



Legislation Text

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Res. No. 219

Resolution declaring February 18 annually as Audre Lorde Day in the City of New York to honor her legacy as a poet, essayist, memoirist, and lecturer, whose life and work powerfully addressed the injustices of racism, sexism, and gender discrimination

By Council Members Hudson and Louis

Whereas, Audrey Geraldine Lorde was born in Harlem on February 18, 1934, to Frederick Byron Lorde of Barbados and Linda Gertrude Belmar Lorde of Grenada, who had come to New York City (NYC) in 1924; and

Whereas, As a child, Lorde dropped the “y” from her first name, preferring the look of having both her first and last names end in “e” and disliking the look of the tail on the “y”; and

Whereas, Lorde, who was legally blind and did not speak until she was four or five, explained that, as a child, she “used to speak in poetry” by reciting lines from poems she had memorized in order to answer people’s questions, a habit that she described as “communicat[ing] through poetry”; and

Whereas, Even before graduating from the prestigious Hunter College High School, Lorde had joined the Harlem Writers Guild, where she met Langston Hughes and other remarkable writers, and had published her first poems in the *Harlem Writers’ Quarterly* and *Seventeen* magazine; and

Whereas, Lorde attended the National University of Mexico in Cuernavaca for a year before returning to NYC and earning a bachelor’s degree from Hunter College at The City University of New York (CUNY) and then a master’s degree in library science from Columbia University; and

Whereas, Lorde worked as a librarian in the NYC public schools from 1961 to 1968, following in the footsteps of Augusta Baker, a neighborhood librarian who had befriended Lorde when she was small and had

introduced her to poetry; and

Whereas, Lorde later became a college professor, first winning a National Endowment for the Arts grant to become a writer-in-residence at Tougaloo College and then going on to teach at Lehman College (CUNY), John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY), and her alma mater Hunter College, while lecturing nationally and internationally; and

Whereas, Lorde married and divorced Edwin Rollins and had a son and a daughter from that marriage, who were raised by Lorde and her partner of two decades Frances Clayton, a white female psychology professor, in a house on Staten Island, now designated as a landmark by the NYC Landmarks Preservation Commission; and

Whereas, Among her best-known essay and poetry collections are *The First Cities* (1968), *Cables to Rage* (1970), *From a Land Where Other People Live* (published in 1973 and a finalist for the National Book Award for Poetry), *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974), *Coal* (1976), *The Black Unicorn* (published in 1978 and inspired by a trip to Benin), *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (published in 1984 and including the landmark essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”), and *A Burst of Light and Other Essays* (published in 1988 and winner of the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award); and

Whereas, Her 1980 memoir *The Cancel Journals*, which told of her brutal struggle with breast cancer and a mastectomy, powerfully addressed the silence and isolation that women-and especially Black lesbians-with breast cancer faced from society and the difficulties Lorde herself had encountered in dealing with a medical system she considered racist; and

Whereas, In 1982, Lorde published a second memoir, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, to reflect on her acceptance of her own identity as a Black lesbian in her early years, recounting funny, dramatic, and colorful anecdotes from her life downtown in the 1950s and writing that it “was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female, to be Black female, and gay,” but perhaps “simply suicidal” to “be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet in a white environment”; and

Whereas, Lorde also was concerned and wrote about the growing environmental crisis, noting in 1990 that the “earth is telling us something about our conduct of living”; and

Whereas, Lorde was a founding member of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and of Sisterhood in Support of Sisters in South Africa, and she served on the board of the Feminist Press; and

Whereas, Among other honors she received, Lorde was given the Manhattan Borough President’s Award for Excellence in the Arts in 1988 and was awarded honorary doctorates from Hunter College, Oberlin College, and Haverford College; and

Whereas, Lorde was honored as the poet laureate for New York State for 1991-1992 and was posthumously elected to the American Poets Corner at NYC’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine; and

Whereas, Lorde often introduced herself as “a Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,” sometimes adding “doing my work, coming to ask you if you’re doing yours”; and

Whereas, In her later years, Lorde often said, “What I leave behind has a life of its own,” foreshadowing the power that her writing continues to have today in changing the way people think about discrimination against all of the communities that she belonged to and championed; and

Whereas, Before her death, Lorde adopted the African name Gamba Adisa, which means “Warrior: She Who Makes Her Meaning Known”; and

Whereas, Lorde died at the age of 58 on November 17, 1992, of liver cancer at her home in St. Croix, Virgin Islands, where she lived with her partner Gloria Joseph; and

Whereas, The designation of a day is fitting to commemorate the life and work of Audre Lorde, who still speaks through her writing to all New Yorkers affected by the consequences of bias and intolerance; now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Council of the City of New York declares February 18 annually as Audre Lorde Day in the City of New York to honor her legacy as a poet, essayist, memoirist, and lecturer, whose life and work powerfully addressed the injustices of racism, sexism, and gender discrimination.

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