# Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches Study Guide

## Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Plot Summary

Sister Outsider is a collection of essays and speeches by Audre Lorde, a black lesbian feminist more widely known for her poetry. Most of the works in Sister Outsider were presented or published between 1976 and 1983 and range from travelogues (Notes from a Trip to Russia, Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report) and letters (An Open Letter to Mary Daly) to academic papers and presentations. Audre Lorde uses all of these forms to explore race and sex issues and the anger, guilt, and fear that may result from internalizing a skewed system of values.

Several themes are prominent in Lorde's essays, one of which is a deeply-held distrust for the prevailing American system of values, which she believes promotes racism, sexism, homophobia, and a host of other ills. With material profit as its core, this value system discourages the exploration of the self in favor of unquestioning adherence to societal norms. Most minority groups, of course, are not included in these norms. Exacerbating this is the fact that most minorities are relatively powerless figures in the economic sense. Worse still, the structure of society, Audre believes, encourages division and infighting in minority groups, keeping their power to a minimum.

Oppression is a major theme in all of the works in Sister Outsider. Audre illustrates her disapproval for various institutions that she sees as oppressive through her unusual system of capitalization, in which, for example, "Black" is capitalized while "america" and "christian" are usually not.

Audre Lorde is a unique figure in that she does not fit neatly into any minority group, making her a sort of "ultimate outsider." She acknowledges this, clearly identifying herself as "a forty-nine-year-old black lesbian feminist mother of two, including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple" (Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference, p. 114). This mixed identity opens her up to criticism from all sides, and because of this Lorde is able to recognize prejudice in many forms. Unlike other feminists of her time, she focuses on more than sexism, identifying racism, sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism as simply different forms of the same societal ill.

Audre Lorde was well known in her time for the intensity and even anger of her writings. The essays and speeches in Sister Outsider make it clear that Lorde's anger is a response to what she sees as the fundamental injustices inherent in the society of her time.

Audre Lorde wrote or presented all the works in Sister Outsider between 1976 and 1983. Her main audience included her feminist contemporaries, women in general, and the black community, so she often addresses these groups specifically. Her essays are intended to challenge the reader and provoke thought, often on topics that are controversial even by today's standards. This book represents a collection most of Lorde's non-poetry writings.

# Notes from a Trip to Russia

## Notes from a Trip to Russia Summary and Analysis

In 1976, Audre Lorde made a trip to Russia as the American observer for the Union of Soviet Writers' African-Asian Writers Conference. This essay is an account of her travels and experiences over the course of this two-week trip. Lorde begins the essay by recounting several dreams she has had since returning from her trip to Russia. She states that in her dreams "Russia became a mythic representation of that socialism which does not yet exist anywhere I have been" (p. 13). She mentions that her impression of Russia is that of a place with different opportunities and challenges to offer than the United States.

In Section I, Lorde begins to describe her journey through Russia. She flies in near Moscow on September 10, 1976 and likens the overcast weather to that of her hometown, New York. She meets Helen, who is to be her guide and translator for the trip, at the airport. They travel the thirty miles to Moscow; Lorde checks in to the Hotel Younnost and has dinner. Lorde finds Moscow to be very similar to New York in atmosphere, though she notes that almost everyone is white, the subway stations are very clean, and strangers seem friendlier than in New York. Lorde begins to enumerate the ways in which Russia differs from America in this section. She notes that productivity in Russia is measured in terms of food rather than money.

In Section II, Lorde describes her second day in Moscow. She goes on a tour of the city with other conference members and is interviewed by a woman from the Union of Soviet Writers who is doing a study of what she calls "Negro policy." Helen, Lorde's guide, complains at one point of the "reverse snobbery" of the Russian working class towards those identified as intellectuals. Audre notes that Russians seem to talk about their lives fairly openly, and that they refer to World War II as the Great Patriotic War. She is interviewed in the evening by a man named Oleg.

Section III involves Lorde's journey south to Uzbekistan, then a part of the Soviet Union, where the conference will take place. She arrives in Tashkent, a city that reminds her of Ghana. She and the other conference members are greeted at the airport by a delegation of children. She notes that only four other black women are attending the conference.

Section IV encompasses the rest of the conference in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The city reminds Lorde of parts of Africa she has visited for both aesthetic and social reasons. She credits the state's official position against nationalism and racism for the atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance she feels in Tashkent. Following two days of meetings in Tashkent, Lorde travels through Uzbekistan with the other members of the conference. Traveling through what seems to her to be a flourishing countryside leads her to speculate on the nature of the people of Uzbekistan, whom she characterizes as industrious. They stop in Gulstan and visit a collective farm called the Leningrad

Collective, where Lorde meets a woman she identifies with strongly though they only speak through an interpreter. The conference arrives in Samarkand, a city famed as the home of Tamerlane the Great. Lorde, Helen, and Lorde's friend Fikre visit a market. Audre talks in this section about the ideological differences between the Soviet Union and the United States, stressing that the main difference is that while in the U.S., profit is central, the Soviet Union, at least officially, puts people at its core through such programs as nationalized, free healthcare. While in Samarkand, Lorde meets Madam Izbalkhan. Lorde also mentions that most Uzbekis seem to know little of American blacks and their struggles.

Section V deals with Toni, a Chukwo Eskimo woman who Lorde meets at a conference dinner and is immediately drawn to. The two women bond over a shared feeling of being part of an endangered people. Their mutual admiration soon turns to feelings of attraction after Toni repeatedly compliments Lorde's appearance and moves closer to her at the dinner table. Lorde and Toni kiss but part ways immediately after dinner, and Lorde notes that Toni seems to be leaving in the company of a man.

In section VI, Lorde returns to Moscow for her flight back to the U.S. She again compares Moscow to New York.

Section VII is comprised of Lorde's final thoughts on her trip. She remains unconvinced that Russia is a truly classless society as it purports to be. She counts in Russia's favor the fact that no one seems to be starving, and notes that Russia is a very literate society.

# Poetry Is Not a Luxury

## Poetry Is Not a Luxury Summary and Analysis

In Poetry Is Not a Luxury, Audre Lorde seeks to define poetry as something vital and necessary to the human (especially female) condition rather than a leisure activity. To Lorde, poetry is the essence of womanhood, and the feelings poetry is so easily able to express are a direct link to ancient society. Lorde sees this ancient connection as a sort of antidote to the ills of modern life, which include an unhealthy focus on profit, linear power, and institutional dehumanization.

Lorde sees poetry as a step in the formation of ideas, rather than the expression of an already formed idea. Hopes and dreams are transformed into language through poetry, which then becomes a coherent idea that can be used to catalyze action. Poetry is equivalent to feeling rather than thinking and is thus more essential than idea or thesis-based writing. Expression through poetry leads to new ideas that are more easily formed on an emotional level. Since the acceptance of one's feelings can lead to empowerment, poetry itself becomes a means of empowerment for the oppressed.

The theme of the ubiquity of ideas is mentioned in this essay, as Lorde states, "but there are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves—along with the renewed courage to try them out." Poetry is one method by which these old, forgotten ideas may be given voice.

