

AUDRE LORDE

The Fourth of July

Audre Lorde (1934–1992) was a poet and nonfiction writer. Born in New York City to Caribbean immigrants, Lorde trained and worked as a librarian and became a widely published poet in the 1960s, when she also became politically active. Her poetry collections include The First Cities (1968), Cables to Rage (1970), and The Black Unicorn (1978); her other books were memoir and political and social theory, including The Cancer Journals (1980) and Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982).

“The Fourth of July” is a beautifully spare yet forceful piece of writing. In it, readers can see the anger that spurred much of Lorde’s writing, whether about racism, as in this essay, or about sexism or homophobia, but they can also see the control with which Lorde expressed her ideas and the honesty with which she implicated herself and her family in her writing.

The first time I went to Washington, D.C., was on the edge of the summer when I was supposed to stop being a child. At least that’s what they said to us all at graduation from the eighth grade. My sister Phyllis graduated at the same time from high school. I don’t know what she was supposed to stop being. But as graduation presents for us both, the whole family took a Fourth of July trip to Washington, D.C., the fabled and famous capital of our country.

It was the first time I’d ever been on a railroad train during the day. When I was little, and we used to go to the Connecticut shore, we always went at night on the milk train, because it was cheaper.

Preparations were in the air around our house before school was even over. We packed for a week. There were two very large suitcases that my father carried, and a box filled with food. In fact, my first trip to Washington was a mobile feast; I started eating as

soon as we were comfortably ensconced in our seats, and did not stop until somewhere after Philadelphia. I remember it was Philadelphia because I was disappointed not to have passed by the Liberty Bell.

My mother had roasted two chickens and cut them up into dainty bite-size pieces. She packed slices of brown bread and butter and green pepper and carrot sticks. There were little violently yellow iced cakes with scalloped edges called "marigolds," that came from Cushman's Bakery. There was a spice bun and rock-cakes from Newton's, the West Indian bakery across Lenox Avenue from St. Mark's School, and iced tea in a wrapped mayonnaise jar. There were sweet pickles for us and dill pickles for my father, and peaches with the fuzz still on them, individually wrapped to keep them from bruising. And, for neatness, there were piles of napkins and a little tin box with a washcloth dampened with rose-water and glycerine for wiping sticky mouths.

I wanted to eat in the dining car because I had read all about them, but my mother reminded me for the umpteenth time that dining car food always cost too much money and besides, you never could tell whose hands had been playing all over that food, nor where those same hands had been just before. My mother never mentioned that black people were not allowed into railroad dining cars headed south in 1947. As usual, whatever my mother did not like and could not change, she ignored. Perhaps it would go away, deprived of her attention.

I learned later that Phyllis's high school senior class trip had been to Washington, but the nuns had given her back her deposit in private, explaining to her that the class, all of whom were white, except Phyllis, would be staying in a hotel where Phyllis "would not be happy," meaning, Daddy explained to her, also in private, that they did not rent rooms to Negroes. "We will take you to Washington, ourselves," my father had avowed, "and not just for an overnight in some measly fleabag hotel."

American racism was a new and crushing reality that my parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to this country. They handled it as a private woe. My mother and father believed that they could best protect their children from the realities of race in America and the fact of American racism by never giving them name, much less discussing their nature. We were told we must never trust white people, but *why* was

never explained, nor the nature of their ill will. Like so many other vital pieces of information in my childhood, I was supposed to know without being told. It always seemed like a very strange injunction coming from my mother, who looked so much like one of those people we were never supposed to trust. But something always warned me not to ask my mother why she wasn't white, and why Auntie Lillah and Auntie Etta weren't, even though they were all that same problematic color so different from my father and me, even from my sisters, who were somewhere in-between.

In Washington, D.C., we had one large room with two double beds and an extra cot for me. It was a back-street hotel that belonged to a friend of my father's who was in real estate, and I spent the whole next day after Mass squinting up at the Lincoln Memorial where Marian Anderson had sung after the D.A.R. refused to allow her to sing in their auditorium because she was black. Or because she was "Colored," my father said as he told us the story. Except that what he probably said was "Negro," because for his times, my father was quite progressive.

I was squinting because I was in that silent agony that characterized all of my childhood summers, from the time school let out in June to the end of July, brought about by my dilated and vulnerable eyes exposed to the summer brightness.

I viewed Julys through an agonizing corolla of dazzling whiteness and I always hated the Fourth of July, even before I came to realize the travesty such a celebration was for black people in this country. 10

My parents did not approve of sunglasses, nor of their expense.

I spent the afternoon squinting up at monuments to freedom and past presidencies and democracy, and wondering why the light and heat were both so much stronger in Washington, D.C., than back home in New York City. Even the pavement on the streets was a shade lighter in color than back home.

Late that Washington afternoon my family and I walked back down Pennsylvania Avenue. We were a proper caravan, mother bright and father brown, the three of us girls step-standards in-between. Moved by our historical surroundings and the heat of early evening, my father decreed yet another treat. He had a great sense of history, a flair for the quietly dramatic and the sense of specialness of an occasion and a trip.

“Shall we stop and have a little something to cool off, Lin?”

Two blocks away from our hotel, the family stopped for a dish 15
of vanilla ice cream at a Breyer’s ice cream and soda fountain.
Indoors, the soda fountain was dim and fan-cooled, deliciously
relieving to my scorched eyes.

Corded and crisp and pinafores, the five of us seated ourselves
one by one at the counter. There was I between my mother and
father, and my two sisters on the other side of my mother. We
settled ourselves along the white mottled marble counter, and
when the waitress spoke at first no one understood what she was
saying, and so the five of us just sat there.

The waitress moved along the line of us closer to my father and
spoke again. “I said I kin give you to take out, but you can’t eat
here. Sorry.” Then she dropped her eyes looking very embarrassed,
and suddenly we heard what it was she was saying all at the same
time, loud and clear.

Straight-backed and indignant, one by one, my family and I
got down from the counter stools and turned around and marched
out of the store, quiet and outraged, as if we had never been black
before. No one would answer my emphatic questions with any-
thing other than a guilty silence. “But we hadn’t done anything!”
This wasn’t right or fair! Hadn’t I written poems about Bataan
and freedom and democracy for all?

My parents wouldn’t speak of this injustice, not because they
had contributed to it, but because they felt they should have
anticipated it and avoided it. This made me even angrier. My fury
was not going to be acknowledged by a like fury. Even my two
sisters copied my parents’ pretense that nothing unusual and
anti-American had occurred. I was left to write my angry letter to
the president of the United States all by myself, although my
father did promise I could type it out on the office typewriter next
week, after I showed it to him in my copybook diary.

The waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice 20
cream I never ate in Washington, D.C., that summer I left child-
hood was white, and the white heat and the white pavement and
the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer
made me sick to my stomach for the whole rest of that trip and it
wasn’t much of a graduation present after all.