

Pride on Film: Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992

Published on: 20th March, 2012

Photos courtesy of [Dagmar Schultz](#)

In “[Audre Lorde - The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992](#)” German filmmaker [Dagmar Schultz](#) directed and produced this documentary which chronicles the years Lorde, the African American gay activist and writer, lived in West Berlin. During Lorde’s stay as a visiting professor she ignited the Afro-German and feminist movements in Germany.

Schultz first met Audre Lorde in 1980 at the UN World Women’s Conference in Copenhagen in a discussion following her reading. Schultz was impressed with the openness with which Lorde addressed the white women.

PrideIndex talked to Schultz on the eve of the New York premiere the film which takes place on Monday March 26 at the [Brecht Forum](#) in New York at 7:30 PM. Schultz talked about Lorde, her impact on the white women and what she hopes to ultimately accomplish with this film.

PRIDEINDEX (PI): Why did you make “[Audre Lorde - the Berlin Years 1984 to 1992?](#)”

DAGMAR SCHULTZ (DS): Fortunately, during much of the decade in the course of which Audre Lorde spent weeks and months in Berlin, I photographed, audio- and video-recorded Audre with her consent, but without any plan whatsoever about what to do with this trove of material. In the ten plus years it has taken me to bring this film to fruition, it was clear to me that I definitely wanted to make this material available to as many people as possible and bring to light a little known chapter of Audre Lorde’s life which was and is extremely important to her and to Black and feminist white communities in Germany and in Europe.



PI: Talk about any notable challenges that occurred during the making of “[Audre Lorde - The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992](#)” and what you did to overcome them.

DS: Notable challenges have been fundraising, work on releases for photos of persons from 25 years ago, technical difficulties with old visual and audio archival material, and finding the right coworkers for this film.

PI: Briefly describe your first meeting with Ms. Audre Lorde. What was she like?

DS: I myself lived in the United States and in Puerto Rico from 1963 to 1973 and was active in the civil rights movement, in the anti-Vietnam movement and in the women’s and lesbian movement. Thus I had plenty of opportunity to confront myself with my role as a German and as a white European. After my return to Berlin it became more and more clear to me to what extent the absence of Black and Jewish women in the women’s movement determined the identity and the politics of that movement.

In 1980, I met Audre Lorde for the first time at the UN World Women’s Conference in Copenhagen in a discussion following her reading. I was spellbound and very much impressed with the openness with which Audre Lorde addressed us white women. She told us about the importance of her work as a poet, about racism and differences among women, about women in Europe, the USA and South Africa, and stressed the need for a vision of the future to guide our political practice.

On that evening it became clear to me: Audre Lorde must come to Germany for German women to hear her, her voice speaking to white women in an era when the movement had begun to show reactionary tendencies. She would help to pull it out of its provinciality, its over-reliance in its politics, on the exclusive experience of white women. At that time I was teaching at the Free University of Berlin and thus had the opportunity to invite Audre Lorde to be a guest professor. In the spring of 1984 she agreed to come to Berlin for a semester to teach literature and creative writing.

PI: How was Ms. Lorde’s message of empowerment received by German women of African descent?

DS: One of Audre Lorde’s first questions on arriving in Berlin was, “Where are the Black Germans?” Thus began a political movement- and awareness-building journey that lasted until the end of her life.

Especially important was Audre Lorde’s presence for the birth and development of an Afro-German movement. Her view that voices of those silenced,



Related Articles

- No Related Post

invisible or met with indifference should be heard encouraged Afro-German women to write the book *Farbe Bekennen. Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*, which Orlanda Frauenverlag published in 1986 (the English translation was published by the University of Massachusetts Press under the title: *Showing Our Colors. Afro-German women Speak Out*). She wrote the preface for that book and stated that Afro-Germans constituted an important aspect of her personal and political life as part of the African diaspora. In 1987, she told writers at the conference “The Dream of Europe” in Berlin that Europe had been a nightmare for her, and her dream, her vision of Europe’s future depended on the Black Europeans, the hyphenated people, who offer Europe



its last chance to learn how to deal with differences. (Lorde in Schultz 1991, 216-217)

The Afro-German literary critic Marion Kraft, protagonist in the film, said in her talk at Audre Lorde’s memorial celebration in Berlin: “Her hope was global sisterhood, and that we begin to see one another at the same time we begin to see ourselves. Self-definition and perception of the other is basic to Audre Lorde’s work. Above all, we Afro-German women – and men – have benefited from her gift of a pathway out of our socially-constituted personal and political isolation. We should do everything we can to continue down this path as she would have wished.” (6.2.1993)

Ria Cheatom, co-authoring of the script of the film and protagonist in the film says in the film: “I met Audre Lorde through the book “Showing Our Colors.” It moved me that she introduced the term ‘hyphenated people’ to us. I could totally identify with that word. And, I was deeply impressed that she came to Germany looking for us, Afro-Germans. That was... That was an incredibly strong moment. It was the first time I felt it was really about me! Me as an Afro-German woman, here in Germany.”

And again Marion Kraft in the film:

“Her intention was to make us feel, no matter what you do, you are not alone! You must work together! Make yourself visible and raise your voice, each one of you in her own way. That was an important step for my personal development. To see the others as a mirror for myself.”

PI: Why was Ms. Lorde’s message so important?

DS: Judy Gummich, protagonist in the film says: “First of all, we became aware of ourselves as Black women, as Afro-Germans in particular... ..and as a part of the worldwide Community of People of Color. Thanks to Audre, thanks to the things she said and wrote... ..how she supported us, spoke and laughed with us... ..we began to realize what we are capable of! Before, people often made us feel like we were useless. This was an absolutely different message! That’s when I started to get organized. We co-founded the ADEFRA (Afro German Women) office, supported the ISD, which has always been a sister-organization... ..and also the white women’s movement could never take that away from us.”

