

Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years

Directed and produced by DAGMAR SCHULTZ
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Audre Lorde lives. Twenty years after her death, *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years*, a film by Dagmar Schultz, celebrates the vitality and urgency of the self-identified “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” as she built community in Berlin during the last years of her life. Here are images that sustain my Black queer poet troublemaker soul:

- Audre Lorde’s face offered in gorgeous photo portraits, in sunlight, in reflection, in the middle of laughing.
- Her sensuality biting into a beet; dancing with her partner, Gloria Joseph, and friends; touching her own hair.
- Her words acting as a drug or a chisel, her urgent voice, her shrill confidence, her perfect pauses making sure we are never again the same.

Predictably (but still appropriately, in my view), the film is structured around Lorde’s most enduring poem, “A Litany for Survival,” and it offers survival resources for countless contemporary movements. I will name three of the most important.

The crucial legacy of Lorde’s time in Germany, which the film (correctly) chooses to foreground, spotlights her role as an ally and inspiration to budding Afro-German women’s movements in Berlin and several other cities in Germany. Archival photo and video images of fresh-faced Afro-German women finding each other for the first time are juxtaposed with interviews with leaders of the Afro-German women’s movement who are now elders. The film dwells on the value of Lorde’s articulations, audacity, and attention for the institutions that these leaders have grown and grown through, while also affirming the Afro-German women’s movement as a movement of its own with its own intergenerational impact. Touchingly, the film includes a large amount of footage and images of May Ayim, a young poet and Afro-German feminist activist mentored by Lorde who died at the age of thirty-four, four years after Lorde died. While this is not marked in the film, those watching who know of Ayim’s work will appreciate it. There are more portraits and speaking moments of her in the film than there are of anyone but Audre Lorde herself.

As a film created by a white German feminist colleague and comrade of Lorde’s, the film importantly includes many of Lorde’s imperatives to white feminist would-be

allies, whom Lorde called on urgently during a time in Berlin, much like today, when neo-Nazi violence against people of color and immigrants made clear the genocidal persistence of white supremacy. Schultz shows Lorde talking to packed rooms of mostly white women in the tone of tough love and outrage. I know that many women of color who are tired of telling white feminists what Audre Lorde and many other feminists of color have already stated so clearly hope that our would-be allies will pay special attention to these moments in the film.

Finally, Lorde's physical commitment to her own survival beyond society's understanding of her body stands as a light for those of us committed to healing justice. Lorde's time in Berlin was politically timely, but logistically designed around her health and her critique of American medical norms of cancer treatment. She moved to Germany to work with a doctor who partnered with her on a holistic approach that prioritized her full wellness, not only the narrow mission of "fighting cancer." It seems clear that the quality of the last years of Lorde's life and her ability to engage community was greatly impacted by this choice to center wellness instead of pathologization.

Audre Lorde lives. May we allow her enduring legacy to enrich our lives, sharpen our work, and deepen our love.

—Alexis Pauline Gumbs