

The archival activist

Dagmar Schultz on Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years 1984-1992



Dagmar Schultz on Audre Lorde at the Winterfeldt Markt in Berlin (1992):
"She really liked going to the markets, to cafés, and really enjoyed the city."
Photo: Dagmar Schultz

Dagmar Schultz's up-close and personal portrait Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years 1984-1992, co-written with Ika Hügel-Marshall, Ria Cheatom, and Aletta von Vietinghoff (who is also the editor) takes us into the private and public life of the poet, activist, teacher, humanitarian, whose life-affirming outlook remains evermore important today. Audre Lorde was a graduate of

Hunter College High School and Hunter College in New York City, and a Distinguished Professor of English at the college from 1981 to 1986. In 2019, Audre Lorde was honored, along with Maya Angelou, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Celia Cruz, [James Baldwin](#), Gil Scott-Heron, Tito Puente, and Reggie Jackson by the artist Rico Gatson with their portraits in glass mosaics for the 167 Street subway station in the Bronx.

In 2021, Hunter College hosted during the spring semester an "[Audre Lorde Now Series](#)", a public program of four online events: My Words Will Be There; Doing Our Work: Confronting Racism - and Other "Isms"; There Is No Separate Survival: From Divide and Rule To Define and Empower, and Self-Care as Political Welfare.

Dagmar Schultz is no stranger to Hunter: "I was there in Audre's poetry class a couple of times in 1985 and with the film in 2012."

Audre Lorde's voice guides us through the film, as we are plunged from the get-go into the world she experienced and created during her many stays in Berlin between 1984 and 1992.

The timing is particularly interesting, as the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 happens right in the middle. Audre's skepticism about the reunification's byproduct - a rise in xenophobia - presaged things to come.

"Your power is not my power, you can reach people I can't reach," is one of many empowering statements that encourage everyone to speak up. Poetry



Dagmar Schultz with Anne-Katrin Titze on Audre Lorde: "She called herself a cultural worker, a cultural traveller. For her it was very important to come to Germany."

was her weapon of choice, "part of my arsenal," as there is "always some group of people that define me as wrong." Seeing the private person - who enjoys ice cream and swimming and laughing with friends - merge with her activism, her wisdom, her intellectual and emotional clarity, is what makes this documentary so extraordinary and abiding.

From Berlin, [Dagmar Schultz](#) joined me on Zoom for an in-depth conversation on Audre Lorde and Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years 1984-1992.

Anne-Katrin Titze: How are you, Dagmar? How is Berlin?

Dagmar Schultz: I'm fine. Sunny weather, that's good.

AKT: Are cinemas open in Berlin?

DS: Not yet, but I think they're starting to with regulations. Coming down.

AKT: Here in New York it's [25% for Film at Lincoln Center](#), where [New Directors/New Films](#) was going on. [Tribeca](#) has [outdoor screenings](#), but we're not back.

DS: We aren't either. It's good not to do it too fast because we'd have a next wave.

AKT: I agree! Let's talk about your film. It's so rare to have a documentary where you get the feeling from the get go that the person who made the film had complete trust of the subject. That's very much the case with your film. How did it all begin? How did you convince Audre to film her for all those years?



Gloria Joseph, Audre Lorde, Ika Hügel-Marshall, and May Ayim: "It was the beginning of a Black movement in Germany and she really encouraged young people to come together to represent themselves. To start writing about their lives, their situations." *Photo: Dagmar Schultz*

DS: Audre called herself a photo bank. She liked taking pictures herself and taking the first camcorder in her hands, too. So she did not mind. I did not take pictures and video with the intention of making the film. It was more that I had the possibility of inviting Audre to come to Berlin as a guest professor and I just had this very strong urge to document this very rare occasion.

Then it turned out that she was coming for the next eight years and stayed with us and spent a lot of time with us. So there was a lot of opportunity for pictures and videos. I'm sure Audre knew I was going to do something with it, that I wouldn't just let this material sit. The important thing was and why the film maybe also seems to you to be so personal, that I recorded a lot of audio. I recorded all her seminars, interviews, readings, discussions, and that way Audre was the narrator in the film.



Audre Lorde on the Krumme Lanke lake *Photo: Dagmar Schultz*

AKT: It's a wonderful combination to hear her voice and to see that footage that is so personal. In 2021, we also get the sense of the archival. You document a time and a place and a group of people. Simple things like your haircut changing and what people are wearing - it has a wonderful archival Benjamin quality to it.

DS: Yeah, I can call myself an archival activist. Because it wasn't just presenting an archival material, which it also was, because we have now an Audre Lorde archive at the Free University Library, which is used quite a bit, but it was also that Audre's presence here brought about a lot of important movement developments among Black women, Black people. It was the beginning of a Black movement in Germany and she really encouraged

young people to come together to represent themselves. To start writing about their lives, their situations. She was kind of at the birth of this Black movement. And for white people, white women, the white women's movement, it was very important because it was a time in the early Eighties when racism was not a common term to be used.

