

# THE CANCER JOURNALS (1980)

Audre Lorde

*Poet Audre Lorde's memoir chronicles her experience, as a black feminist and lesbian, with breast cancer and radical mastectomy. Lorde rejected the "path of prosthesis, of silence and invisibility"; while she acknowledged that every woman has the right to make her own choices about her body, she objects to prosthesis as the norm.*

## ❖ Key Concepts

Breast cancer  
Prosthesis  
Black lesbian experience  
Black feminism  
Heterofemininity  
Women's health  
Alternative medical treatments  
Intersectionality

## OVERVIEW

*The Cancer Journals*, by writer and activist Audre Lorde, explores the impact of breast cancer on a black feminist lesbian's life. Juxtaposing journal entries, retrospective commentary, a speech, and an essay, the book documents Lorde's battle against the fear, pain, and despair brought about by her 1978 diagnosis and subsequent mastectomy. As she writes, "any amputation is a physical and psychic reality that must be integrated into a new sense of self." Lorde gives voice to the feelings and lived experience of cancer not only to cope with her new body but also "to share it for use, that the pain not be wasted." Moving between private experience and political analysis, *The Cancer Journals* addresses topics including prosthesis, the politics of appearance, the power dynamics of the patient-doctor relationship, feminism and social struggle, and the function of cancer in a capitalist economy. Considered among the most inspiring and empowering works about what it means to live with cancer, Lorde's memoir has been reprinted and translated, and remains a key point of reference for health feminism, studies on breast cancer, and women's disability experiences.

## HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Lorde's experience of cancer was informed by the circumstances of her early life growing up "with no words for racism"—as a result of her parents' efforts to protect her from it—and a severe visual impairment, which she describes in her book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). In *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde characterizes her early life as a battle on many fronts: "Growing up Fat Black Female and almost blind in America requires so much surviving that you have to learn from it or die. [...] survival is only part of the task. The other part is teaching. I had been in training for a long time." Her story of illness exemplifies how a self-described "black woman warrior poet" uses these lessons of survival to make sense of her subsequent experience with cancer and how she teaches others by turning her personal struggles into politically useful ones.

Lorde acknowledges the need to "teach by living and speaking" personal truths in the first chapter of the book, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," a speech that was delivered in 1977 at the Modern Language Association's Lesbian and Literature panel in Chicago. The speech reflects a central tenet of second-wave feminism, namely that "the personal is political." Lorde begins by describing her first experience with breast surgery, an operation to remove a tumor that turned out to be benign. She relates that the incident made her more aware of her mortality and past regrets: "My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you." Lorde urges her audience to speak out, asking: "What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? 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?"

In the context of *The Cancer Journals*, this appeal is reframed: "If we are to translate the silence surrounding breast cancer into language and action

## KEY FACTS

### Subject:

Audre Lorde (1934–1992)

