

19 January 2015



Audre Lorde's Germany - Audre Lorde Icon by Kim Everett. Poster design Pawel Zoneff.

‘Audre Lorde’s Germany’

Audre Lorde was a library science scholar. She earned a BA in Library Science at Hunter College, New York (1954-1959) and went on to acquire an MA in the same at Columbia University New York (CUNY) in 1961. In addition to her multifaceted professional, political, social, academic, authorial and publishing activities, Lorde worked at the Mount Vernon Public Library and as Head Librarian at the Town School Library in New York City. I had never really picked up on this aspect of Audre Lorde’s life and work before. I emphasize this information, since it seems to lend greater clarity to Lorde’s farsightedness, her encompassing perspective on multifarious political and personal strands of meaning, which work together to structure the course of a life.

Audre Lorde’s works are marked by an incredible diversity of perspectives and themes. Thus a perspective informed by this discipline must definitely have reinforced Lorde’s extant talent that enabled her to visualize, record and understand social realities as interwoven complexes of unequal positionings. It appears as if imaginations, languages and narrative constructions (her own and those of others) were easily accessible and comprehensible to Lorde. At any rate there was a source from which Lorde acquired these vectors of connectivity, which then allowed her to build further bridges to other perspectives. Lorde’s work demonstrates the direct engagement with and the articulation of life themes and requirements for action in larger social groups. This multi-perspectival stance is apparent in Lorde’s poetry and prose - it is the common denominator in the approaches, ambivalences, crises, relationship networks, activism and communication processes thematised in her work.

This article's point of departure involves the question of which aspects of an active life should be commemorated. Which life episodes can be rendered visible and productive in retrospect and to what end?

The Stories of Our Lives: Historicisation as a feminist task

*“What I leave behind has a life of its own. I have said this about poetry.
I have said it about children.
Well, in a sense I'm saying it about the very artifact of who I have been.”*
— A Litany For Survival: the Life and Work of Audre Lorde (Trailer)

It was a short, intensely lived life. Audre Lorde died in November 1992 at the age of 58. She left behind an extensive literary oeuvre and significant traces in diverse social arenas. In the last 14 years of her life, while confronted first with breast cancer and then liver cancer, she wrestled with the reality of this life experience. She lived out this experience publicly, in that she made full use of her powers of articulation. She wrote *The Cancer Journals*¹⁾, after which came *A Burst of Light*, an anthology of poems and prose texts. She wrestled with death, she wrestled with life. She wrestled with the disease. She wrestled with desperation and wrote it all down. She kept her humour and her farsightedness. She travelled, taught, wrote poetry, loved. With great consciousness, Lorde experienced her last relationship with her partner Gloria I. Joseph, a black activist and professor of feminist sociology, with whom she lived in St. Croix in the Caribbean.

Audre Lorde and the Black Feminist Movement in Germany

At the time of her health crisis, an intense chapter in Lorde's life began in Berlin-Germany, when she joined the Free University in Berlin in 1984 as a guest professor. An interesting coincidence is that her arrival in Germany occurred exactly a hundred years after the Berlin Conference on Africa (The Scramble for Africa). Lorde became a central symbolic figure for the German feminist movement, especially for a group of young Black lesbian women, who had just begun to organize politically. Audre Lorde became involved in Berlin's feminist scene at a decisive point, when she recognized and grasped the opportunity to help jump-start the movement inspired by Black Feminism. She implemented her powers of articulation as well as her activist and analytical expertise, in order to formulate and structure the internal and external requirements and demands of the Black Feminist movement in Germany. To these efforts she lent her narrative and political force as well as her transnational visions for the future.

From her diary entry – Berlin, 23 May 1984:

“Afro-German. The women say, they have never heard that term used before. I asked one of my Black students, how she'd thought about herself growing up. “The nicest thing they ever called us was ‘war-baby’”, she said. But the existence of most black Germans has nothing to do with the Second World War, and in fact predates it by many decades. I have Black German women in my class, who trace their Afro-German heritage back to the 1890s.”²⁾

The naming of the Black Feminist movement in Germany was speeded up through Lorde's powers of articulation: one concrete instance of her activism as a direct consequence is the founding of the initiative (later association) ADEFRA – Black Women in Germany. Audre Lorde encouraged public stances and debates; she created and provided a space and a

framework, where Black Activists could meet and personally and politically engage with the common ground of their social situations. At the same time, she obtained strength for her own life's work from these developments:

“For me, Afro-German the shining faces of Katharina and May in animated conversation about their fathers’ homelands, the comparisons, joys and disappointments. It means my pleasure at seeing another Black Woman who walk into my classroom, her reticence slowly giving way as she explores a new self-awareness, gains a new way of thinking about herself in relation to other Black Women.”³⁾

Audre Lorde explored homeopathic cancer therapy in Berlin from 1987 till 1992. Her health politics acquired significant contours through this decision and her subsequent experiences. This influenced her thought processes and her public articulations of feminist debates and perspectives on life with cancer in Germany, in the US and numerous other places, where Lorde's texts are read and discussed.

