



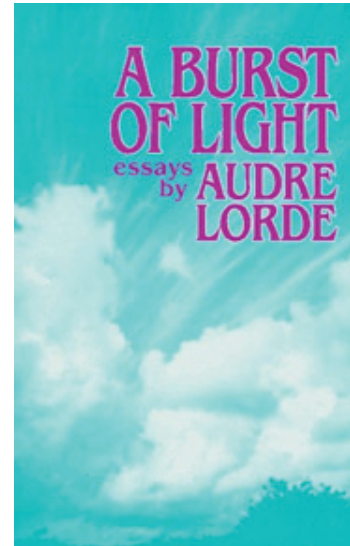
# *A Burst of Light* by Audre Lorde

## **This Woman's Work**

*A Burst of Light* is a collection of prose that focuses on the experiences and beliefs of Audre Lorde, a self proclaimed Black Lesbian Feminist poet. The book is full of interesting information told from Lorde's view point. Although the reader, especially if not a woman of color, may at times feel disconnected from the author and quite possibly derided by her attitude, at the very least from this book the reader abstracts another person's view on subjects such as lesbian sadomasochism, stereotypes, child rearing, and apartheid. More importantly, the reader gains insight into one Black Lesbian Feminist's life in the 1980's.

The book begins with an interview with Lorde conducted by Susan Leigh Star. In this section, "Sadomasochism: Not About Condemnation," Lorde and Star address the occurrences of sadomasochism in the lesbian community. Although I have never thought much about the practice of sadomasochism in the lesbian community, I found Lorde's comments on the role sexuality plays in daily life interesting. Lorde states that the downfall of sadomasochist practice extends beyond the private life because it is an "institutionalized celebration of dominant/subordinate relationships" (14). Lorde argues that sadomasochism is not only confined to the bedroom. She proposes that the power struggle born of the practice permeates all areas of the participant's life because it is impossible to remove the sexual aspects of our life from other aspects within ourselves.

In the essay "I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities" Lorde takes the reader on an eight page journey of who she is and how she identifies herself. Not a single paragraph slips by without her reminding us that she is a Black Lesbian. Lorde reminisces about her days in college, her children, her activism, and career, and how during all of her life she has identified herself as a Black Lesbian.



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In this essay, Lorde is reaching out to straight black women and declaring that they should not be threatened or feel repulsed by Black Lesbians, but should unite together as Black women regardless of sexual preferences. In this essay the reader can sense that Lorde feels strongly about how individuals and groups of people identify themselves. That same identification that she declared so proudly starts to become limiting. In her effort to connect with other Black Lesbians or black women, she's possibly alienating others (heterosexuals, white people, males, etc.) by exclusively reaching out to unite with only small population of people.

In the essay "Apartheid U.S.A." Lorde relates apartheid in South Africa to her vision of African-American expendability and suppression in America. It is important for the reader to remember, while reading this piece, that it was written in 1986 and Apartheid in South Africa was a current issue. This piece is significant in that we can see how things have changed in the twenty years that have passed since Lorde wrote it. In the essay Lorde claims that black people in America are as worse off, if not more so, as those in South Africa. Lorde states that as "African-Americans can still move about relatively freely, do not yet have to carry passbooks or battle an officially named policy of apartheid, should not delude us for a minute about the disturbing similarities of the Black situation in each of these profit-oriented economies" (36). This statement seems odd, as though Lorde thought the civil rights movement was bound to take a step back.

I think Lorde's claims in "Apartheid U.S.A." are peculiar and counter productive. She seems to argue that African-American workers are not capable of any occupation other than menial labor. While talking about unemployment, she draws a parallel between people in America and South Africa by stating that "African-Americans are increasingly superfluous to a shrinking economy" (35) and continues by noting that "a cheap labor pool of Blacks is still pivotal to the economy" (35) in South Africa.

In "Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986" Lorde imparts her thoughts on raising children as a "Lesbian and a Black African Caribbean American woman" (42). Whether she realized it or not, much of the information Lorde gives is pertinent to any parent, regardless of sexual preference or color. Her views that children should be raised to be strong, confident, and well-adjusted are not exclusive wishes of lesbian parents. She does, however, make a good case that children of lesbian parents may have a harder time meeting those goals their parents set for them because of the stereotypes and bigotry that existed then, and now. Lorde is especially firm in her belief that "children of Lesbians of Color did not choose their Color nor their mamas. But these are the facts of their lives, and the power as well as the peril of these realities must not be hidden from them as they seek self-definition" (46).



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“A Burst of Light: Living With Cancer” is the longest and most personal section of the book. It consists of select passages from Lorde’s journal from the three years following her diagnosis with liver cancer. The passages highlight Lorde’s efforts to live a normal life while dealing with the knowledge that cancer is invading her body. In this section Lorde maintains her identity as a Black Feminist Lesbian, but the reader sees her in a new way. There are points when she questions what to do with the rest of her life and how she wants to spend the rest of her times. Although her strong and brave persona comes through when she decides that she will continue her work and “go out like a fucking meteor!” (77) This section is an opportunity for the reader to see Lorde’s personality. It is a look into her emotions and thoughts unadulterated by the politically charged issues of the essays.

The ideas expressed by Lorde are important to consider because she represents a part of the population that is not always heard from. The aspects of the book that seem dated are still important to consider. They give the reader insight to the issues that afflicted people in the 1980’s. I would like to think that the changes we have seen are due to people like Lorde and the work, like this book, that they have done. The main obstacle I had while reading the book was feeling alienated by Lorde’s frequent use of labels. At times Lorde’s separation of people by their political identities made me feel unable to identify with the author. Another small obstacle I had with the book is in the language Lorde used. It is possibly in an attempt to empower, but it seems like an attempt to insult or belittle those different than her, Lorde spells certain words with a capital letter and certain ones in all lowercase (i.e. Black and white, African and American). The issue of alienating people that cannot identify with her, as a Black Feminist Lesbian, may not have been a concern to Lorde. The primary point of this book is to empower people Lorde identifies with. But this book may be more valuable to people who do not identify as Black Feminist Lesbians. Lorde describes the opposition as people who are “white racist profit-oriented sexist homophobic” (46). This book, especially the section “A Burst of Light: Living With Cancer,” demonstrates that we are all human and the differences we have are not that different.

*Reviewed by Sarah King*