# The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action

## The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action Summary and Analysis

The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action is a talk Audre Lorde gave at the Modern Language Association's "Lesbian and Literature Panel" in 1977. Lorde begins this speech by talking about her benign breast tumor surgery and how it forced her to examine herself more closely. She says that life experience has taught her that important issues are always better discussed than left unexpressed.

Silence, to Lorde, can be damaging. Silence allows injustices to go unheard and fears to remain powerful. Contemplating her own mortality gave Lorde perspective over her fears and made her realize that silence was an ineffective means of protecting oneself from one's fears.

Looking back on her life, Lorde realizes that she regrets only the times when she was silent, not those in which she spoke up, even if she was misunderstood or punished for speaking. She challenges the members of her audience to examine their own lives in the same way she did in response to her cancer treatment. She asks the audience what injustices they might be enduring in silence rather than speaking against them. Lorde delves into some of the reasons the audience might have for their respective silences, including discrimination as a result of sex or color. She uses black women as an example of a group that is very visible as "different" but simultaneously invisible as second-class citizens. Invisibility (i.e., silence) can create an illusion of protection from those who might wish one harm. She points out that silence and passivity might create this illusion, but will never eliminate the fear that results from being in an oppressed group.

Lorde brings up a recurring theme in her works, the need for mutual support and understanding between different groups. She says that the illusion of separation between groups is imposed on the oppressed individual by society and must be recognized for what it is and transcended. Dialogue between different groups and individuals is essential for understanding but is often not attempted due to such incorrect, indoctrinated views.

# Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving

## Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving Summary and Analysis

At the beginning of Scratching the Surface, Audre Lorde defines four words—racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia—and then identifies all four as "forms of human blindness" (p. 45). This blindness, Lorde says, might be remedied through the realization that differences are enriching rather than threatening. She talks about the American black community in this context, saying that even within that community, members have learned to distrust one another, mainly in that black men as a group often view black women as threatening if insubordinate. She talks about instances in which black women have been actively discouraged from coming together, including an example of a New York state college in the 1970s where black women attempted to come together to discuss women's concerns and were threatened with violence, shunned by their black male peers, and eventually even beaten and raped in some cases.

Lorde discusses the fact that black men encourage by black women to identify themselves only in terms of their allegiance to their black male partners and not on their own terms, using threats of emotional rejection to persuade. Black lesbians are seen as especially threatening since they do not fit into this model. Such "horizontal hostility" (p. 48) can be a useful tool for those who wish to oppress a given group, Lorde says, and thus is better eliminated.

Lorde goes on to talk about what she calls "women-identified women" (p. 49), those women who seek to identify themselves and seek support from each other rather than from males in their community. She says that this idea is nothing new, citing African co-wives and the Amazon women of ancient Dahomey as examples. She mentions an Efik Ebibio woman from Nigeria, married to a man, who spoke freely of her lesbian relationship with another married woman. To Lorde, modern-day lesbians are simply an updated version of the woman-identified woman. She sees the intense distrust between black women in her society as a result of the low numbers of black men of marriageable age, and explains the anger many black women have toward white women who date black men as stemming from this same source.

The divisions within minority groups, Lorde says, are based on the false assumption that there is a limited amount of freedom to go around. This misconception leads to the fear that another group's success at securing some of that freedom will take it away from another group. She mentions a heterosexual black woman who, at a conference, described lesbianism as leading to the extinction of her race. Lorde uses this as an example of the belief that unwanted traits are so powerful as to be contagious, a belief shared by racists.

Lorde ends this essay with the reiteration of its core message: that any group wishing to fight for its rights is better served by banding together to fight for better treatment than by fighting over who is more oppressed or by defining differences as detrimental rather than beneficial.

# Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power

## Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power Summary and Analysis

Audre Lorde begins The Uses of the Erotic by defining the erotic as both female and spiritual and as a source of power. Because it may be used as a source of power for women, Lorde says, the erotic is a suppressed element in her society. The erotic is a depth of feeling that women in this society are encouraged to ignore except in the service of men, when it can be "psychically milked" (p. 54) for their benefit. Lorde defines pornography as the opposite of the erotic, though the two are often confused. While the erotic is all about feeling, pornography is about sensation only, completely devoid of feeling.

To Lorde, the erotic serves two main functions: it provides the power of sharing an experience with another and reminds her of her human capacity for joy. This is what makes the erotic dangerous—once the individual has experienced such satisfaction, it is much harder for that person to settle for less. In the hands of women especially, this sort of empowerment is seen as dangerous. Thus, women are taught that the erotic is only of use in the sexual realm.

Lorde mentions again the idea that American society values profit over human need and defines human need in a limited way, ignoring emotional concerns. This leads to the de-eroticization of work, taking the passion out of it and leaving it a simple unpleasant necessity. Lorde also sees the separation of the spiritual and political and the spiritual and erotic as false.

To Lorde, the power of the erotic can be summed up in the phrase, "It feels right to me." The erotic can point out a deep, instinctive understanding that rational thought processes may leave out. Acknowledging one's feelings and dealing with them rather than attempting to ignore them can lead to better decision-making, and this becomes a source of power. Looking away from feeling (the erotic), on the other hand, leads to the abuse of its power, which can be seen in pornography and obscenity, fruits of what Lorde calls the "european-american male tradition" (p. 59). The final and most important use of the erotic is as a tool for empowerment and an energizing force to bring about change.

# Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface

## Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface Summary and Analysis

In Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface, Audre Lorde discusses the topic of black males' anger toward black females. The essay was first published in The Black Scholar in 1979 as a direct response to an article by Robert Staples published in the same journal earlier that year called The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists. The tone of the essay is confrontational. Lorde accuses Staples of attacking black feminists under the guise of attempting to open a dialogue with them. She sees Staples' article as indicative of a wider trend in the black male community toward seeing black women as a threat rather than as potential allies.

To Lorde, the language in Staples' article makes it clear that for him, like many black men, black females have become a primary target for an anger whose cause is actually external to the black community. This article is Lorde's attempt to point out the fact that much of the rage black men manifest toward black women would be better used as a force for greater change in society. She asks many rhetorical questions of Staples, and thereby the black male community in general, to make clear that while she thinks their anger is justified, it is misdirected. She again uses the example of Patricia Cowan's murder by a black man to illustrate the senselessness of this misdirection.

Lorde goes on to talk about what she believes are Staples' misconceptions about black women. One is a tendency in America to blame the victim for his or her victimization, which is part of what Lorde calls the "Great-American-Double-Think" (p. 61), a symptom of white male-centric thought processes. Another is the idea that to allow another group freedom of expression is to jeopardize one's own freedoms, which Lorde counters throughout the essays in Sister Outsider.

The thesis of Sexism is basically that "one oppression does not justify another" (p. 63)—while Lorde identifies with the feeling of oppression and the resulting rage that Staples feels, she finds fault with his and other black men's method of expressing it toward the women in their community. This is an abuse of male privilege. This essay deals heavily with the theme of infighting in oppressed groups (specifically the black community) as a divisive and negative force. It also delves into the themes of the misconception of difference as a threat and the concept of the self-identified person, as well as the idea of a common source for sexism, racism, and homophobia.