People were maybe talking about hostility towards foreigners but not of racism. Anti-Semitism had been a subject but Audre was someone who all the time called on white women to look at what they were doing. Who were their contacts. Where could they build bridges. Where could they realize that differences could be very productive very creative and to come to terms with recognizing that racism affects everyone, including white women. That was one reason why when I met her in Copenhagen in 1980 and heard her read there and talk, why I thought we have to try to get Audre Lorde to come to Germany.



Audre Lorde with Dagmar Schultz: "My intention was to show Audre onstage and offstage, to capture her personality and her personal life here." Photo: courtesy of Dagmar Schultz

AKT: That meeting is beautifully described by you in the film. You say, you "wanted to capture every sentence she said." I understand that completely, when you hear someone talk and every sentence is meaningful. And then juxtaposed with - which is very funny - that she thought you were working for the CIA.

DS: Yeah, asking her to come to the John F Kennedy Institute.

AKT: She placed herself in the tradition of the troubadours!

DS: That's right, she called herself a cultural worker, a cultural traveller. For

her it was very important to come to Germany. Later on she said that in Germany for the first time she had the feeling that her work had brought about really concrete results. When she came and started looking for Black Germans, that was very important for her. She really enjoyed being in Berlin because it was a metropolitan city and she had just left New York, because New York was too strenuous for her with the cancer illness. Berlin was an alternative for her. She really liked going to the markets, to cafés, and really enjoyed the city. I made this other project, the [Audre Lorde in Berlin - An Online Journey](#) where you see lots of different places in the city and videos and audios and photos of Audre.

AKT: And walk with her through the markets and places she liked. In the film you see her twirling a stalk of dill, she is cutting beets, she obviously loved flowers - these details are great.

DS: My intention was to show Audre onstage and offstage, to capture her personality and her personal life here. Of course the presence of Gloria, her partner was very important. Gloria was someone - unfortunately she passed away - someone who really made you laugh all the time. You can see that in the film. Audre's daughter, when she received an award [Best Documentary] for the film which she accepted for us in New York with the Reel Sisters [of the Diaspora] Film Festival, a group of Black women, she said she never saw Audre laugh so much as when she was in Berlin. It was quite amazing considering that she had to deal with that illness at the same time.

Hunter College Audre Lorde Now Series Presents - There is No Separate Survival: From Divide & Rule to Define & Empower invite

AKT: There is a great moment when Gloria is explaining about the Germans at the lake, pointing at them. I had to think about this film from 1930, *Menschen am Sonntag*, that all the great German filmmakers who emigrated to the US worked on - [Edgar G] Ulmer, [Billy Wilder](#), [Robert and Curt] Siodmak, Fred Zinnemann were making this film about Wannsee and a weekend outing at the lake. The excerpt should be added to every screening of *Menschen am Sonntag*.

DS: It should have Audre and Gloria at the lake! That's so funny, yeah.

AKT: Did you see [Colette](#), the short film that just [won an Oscar](#)?

DS: No, I haven't yet.

AKT: I can send you a link, if you'd like.

DS: Oh yes! I would appreciate that a lot.

AKT: It's about a French woman who was in the resistance whose brother was killed in Dora.

DS: I read about it.

AKT: It's powerful. I had a conversation with [the director and the producer](#).

DS: Oh, I think that's how I read about it! I read your [interview](#).

AKT: The way you capture and present Audre's positivity to us is inspiring.

DS: The thing about this film, what Audre would have been very happy about, is that people who see it get very motivated to think about "the work." Of what they're doing with their lives, their political lives. On the [website of](#)



Audre Lorde speaks at the first London International Feminist Book Fair in 1984
Photo: Dagmar Schultz

[the film](#) we have a category [film comments](#). A lot of the comments say - we walked out of the film and were talking about what should we do? And it really energized us. It has done that in many countries. The film has been all over the world. It was in the Khayelitsha township in Cape Town to India to Sarajevo, to Brazil, Mexico. [72 festivals and other screenings](#). And that's always the reaction, people feel it's giving them something they're walking out with, something that energises them. I think that is something that Audre would have wanted.

AKT: It motivates you to take action and gives power to everybody. That wonderful sentence: "I value myself more than my terrors." Your fears are one thing, but you should really value your other qualities more.

DS: Yeah.

AKT: It is so life-affirming, especially in the time we live in now.

DS: Yeah. Her book *Sister Outsider* was just republished. I had already published some of it in 1983, before Audre came, in a book with texts and poems by Audre and by Adrienne Rich. And they just published a complete *Sister Outsider* and everyone says it's still so actual, still so pertinent to what's happening now. Unfortunately in some way, on the other hand, it's good to have that spirit of hers.

AKT: It's very relevant. Thank you so much.

DS: Thank you, it was nice talking. Bye-bye!



Dagmar Schultz on Audre Lorde: "Later on she said that in Germany for the first time she had the feeling that her work had brought about really concrete results." Photo: Dagmar Schultz

Coming up - Dagmar Schultz on Audre Lorde and James Baldwin, countering fears, looking at what you do, a creative writing workshop, poetry becoming part of your life in a useful way, and more.

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