody.

I'm really glad. I've been very affirmed by how many different people, people who are not black, people who are not women, who have in fact responded to me, have written and said, "This has been very important."

**Smith:** Another one of your particular missions: the Kitchen Table Women of Color Press. You were one of the co-founders of that with your friend, the writer Barbara Smith, who I believe is located, of all places, right here in Albany.

**Lorde:** Right here in Albany.

**Smith:** What's the mission of Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, and how's it going?
Lorde: Well, thanks to Barbara Smith, Kitchen Table Press is still a going, thriving reality. But it is very, very difficult in these times, certainly, to maintain a press that is dedicated to publishing and distributing the works of various communities of women of color across this country. That is our mission: to really take voices from communities of various women of color, black women, Latina women, Native American women, Asian-American women, and listen to what they are saying and, if possible, help this material get out into their communities, into other communities.

It's been wonderful and very, very difficult. As I say, if it was not for Barbara Smith, I think that the press would not have lasted now for the ten years it has. When I think about the things I have been involved with in my life, Kitchen Table Women of Color Press is a very bright star.

Smith: Indeed it is. Incidentally, before we start running out of time, would you read another poem for me? Let me fish around here for one I like. This is from the *Our Dead Behind Us* volume. "Sister Outsider," that's fine. There's a couple others in there I love, but why not "Sister Outsider"?

Lorde: "Sister Outsider." This is the poem that gave the title to my first collection of essays. (reads poem)

Smith: Thank you, Audre. I'm talking with poet Audre Lorde about her art, about her career and about her ideas. Audre, you've been such a passionate outsider all your life, I guess. Certainly as a poet. You've been a minority voice within a minority voice within a minority voice in some respects. How does it feel, at long last at this point in your career, you're the new, official New York State Poet? How does it feel to get this mainstream recognition from the state of New York? What particular obligation from your various constituencies do you feel is involved with that?

Lorde: I have always felt that there is something in my work that is bound to offend everybody at one point or another, and I feel that that's a piece of my strength. Being named the state poet of New York is, I think, an illustration of that fact that we live in a
world of intense contradictions. I feel that this is one of the contradictions that I can really grow from.

I feel it's very important for poetry to have as wide a voice as possible. I believe in poetry. I believe in poetry as a weapon for change. I believe that not until we can get into the heads and hearts of as many people as possible and alter the stock reactions that we've been encouraged to have, are we going to be able to bring about change. It is slow, but it is inevitable. I believe that poetry is the weapon that will do that. That's why I say it's so subversive – because we're in the business of affecting feeling.

I think being named State Poet of New York can only encourage or increase that audience. Not only for my poetry, but for the poetry, as I said, of all the disenfranchised, silenced and oppressed people.

**Smith:** That is truly the majority of the citizens, whether it's New York state or the country, are the disenfranchised, are the silent voices. You mentioned a little while ago W.H. Auden, and I think it was his phrase at the beginning of the second World War – that “poetry changes nothing.” Poetry changes nothing. Do you think poetry can heal? As we speak now, in my lifetime, I don't think I've seen such racial bitterness, such alienation, such suffering in communities ever. Do you think poetry can not only bridge certain chasms between people but can heal the deep wounds, whether it's racism or racial bitterness, or just a general alienation between rich and poor in this country?

**Lorde:** It's not such so much a question of "can poetry heal wounds" as "can poetry encourage us to see and to understand how the other feels in what is happening, what is going on?" To make change then inevitable because it feels right. I feel that what poetry does is enable us to get into each other in a way that nothing else can. Yes, I think this does have to happen.

I have to tell you, I don't agree that poetry changes absolutely nothing. I think poetry changes the people who really feel it and who really read it and get into it. I think that is what happens before any external change comes about.
Smith: Do you feel, whether as a poet or as a human being, optimism that some of these wounds will be healed in this country?

Lorde: I feel great optimism. I feel great optimism, but it is not an optimism that's based on airy, fairy fantasy. I think that we're in for very, very difficult times. I think the times have gotten hard, and I think they are going to get harder, Tom. I don't know whether change. . . I'm quite sure at this point that it probably will not become effective within my lifetime. I hope it will become effective within my children's lifetime. But I do know that change is coming. If we can keep this globe, if we can keep this earth spinning long enough, if we can keep the ozone from tearing apart, if we can keep from wiping ourselves off the face of this earth, change is coming. And it is coming because there are more and more of us, the small people that are demanding that it happen. As I travel all over the world, I have seen people of color, small groups of people saying, "Listen. This is not right. You've taken our land, you've used it, you've abused it, you haven't paid us for it. Give it back." We want to try another way, whether it's women, whether it's the South Sea Islanders, whether it's people in the Caribbean, whether it's black Germans, Afro-Europeans, they're saying, "There has got to be another way." That's the movement. That's the flow I'm going with. I believe in that. Yes, so I do feel optimistic. But it's going to be difficult.

Smith: You said in your very, very moving, powerful acceptance remarks when Governor Cuomo gave you the award, you said toward the end, "All of us know how little there is to lose. Not how much there is to lose, but how little." If that is not a clarion call, I don't know what is. Audre Lorde, congratulations once again and thank you for your eloquence and your honesty and your art. This is Tom Smith saying so long until next time on The Book Show.