# An Open Letter to Mary Daly

## An Open Letter to Mary Daly Summary and Analysis

An Open Letter to Mary Daly is a letter that Audre Lorde wrote to Mary Daly, the white female author of the feminist work Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism. The letter conveys a challenging tone toward Daly and enumerates the many omissions and distortions Lorde feels Daly has made regarding the issues affecting non-white, non-European women. This piece was written shortly after 12 black women were murdered in the Boston area in the spring of 1979, a fact that Audre brings up at the beginning of the letter, as Mary Daly was working at the time to overcome what Audre calls "the repressive forces of the University of Boston" (p. 66).

Lorde begins the letter by mentioning that Mary Daly had a copy of Gyn/Ecology sent to her for review. At first, Lorde praises Daly's work, but she soon moves on to begin criticizing what she sees as the intentional omission of the black woman's perspective in Gyn/Ecology. She indicates a fear that Daly will not want to hear these criticisms.

She begins by asking Daly why all of her examples of Goddess imagery are white when there are many examples of the concept in African cultures. She then moves on to talk about Daly's use of examples of non-white women only in negative contexts and accuses her of completely dismissing the influence of black women in history. This sort of trivialization is especially hurtful to Lorde coming from another feminist. Lorde reveals that Daly has used a quote from one of her poems in Gyn/Ecology in a section of the book that deals with female genital mutilation in Africa. She accuses Daly of using her words simply to legitimize the book in the eyes of black feminists without actually considering their meaning. She questions whether Daly even reads the works of black women, accusing her of simply searching through them for quotes to use in her own writings.

Lorde likens what she sees as Daly's dismissal of the black feminist point of view to other forms of racism that stand as a barrier to understanding. This dismissal is unacceptable to Lorde and leads her to threaten "war between us, or separation" if the issue is not dealt with. Though Lorde wishes to come together with the white feminist community, she feels ignored and trivialized by it. She urges Daly to recognize the differences that exist between black and white feminists rather than to assume that all women face the same struggles. Doing so, says Lorde, invites further separation. Lorde chose to publish the letter four months after sending it and receiving no reply.

# Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response

## Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response Summary and Analysis

Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response is a story of Audre Lorde's relationship as a lesbian mother to her son Jonathan. She stresses at the beginning of the essay that it will not advise or make generalizations, but simply deal with her experience. She acknowledges the fact that raising a boy has a unique set of challenges for a lesbian feminist, as "our sons will not grow into women" (p. 73). She feels that her son, who at the time of the writing is fourteen years old, will have to forge his own identity without a clear model to aspire to or rebel against. She generalizes a bit by saying that the sons of lesbians have the advantage of seeing their mothers' "blueprints for survival" (p. 73) in a sometimes harsh world, but the disadvantage of having to formulate their own ideas about what it means to be male.

Lorde feels that the most important gift she has given her children as a mother—she also has a fifteen year old daughter named Beth—is the gift of honesty about herself and her feelings, which will enable them to be honest with themselves. She gives the example of Jonathan coming home crying after being tormented by bullies. After several instances of this, Lorde finds herself almost losing her temper and telling the boy to react with violence, but catches herself before perpetuating the lie of "might makes right." After some thought, she talks to Jonathan about how she too used to be afraid of bullies. The revelation that his mother, such a strong figure in his life, has weaknesses too helps Jonathan cope with the bullying.

Lorde expresses the wish that Jonathan, rather than growing up to be just like her, grow up to be who he really wants to be. She is proud of him for already showing the courage to speak the truth, as he did when he revealed to a friend that Frances was in fact his mother's lover and not the maid.

Recounting a recent example in which an invitation to a lesbian/feminist conference specified that no boys over the age of ten would be allowed admittance, Lorde begins to examine the issue of separatism in her communities. She admits to sometimes desiring the company of exclusively women or exclusively other black people, mainly for the ease of communication, but stresses that differences do not have to be threatening when approached honestly.

Lorde ends the essay by recounting Jonathan's answer to the question of what he perceives as the advantages and disadvantages of being raised by two women. He responds that though he feels that he understands people better than most children his age, he does not enjoy the ridicule he sometimes receives from the children of heterosexual parents.

# An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich

## An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich Summary and Analysis

The interview in An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich was created from an edited tape of a conversation held on August 30, 1979. The interview was commissioned by Marilyn Hacker for the book Woman Poet: The East but was first published in a periodical called Signs. Adrienne Rich, a white lesbian feminist, acts as the interviewer. The interview is centered on Audre Lorde's life and the experiences that shaped her into who she is.

The interview begins with a question about Audre Lorde's poetry. Adrienne Rich asks why Lorde describes two of her poems, Poetry Is Not a Luxury and Uses of the Erotic, as "progressions." Lorde feels that these two works follow directly from the first piece of poetry she ever wrote. She talks about how she used poetry from an early age to communicate answers to difficult questions. Her mother used to make up words when she could not find a word that suit her particular meaning. Lorde had to learn nonverbal communication at a young age because her mother expected her to know what she was thinking without actually telling her.

Next Lorde describes an experience she had at age nineteen while studying in Mexico. She woke up one morning and walked outside, and the scenery was so beautiful that she realized that the beauty she had always considered only possible in fiction was, in fact, possible in real life. She felt that she could recreate this beauty through her writings, and this epiphany inspired her and released her creativity.

After studying in Mexico, Lorde moved back to the Lower East Side of Manhattan and began work on a story tying together the Mexican myth of La Llorona, in which a mother drowns her children in retaliation for her husband's infidelity, and her own mother. The story was published under the pseudonym Rey Domini because Lorde considered herself a poet rather than an author. She then goes on to talk about sometimes not really knowing the meaning of her writings while composing them.

The next part of the interview deals with Audre Lorde becoming a teacher. Soon after her first book of poems, The First Cities, was published, she was invited to become poet-in-residence at a black college in Tougaloo, Mississippi. She felt an easy acceptance there that she hadn't felt before from her family or peers, though she had difficulty justifying her marriage to a white man to her peers and students. Her experience there led her to the realization that she needed to teach, and she also met Frances, her future lover, who was a professor at Tougaloo.

After Lorde returned to Mew York from teaching at Tougaloo, she attended a performance by the Tougaloo Choir at Carnegie Hall. It was there, on that night, that she learned Martin Luther King had been killed. The realization of the importance of the civil rights movement that resulted from this tragedy led Lorde to quit her work as a librarian and become a full-time teacher. In 1969 she began teaching a class on racism for white students at Lehmann College in New York called "Racism and the Urban Situation." The stress of the class, along with the black and Puerto Rican occupation of City College, which reminded her of the poor treatment black women were still receiving even from their peers, eventually led her to realize that she wanted to teach black students again. She moved to John Jay College, a school with mostly black and Puerto Rican students. Even within a mostly minority environment, she encountered discrimination based on her sex and sexual orientation.

In the next section Lorde and rich discuss Lorde's poetry and the concept of the Black Mother. Lorde does not agree with the worldview that rationality and feeling are necessarily opposing concepts. Lorde believes that white-male-European influences society has taught that they are, leading to the rejection of feeling as inferior. This, she says, is what has led many members of society to ignore the part of themselves that she identifies as the Black Mother, the feeling, poetic, feminine side of personality. Lorde explains that she is constantly accused from all sides of reducing the feminine to a set of ideas that are trivial or not useful in serious discourse; she aims to point out that things like feeling, the erotic, and intuition are not, in fact, useless or trivial—they have just been ignored as sources of power for a long time.

