
Audre Lorde Film Presents Poetry in Action

Last Thursday, director Dagmar Schultz presented her film *Audre Lorde; The Berlin Years in Herter Hall* at UMASS Amherst. The film's conception was brought about by Schultz's deep personal relationship with Lorde, one that began when Schultz heard Lorde read at a women's center in Copenhagen, Denmark. Laughing, Schultz recounted how Lorde later told her that upon meeting Schultz, Lorde thought of her as a "lesbian CIA agent." Through Schultz's persuasion, Lorde accepted a post at the German Free University, where she taught for a semester, giving writing workshops and helping to launch the Initiative of Black Germans (IBG).

The IBG began around 1989, when, following the destruction of the Berlin Wall, there was an upsurge in both nativist sentiment and racist violence. Lorde, then famous for her work in America confronting racism in the feminist movement, began her work in Germany with the question, "What can we learn from our connected differences that can benefit us both, Afro-German and African American?" She also sought to keep her approach to anti-racist activism broad. Her approach supported her conviction that "Your power is not my power ... you can speak to people whom I cannot reach." Lorde sought to address the perception of many black Germans that there was no Afro-German community by reaching out to older Afro-Germans and encouraging them to tell their stories.

Lorde's use of her poetry as "part of my arsenal" in addressing social justice issues inspired not only Schultz, who founded *Orlanda Verlag Press*, which remains the most well-known publisher of Afro-German women writers, but also May Ayim, a young Afro-German activist whose work and public presence were becoming eminent by the time of her suicide in 1996. Born in Hamburg, Ayim, who was of Ghanaian and German descent, grew up in a white foster family. She described the disorienting aspect of her experience in the following anecdote: "I was afraid of black Santa because he was like me." Reflecting upon her identity from such a young age led her to the realization that, "These people are adults, but they had no idea. They asked, 'Are you a war baby?'" Lorde, in a later lecture, illuminated Ayim's meaning, describing how the most positive racial epithet in Germany at the time of the movement was "war baby," which referred to the label applied to immigrants of color who relocated to Germany during the post-World War II Allied occupation.

Clips of Ayim reciting her poem “A poem against the pretense of German Unity” show the humor that she used from an early age in order to deal with her racist environment. Holding imaginary suspenders, she presented the paradoxes of daily forms of bigotry, ironically assuming the position of the aggressor. Despite very public recitations, including one at Musikfest in Johannesburg, Ayim did not identify herself as a poet, seeing herself instead as a member of the rap tradition. “Poetry is thick, abstract, elite,” Ayim said in an interview with a German news station. “I want to get a message across and I want it to be understood.”

Ayim praised Lorde for standing by her words. “People often hide behind their words [when they] should show who you are and what you are and why you stand for that,” said Ayim, who also stood by Lorde’s credo that what poetry requires is “genuine movements toward action.” Schultz displayed how the Afro-German movement continued following Lorde’s visit, demonstrating how art can cross national and cultural borders and lead to change. Schultz’s publication *Orlanda Verlag*, and its presentation of art that challenges social assumptions ensures that the movement has continued following Ayim’s death.

Schultz’s personal connection with Lorde provides a more intimate perspective on her life. Footage of Lorde dancing in what is clearly a home video humanizes her, providing a glimpse of the person responsible for generating so much poetry and constructive cultural change.

A series of interrelated films by women from Germany will continue throughout the semester. The Berlin documentary filmmaker Aysun Bademsoy will present her 2012 film Honor (Ehre) at UMass Amherst in Flavin Auditorium, Isenberg School of Management 137 at 8 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 16.

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