

Hello and welcome. My name is Sara Ahmed and I am delighted and honoured to introduce this film, [Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years](#) directed by [Dagmar Schultz](#), and premiering in the UK today as part of *Fringe! London's Gay Film Festival*. Today is a very significant day. With this film, through this film, Audre Lorde enters the room. For some of you, this might be your first encounter with Audre; for others, her words will already be interwoven with your memories. Audre Lorde: who was born in 1934 and who died in 1992 at the age of 58: 20 years ago this year. Audre Lorde: born in New York City, the daughter of Caribbean immigrants from Granada. Audre Lorde: writer, activist, poet, scholar, mother, warrior, lesbian, black, woman, feminist. Audre Lorde: who always took the risk of naming herself, of asserting her right to exist in a world that made her existence difficult. In this film, Audre Lorde reaches out to each of us; we can hear her voice, follow her in her travels, as she walks down a street, laughs, talks, eats, dances, reads and even sings her poems. To have this footage of Audre Lorde in Berlin, a city she visited many times between 1984 and 1992, is an extraordinary gift.

If this film allows Audre to reach us, then it can allow us to extend her reach. I want to follow Audre Lorde's example, and describe how her work came to matter to me personally: Audre asks us to be personal, to refuse the refuge of distance and abstraction. I think of Audre Lorde and I think of those moments when a life-line is thrown out to you; those moments when what is given to you is what gives you a chance, a breathing space. A life-line can be anything or perhaps it is always something: the quiet words of an encouraging friend, an unexpected alliance with a stranger, the sounds of a familiar landscape, or of an unfamiliar one. A life-line can be the words sent out by a writer, gathered in the form of a book, words that you hang on to, that pull you out of an existence, that can, perhaps later, on another day, pull you into a more liveable world. That's what it was for like for me, reading Audre Lorde's words as a student of colour in the early 1990s, especially the essays collected in *Sister Outsider*, and her extraordinary memoir *Zami* (there is a great story about the back cover of *Zami* in the film, I say no more). Your words Audre were my teachers. You taught me to turn towards what was hard, what made me feel out of place, alone, or strange, to turn towards rather than away from what made life difficult. This film allows me to meet Audre in another way (I never met her in person, even if I was taught by her words). And for that, I am so grateful.

We can also reflect on why this film matters now, as a way of keeping the legacies of Audre Lorde alive: even if we know about her influence in the 1970s and 1980s, we need to become open to receiving her influence today. I think this film offers such an opening. The film is specifically about Audre's Berlin Years and her influence and significance within Germany; how she was involved in creating a space in which Afro-German people could articulate a sense of their own histories, could find each other in the sea of whiteness, could create a sense of belonging. Through watching Audre's Berlin years, through watching her at work, we can also reflect on the politics of black, feminist and queer activism today.

I will put some 'words' as pathways or trails for reflection: transnational. We get a sense from the film of transnational as an actual lived space populated by real bodies, not a glossy word in a brochure but a word that requires work. We have to work to learn from others who do not share our language. We have to travel away from our comfort zones; to listen, to open our ears. We learn especially of the importance of a transnational black feminist politics: of what can happen when African-American and Afro-German women speak to each other, when women of colour across the diasporas speak to each other; between generations, across time as well as space. We learn from differences about differences. We learn also that the national is transnational: that Germanness or Britishness is shaped by

histories of empire and colonialism, which affect the very grounds upon which we live; migrants who in staying leave bits and pieces of ourselves all over the place.

Collective: This is a film about an individual activist no doubt though one deeply immersed in a world with others. We hear the sounds of collectivity in the sounds of many voices; voices that, in speaking together, become even more audible. The film shows how we learn from each other by working with each other; how we achieve solidarity by not assuming solidarity. We get a sense that an individual life does matter, that Audre is asking us to ask ourselves what our life is and can be. I think listening to Audre also teaches us that what people call (sometimes dismissively) 'identity politics' is a politics that we still need; how to claim an identity as women, as people of colour, as queers in a world that still tends to equate human with male, white and straight is to challenge that world. From Audre Lorde we can think of identity as a political art, as poetry, as a way of inventing ourselves.

Racism: Audre Lorde calls for us to attend to racism – to how violence falls against some more than others; those deemed out of place, as not from here: violence against black people, immigrants, foreigners. She also asks us to think about how racism operates close to home: within our own political movements. Racism often works by the creation of the very impression that racism is over; that it is behind us. People of colour are often asked to get over racism. Audre teaches us that racism is not over. If it is not over, then it is not the time to get over it. She give us courage, and it takes courage, to use the word 'racism' even when to use that word, that difficult word, is to be judged as creating the problem you describe.

Lesbian: I love how Audre describes her love for women as a woman. At this moment, it might seem that the happiness of the queer umbrella makes the declaration of a lesbian identity less relevant. Audre would teach us that 'lesbian' can be an open address; how women desiring women in a world still organised around men and their desires matters. We might need to insist on 'being lesbian' in order to persist as lesbians: even when we happily enter queer spaces. Just listen to Audre: very serious in her dyke desire, but also naughty and mischievous, always alive to queer possibilities.

Feminist: Audre showed us how feminism can be about new ways of being in the world, suggesting that if we do not use the master's tools, if we build with our own hands, we can create new dwellings. I do think of her as a feminist killjoy, willing to name sexism, to call attention to violence against women wherever it happens. Audre Lorde also speaks out as an angry woman of colour; willful in her willingness to expose racism within feminism, committed to showing how this exposure is necessary if white women and black women are to work together. And we learn from this film that the life of a kill-joy can be a life full of joy, the joy of possibility, the joy of world creation.

Audre Lorde believed that poetry can be revolutionary because it can move us; it can make us feel, allow us to be vulnerable. She invites us to stay with the hard feelings; to refuse to be silenced by anger, to speak out of anger, to inhabit the despair of knowing the world you aim for will not be achieved in your life time; the hope of passing an aim onto others. This film is also full of the humour and warmth of the lives and friendships it reveals to us. There can be warmth in struggle; there can be kindness and patience in survival (Audre shows us that 'survival' is a radical project for those who are not meant to survive). Even Audre Lorde's approach to cancer, to death, was to embrace life as a struggle. Perhaps the very struggle against injustice is what gives us the resources we need to build a more just world. These resources for survival might include a certain willingness to cause trouble, but also humour, love, a certain lightness of spirit, and wit: we lighten our loads as well as

our moods when we create spaces to be with each other. Perhaps we also need to find ways of introducing ourselves to each other. So I Sara Ahmed will introduce myself to you Audre Lorde: woman of colour, mixed heritage, lesbian, queer, feminist, anti-racist, academic, activist, writer. I ask each of you in seeing this film to introduce yourself to Audre. She is waiting to hear from you.

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