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AUDRE LORDE – HER STRUGGLES AND HER VISIONSⁱ

In this presentation I will try to explain how Audre Lorde came to Germany, what she meant to me personally and to Orlanda Women's Publishers, and what effect her work had in Germany on Black and white women.

In 1980, I met Audre Lorde for the first time at the UN World Women's Conference in Copenhagen in a discussion following her reading. I knew nothing about her then, nor was I familiar with her books. I was spellbound and very much impressed with the openness with which Audre Lorde addressed us white women. She told us about the importance of her work as a poet, about racism and differences among women, about women in Europe, the USA and South Africa, and stressed the need for a vision of the future to guide our political praxis.

On that evening it became clear to me: Audre Lorde must come to Germany for German women to hear her, her voice speaking to white women in an era when the movement had begun to show reactionary tendencies. She would help to pull it out of its provinciality, its over-reliance, in its politics, on the exclusive experience of white women. At that time I was teaching at the Free University of Berlin and thus had the opportunity to invite Audre Lorde to be a guest professor. In the spring of 1984 she agreed to come to Berlin for a semester to teach literature and creative writing.

Earlier, in 1981, I had heard Audre Lorde and Jewish poet Adrienne Rich speaking about racism and antisemitism at the National Women's Studies Association annual convention. The idea of translating their two lectures resulted in me editing the book *Macht und Sinnlichkeit* (1983/1991) (*Power and Sensuality*), a collection of poems and essays of both authors. I hoped this book would launch a discussion of racism and antisemitism in the German women's movement and at the same time bring close to German readers Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich in their liveliest form – presenting themselves as friends, colleagues, activists and as lesbians in a common struggle against racism and antisemitism, but also as two independent women of very different backgrounds and life paths who did not flinch from addressing their differences.

Audre Lorde's parents emigrated from the Caribbean to Harlem in New York City and raised their daughter in a hostile white environment with silent discipline. Extremely near-sighted, Audre perceived a "dazzling world auf strange lights and fascinating shapes" (Lorde, 1982, 31), until she was five and got her first glasses.

Survival meant for her that early on she found in poetry the form in which to express complex feelings. Survival meant learning from observation and listening to her mother's message: "You have to understand the basics without words...You have to take what you need by yourself alone...You'll grow strong by doing those things you need to be strong to do." (Lorde in Schultz, ed., 1983,/1991, p. 29, back translation)

This also meant dealing daily with racism and understanding what her mother wanted to protect her from, through silence; making a place for herself as a young Black lesbian in a majority white Greenwich Village of the fifties; being married and eventually divorced; writing a book between two jobs and raising two children with

her white woman partner; at age 44 getting breast cancer and fourteen years long struggling despite the illness to love, to work creatively and to remain politically active.

Survival meant for Audre Lorde being an outsider – as a lesbian in the Black community, as a mother in the lesbian community, as a Black political radical in academic circles. The guiding motifs of her work derived from these experiences: to trust her own perceptions, whether pleasant or unpleasant; to speak for herself instead of remaining silent; to recognize her own strengths and power and put them to use; to live with self-consciousness and for the things she chose to do, with happiness, engagement and total concentration; and to love and support women. She held people spellbound, particularly those women who attended her readings and seminars and who knew her privately; and in my view the fascination came from her basic convictions and the intensity with which she communicated them. Add to this the fact that Audre Lorde believed every woman capable of growing beyond herself – after all, hadn't the visually impaired, raised-in-silence girl born into Depression Harlem become one of the most expressive writers of our time, overshadowed by none?

In 1984 Audre Lorde came to Berlin. The sojourn meant her first intensive contact with Europe, with the white German women's movement, with lesbians and with Black German women in West and East Berlin, as well as Afro-Dutch and Afro-British women.ⁱⁱ The white women – and also most of the Black – found in her for the first time an older Black woman who understood herself to be a survivor and drew from this understanding the consciousness which guided her life, leading her to form a self in which flourished an intensive and meaningful diversity.

