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Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992: The Making of the Film and Its Reception

I FIRST MET AUDRE LORDE IN 1980 at the United Nations World Women's Conference in Copenhagen. At the time I was an assistant professor of North American studies at the Free University of Berlin and in a position to propose Audre for a visiting professorship for a semester. She came to Berlin in 1984 and kept returning until 1992. During these visits, I accompanied Audre to her speaking and teaching engagements, recording her both on audio and videotape, as well as through photography: Audre considered me her "house photographer." Sometimes she would even pose for pictures or looked directly into the video camera. It was clear to us both that I would eventually do something with these photos, audiotapes, and video footage. My subsequent film *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992* draws on these various recordings, showing Audre both on- and offstage and in the many different contexts that made up her life in Berlin. I see the film as a project of "archival activism" — that is, as both a personal, individual, and sociopolitical document *and* a text that has the potential to generate activism. My goal in making the film was to capture the ability of Audre to empathize with, motivate, and empower women and men. At the same time I hoped to capture and convey the significance that her life in Berlin — and the encounters that she had with Black and white women there — held for her.

One of Audre's first questions on arriving in Berlin in 1984 was: "Where are the Black Germans?" She soon established close contact with

a number of Black women, some of whom attended her classes in 1984. She initiated work on the book *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*, which was published by us at Orlanda Frauenverlag (Orlanda Women's Press) in German in 1986 (later translated into English in 1991) and which had a decisive impact on the formation of a Black German movement as well as on a surge of transatlantic research projects on Afro-Germans.¹ Audre particularly encouraged Afro-German women to write of their experiences, and as a result several new authors were published, the first ones being Katharina Oguntoye, May Ayim, and Ika Hügel-Marshall.² I was able to get three books by these newly published authors translated into English, contributing to transnational research on and contacts between Black Germans and Black Americans in the United States.³ Through her own publications, through inspiring others to write, but above all through her critical public stance concerning widespread ignorance of racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-immigrant discrimination within and outside the women's movement, Audre made lasting contributions to the German political and cultural scene, both before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Her recurrent presence in Germany gave impulse to several conferences of Black, Jewish, and immigrant women; conferences that confronted the state of each group's different communities and their interrelationships.⁴ Audre continually challenged white German

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1. Katharina Oguntoye, May Opitz, and Dagmar Schultz, eds., *Farbe Bekenennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1986), trans. Anne V. Adams, *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991).
 2. Oguntoye, Opitz, and Schultz, *Farbe Bekenennen*; Katharina Oguntoye, *Eine afro-deutsche Geschichte: Zur Lebenssituation von Afrikanern und Afro-Deutschen in Deutschland von 1884 bis 1950* (Berlin: HoHo Verlag Christine Hoffmann, 1997); May Ayim, *blues in schwarz weiss* (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1995); May Ayim, *Grenzenlos und unverschämt* (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1997); May Ayim, *Nachtgesang* (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1997); Ika Hügel-Marshall, *Daheim unterwegs: Ein deutsches Leben* (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1998).
 3. Oguntoye, Opitz, and Schultz, *Showing Our Colors*; May Ayim, *Blues in Black and White*, trans. Anne V. Adams (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2003); Ika Hügel-Marshall, *Invisible Woman: Growing Up Black in Germany*, trans. Elizabeth Gaffney (New York: Continuum, 2001).
 4. May Ayim and Nivedita Prasad, eds., *Documentation: Paths to Alliances* (brochure published about two conferences) in cooperation with the FrauenAnstiftung: Conference by/for Ethnic and Afro-German Minorities, Bremen, June 8–10, 1990; and Second National Congress by and for Immigrants,



Portrait of Audre Lorde, taken by Dagmar Schultz, 1984.

women to examine their relations to and with Black women, migrant women, and Jewish women. From her conversations and readings held in the Federal German Republic, Switzerland, the Netherlands, East Berlin, and Dresden, many white women learned to be more conscious of their privileges and more responsible in the use of their power. Following the 2012 release of *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years*, the film's reception has confirmed this contribution of Audre to deepening interracial understanding: as Alexis Pauline Gumbs (also in this issue) puts it, "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."⁵

THE GENESIS OF THE FILM

Audre's writings, which were translated and published at Orlanda, and her work in Germany fueled my political work as a feminist publisher,

Black-German, Jewish Women and Women Living in Exile, Berlin, October 3 to 6, 1991.

5. Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years," *make/shift* 13 (Spring/Summer 2013): 46.

teacher, and activist.⁶ Her influence on me formed the base of several key themes in the film: Audre's impact on Black Germans and her ideas on the role of what she called the "hyphenated people" of Europe; the significance that the notion of difference had for her, a central theme that was especially acute in her interactions with white Germans; the importance she attached to a positive concept of power; her understanding of her own multiple identities, including her identity as a Black lesbian as she applied it to herself and discussed it with other women of color and white women; her views on racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia in Germany and beyond; her views on political strategies, alliances, and networks; and finally, her ways of dealing with cancer and survival.

I compiled footage from many sources to augment my own recordings. Third World Newsreel let me purchase copies of material they had filmed with Audre in Berlin in 1989 and that had been used in part for the film *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* by Michelle Parkerson and Ada Griffin. I had around six hundred photographs that I had taken over the years and also about seventeen hours of videotapes that I had shot during the last two years of Audre's visits to Berlin (luckily, the quality of tape still proved good twenty years later!). My audio recordings, of which I had about sixty hours, proved to be crucial for the filmmaking — without them the film simply would not have been possible. I also decided to include my interviews with Audre's contemporaries that had been conducted in 2011. Two Afro-German friends, my partner Ika Hügel-Marshall, and our close friend Ria Cheatom, took up the challenge to cowrite the script with me. Both of them also appear in the film as interviewees and protagonists. Over an intense period of several weeks, we reviewed the material, evaluated the interviews, and wrote a four-hour script based on themes that I had generated over time

6. We also published her biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, as well as *The Cancer Journals*, a number of her essays, and part of her poetry, including a bilingual volume of forty-two poems selected by Lorde from her work during her last summer in Berlin in 1992. See Audre Lorde, *Zami: Eine Mythobiographie*, trans. Karen Nölle (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1986); Audre Lorde, *Auf Leben und Tod: Krebstagebuch*, trans. Margarete Längsfeld (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1987); Audre Lorde, *Lichtflut*, trans. Margarete Längsfeld (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1988); and Audre Lorde, *Die Quelle unserer Macht: Gedichte*, trans. Marion Kraft and Sigrid Markmann (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1993).

as well as additional ones that we extrapolated from the interviews. Film editor Aletta von Vietinghoff consolidated our four-hour script into a final seventy-nine-minute film. Her sensitive, professional, and creative editing work on the film was essential.

Audre's interactions with her partner Gloria Joseph, who frequently accompanied her to Berlin and shared her personal and political interactions, alongside Gloria's views on Audre's times in Berlin, are one central aspect of the film. In addition, the film profiles Audre's cancer both as a personal experience and as a medical and political issue, linked to her criticisms of racism and of a profit economy. Audre neither denied her illness nor placed it at the center of her life. This is communicated in the film through depictions of her courage, her fears, and her fierce determination to live a joyful life despite her illness. Her offstage life, too, became an important part of the film: a day spent at a lake, time spent in Berlin's many cafés, shopping at markets, buying flowers, dancing at her last party in our home in 1991, bedside conversations, and interactions between Audre and Gloria all found their way into the film. As many viewers, including Audre's daughter, confirmed, all of these scenes have served to show an intimate side to Audre's life without taking away the tremendous political influence she had.⁷

In 2011, I was awarded the Margherita von Brentano Award for my achievements in promoting women's equality in academia. I used the grant to help complete the film and to partially fund the establishment of an Audre Lorde archive at the library of the Free University of Berlin, which contains all my materials as well as those of Orlanda Verlag.⁸

7. See Elizabeth Lorde-Rollins's comment on the film about her mother on the *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years* website, <http://audrelorde-theberlinyears.com/comments.html#Uxeh-yhgS5c>.

8. The body of work housed at the Free University of Berlin is another example of "archival activism." It comprises full audio recordings of three courses that Lorde taught at the university in 1984, audio recordings and transcripts of more than thirty readings, discussions and interviews, personal correspondences, photos and videos, as well as reviews, articles, and material from Orlanda Verlag relating to Audre's books and readings. See http://www.fu-berlin.de/sites/uniarchiv/bestaende/abteilung3/nachlass_lorde/index.html.

RECEPTION

Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years was accepted by the 2012 Berlinale — Berlin’s international film festival — an important and prestigious indication of an initial positive reception for the film. At the last count (in February 2014), the film has been shown at sixty festivals and over 100 screenings in five continents and twenty-two different countries, the latest one in Bangalore, India. It has received five awards from festivals in Barcelona and Zaragoza, Spain; Palm Springs and New York, United States; and Kingston, Canada. Comments and reactions that have been sent to the film’s website and Facebook page reveal that the film is not simply being viewed as a historical document and homage to Audre Lorde, but that it touches many people deeply and moves them to reflect on their position in society, to live their manifold identities, and to become (even more) active. One such comment from a screening event at the University of Toronto expresses one woman’s experience:

