

Audre Lorde: Her Years in Berlin

by ALEXIS

“The political and social situation in Berlin and to an even greater extent in the rest of Germany is a nightmare. And what makes it worse is the overlay of pleasantness it is still quite possible to find. The only real hope is the growing horror of groups of people like the healing practitioners, the small publishers, the social workers, women’s groups etc, but those grassroots outcries and demonstrations are coming together really slowly, it takes a lot to galvanize them because in many cases they really do not believe their own history.” Audre Lorde, in a Letter to fellow poet Adrienne Rich Sept 20, 1992

These words, written to by Black Feminist poet Audre Lorde to Jewish-American poet Adrienne Rich about the extreme racist violence in Germany in the time directly after the Berlin wall fell in 1989, raise questions that resound today. What is the status of an anti-racist movement in Germany? How have the efforts of healing practitioners, small publishers, feminist organizations and social workers changed, grown or weakened in the past 20 years? To what extent do progressive groups of people in Berlin and wider Germany remember their history, and catalyze it into a powerful force for action against anti-immigrant and racially biased institutional and interpersonal practices?

At the end of her life Audre Lorde spent considerable time in Berlin, working with a naturopathic doctor who extended her life, improved her quality life and partnered with her in a vision to address returning cancer without conforming to standard chemo-centered American medical practices. Starting in the 1980’s, Lorde’s relationship to Berlin was not merely medical, but also, like all of her other relationships, deeply political.

A self-described Black Lesbian Warrior Mother Poet of Afro-Caribbean heritage, Audre Lorde was a widely recognized poet, eventually named the State Poet of New York, and an ardent participant in the Civil Rights, Black Gay and Lesbian, Women’s Liberation, Lesbian Feminist, Anti-Nuclear, Ethnic

Studies Movements and Anti-Imperialist movements. If her comments above seem harsh towards what she saw as inadequate civil society responses to acts of violence, including the stoning, murdering and harassment of Black German and German immigrants by other civilians, they are no more harsh than her critiques of the movements that she herself participated in, in the United States. Lorde is accurately remembered as the person who would call out fellow Black liberation activists for their homophobia, fellow feminist activists for their racism, fellow ethnic studies activists for their sexism and so on.

When Lorde began to come to Berlin regularly for medical treatments she also became involved in the feminist movement in Berlin. According to feminist writer and publisher Dagmar Schultz, Audre Lorde challenged white German women on their racism in a way that was uncomfortable, but ultimately transformative in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Among Black German women, with whom Lorde helped coin the term "Afro-German" which sought to invoke solidarity with other African descended people in western nations, Lorde's impact was inspiring. Lorde's reading in Berlin and Frankfurt were some of the first opportunities that Black German feminists and lesbians had to meet each other and recognize themselves as part of an intersectional movement. Participants in a writing workshop that Lorde held created a book called *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*. Lorde wrote a preface for the book and helped facilitate its translation into English.

Hearing the stories of isolation that Afro-German women experienced and learning about the harassment they faced on the street, in the workplaces and sometimes even within their own families provided Lorde with information on the atmosphere of racial terror that accompanied the period of transition accompanying the end of the East-West split. Lorde, who suffered acts of racism in the streets of Harlem New York as a child growing up during the Depression in the United States, understood the relationship between economic transition and white racist scapegoating of people of color. In her introduction to the translation of *Showing Our Colors* Lorde she reminds readers that "Without vision, every social change feels like death." And at this period of time groups of disgruntled white Germans were actually visiting violence and sometimes death on those immigrants and Black people that were most socially lated and vulnerable. Does this sound familiar? Relevant to a current moment of economic transition and anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe?

Lorde and her partner Gloria Joseph, who often lived with her in Berlin sent letters to officials including Helmut Kohl demanding a response to the violence and explaining that in this atmosphere of so called freedom (in Western market terms) they were willing to report to their networks in the US, South Africa, and on their travels around the world that Germany was in fact not in a new era of freedom, but rather in a very regressive phase of racial and ethnic terror. In reality though, Lorde's letters to her closest friends and colleagues reveal that she did not have much hope that the German state or the Berlin city government would respond without a movement from within by German civilians. She pinned her hope on the healers, the publishers, the feminists, the social workers, who demonstrated that they were horrified at the violence, but as of 1992, had not galvanized themselves, at least in Lorde's opinion, into a sufficient force to pressure the government, or two counter the homegrown violence.

So 19 years later, in September 2011, after Lorde has become an ancestor and the world has continued to change, when Berlin is boycotting UN anti-racism events, what does it mean for grassroots activists in Berlin to believe their history? Is Lorde referring to the reality of modern genocide in the history of Germany that would hopefully inspire Berliners to understand the urgency of responding to racial and ethnic acts of violence and terror and policies that promote racism? Is Lorde referring to the history of the deep power of healers, those with the power of the independent press, and women to transform the meaning of life and community? In the echo of archival history, rebroadcasted over the mic by another Black feminist today, who is Audre Lorde talking about, Berlin? Is she talking about you?

Alexis Pauline Gumbs, PhD is a Queer Black Troublemaker and a Black Feminist Love Evangelist based in Durham, North Carolina. She has researched, written, published and taught extensively on Audre Lorde and is the founder of the School of Our Lorde (summeroffourlorde.wordpress.com). Check out her work on the Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist community school (blackfeministmind.wordpress.com) and the Mobile Homecoming experiential archive project amplifying Black LGBTQ brilliance (mobilehomecoming.org). Get up to the moment Black Feminist love at blackfeminismlives.tumblr.com or email Alexis at alexispauline@gmail.com.

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