

## Inauguration of the Audre Lorde Women's Poetry Center



*Professor Audre Lorde holding plaques naming the Women's Poetry Center in her honor.*

### Who Said it Would be Simple:

by Gina Rhodes

**“W**ho Said It Would be Simple” is the title of one of Audre Lorde’s poems. Her work—which can be viewed as a progression of her life—is a testament to just how *unsimple* it has been. Still, Audre Lorde has chosen “this brick and shitty stone over the good earth’s challenge of green.”\* In living that choice she has confronted an unceasing battalion of foes, winning, in the process, many victories.

The evening of December 13, 1985 was one such victory. On that evening, in room 417 Hunter West, several weeks of chaotic but tireless organizing came together. For all of the women who took part, it was both flower and fruit of our combined efforts—the dedication of the Audre Lorde Women’s Poetry Center. Not all of our lives’ efforts turn out as brilliant and as open as Audre’s goddess smiling face, but to have had a part in this occasion was one of the most gratifying experiences of my life.

President Donna Shalala, although unable to attend, gave her good wishes to Audre and the future success of the poetry center in a letter she allowed us to read to the gathering (see Letters section). Poet Cheryl Clarke also sent her regards, saying, “. . . I can think of no teacher, writer, hardworking black woman who deserves to have a poetry center named after her more except for those nameless black women workers who’ve gone before and in whose name I know you accept this honor . . .”

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*“President Shalala gave her good wishes.”*

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Professor Blanche Cook, who has known Audre since their high school days, presented letters from the president and vice-president of John Jay College, where Audre taught for 11 years. President Gerald Lynch wrote: “She has touched us all—unsettling, probing, loving and real and always to leave us thinking and more aware of our humanity and, sometimes, our inhumanity. . . . What *she* does lives on—to survive *her* and *me* and *all of you*.”

More than once during the night I looked around at the audience, thinking that this night was a merging of generations in a place of possibility and change. For Hunter was where Audre first tested the waters of her “different” life, and first found the waves against her were not mild. Here it was, said Blanche, that “our publication was censored, our sensibilities disallowed.” Where else but at Hunter would Audre be a professor? A professor who insists we call her simply, Audre; who teaches nothing from the blackboard; who teaches urgently of yesterday, today and tomorrow and of how our individual voices must figure in the continuation or dissipation of the world. As Lynch put it, “Our poet is not to be taken lightly or consigned to some intellectual corner. She is in the world.”

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*Professor Louise DeSalvo, Rosette Capotorto, Cassie, Victoria Heacock, Kathleen Walsh D'Arcy.*

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The significance of this Center, then, is a place for her students now and for future generations of "different folk" to be, as Audre enjoins, who we are and will be. "Audre Lorde is about love and about power," according to Blanche, and those students through whom these energies have been channeled describe the effects of Audre's teaching:

**Sook L. Park:** "She taught me that I have a voice to be used to speak out."

**Yasmin Adib:** "One of the first things that Audre teaches her classes is that a poem is like a light beam that goes through an experience or feeling. You shouldn't try to write about everything you feel about something, but take one aspect of it . . ."

**Deborah Aguayo-Delgado:** "One of the many lessons I've been taught by Audre within her class and outside has been *never* to be silent, and that I am not alone in any of my experiences."

**Jean Johnston:** "She taught me that I didn't have to be afraid to speak; that I don't have to be afraid to share my feelings."

When these poets, some with newly found voices, finished reading, many in the room must have rediscovered the importance of poetry as an instrument of change, and felt again the difference a committed teacher can make in her students' lives.

The evening continued with readings from Audre's work by Yolanda Rios Butts, and by Audre's daughter, Beth Lorde-Rollins. I could see the currents of love moving back and forth between each of them and her, as she mouthed each word of every poem and flung back her head, responding with rolling laughter to humorous lines. Lisa Vice, who played a significant role along with Karen Monash in setting up the Women's Poetry Center, made the actual presentation of the plaque to Audre, her former teacher and friend. And soon the Kuumba Women Drummers called upon their drums for blessings, and received them.

The reading and presentation were followed by a reception at the new home of the Women's Poetry Center, Roosevelt House at 68th and Park.

We envision the Audre Lorde Women's Poetry Center as both a city and nationwide center where poets may come and share and leave some piece of themselves. Without question the commitment of Audre and those whom she has touched make that vision real. □

*\*From Chosen Poems, "To the Girl Who Lived in a Tree."*

*The letters of Presidents Shalala and Lynch are reprinted in full in the Letters section (page 30).*