Many white women were irritated at first, interpreting Audre Lorde's expectations of herself and others as criticism only – for instance, when she asked how they imagined their lives would be five years down the road. Yet most came to feel that in her question lay an opportunity, an offer seldom made to them.

Similar difficulties awaited her seminar students when after reading one of their poems she would ask: "What were your feelings as you heard this poem?" The women reacted with timorous silence - in Germany you never ask about feelings. However, Audre Lorde saw in feeling and thinking no contradiction: "Rationality isn't useless. It serves our feelings...However, men have taught us to deny the existence of this fertile part of every person...I'm not saying that women don't think or analyze. Or that whites don't feel. I am saying we have to unite the two and never close our eyes before the terror, the chaos, that is Black, feminine, dark, creative, and rejected..." (Lorde in Schultz, ed., 1983,/1991, p. 48-49, back translation)

These thoughts were new to the German women, and just as novel was the binding of emotion, power and the erotic: "The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person...Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy...For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like the only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within." (Lorde, 1984, 57-58)

Many women were confused and uncertain of themselves when confronted by Audre Lorde's combining spirituality and politics. They had been used to discussions in which the so-called spirituality women faced off as polar opposites with the politicians in an either-or stance. For Audre Lorde, this separation did not exist. She had found in the gods of the Ewe and Yoruba, in Mawulisa and Yemanja and the deliberate verbal artist Afrekete a tie to the traditional African cultural heritage based on female strength which in no way disallowed a sharp analysis of social, political, or economic developments. For Audre Lorde, knowledge of African myths and religions, familiarity with the goddesses of war of the Vodun, the amazons of Begin and the warriors of Dan, became "...the foundation of noneuropean female strength and power that nurtures each of our visions." (Lorde, 1984, 68) In many poems and in her novel ZAMI we can see this very clearly.

Power, for Audre Lorde, did not connote a static, hierarchical position which a man or a woman would strive to reach in order to exercise political power. In all her readings she told women that our responsibility and our opportunity lay in our determining and using our power, how little it may be, because we could be sure that power we failed to use would be used against us. She saw power, for instance, in that we had both the possibility and the ability to stand by what we are and to believe in ourselves.

Already in 1971, Audre Lorde posted her poem "Love Poem," which openly describes sexual love between women, on her office door in New York at John Jay College (attended largely by Black and white police), before it was published in *MS Magazine*. This was a courageous act at that time, as it was difficult and dangerous to be a lesbian. For Audre Lorde, it meant that, aware of potential victimization, she refused to increase her vulnerability by putting the weapon of silence into her enemy's hands.

I have known women who have expressed their opinions with vehemence in all possible situations, but Audre Lorde was the first who explained in speech and writing why it is a matter of life and death for each of us to transform silence into speech and action, going beyond our fear of visibility, of others' judgements, and thus of saying something wrong.

Just as Audre Lorde revealed her lesbianism, she openly dealt with her breast removal. In her book *The Cancer Journals* she wrote: "I have tried to voice some of my feelings and thoughts about the travesty of prosthesis, the pain of amputation, the function of cancer in a profit economy, my confrontation with mortality, the strength of women loving, and the power and rewards self-conscious living." (Lorde, 1980, 9-10) She wrote about her illness, because writing was her means of processing her meeting with death and breaking the taboo on revealing the environmental causes of breast cancer. And she hoped that her words would "serve as an encouragement for other women to speak and to act out of our experiences with cancer and with other threats of death, for silence has never brought us anything of worth." (ibid., 10)

Audre Lorde shook women up by the way in which she dealt with her various identities. At each of her readings, she presented herself as a Black feminist, mother, lesbian, warrior, poet and cancer survivor – a description capturing her multiple outsider positions. This led white women to ask Audre Lorde, for instance, how she experienced certain things as a lesbian. Her answer was that she did not move in this

society first as a lesbian and then as a Black woman, but as a lesbian Black woman, and that the different parts were tightly tied together in her, mutually nourishing. From this she drew her strength.