And May Ayim Ghanaen German poet and activist in the film reports: “The ‘Initiative of Black Germans’ was the beginning of a movement of Black Germans... ..who said “We are born here in Germany and we will stay here!” We need our own terms to define ourselves positively. We introduced the term ‘Afro-German’ ourselves. Before that, only terms like “mulatto”, “negro” or “cross-breed” existed. Terms that no one feels at ease with or even know about their real meaning. As a child, I always thought of ‘mulatto’ as a foreign word. Later, I found out that it’s Portuguese for ‘mule’. This implies that



Black and White is in the same relation as horse and donkey.”

White women confronted themselves with issues of racism, difference and power through the encounter with Audre Lorde. Again and again she would ask white German women about their relations to and with Black women, migrated and Jewish women. The more frequently she came to Germany – from 1984 to 1992 each year except in 1985, the more intensively did she concern herself with political developments and the conflicts between white and Black woman as well as the difficulties that Black women, immigrants and Jewish women had among themselves. And whenever women wanted to meet with her, she was there to share her experience and opinions with them, to encourage them to find ways of working together, to urge them on to a mutual exchange of thoughts and feelings. From Audre Lorde’s conversations and readings held in the Federal German Republic, Switzerland, East Berlin and Dresden, many white women learned to be more conscious of their privileges and more responsible in the use of their power.

Ilona Bubeck, team member of Orlanda Press and protagonist in the film says:

“I learned from her that it’s not the differences between people that divide us... ..but the fact of not dealing with these differences and of remaining silent! I haven’t always been successful at this, it can be difficult, but it’s worth working on. In that respect, Audre has influenced me the most. I think no one else ever encouraged me like Audre! She made me aware of my own responsibility, of my own power to do things. That was totally new to me. When

I met Audre for the first time, I felt that her writings and her personality were identical.”

PI: Talk a little bit about your filmmaking journey, why did you become a filmmaker? Where did you receive you professionally train as a filmmaker?

DS: Years ago I studied Speech, i.e. Journalism, TV and film at the University of Michigan, but I did not pursue that career. My interest in writing, photography and video work I maintained, I do not consider myself a professional filmmaker. When May Ayim died in 1996, I co-produced the film “Hope in My Heart. The May Ayim Story” (distributed by Third World Newsreel) and now I got fully involved in making the film on Audre Lorde’s times in Germany.

PI: Why did you wait until now to make this film?

DS: I made several attempts at starting the film. The first one in 1995 with the interview with Dr. Gloria I. Joseph parts of which are in the film. Then May Ayim died and I devoted myself to producing that film. In the course of the years I tried to find a filmmaker, preferably a Woman of Color, to work with me on the film. Eventually, Ika Hügel-Marshall and Ria Cheatom worked with me on the script and I finally was able to complete this project for the 20th anniversary of Audre Lorde’s passing.

PI: What other Audre Lorde inspired projects are you working on? When do you expect to have those projects completed?

DS: I was awarded the Margherita-von-Brentano-Price 2011 for work which furthers the equal rights of women in academia. The funds of the award contribute to the production of the film *Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992* and to the establishment of an Audre Lorde Archive at the Free University of Berlin. This archive contains all my materials on Audre Lorde’s work in Germany, such as recordings of all the courses she taught in 1984, recordings of many readings and subsequent discussions, photos and videos I took, personal correspondence and correspondence with the publishing house Orlanda, published articles, interviews and reviews etc.



PI: If Ms. Lorde were alive today what would she say about plight of women’s lib in Germany?

DS: She would probably say: “Women, I told you years ago everything is going to get worse, Okay? You have to accept that. It’s going to get worse! That does not mean, don’t fight! That means don’t think it’s going to be easy! Because it’s not, it’s not!”

PI: Where will this film be shown in the United States?

DS: All over. We are offering the Audre Lorde Legacy Cultural Festival with the new film and with two other films on Audre as well as the film on May Ayim and a reading of Ika Hügel-Marshall from her book “Invisible Woman. Growing Up black in Germany.” We travel with this program, the first tour being in March to Spellman College in Atlanta where the Audre Lorde Archive is located and to North Carolina State University and No. Carolina Central University and finally the film will have its New York premiere at the Brecht Forum on March 26. (See the calendar under “events” on the films website www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com). In September/October, we will have a tour from the University of Hawai’i cross-country to Massachusetts.

Furthermore, the film will be at festivals, e.g. Frameline in San Francisco.

PI: What do you ultimately hope to accomplish with this film?

DS: I/we want the film to be a reminder of past struggles and achievements and an impulse and encouragement to reflect and act on issues of difference, against reactionary, racist and neo-Nazi developments. I/we want women to see the need for solidarity, for renouncing competition and envy, developments which Audre would have been horrified to see.

That Audre not be forgotten, because she was so important for the Afrogerman movement. Not to rest on what has what has been achieved, but have inspiration return and give new energy to create visions that strengthen us and the movement.

The film shows that the feeling that we have reached a place where struggle is not so necessary is false. Many still live in isolation, and for those who had the chance to encounter Audre in person it is their duty to communicate to others how important it is to create community and to look for and to create networks with others such as immigrants and white allies.

Finally, to have a chance to experience Audre on and off stage in a very endearing way.

“Audre Lorde - The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992” makes its New York premiere on Monday March 26 at the Brecht Forum located at 451 West Street in New