

AUDRE LORDE

*Your Silence Will Not Protect You: Essays and Poems*, Silver Press, 2017

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The first words that come may not be the right ones. Finding the words may be hard, painful, a labour. The words for the things that you can't yet name, call out to condemn, or bring into being, for yourself and for others. But without the search for those words — a discomfort lodged in your throat; a responsibility left hanging.

“It is not difference which immobilises us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.” This is the first lesson of “Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” Audre Lorde (born 1934, Harlem) in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, the first, long-overdue collection of her transformative writing to be published in the UK. “What are the words that you do not yet have? What do you need to say?” she asks. “What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?”

The titular passage comes from “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”, a speech that the author and activist delivered to the Modern Language Association's conference in 1977 shortly after undergoing cancer surgery. (The disease, which she wrote about three years later in *The Cancer Journals*, would eventually claim her life in 1992 at the age of 48.) In a conversation included later in this volume with the radical poet Adrienne Rich, we hear how Lorde had been reluctant to participate when her friend suggested, “Why don't you tell them about what you've just been through?” Brought closer to death, Lorde saw the imperative to “examine the terms and means as well as the whys of my survival”.

The vital harmony of this collection is in such threads of life and thought that link the texts together, in tune with the struggles — against racism, sexism, homophobia — to which Lorde devoted herself. Between speeches, essays and poems, readers gain insight into her process: how her poetry came out of a “pre-verbal” place, “a dark temple where your true spirit rises” (“Black Mother Woman”), while her prose thought through the social backdrop of feeling.

“We were never meant to survive”, writes Lorde in the poem “A Litany for Survival”, and with this “we” she is addressing communities of colour in particular, for whom death lingers in closer proximity to daily life. That her children's “playgrounds were

graveyards” makes a further urgency to speak out and write. Some words come freely, unstopably: she pulls over her car to rush down the poem “Power”, upon hearing of the acquittal of a police officer who murdered a young black boy; or “Equinox”, which opens with her daughter’s spring birthday, before the news of Malcolm X’s assassination, heard through a “borrowed radio” one Sunday. If her work is in dialogue with death, it harnesses first the determined force of life.

But Lorde is also speaking to “the Black mother in each of us, whether we are Black or not”. In an unwavering style that retains the directness of orality, she describes complex interpersonal dynamics in clear, nuanced terms. Her writings advocate what is now called intersectionality – the recognition that social identities are multiple and oppressions overlapping – before the word. Others preach self-care before this was co-opted as a marketing strategy, and when it went hand-in-hand with collective work. “For every real word spoken”, she recounts of her conversations in the US women’s movement in the 1970s, “for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, [...] we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences.”

As UK-based writers Sara Ahmed (*Living a Feminist Life*, 2017) and Reni Eddo-Lodge (*Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, 2017) emphasise in their prescient introductions, Lorde’s work resounds deeply amid 2017’s retrograde racist grim. She urges her readers to reach inside themselves and acknowledge what bodily fears or prejudices they carry, to “touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there.” From this self-questioning, it may be possible to move forward into the generative power of community, where people are given not only the opportunity to voice, but the space in which to listen, quietly.