Three documentary films have explored the meaning of Audre Lorde's life at the intersections of academic, artistic and political engagement with feminist social subjects. The first film is *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (1995) by Ada Gray Griffin and Michelle Parkerson. The second documentary film is *The Edge of Each Other's Battles* (2002) by Jennifer Abod. The third film is *Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984-1992* (2012) by Dagmar Schultz. The first film is definitely the most remarkable, the third is of especial significance for the German context. All three are socio-cultural texts, which aim to systematically approach Audre Lorde as a symbolic figure, as a real person, as a provider of ideas for countless socially critical movements.

The Conference ‘Audre Lorde’s Germany’: African Diasporic Presences and Influences on Contemporary German Literary and Cultural Politics

A conference in January 2015 will focus on Audre Lorde's influence on the German context. Her ideas, social paradigms and her presence in Germany provide the framework for an engagement with society from politicized Black feminist female subject positions. Significant activist, academic and authorial structures in Lorde's life will be thematised at this event e.g. the political force of expression of her membership in the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black lesbian feminists. The founding of the publishing collective Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press (1980) by Barbara Smith and Cherrie Moraga are attributable to Lorde's ideas and encouragement. Such monumental publications like *This Bridge called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1983) established, articulated and focused on the types of alliance that Lorde had visualized between Feminists/Scholars of color. These levels of connectivity will be a significant focus during the conference.

Lorde's contributions in the context of Black feminist theory production as social criticism serve as points of departure for a reflective engagement with the narrative force of feminist theory and practice in Germany. The multifarious voices made visible by Lorde in transnational literary production by black feminists consist of significant critiques of the homogeneity apparent in feminist narratives in Germany. These critiques need to be examined, since they are generated by the publicly articulated forms of activism and epistemologies of black and/or female and/or lesbian subjects. It would be imperative to embed these in a multi-perspectival feminist cultural critique.

The main focus will be on the central themes in Lorde's work: her thoughts on self-determined lesbian parenting, her sexual politics on the erotic as a form of self-emancipation. The conference contributions will converge on Lorde's challenge to recognize and know one's own sexual power and to use it for one's own well-being. Lorde's dedication to find language to articulate especially those issues and life perspectives which have been denied, ignored or appropriated, is an active impulse towards an explicitly feminist thematization of the relations between Afro-German diasporic subjectivities in the world. Lorde's concept of self-emancipation and the contingent mutual liberation of black female stakeholders, their images of positive uses of power and forms of self-determination, in turn, firmly inscribes black lives and activity into the history of Black Activism in Germany. Audre Lorde's encouragement is still effective today; it lives on in the form and structure of the politically engaged feminist stance in Germany.

Maureen Maisha Eggers, Berlin 17.12.14

Translation Christine Vogt-William, Berlin 30.12.2014

Dates: 30- 31 January 2015

Venue: Humboldt-Universität-Berlin, Unter den Linden 6, Senatssaal

Organisers: Christine Vogt-William, Maisha M. Eggers und Eva Boesenberg

Speakers: Fatima El Tayeb, Kara Keeling, Gloria Wekker, Tracie Morris, Katharina Oguntoye, Peggy Piesche, Nicola Laurè Al-Samarai, Katja Kinder, among others

Footnotes

- The Orlanda publisher website was not reachable at the time this article was sent to press. In order
1. ↑ to identify the books cited here, we have provided the links to the Amazon Store. These are affiliate links, which are supported by the project FemBio – Das Gedächtnis der Frauen.
Lorde, Audre. (1980). Foreword to the English Language Edition. *Showing Our Colors: Afro-*
 2. ↑ *German Women Speak Out*. Ed. May Opitz, Katharina Oguntoye and Dagmar Schultz. Engl. Trans. Anne V. Adams. The University of Massachusetts Press. 1992. vii.
Lorde, Audre. (1980). Foreword to the English Language Edition. *Showing Our Colors: Afro-*
 3. ↑ *German Women Speak Out*. Ed. May Opitz, Katharina Oguntoye and Dagmar Schultz. Engl. Trans. Anne V. Adams. The University of Massachusetts Press. 1992. vii.

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