### Occupation:

Poet

### Nationality:

American

### Genre:

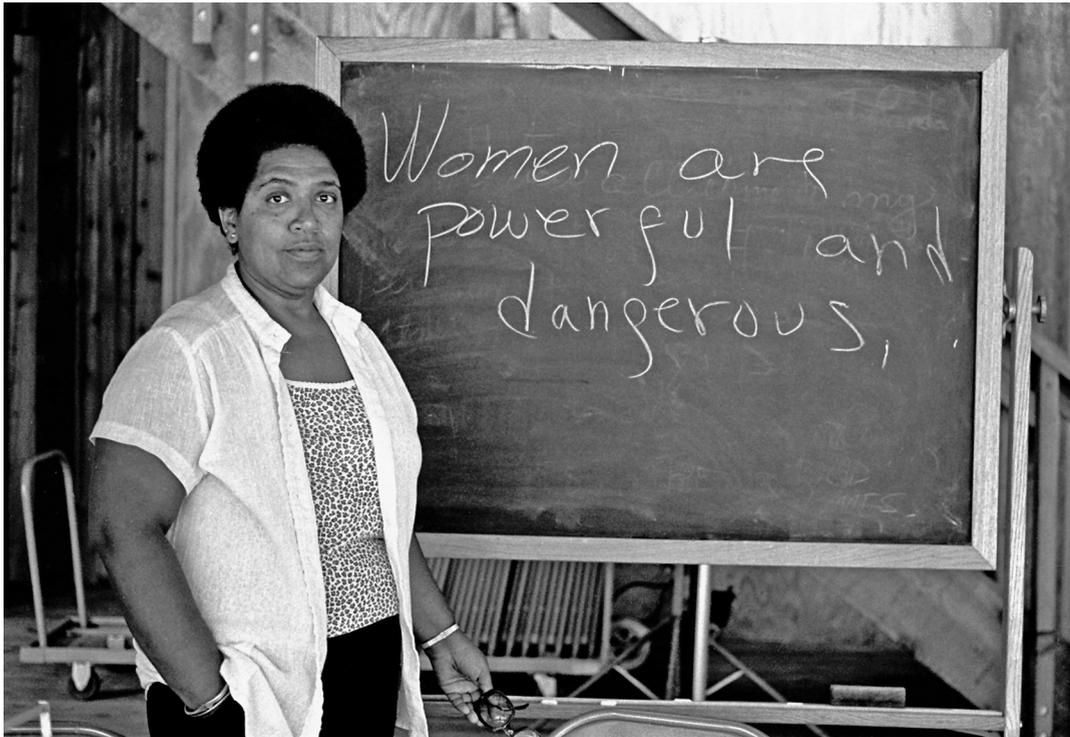
Memoir

### Time Period:

1970s to 1980s

### Historical Context:

Changing attitudes toward prostheses  
Black feminist movement



Author Audre Lorde, 1983.  
ROBERT ALEXANDER/GETTY  
IMAGES

against this scourge, then the first step is that women with mastectomies must become visible to each other. For silence and invisibility go hand in hand with powerlessness.” With her call for solidarity and community-based activism, Lorde challenges what Maren Klawiter (2008) described as “the regime of medicalization.” During the first seventy years of the twentieth century, this regime isolated women with breast cancer by preventing them from “participating in decision making about their treatment” and encouraging them to “maintain a normal, heterofeminine appearance.”

*The Cancer Journals* moves across various genres. Alongside its contribution to black feminist thought and activism, it can be situated in the traditions of feminist self-writing, what Jeanne Perreault (1995) called “feminist autobiography”; contemporary autobiographical writing about trauma, a category that Susanna Egan (1999) suggested is more open to formal experimentation than other kinds of life writing; and a group of memoirs, identified by illness narrative scholar Arthur W. Frank (1995), in which “the post-colonial, embodied self pushes the limits of testimony.” Moreover, Lorde’s emphasis on every woman’s “militant responsibility to involve herself actively with her own health” connects *The Cancer Journals* to a genealogy of health feminism from the 1970s and to the illness narratives that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, when patients refused to surrender to medical authority and reclaimed the capacity to tell their own stories

about their bodies. By attending to the ways illness and disability intersect with categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality, Lorde’s narrative constitutes an important precursor to the ongoing work of diversifying the fields of disability studies and the medical humanities.

In 1984, Lorde was again diagnosed with cancer, which had spread from her breast to her liver. In her essay collection *A Burst of Light* (1988), she writes about her decision to forgo a biopsy and to embrace such alternative treatments as homeopathy and self-hypnosis. Lorde died in St. Croix, US Virgin Islands, from complications of liver cancer in 1992, a year after becoming the first African American and the first woman to be named New York State poet laureate.

#### THEMES

Egan maintained that by refusing a single linear narrative and bringing together material written “on different timelines” and in different “modes of address,” *The Cancer Journals* enacts textually “Lorde’s lived process of moving from experience to activism.” Even as her journal entries written immediately after the surgery express pain for her “lost breast,” in her retrospective commentary Lorde defends her refusal to follow the “path of prosthesis, of silence and invisibility.” While she acknowledges that every woman has the right to make her own choices about her body, she objects to prosthesis as “a norm for post-mastectomy women.” In the third chapter, “Breast Cancer: Power vs. Prosthesis,” Lorde



## PRIMARY SOURCE

### Excerpt from *The Cancer Journals*

Here we were, in the offices of one of the top breast cancer surgeons in New York City. Every woman there either had a breast removed, might have to have a breast removed, or was afraid of having to have a breast removed. And every woman there could have used a reminder that having one breast did not mean her life was over, nor that she was less a woman, nor that she was condemned to the use of a placebo in order to feel good about herself and the way she looked.

