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New Audre Lorde film looks at her time in Berlin by Steven Chaitman 2012-09-26



Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years. Image courtesy Dr. Anna M. Parkinson

A new documentary about influential Black lesbian writer and poet Audre Lorde comes to Chicago next week all the way from Berlin, Germany. "Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years—1984 to 1992" tells of Lorde's frequent stays in Berlin in the final years of her life and how she helped catalyze the beginning of the Afro-German women's movement.

The film, which is touring the country as the Audre Lorde Legacy Cultural Festival, will screen twice in the Chicago area, first at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) Oct. 2 and then as part of a bigger event at Northwestern University Oct. 3-4.

"The Berlin Years" shows both the public and private side of Lorde, a self-described "Black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet" in the years before she lost her battle with cancer in 1992. It features never-before-seen videos, images and audio recordings of Lorde collected by the filmmaker Dagmar Schultz a now-retired professor, publisher and author from Berlin.

Schultz met Lorde at the United Nations' Second World Conference On Women in Copenhagen in 1980 and invited her to be a guest professor at the Free University of Berlin. Lorde came to Germany four years later, where she made connections with German feminists and women of color and encouraged them to make their voices heard.

"I think for Audre, the time in Berlin—and not just Berlin, Germany, but also the UK and Netherlands—she was discovering a Black diaspora she wasn't familiar with," Schultz said. "She knew there were Black people and they had different backgrounds and different countries, and for her that was really a journey of discovery, which I think I can say broadened her vision in many ways."

As Lorde began to speak at the university, Schultz said it became clear to her that this was a very important time in her and others' lives, so she began to record Lorde and take numerous photos.

"At the time, I was not doing this and I was not talking with Audre about this becoming a film, I was just kind of collecting," Schultz said. "And then after her death, Gloria Joseph, her partner, came to Berlin [in 1995] and by then I thought, Wow, I really need to do something with this. It can't just sit in my drawers."

Lorde had to postpone the project, however, after the suicide of Ghanaian-German poet and historian May Ayim, one of the founders of the Black German movement. Schultz then turned her attention to producing a film about Ayim, which will also screen at the Northwestern stop of the festival. It took another several years for Schultz to find the right editor to help her complete "The Berlin Years"

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Compared to previous films about Lorde, Schultz said the film shows her not just on but off the stage, particularly the more private moments of her time spent in Berlin. It showcases Lorde's lighter side, not just her persona as a "serious political advocate."



"Sometimes people say 'Oh, she's put on a pedestal; she's made into an untouchable person,' but I think this film humanizes her," Schultz said. "The film has a lot of laughter in it, even though it was the last eight years of her life and she was dealing with cancer all along."

Elizabeth Loentz, associate professor and head of Germanic studies at UIC, said she is excited to see this part of Lorde's life that in the U.S. isn't as well known as her activism, but she advocated to bring the film to UIC to provide students the opportunity to see a prime example of someone who applied their activism in the U.S. on an international level.

"[The chance to show the film] shows really well how an American woman, writer and activist who lived in Germany then, brought her insights from the American context and was able to help them apply the knowledge she gained and the experiences that she had to their context in Germany," Loentz said.

Testament to Lorde's influence on so many movements on an international scale is that the UIC screening is co-sponsored by the Germanic studies, gender and women's studies, history and African-American studies at the school as well as the African-American Cultural Center. Loentz said the film is an opportunity really to look at these transnational connections to the women's, LGBTQ and civil-rights movements.

According to Schultz, not being any one thing or a part of any one group but all of them together was extremely important to Lorde, and Loentz said this comes off in the frankness, honesty and intimacy in her writings.

"She didn't want to see any aspect of her identity as the one, so she really looked at how all of those looked together," she said. "I think in doing so she was really a great influence on intersectionality theory and the idea that these aspects of identity are really interconnected."

Schultz said one of Lorde's biggest messages was that all people, disregarding social status or ethnic background, have some kind of power, and it's very important to identify it and use it lest it be used against you.

"Everything she's saying in the in film is still very relevant today," Schultz said. "It's unfortunate, in part, but still, it means we can still learn a lot from her life experiences."

The UIC screening of "The Berlin Years" takes place Oct. 2 at the African-American Culture Center, 830 S. Halsted St., at 2 p.m. A discussion with Schultz and Afro-German writer Ika HÄgel-Marshall will follow.

The Northwestern screening takes place Oct. 3 at Evanston's Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, 40 Arts Circle Dr., at 6 p.m. following a screening of Hope in My Heart: The May Ayim Story. Starting at 4 p.m., however, HÄgel-Marshall will also read from her book, Invisible Woman: Growing Up Black in Germany. The second day of the festival includes screenings of the 1995 documentary Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde and The Edge of Each Other's Battles: The Vision of Audre Lorde" back-to-back at the Block Museum of Art starting at 6 p.m.

All events are free and open to the public. For more information on the film and festival, visit [www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com](http://www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com).

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