I’m still beaming after last night’s doc screening of *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years*. Your film was a love letter to Audre & a heart-warming tribute to her influence, her joy & her humanity.... But most of all, your film simply made me want to be a better, more courageous, more loving warrior.⁹

Viewers from Novi Sad, Serbia, also talk about the political impact after the film:

The screening in Novi Sad on November 1 went fantastic!! ... after the film we had a discussion, and mentioned a lot of the words of Audre that she said in the movie! thank you thank you a lot, for all your work to make this film possible. it’s so important for our history but also for putting some questions that are still very actual.¹⁰

The twentieth anniversary of Audre’s death was in 2012, and there were many opportunities to reintroduce Audre’s work to today’s young

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9. Salina Abji, comment following the screening of *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years* at the “Contemporary Urgencies of the Audre Lorde Legacy” event at the University of Toronto, March 15, 2013, <http://audrelorde-theberlinyears.com/comments.html#.Uxeh-yhgS5c>.
 10. Tijana Popivoda, comment following the screening of *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years* in Novi Sad, Serbia, December 7, 2012, <http://audrelorde-theberlinyears.com/comments.html#.Uxeh-yhgS5c>.

students. We created a traveling cultural festival—"Audre Lorde's Legacy"—that consisted of three films, including *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years*; the documentary film about Afro-German poet May Ayim *Hope in My Heart: The May Ayim Story*; and a reading by Ika Hügel-Marshall from her book *Invisible Woman: Growing up Black in Germany*. Ika was personally mentored by Audre and had received the Audre Lorde Literary Award that enabled her to write a memoir about her life. Our traveling festival toured in the spring and fall of 2012, taking us to fourteen universities from Hawai'i to Illinois, North Carolina, Massachusetts, and New York. At Spelman College, Georgia, the home of Lorde's archive, a student remarked that while she knew a lot about Audre, she had never seen her laugh as much as she did in Berlin in *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years*.

The University of Kent was the first university in Europe to offer the festival, in May 2012, and it did so to a diverse, highly interested public (Black people of all ages formed the majority of the audience) at an event hosted at The Women's Library in London. When feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed introduced the film at Fringe!, London's queer film festival, in April 2012, she said:

We can also reflect on why this film matters now.... Through watching Audre's Berlin years, through watching her at work, we can reflect on the politics of black, feminist and queer activism today.... 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.... And we learn from this film that the life of a killjoy can be a life full of joy, the joy of possibility, the joy of world creation.¹¹

In March 2013, Afro-German author Marion Kraft and I toured with the film to various screenings and accompanying panel discussions. One such event at the University of Toronto was titled "Contemporary Urgencies of the Audre Lorde Legacy" and brought together students and the local community and was where Professor Gloria Wekker, friend

11. See Sara Ahmed's introduction to *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years* at London's Fringe! festival, April 14, 2012, http://www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com/pressclips/Fringe_Intro_SaraAhmed.pdf.

of Audre's and a member of the Black women's movement in the Netherlands, shared the panel with us.¹² Presentations at the Rainbow Reels Queer Film Festival in Waterloo, Ontario, at Indiana University, and at the Goethe Institute in New York City followed. At all of these institutions we met a highly diverse audience, comprised of students, faculty, and the local community, some of whom had known Audre in person. My interviews with professors, students, and audiences in these settings have been added to the film's YouTube channel.¹³ These interviews reflect how the film touches people, reveal new perspectives of Audre Lorde, and motivate for action. The DVD of the film has over 70 minutes of extra material, including Audre reading her poetry and reflecting on her literary work. A study guide is available on the website www.audre-lorde-theberlinyears.com.

It has taken twenty years to complete this project. Judging by all the reactions to the film, it has come at the right time, touching viewers deeply and moving them to reflect on their social locations, to live their manifold identities, and to become (more) politically active. One comment, written after the screening of the film at London's Fringe! film festival, encapsulates this reaction: "Amazing, and testament to [Lorde's] awesome power that everyone I spoke to afterwards felt inspired to be bolder and more ambitious in their own work and activism, and buzzing with ideas about things they wanted to do next."¹⁴ Audre would have seen the significance of the film in these reactions, and so do I and my coworkers. Thank you Audre—and may your words and your spirit inspire us in times to come.

12. See interview on Youtube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbswPuyVNbM>.

13. See the Audre Lorde YouTube channel at http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdf6L99RQFnyXu94BDkW_XA.

14. Peter J. Piercy, comment following the screening of *Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years* at London's Fringe! festival, April 16, 2012, <http://audrelorde-theberlinyears.com/comments.html#Uxeh-yhgS5c>.