
'Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992': Interview with Dagmar Schultz

Twenty years have passed since Audre Lorde's death by liver cancer. But her efforts in pursuit of respect and equal rights for women, and in particular, women of color, remain vital, celebrated and emulated around the world. While many admirers recall her work in the United States, she also spent her later years in Berlin. Here the activist, author, and filmmaker Dagmar Schultz, developed a longstanding professional and personal relationship with Lorde. A scrupulous scholar, Schultz developed an extensive Audre Lorde archive, including video footage, audiotapes, photos, and notebooks. After many years and various struggles, Schultz has made an 84-minute documentary called [Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992](#). The film premiered at the 62nd Annual Berlin Film Festival and continues to tour the globe. *PopMatters* caught up with Dagmar Schultz on a stop this spring at this year's [Torino GLBT Film Festival](#).

I'd like to start at the beginning, when you first encountered Audre Lorde. Where did you meet her?

I first met her at the Copenhagen Women's Conference in 1980. I saw her there at a reading. [The audience] was primarily made up of white women. I was very impressed by how she encouraged us to look beyond our immediate concerns and that she was willing to engage in such an intense conversation with young, white women from a very different place. Then I thought it would be great if she could come to Germany.

What was her reaction to you?

I was teaching at the John F. Kennedy Center for American Studies at the University of Berlin. So I asked

her if she would be willing to come as a guest speaker, because I could try to organize that. She said, “Yes, possibly.” I was very happy and I went back and started to organize something for her.

Four years passed between that meeting and her arrival in Berlin. What happened during that time?

Actually, we had invited her to come earlier, but she had some previous commitments, so it didn't work out until 1984. I saw her in between, during a visit to New York. In 1983, I published a book, [*Macht und Sinnlichkeit*], featuring writings by her and Adrienne Rich. It was a book that initiated a lot of discussion about racism and the Women's Movement. Because of this publication, people already knew about her when she came to Berlin.

How did you come up with the structure of the film, the arrangement of archival and personal material?

My idea had always been to make a film that would show Audre on and off stage, because I had always taken a lot of pictures and films. We recorded all of her seminars and her readings, not on video but on audiotapes, so I had a lot of audio material. My idea was to show her in relation to black Germans and the movement that she basically initiated with white women and the discussion of racism that she really pushed for. I was also interested in the context of her illness, the treatment she received and her view of the black diaspora, which had really expanded throughout Europe. So those were some of the public and private parts that made up the idea for my film.

What was the process of making this film?

In 1995, we had started the first attempt to make the film and I was working with two women who made the interview with Gloria Joseph, Audre's partner and colleague, which is now in the film. Then in 1996,

May Ayim, the Afro German poet and writer who was a friend of Audre's, died. We [Schultz and director Maria Binder] made a film about her called [Hope in My Heart: The May Ayim Story](#), and consequently put the other film on hold. But I kept looking for someone to do the film with.

Had you secured funding in 1995, when you started?

No. I had asked and written to friends. At that point, I had gotten some \$100 checks, which I either returned or didn't cash. It was only about two years ago that I decided, "It's now or never," seeing as I have all this material and it was just sitting in my closet.

How did you decide that you would be the filmmaker?

I found this young editor who was working for television. She had no idea who Audre Lorde was. After our first meeting, I remember her sitting on the subway, with her bag full of books, ready to learn. We put a script together and we integrated the interviews and we decided on a structure. I gave her four hours worth of film and she made an 80-minute film from all of that. We continued to review it together.

Fortunately, Audre Lorde is considered to be very significant. If I had asked people for money for something else, I don't think I would have gotten it, but because people thought it was an important project and they were committed to Audre, I got a lot of private donations. Her publishing house, Mamamelis, was one of the first partners, along with the school where I was teaching, the Allemande. Then last year, I received the Magherita von Brentano Award, given by the Free University for my work over the years, specifically for my political engagement and work with women. I was given €15,000, which was a nice chunk for the film and helped to pay my new editor. Some of the money was also used for establishing an Audre Lorde archive at the [Library of the Free University](#). Now all of my material is there for people to use: photos, other visual material, all the courses she taught are on audiotape, her readings, interviews, everything.