Yet a woman who has one breast and refuses to hide that fact behind a pathetic puff of lambswool which has no relationship nor likeness to her own breasts, a woman who is attempting to come to terms with her changed landscape and changed timetable of life and with her own body and pain and beauty and strength, that woman is seen as a threat to the "morale" of a breast surgeon's office!

Yet when Moishe Dayan, the Prime Minister of Israel, stands up in front of parliament or on TV with an eyepatch over his empty eye socket, nobody tells him to go get a glass eye, or that he is bad for the morale of the office. The world sees him as a warrior with an honorable wound, and a loss of a piece of himself which he has marked, and mourned, and moved beyond. And if you have trouble dealing with Moishe Dayan's empty eye socket, everyone recognizes that it is your problem to solve, not his.

Well, women with breast cancer are warriors, also. I have been to war, and still am. So has every woman who had had one or both breasts amputated because of the cancer that is becoming the primary physical scourge of our time. For me, my scars are an honorable reminder that I may be a casualty in the cosmic war against radiation, animal fat, air pollution, McDonald's hamburgers and Red Dye No. 2, but the fight is still going on, and I am still a part of it. I refuse to have my scars hidden or trivialized behind lambswool or silicone gel. I refuse to be reduced in my own eyes or in the eyes of others from warrior to mere victim, simply because it might render me a fraction more acceptable or less dangerous to the still complacent, those who believe if you cover up a problem it ceases to exist. I refuse to hide my body simply because it might make a woman-phobic world more comfortable.

As I sat in my doctor's office trying to order my perceptions of what had just occurred, I realized that the attitude towards prosthesis after breast cancer is an index of this society's attitudes towards women in general as decoration and externally defined sex object.

SOURCE: Lorde, Audre. *The Cancer Journals*. San Francisco, Spinsters, Ink, 1980, pp. 59–61.

describes going for the first time to her doctor's office without a prosthesis and being confronted by a nurse who says that "you will feel so much better with it on" and that not wearing one is "bad for the morale

of the office." Lorde rejects this perspective: "The real truth is that certain other people feel better with that lump stuck into my bra, because they do not have to deal with me nor themselves in terms of mortality nor in terms of difference."

Lorde views the demand for "a normal" body, on which the choice of prosthesis is based, as "an index of this society's attitudes towards women in general as decoration and externally defined sex object." Unlike prosthetic devices that serve a function, "false breasts" are designed "for appearance only." G. Thomas Couser (1997) argued that by shifting between "the emotional and the intellectual," Lorde offers another example from her personal story to illustrate how a prosthesis can trivialize or ignore women's own perceptions of themselves. She tells of a visit she received by a volunteer from Reach for Recovery after her mastectomy. While the woman extols the advantages of prostheses, Lorde "look[s] away, thinking, 'I wonder if there are any black lesbian feminists in Reach for Recovery?' [...] I needed to talk with women who shared at least some of my major concerns and beliefs and visions, who shared at least some of my language. And this lady, admirable though she might be, did not." Moreover, she decries the absurdity of the woman's statement that with a prosthesis "You'll never know the difference." Lorde points out that the pink prosthetic "was the wrong color, and looked grotesquely pale through the cloth of my bra." By showing how her racial difference is rendered invisible by a prosthesis, she emphasizes how illness and disability are not experienced in a uniform way by all women.

Lorde concludes that "prosthesis offers the empty comfort of 'Nobody will know the difference.' But it is that very difference which I wish to affirm, because I have lived it, and survived it, and wish to share that strength with other women." She asserts: "Either I would love my body one-breasted now, or remain forever alien to myself." Cultural stereotypes imagine disabled women as asexual and unattractive, but Lorde insists that "a woman can be beautiful and one-breasted." In fact, placing herself "in the vanguard of a new fashion," Lorde was the first to design clothes and jewelry for one-breasted women favoring "asymmetrical patterns."