Next, Lorde and Rich talk about other discussions they have had and how they are representative of the black woman/white woman dynamic. Rich has told Lorde in the past that she sometimes needs more detailed, analytical explanation than Lorde is willing to give. Lorde counters that sometimes, a more detailed explanation than "I intuit this" can actually obscure the deeper meaning of an idea. As a librarian, she has realized that all the information in the world does not necessarily lead to understanding. Rich becomes more conversational in this section, explaining her need for documentation when discussing feminist issues.

Lorde and Rich then discuss the shooting of a young black boy by a white policeman, a crime for which the officer was acquitted. This incident occurred while Lorde was teaching at John Jay, a school that included many police officers among its students. Lorde had difficulty knowing what she could do to effectively influence society toward keeping this kind of event from happening again. This leads the women into talking about Lorde's breast cancer experience and her decision to continue speaking despite her health issues. It was during this time that she wrote The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action, because she realized that if she died having stopped speaking her mind, she would regret her silence. She tells Rich that the writing of that paper helped her continue writing more afterward because it allowed her to understand an idea that she had not fully expressed before giving it voice through writing.

# The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House

## The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House Summary and Analysis

This essay deals with Lorde's conviction that in order to transcend prejudice and oppression, new tools must be forged to fight them. It was presented as a speech at "The Personal and the Political Panel" at the Second Sex Conference in New York on September 29, 1979. She starts the essay by discussing the importance of discussing difference in the lives of women, without which she feels feminist theory is incomplete, for not all women face the same problems or prejudices. She goes on to criticize the fact that the panel she is participating in is the only one in which black, lesbian, or feminist points of view are represented. She argues that this is indicative of the wider trend in American society of attempting to instigate radical change using the same tools used by the system one is trying to alter. This, Lorde believes, is an ineffective route toward change.

Lorde discusses the idea that bonding between women is seen as dangerous to patriarchal society, which would prefer that maternity be women's only route to social fulfillment. She stresses the importance of the acceptance and celebration of differences between members of society rather than mere tolerance. She notes that it is those who, like herself, have been shunned by society who have figured out the fundamental truth that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." She again (as in other essays in Sister Outsider) talks about her feeling that most white feminists have not taken the time to learn much about black women's issues, instead waiting for black women to explain themselves. This is another by-product of American society: the burden of explanation is put on the oppressed group. The same pattern can be seen between men and women. She ends by urging the audience to look within themselves, recognize their own prejudices, and by acknowledging them, begin to work past them.

# Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference

## Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference Summary and Analysis

Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference was presented at the Copeland Coloquium at Amherst College in April 1980. Audre Lorde begins the essay by restating some themes common in her works: that America is a society based around profit rather than human need; that, in this society, the oppressed person is expected to explain him or herself to the oppressor; that the refusal to recognize difference, rather than difference itself, is what separates people. These ideas are unified in this essay. Lorde writes that in a profit-based society, outsiders are like "surplus people" (p. 115). Because of this, differences are considered best either ignored, copied if deemed useful, or, if useless, destroyed. Differences are misnamed because of fear, often in a pattern of false opposition (good/bad, etc.). Recognizing differences, says Lorde, is be the first step toward accepting them, which can lead to true unity.

Lorde then goes on to specify how these themes relate to women in particular, and examines in detail the relationship between black women and white women. She accuses white women of focusing on the struggles of women as women and ignoring the differences within the feminist movement—differences of race, age, class, and sexuality. She mentions specifically ways in which racism, ageism, classism, and heterosexism can harm the feminist movement. Lorde cites the bias against poetry she has observed among the literary world as an example of unrecognized classism, as she defines poetry as the art form most accessible to the masses. What is popularly called the "generation gap" is in fact, to Lorde, a useful tool for oppression, as it divides young and old. As Lorde stresses in all her works, the divided are more easily conquered. She goes on to talk about what she sees as the white woman's unwillingness to strive for true understanding of the black woman. These women would rather ignore differences other than sex, Lorde says, placing all women under the blanket term of "sisterhood." White women also have the option of identifying themselves with the white patriarchy to gain an illusive form of power by association. This is one of the many , often unrecognized differences between black and white women.

People of color, Lorde says, are also suspicious of difference due to the need for unity, leading to divisions between black men and black women, black heterosexual women and black lesbian women, and so on. The pressure to focus on one aspect of oneself to the exclusion of others can be overwhelming in any community.

Lorde urges the community of women to begin to recognize each other's differences and different struggles in addition to what the struggles all women have in common. The problems created by difference, Lorde says, are due not to the differences themselves but to the misnaming of those differences. Once differences are recognized for what

they are; once buried patterns of oppression between women are rooted out and eliminated; and once power is redefined to exclude oppression; only then may true change come about.

# The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism

## The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism Summary and Analysis

In The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism, Audre Lorde explores the complex reactions that result from being discriminated against. The essay was presented at the National Women's Studies Association Conference in 1981, and it specifically addresses other women who have a problem with the anger of black women. Her primary reaction to racism, she says, is anger—an appropriate reaction to injustice, she says. She distinguishes between anger, guilt, and defensiveness, the latter two of which, she says, are of no use to anyone. Lorde then gives examples of the kind of nonchalant racism, mostly on the part of white women, that infuriates her so. In all the cases, Lorde says, the women fail to recognize the differences that exist within their community, or perhaps restrict themselves to the academic community. These women invariably consider Lorde's anger either disruptive or useless. Lorde defends anger as a potentially useful force in this essay.

She uses the example of a white woman who hears a racist remark and becomes angry, but who, instead of expressing her anger to the originator of the remark, bottles up her anger and releases it later on an innocent party. This anger could be used constructively in the moment, Lorde says, as a tool against the oppressive mindset that led to the remark in the first place. This mindset is so entrenched that the very idea of women coming together against racism is dangerous, Lorde says. Sexism and racism are facets of the American system, seen by most as inevitable.

Lorde goes on to distinguish between anger and hatred: "Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change" (p. 129). She likens the anger of black women in American society to a symphony, organized so as not to overwhelm the individual. This anger is due to a systematic rejection of everything about black women and a prevailing view of them as useless except when in service to the oppressor. She asks the women present whether the anger of black women is any more frightening than the hatred of women that all of them must face.

Next Lorde distinguishes between anger and guilt. Unlike anger, guilt is useless. It is a method of avoiding action, whereas anger can be a call to action. Anger is a step beyond guilt. Lorde writes that white women's groups have, on the whole, avoided addressing the issue of anger between women in favor of focusing exclusively on women's anger toward men. This leads directly from a tendency to ignore differences rather than explore them. Anger is often seen as the threat of violence by women raised in a violent environment, a fact that leads such women to shut down when presented with anger in any form. This reaction must be overcome for women to relate to each

other honestly. The anger of black women, Lorde says, is not what has caused the problems that women face. This anger must be accepted and used against the oppression that is the real problem.