Audre once said she wanted to “challenge white women to acknowledge their white privilege and to deal with the differences in constructive ways.” Can you describe your relationship with her?

My background is that I was in the States for 10 years, from 1963-1973. I was involved in the Civil Rights Movement in college, and involved in the Women’s Movement in Chicago. I had the great privilege of being able to confront myself with racism and feminism. Then when I went back to Germany in ’74, I was kind of put off by the fact that the Women’s Movement was so white. It took me a while to realize in what way I would translate my experience and then to try to become active around it.

We created a publishing house called Orlanda Women’s Press, which published all of Audre Lorde’s work. In the very early ‘80s, we decided we weren’t going to just publish works about racism and literature by women of color, but that we also wanted to have a team that was more inclusive, that was working as a black and white team. That was around the time when I met Audre. I was not put off by what she said, but I was challenged. We shared long conversations, and she insisted that we had to try to create a more culturally diverse environment in terms of friends and contacts.... Through my relationship with Audre, one thing I learned is that I could not just assume that the other person would judge and accept or reject me. It was something that I had to keep working on, recreating the trust.

Audre Lorde’s work still seems very contemporary. She wrote, “We need each other but we are different. I can know and respect your differences. You must know and respect mine. This is the only way we can work it out.” It seems a useful idea for today’s politicians to take up.

That was one of the central ideas that came to me and was very important in my own writing and research. I think it was something in my personal life, in my relationship with Ika [Hügel-Marshall, Schultz’s partner of 22 years]. For one thing, we have very different pasts. I think Audre’s words are, as you suggest, very contemporary because not that much has changed. I mean, things have changed a bit. But in terms of the networking Audre often called for, it’s really different now in terms of color. [That networking] exists to some extent, but we had hoped that we would have been closer as people. We have

to keep working. And if Audre were here, she'd make the same call for action.

***The Cancer Diaries* was published in 1980, but the network she imagined exists now, for instance, on the internet. Her writings were a precursor to information sharing and blogging, especially the ways women reach out to one another about disease and treatment.**

I think at the time it was outstanding, because it wasn't just a report about her own experience. It went beyond that, for example, in the chapter on power and prosthesis. She also wrote about breast cancer and power from a black perspective and expectations. She brought up many aspects that weren't talked about then, environmental effects on health and cancer that couldn't be treated. She was very concerned about the state of the world and environmental issues, convinced there were environmental effects on her. She understood the connection. When she worked as a young woman in the factories, she felt it could have had some effect on her health.

And then, when she turned to alternative medicine, that was very courageous too. Though one doctor told her, "You'll be fine," others questioned her about not wanting to do chemo. When she came back from Berlin and was on mistletoe treatment, along with homeopathic medicines, doctors said, "Well, it must be the chemicals that are having an effect." They wouldn't recognize that this treatment had anything to do with the fact that she was feeling better. And yet she went on living for eight more years.

Did you introduce her to Dr. [Manfred] Kuno, the naturopath you knew in Berlin?

Yes I did, but before Dr. Kuno, I had introduced her to another anthroposophic/alternative woman doctor. It was in 1984 in New York, a doctor with whom she started her first alternative treatments. One day I went to the doctor to get Audre something and the doctor asked, "Are Audre Lourde's parents black?" I replied, "Of course they're black. What do you mean?" Then she said, "Well she's such a cultured woman. I didn't think they would both be black." And I said to her, "How can you say that?" I couldn't believe it. I mean, after having this very intimate relationship with Audre for three months,

teaching her how to inject herself and working with needles about which Audre had a phobia. They had a friendship. I told Audre, of course. She said, “Well, let’s get her some literature.” She was always interested in dispensing information.

I understand you will be [touring in the United States](#) this fall with Ika, presenting her book, *Invisible Woman: Growing Up Black in Germany*, and your film.

We will be travelling in September and October, beginning in Hawaii and finishing with a date in New York City at Hunter College, where Audre taught. It is sure to be an interesting and emotional journey.

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