In the chapter and manifesto "Breast Cancer: Power vs. Prosthesis," Lorde writes that treating cancer as merely a cosmetic issue not only reinforces isolation and invisibility among women with breast cancer but also misconstrues it as "a private problem." Such an approach diverts attention away from addressing the environmental causes of the disease and limits awareness of social inequities (such as the increased rate of breast cancer among black and poor women) and "the profit in the treatment," with which the American Cancer Society is complicit, rather than prevention of the disease. Drawing on a topic in

lesbian fiction and myth—the woman-identified and single-breasted community of the Amazons—Lorde asks, “What would happen if an army of one-breasted women descended upon Congress and demanded that the use of carcinogenic, fat-stored hormones in beef-feed be outlawed?” Health is ultimately a political issue for Lorde, and the emphasis on wider societal structures and attitudes that contribute to ill health in *The Cancer Journals* links her intervention to the social model of disability and to activism more generally. Offering a powerful critique of happiness in the book’s final chapter, Lorde cautions against the dangerous belief that “the achievement and maintenance of perfect happiness is the only secret of a physically healthy life in America.” This attitude not only blames the victim but depoliticizes the disease, as it becomes divorced from broader social struggles of which the fight against cancer is just one part. Rather than adopting the “superficial” mentality of “looking on the bright side of things,” which upholds the status quo, Lorde demonstrates through her experience and writing of cancer “the power and rewards of self-conscious living.”

#### CRITICAL RESPONSE

*The Cancer Journals* was very successful in its first edition, with many women—especially lesbians—sending letters to Lorde to thank her for breaking the silence and placing her experience in a political framework. In her review of the second edition of the book, Susan McHenry (1981) noted that it includes a black-and-white photo of Lorde on the cover wearing a single dangling earring “in the name of grand asymmetry.” McHenry maintained that Lorde “dares to acknowledge her radically altered body image [...] and with it embraces a radically altered self—one even more vital and whole than before.” In her foreword to the 1985 British edition of *The Cancer Journals*, naturopath Carol Smith praised Lorde’s “strengths and insights,” arguing that “prosthesis is a part of the spectrum of oppression that treats people with physical differences or disabilities as ‘abnormal.’”

In the 1990s, autobiography and black-studies scholars examined the power of Lorde’s life writing. Perreault noted the following paradox: Lorde’s writing “lives close to the vulnerable and uncertain flesh, and yet enjoys rhetorical authority, sureness, and even righteousness.” Frank cited Lorde several times in *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995) when outlining his concept of the “communicative body,” which “communes its story with others” and “invites others to recognize themselves in it.” Elizabeth Alexander (1994) also focused on the importance of the body in Lorde’s work but connects it to a larger exploitative history of representing black bodies. Alexander stressed the power Lorde reclaims in “showing us her insides, that sanctified, veiled territory that looks so different because she is showing it herself.”

In her 2007 book *Treatments*, Lisa Diedrich argued that *The Cancer Journals* integrates the “affective” and “effective,” reading the memoir as an example of a particular form of “politicized patienthood” that is centered on “experience.” A series of other scholars have explored Lorde’s legacy for health feminism and breast-cancer activism in the twenty-first century, as discourses of the politicized patient are being supplanted by neoliberal models of health. Drawing on paradigms that have changed perceptions of the body since the publication of *The Cancer Journals*, feminist critic Diane Price Herndl (2002) justified her choice of breast reconstruction and describes why she did not “wear breast cancer in the same way” as Lorde. In her article “Cancer Butch” (2007), S. Lochlann Jain updated Lorde’s theorization of breast cancer in the United States by offering a queer analysis. In her study *Mammographies* (2013), Mary K. DeShazer focused on breast cancer narratives by Zillah Eisenstein and Evelyne Accad, whom she viewed as Lorde’s “postmillennial successors.”

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