# Learning from the 60s

## Learning from the 60s Summary and Analysis

In Learning from the 60s, Audre Lorde recalls some of her experiences during the 1960s and reflects upon what might be learned from the '60s in the context of the 1980s. The talk was given in 1982 at the Malcolm X Weekend at Harvard University. She focuses on Malcolm X's later years in the beginning of the essay, saying that he eventually got closer to understanding the complexities of social change than any other person she observed. Towards the end of his life, he changed his topic on various topics in a way that began to bridge the gap between himself and Martin Luther King. He broadened his opinions about women, became open to alliances, and began to become aware of the lingering effects of oppression that can lead oppressed groups to bicker rather than work together for change. Lorde says that the primary lesson black community can learn from the '60s is that there is diversity within any group and that examination of differences can lead to greater unity. In the '60s, she says, the anger of the black community was often wrongly directed at other members of that community rather than at harmful outside sources. One of the lessons of the '60s, Lorde says, is the recognition that it is necessary to not only go against outside forces, but also to expose the oppressive values that can tear a community apart.

Problems within the black community in the 1960s included an incorrectly perceived need for homogeneity, the belief in easy solutions, and infighting. For Lorde herself, the '60s were a time of great frustration and isolation. Her numerous identities and unwillingness to isolate any of these left her excluded from many groups. She learned that she must define herself for herself and not let others define her in false ways.

The black movement of the 1960s had many positive effects despite its internal problems. Other movements of oppressed peoples grew out of the energy of the black movement. Many gains were made, but Lorde stresses that the oversimplification of ideas often present within the movements of the '60s is a mistake that must be learned from. She warns against romanticizing the past instead of learning from it.

Lorde says that the destructive infighting of the '60s has continued even into the '80s, and warns that it distracts from the increasing evidence that people of color are of little importance to the American government, both at home and abroad. She gives examples of conflicts overseas in which the official American position either supports the oppressors or is itself oppressive. Revolution, she says, is an ongoing event, and she asks the members of the audience not to wait to be led to positive change, but to seek it for themselves. Much of the black community is mired in passivity due to a false sense of security or despair. Lorde urges actively working toward change—what she calls militancy, which, she clarifies, does not necessarily include violence. She again stresses the examining toward the goal of eliminating oppressive tendencies, and cites examples of prejudice against gays and lesbians within the black community. Lorde focuses especially on the phenomenon in the black community of using "lesbian" as a

derogatory term for a self-identified, independent woman. She ends by stressing that misunderstandings within the black community must be resolved in order to fight for change in the greater community. This is the greatest lesson that may be learned from the 60s.

# Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger

## Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger Summary and Analysis

This essay examines black women's anger and how it is expressed toward each other. Lorde begins by saying that all black women have an inner reserve of anger and that she has spent her life learning to express her own properly rather than suppress it. She has also noticed, however, that this anger seems most easily expressed toward other black women. She begins exploring this issue by noting that black women absorb the hatred of most of society from a young age, and even learn to feed off of it. She gives several examples of instances in which she gradually became aware of white people's hatred of her as a child. She often wondered as a result of feeling this hatred if something was wrong with her specifically, and this feeling was exacerbated by the fact that her mother favored her lighter-skinned sisters over her. She began to wonder if black meant bad. This rejection by even her own family fed a deep and unshakable anger in Lorde, a burden she feels all black women bear. She gives examples that illustrate how hatred is expressed toward black women around the world, asking whether any other group of people is as universally hated and yet expected to continue functioning within society.

Lorde then discusses the history of support and the sharing of power within the black female community, from ancient Africa to contemporary times, saying that contemporary black women have been born into a time in which they hated simply for being alive. This hatred is present from such an early age that the anger that results from absorbing it becomes a fundamental part of the black woman's personality. In some cases, the anger becomes more important any other feeling because it is so powerful. Strength based in anger can only destroy the past, though, and is incapable of helping to build a new future. This leads to the fear black women have of connecting with each other—a fear of each other's anger.

In Section I, Lorde gives examples from her own life of the anger between herself and other black women, including her two sisters. She suggests that black women are unable to love each other because they never learned to love themselves, and see their own faces in each other. As well, the pain resulting from society's hatred has become such a commonplace feeling for the black woman that she sees no reason not to inflict it upon another.

In Section II, Lorde talks about her daughter Ruth. She laments that her daughter has finally left home to attend college, where she has found a new set of prejudices and hatred to deal with. She goes on to talk about the special relationship black women have with their mothers, who seem to be the only black women who understand and accept them for who they are. Black women must learn, Lorde says, to offer themselves

this understanding and acceptance in order to be able to understand and accept each other. The society that hates black women has taught them to hate themselves. She mentions events that she sees as clear causes for righteous anger which could then be misdirected. She asks how black women might relieve themselves of this anger if not toward each other. She then includes a letter she wrote to a potential therapist, Leora, also a black woman. The letter expresses a wish that Leora realize that by taking Lorde on as a patient, she will need to explore the complex relationship they have simply by both being black women.

Section III deals with the relative ease of relationships between black women and white women, which Lorde feels to be especially between herself and her lover, Frances, a white woman. She acknowledges that while these relationships may be more comfortable, they can never substitute for the depth and validation of an equal, accepting relationship between two black women. She cites her mother's advice that she trust neither white people nor anyone darker than herself as an example of a hurtful message she absorbed at a young age, asking how many people received similarly destructive messages and what might be done to get past them.

Section IV deals in more detail with the idea that a low sense of self-worth can lead to the devaluation of those like oneself. Though, like Lorde, many black women desire supportive relationships with other black women, they often cannot bring themselves to put aside the fears and anger they have toward themselves and project onto each other. They hold each other up to the skewed standards of their oppressors, against which they will never measure up, and misidentify the source of their pain as each other.

Section V enumerates what Lorde calls the "myths of self-protection" (p. 168) that keep black women separated. One is that politeness calls for black women to acknowledge each other indirectly or not at all. This stems from their fear of each other's anger. The second myth is that the support black women give each other against outsiders negates the ways in which they devalue themselves and each other. This devaluation is a result of internalizing the prejudices of a system which awards black women very little value. The third myth is that perfection is attainable and should be insisted upon. Black women who buy into society's idea of perfection will always fall short because they are specifically excluded from that idea.

In Section VI, Lorde talks about the ways in which black women reject themselves and, by extension, other black women. They strive for the normality that seems to be the key to acceptance by society at large and which drives them to deny their blackness in a myriad of ways. The sort of introspection that might reveal this, however, is a function of time and luxury of the kind not usually possessed by black people. Lorde sees that generally, white people have more time and space to sit and examine their feelings while black people do not. This doesn't mean that black people need this time any less than whites do—just that they can often not afford it. Lorde discusses the distinction she has begun to make between pain and suffering. Pain, she says, is a feeling triggered by an event. If experienced fully, pain can be transformed into something useful. Suffering, on the other hand, is the result of pain that has not been experienced fully and dealt with. Suffering is the reliving of pain, over and over again, with no resolution. This can

be the result of pain felt at a young age and not understood, as in the example of a young Audre Lorde being sneered at in disgust by a white woman on the subway. The unprocessed pain of suffering can be triggered to release by any number of events—for black women, that can often be the presence of another black woman. Lorde suggests that this cycle of pain and suffering might be ended eventually if one first step is taken: that black women learn to mother themselves. This means acknowledging one's own worth and forgiving oneself for failures. Accepting oneself, for black women, leads to the acceptance of other black women as well.

In Section VIII (there is no Section VII), Lorde discusses empowerment through loving. She reinforces the idea that in order to love others, one must first love oneself. The love of one black woman for another is an element all too often absent from her society, she finds, and it can only be replenished by retraining oneself to act in a considerate and tender manner, recognizing the good in oneself and in others.

# Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report

## Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report Summary and Analysis

Audre Lorde first visited Grenada, the homeland of her mother, in 1979, before the New Jewel Movement's bloodless coup that ended the U.S.-sanctioned, corrupt regime that had been in place and replaced it with the People's Revolutionary Government. She describes how, after her first visit, the People's Revolutionary Government made various improvements on the island.

At the time of the writing of Grenada Revisited, Lorde visits Grenada in fear that its simple beauty and way of life has been ravaged by the U.S. invasion of the island two months before her visit. She lists a series of lies that the U.S. government has told about the invasion which do not hold up under scrutiny. Lorde cites various ways in which the U.S. sought to keep Grenada dependent.

Lorde believes that America was reluctant to help Grenada before the U.S. invasion because a healthy Grenadian economy would set a precedent for strong leadership among the nations of people of color. The fact that most Americans readily accepted the invasion of Grenada indicates to Lorde a society tainted by racism. She questions America's stated desire to support democracy in the Caribbean because of U.S. support for Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

The invasion of Grenada, to Lorde, is a continuation of the Monroe Doctrine, the policy stating that any interventions by European countries in America or its territories be viewed as acts of aggression. She describes the brutal nature of the U.S. invasion, in which Marines destroyed homes, families, and lives searching for a mysterious Cuban enemy. Shortly after Grenada was invaded and much of its production halted, the unemployment rate shot up to 35 percent, at which point the U.S. Agency for international Development recommended changes that would make it easier for international companies to move in and take advantage of the cheap labor.

Lorde mentions a war game performed by the U.S. beginning in 1981 that clearly mirrors the Grenadian invasion and accuses the U.S government of being involved in the assassination of Grenadian Prime Minister Maurice Bishop because of the assassination of the fictional prime minister in the war game. She enumerates the possible purposes the U.S. may have had for the invasion of Grenada, none of which are related to the government's official reasons or the supposed threat of socialism.

While the revolution led by the People's Revolutionary Government in Grenada generally improved conditions in industry, health care, literacy, and other areas, the American invasion has undone many of those improvements, Lorde says. The invasion was unexpected and terror-inducing for Grenadians and disrupted their way of life. However, Lorde stresses that the Grenadian people are resilient and that despite the

damage done to Grenada by the U.S. invasion, the tiny island nation retains its spirit of independence.

# Characters

## Audre Lorde

Audre Lorde is the author of all the works in this book, but is also present as a character in most of them, as she writes in the first person, using stories of her life experience to illustrate her points. Audre Lorde was a black lesbian feminist poet. Though more famous for her poetry, she also wrote essays and gave speeches and lectures frequently. Lorde was born in New York City and grew up in Harlem. She spent a year at the National University of Mexico, during which she had an epiphany that cemented her later career as a poet and writer. She earned her master's degree in library science from Columbia University and became head librarian at Town School Library in New York. During this time she was also married to a white man named Edwin Rollins, with whom she had her two children, Jonathan and Elizabeth. She was invited to teach at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi as a poet-in-residence, and it was there that she met Frances, the white female psychology professor who was later to become her lover.

During the time in which the essays in Sister Outsider were written, Audre Lorde lived with Frances, Jonathan, and Elizabeth in New York. Lorde's writing focused on the issues of difference, oppression, and sexuality. She differentiated herself from her feminist contemporaries by refusing to separate sexism from other prejudices. She believed that sexism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of intolerance all stem from the same problem: the inability to properly recognize and accept differences. Lorde often found herself the outsider in any group she was part of because of the many ways in which she was "different"—she was a woman, but also a lesbian; she was black, but also in a relationship with a white woman; and so on. This unique perspective allowed Lorde to make the connection between different forms of prejudice and led her to fight the oversimplification that characterized many minority rights groups in her day.

## Mary Daly

Mary Daly is the white feminist author of Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism and the person addressed in An Open Letter to Mary Daly. Daly sent Lorde a copy of her book, in which Lorde was been quoted. In An Open Letter to Mary Daly, Audre Lorde takes Daly to task for omitting the history and influence of women of non-European ancestry and using her (Lorde's) words to lend legitimacy to the chapter in the book dealing with female genital mutilation in Africa without actually considering the black feminist point of view or the context of the quote. Lorde sees Daly as representative of a problem in the feminist community of her time: oversimplification in the name of unity. The white feminist perspective is seen as normative while any aberration from this norm is seen as "other." Lorde writes this letter to Daly in part to point out this problem.

## Robert Staples

Robert Staples is the author of The Myth of Black Macho: a Response to Angry Black Feminists, the article which Audre Lorde responds to in Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface. Staples, to Lorde, represents the irrational anger many black men hold toward black women. Audre Lorde encourages him and other black men to recognize that this anger is in fact misplaced and should be directed toward the oppressive elements of American society. Lorde sees Staples as representative of the larger problem in the black community of oversimplification in the name of unity. Difference within the black community is often not tolerated because it is seen as divisive. As Lorde points out, the differences are not the problem—lack of tolerance and lack of understanding for those differences is.

## Audre Lorde's mother

Audre Lorde's mother is a complex figure in the author's life. She is both a source of strength and a source of feelings of inadequacy for the author. She was born in Grenada and moved to the U.S., where Audre was born and raised.

## Frances

Frances was Audre Lorde's white female lover at the time Sister Outsider was written. The two women met at Tougaloo College during Lorde's stay there as poet-in-residence. Audre and Frances live together and raise Audre's two children from her previous marriage to a white man. Frances is mentioned in Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response. A friend of Audre's son Jonathan calls Frances "the maid," and when reprimanded begins calling her "the cleaning woman." Jonathan finally corrects his friend, revealing Frances' identity as his mother's lover.

## Adrienne Rich

Adrienne Rich is a white lesbian feminist poet. She interviews Audre Lorde in An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. The two women have an obvious understanding and find it easy to communicate.

## Helen

Helen is mentioned in Notes from a Trip to Russia. She is Lorde's Intourist (a popular Russian travel agency) guide and translator. Helen was born in Japan but is currently living in Russia with her mother. Helen stays with Lorde throughout her trip.

## Fikre

Fikre is mentioned in Notes from a Trip to Russia. Fikre is a male friend of Lorde's and an Ethiopian student at Patrice Lumumba University.

## Madam Izbalkhan

Madam Izbalkhan is mentioned in Notes from a Trip to Russia. Madame Izbalkhan is the head of the Uzbekistan Society of Friendship. She talks to Lorde about the Uzbek women's revolution, in which Muslim Uzbeki women fought for civil rights such as the right to dress less conservatively and attend school. She refuses to give Lorde her opinion on America.

## Toni

Toni is mentioned in Notes from a Trip to Russia. Toni is a Chukwo Eskimo woman attending the same conference who Lorde meets and becomes enamored with at a dinner in Moscow. The two women are immediately drawn to one another and even kiss at the dinner table, yet they go their separate ways immediately and permanently at the end of the evening.

## Old woman at airport,

The old woman at the airport is mentioned in Notes from a Trip to Russia. Lorde sees her at the Moscow airport on her flight into Russia. She is wearing several medals, which piques Lorde's curiosity. An interviewer later tells Lorde that the woman has probably been named a Hero of the Republic for her years of hard work.

## Oleg

Oleg is mentioned in Notes from a Trip to Russia. He is an official from the Union of Soviet Writers and apologizes for the shabby condition of the hotel his group provided for African-Asian Conference members to stay in. He speaks only Russian but can understand English, and likens South Africa to a wound that is unable to heal.

## The White Fathers

The white fathers are the traditional historical figures of respect in American/European culture. This concept is mentioned in several of the essays in Sister Outsider. Lorde chooses not to capitalize "white" in her writing.

## The Black Mother/Poet

The Black mother/poet is an ancient figure of power Lorde sees as ignored in the society of her day. She is the poet who lives inside all people and does not always find expression due to societal restrictions on displays of feeling. This concept is mentioned in several of the essays in Sister Outsider. Lorde always capitalizes the word "Black" when it refers to people of African descent.

## The Self-Defined Person

The Self-Defined Person is an individual who is able to define him or herself without reference to another group or individual. This concept is brought up in Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving as the Self-Defined Black Woman, a black woman who has rebelled against the society which defines her as marginal by redefining herself on her own terms. It is also mentioned in Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface.

## Patricia Cowan

Patricia Cowan was a real-life black woman who was brutally murdered with a hammer by a black man after being called in to audition for a play called Hammer. Lorde mentions her story in Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving and in Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface to illustrate the violence she sees occurring toward black women by black men.

## Jonathan

Jonathan is Audre Lorde's son, who she talks about in Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response. He is fourteen years old at the time of the writing, beginning to become sexually mature, and this raises a series of concerns and questions for Lorde, who, as a lesbian woman, cannot give him a model of manhood. She has great hopes for him, though, as she believes he may be able to redefine manhood for himself—to reject the false notions of what power and bravery mean that white male society will try to indoctrinate him with.

## Malcolm X

Malcolm X was a powerful influence on Audre Lorde's worldview. He is mentioned in Learning from the 60s

# Objects/Places

## Hotel Younnost

The Hotel Younnost is mentioned in Notes from a Trip to Russia. It is the hotel in which Audre stays in Moscow during the beginning of her visit.

## Patrice Lumuba University

Patrice Lumuba University is mentioned in Notes from a Trip to Russia. It is a university in Moscow for African students.

## Tashkent

Tashkent is the city in Uzbekistan close to the Iranian border in which Audre stays during her travels in Notes from a Trip to Russia. The city has old and new sections, and the older sections remind Audre of Africa. She spends two days in Tashkent for conference-related meetings.

## Samarkand

Samarkand is a city in Uzbekistan that Audre travels to in Notes from a Trip to Russia. It is famed as the home of Tamerlane the Great.

## Woman's Place of Power

Audre Lorde formulates the idea of an emotional source of power in several of the essays in Sister Outsider. This emotional "place" is an ancient, hidden reserve of creativity which Lorde describes as "non-European," meaning that it is not recognized by the white-dominated society in which she was brought up. The power found here is a feminine, creative power and can be expressed most easily through poetry.

## European

European is a descriptor Audre Lorde uses throughout Sister Outsider for things characterized by the prevailing ideas and prejudices that inform her society. She identifies this as a heterosexual/white/male-centric viewpoint. To indicate her lack of respect for this viewpoint, Lorde doesn't capitalize the words "Europe" and "European" in her writings.

## Kwanza

Kwanza is the African-American festival of harvest that begins the day after Christmas and lasts seven days. Each day has a principle to be thought of and put into action on that day. Kwanza is mentioned in The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.

## Moscow

Moscow is the city in Russia that Audre Lorde stays in at the beginning and end of Notes from a Trip to Russia. She compares it to New York several times in the essay. While the cities have many similarities, she notes that Moscow's infrastructure seems more efficient.

## Herstory

Herstory is a word used in place of the word "history" to denote a point of view which is female-centric rather than male-centric. It is used by Audre Lorde in An Open Letter to Mary Daly.

## Cuernavaca, Mexico

Cuernavaca is mentioned in An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. Lorde tells Rich about an epiphany she had while studying in Mexico. In Cuernavaca, at age nineteen, Audre Lorde has an experience that leads her back towards writing, especially poetry. As she walks around the city one morning, she suddenly feels that the beauty she has always read about can actually be real, and that she can recreate it through her writing. She is inspired by the beauty, and it releases her creativity.

## Tougaloo College

Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi is the place where, as poet-in-residence, Audre Lorde realizes that she feels a need to teach. It is the first place in which Lorde feels truly accepted by other black people.

## Harlem Writers' Guild

Audre Lorde was a member of the Harlem Writers' Guild before moving to Mississippi to teach at Tougaloo College in Jackson. She never felt accepted there, partly because it was a male-dominated group. The other members respected but did not seem to understand her poetry.

## John Jay College

Audre Lorde taught a class on racism and a creative writing class in the 1970s at John Jay College, a school whose student body was mostly black and Puerto Rican and that included a large number of policemen. John Jay College is mentioned in An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich.

## Grenada

Audre Lorde's parents moved to the United States from Grenada. Lorde visits Grenada in Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report shortly after the U.S. invasion of the island in 1983 and reports on how that invasion has ravaged the island.

## Lehmann College

Audre Lorde taught a class on racism called "Racism and the Urban Situation" to a mostly white student body at Lehmann College in New York in the 1960s. This is mentioned in An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich.

# Themes

## Institutional Dehumanization

All of the essays and speeches in Sister Outsider deal in one way or another with the problems of institutional dehumanization in the society of the late 1970s and early 1980s in America. Institutional dehumanization is a pattern in a given society of devaluing the individuality of its members in favor of other ideals. American society, to Lorde, values profit over human interests, and this is exacerbates the problems created by racism, sexism, and other prejudices. Groups that are marginalized by prejudice are further marginalized because they have little economic power. White, heterosexual, patriarchal society discourages the expression of traits that do not fall into its norms. This alienates anyone who dares not to conform at the same time that it indoctrinates. Even minorities internalize the skewed system of values that teaches that any aberration from the norm is dangerous, which leads to infighting among minority groups—what Lorde calls "horizontal hostility" (p. 48). The institutional dehumanization inherent in American society leads Audre Lorde to a deep distrust and even hostility toward America. She voices her disrespect for the American system in various ways throughout her essays, most noticeably by choosing not to capitalize the word "America." Profit-based society also devalues human emotion in favor of logic and rational thought. Lorde equates rationalism with white masculinity and feeling with black femininity, saying that the power of feeling (and consequently those who feel) is practically ignored in white American society.

## Ubiquity of Ideas

Audre Lorde repeatedly emphasizes her belief that there are no new ideas—that there are only new ways of expressing the same ideas people have had throughout history. In Poetry Is Not a Luxury, she argues that one of poetry's primary functions is as a method of making the same old ideas be felt in new and different ways. Lorde often uses examples from ancient African civilizations in her essays to reinforce her views on a number of subjects, as giving them a cultural history makes them seem less radical.

## Power Through Difference

Differences often seem to be a source of problems. This leads people to either blame differences for their problems, as in the case of racism, sexism, and other prejudices, or to ignore differences that are inconvenient, as Lorde says the feminism of her time does. All the strife that stems from people's differences, Lorde says, is due to their misnaming. To truly recognize a difference for what it is leads one to realize that differences are not a threat and do not invalidate another way of life. Distorted perceptions due to society's imposed prejudices are often to blame for the misnaming of differences. Once these hidden prejudices are recognized, differences can be

acknowledged and accepted without being misnamed and identified as "wrong." Audre Lorde sees all prejudice as stemming from the misnaming of difference. Differences that have been accepted, on the other hand, may be used to the advantage of a group, Lorde says. Homogeneity within groups is, in fact, an illusion that can harm the group's members. The theme of power through difference ties in to the idea of becoming a self-defined person, as well. Once an individual has defined him or herself without regard to society's definition, he or she is no longer identified in relation to others. Thus, the differences of others no longer seem threatening.

## Masculine/Rational Vs. Feminine/Emotional

One of the ideas that Audre Lorde was most criticized for by her feminist contemporaries is her tendency to identify rational thought as masculine and white and feelings as feminine and black. She was accused of trivializing the female perspective by making it seem "soft" or irrational. What she points out is that emotion is in fact just as valid as rationality. She argues that emotion and feeling are often unfairly dismissed in American/European/Western society. Thus, the objection made by other feminists that identifying femininity with emotion invalidates the female perspective is in fact evidence of their internalization of the skewed system of values inherent in white capitalist society. Lorde characterizes poetry as a means by which these two modes may be merged, as poetry is a method of translating nameless feelings into concrete ideas.

# Style

## Perspective

Almost all of the essays in this book are written in the first person from the point of view of the author, Audre Lorde. The only exception is An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, which is written as a third-person record of a dialogue between the two women. Audre Lorde uses the first person to describe things that she has seen, heard, and experienced and connects these events to her personal feelings and convictions on a wide range of topics. Lorde considers the topics she deals with so personal that the only way to deal with them properly is from a first-person perspective. She also uses this personal perspective to draw the reader/listener in and persuade.

## Tone

Most of these essays were intended to be read or heard by Lorde's feminist contemporaries and other members of the academic world. This would normally call for a rather formal style, but Audre Lorde's passion for her subject matter comes across in every piece. Her writing is very persuasive in nature, as she was directly affected by the issues of racism, sexism, and other prejudices and forms of oppression throughout her life. She seeks to open the minds of her readers to these very real problems. Because of her intense feelings about her chosen subject matter, Audre Lorde's writing also comes across as combative and even angry in many cases. She mentions this as a criticism that she has received from her peers, but defends anger in several of the essays in this book, distinguishing it from guilt (which she deems useless) and presenting it as a potential force for positive change.

## Structure

This book is comprised of fifteen essays, letters, and speeches by Audre Lorde, one letter from Audre Lorde to Mary Daly, and one interview between Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. The pieces range in length from four to thirty-one pages. The essays are named fairly straightforwardly, with the title indicating the thesis of the essay, as in Poetry Is Not a Luxury, or simply indicating the nature of the piece, as in Notes from a Trip to Russia. The speeches and academic essays in this book, which often have their thesis stated in the title, tend to be rather short and focused and waste little time in clearly conveying that thesis to the reader (Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving; Poetry Is Not a Luxury; The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action; Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power; Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface; The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House; Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference; Learning from the 60s). The essays that deal more with observation tend to be longer and less focused (Notes From a Trip to Russia; Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response; Eye to

Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger; Grenada Revisited: An Interim Report). The letter (An Open Letter to Mary Daly) is a heated letter that Audre Lorde wrote to another feminist which she then published after receiving no response. The interview (An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich) is condensed from a longer taped discussion between the two women and is rather conversational.

# Quotes

"If you conquer the bread problem, that gives you at least a chance to look around at the others." Notes from a Trip to Russia, p. 34

"I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile wordplay that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight." Poetry Is Not a Luxury, p. 37

"Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought." Poetry Is Not a Luxury, p. 37

"We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and transpose them into a language so they can be shared." Poetry Is Not a Luxury, p. 37

"The fact that we are here and that I speak is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken." The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action, p. 44

"Both lesbian and heterosexual Black women today share a history of bonding and strength to which our sexual identities and our other differences must not blind us." Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving, p. 52.

"The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance." Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power, p. 57

"One oppression does not justify another." Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface, p. 63

"As Black women and men, we cannot hope to begin dialogue by denying the oppressive nature of male privilege." Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface, p. 63

"When patriarchy dismisses us, it encourages our murderers. When radical lesbian feminist theory dismisses us, it encourages its own demise." An Open Letter to Mary Daly, p. 69

"For then beyond sisterhood is still racism." An Open Letter to Mary Daly, p. 70

"It is as hard for our children to believe that we are not omnipotent as it is for us to know it, as parents. But that knowledge is necessary as the first step in the reassessment of

power as something other than might, age, privilege, or the lack of fear." Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response, p. 76

"I'm a poet, not a historian. I've shared my knowledge, I hope. Now you go document it, if you wish." An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, p. 105

"What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?" The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House, p. 111

"Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression" The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House, p. 112

"Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people." Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference, p. 115

"My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition." Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference, p. 121

"For anger between peers births change, not destruction, and discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth." Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism, p. 131

"What woman here is so enamored of her own oppression that she may not see her heelprint upon another woman's face?" Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism, p. 133

"We do not have to romanticize our past in order to be aware of how it seeds our present." Learning from the 60s, p. 139

"Revolution is not a one-time event." Learning from the 60s, p. 140

"In order to withstand the weather, we had to become stone, and now we bruise ourselves upon the other who is closest." Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger, p. 160

# Topics for Discussion

Discuss what Audre Lorde sees as the common sources for various types of discrimination and oppression (sexism, racism, etc.).

Why did Audre Lorde write "An Open Letter to Mary Daly?" Consider the tone of the letter.

Discuss Audre Lorde's relationship with her mother. How did her mother influence her writing style? In what ways did her mother teach her, through both good examples and bad?

What is institutional dehumanization as defined by Audre Lorde? What does this concept have to do with capitalism in her view? What are the connections between institutional dehumanization and racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice?

Discuss rifts within the black community as perceived by Audre Lorde, including those between black men and black women, black women and other black women, and heterosexual blacks and homosexual blacks. Why are these rifts detrimental? What causes them and what does Lorde suggest may be the remedy?

Why do you think Audre Lorde titled this collection of essays "Sister Outsider?" Discuss what it means to be an outsider in American society, according to Lorde.

How may the erotic be a source of power according to Audre Lorde? Why does American society repress the erotic?

Discuss the concept of silence as it is used in The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action. Why is silence damaging according to Lorde?