Just as she was direct when dealing with the many identities she united, so, also, did Audre Lorde address the too often ignored differences among women. Her frequently quoted essay “The Master’s Tools will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” opens with the words: “It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians...What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.” (Lorde, 1984, 110-111)

In an interview she described the connection between her personal experience and her view of differences: “We have certain common aims, which we must define, and we need to examine what our differences are and how we can use them to accomplish these aims, to bring that future closer which we are willing to own. I see learning how to deal with our differences as a basic problem. If we fail to learn how to use our differences constructively, they will always be turned against us. We have to turn that around, not by pretending they do not exist, but by looking into how we can put them to our own uses.” (Lorde in *tageszeitung*, 19.7.1984)

Again and again she would ask white German women about their relations to and with Black women, migrated and Jewish women. The more frequently she came to Germany – from 1984 to 1992 each year except in 1985, the more intensively did she concern herself with political developments and the conflicts between white and Black woman as well as the difficulties that Black women, immigrants and Jewish women had among themselves. And whenever women wanted to meet with her, she was there to share her experience and opinions with them, to encourage them to find ways of working together, to urge them on to a mutual exchange of thoughts and feelings. From Audre Lorde’s conversations and readings held in the Federal German Republic, Switzerland, East Berlin and Dresden, many white women learned to be more conscious of their privileges and more responsible in the use of their power.¹

My friendship with Audre Lorde had a profound influence on the development of Orlanda Frauenverlag. We published her novel, her essays and part of her poetry, including a bilingual volume of 42 poems she herself selected from her work during her last summer. We accomplished our goal to become a working team composed of Black and white women. This cooperative effort enlarged our vision and made possible our constructive dealing with differences in daily life. For nothing in the world would we white women have given up the debates, friendships, contacts and political work which resulted from that configuration.

Especially important was Audre Lorde’s presence for the birth and development of an Afro-German movement. Her view that voices of those silenced, invisible or met with indifference should be heard encouraged Afro-German women to write the book *Farbe Bekennen. Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte* (the

¹ An excellent example of constructive criticism is in my view Audre Lorde’s “An Open Letter to Mary Daly.” Mary Daly never answered that letter. (Lorde, 1979, published in: Lorde, 1984a)

English translation was published under the title: *Showing Our Colors. Afro-German women Speak Out*). She wrote the preface for that book and stated that Afro-Germans constituted an important aspect of her personal and political life as part of the African diaspora. In 1987, she told writers at the conference “The Dream of Europe” in Berlin that Europe had been a nightmare for her, and her dream, her vision of Europe’s future depended on the Black Europeans, the hyphenated people, who offer Europe its last chance to learn how to deal with differences. (Lorde in Schultz 1991, 216-217)

The Afro-German literary critic Marion Kraft said in her talk at Audre Lorde’s memorial celebration in Berlin: “Her hope was global sisterhood, and that we begin to see one another at the same time we begin to see ourselves. Self-definition and perception of the other is basic to Audre Lorde’s work. Above all, we Afro-German women – and men – have benefitted from her gift of a pathway out of our socially-constituted personal and political isolation. We should do everything we can to continue down this path as she would have wished.” (6.2.1993)

Echoing Audre Lorde’s special relationship to Afro-German women was her caring for women the world over engaged in struggles for freedom, and especially South African Black women who held a central place in her life, reflected in poems like “Call” and “Sisters in Arms”. In 1984, Gloria I. Joseph, professor and activist, founded the organization SISA (Sisters in Support of Sisters in South Africa), and Audre Lorde was involved from the beginning. To support women’s projects in Soweto like “Zamani Soweto Sisters” and “Maggie Magaba Trust,” she gave readings and participated in public fora.

How great Audre Lorde’s influence on women and men in many countries was could be clearly seen at the 1990 Boston conference “I am your sister – forging Global connections Across Difference.” More than 2000 women and also men of various ethnic backgrounds from South Africa to Europe to the Caribbean took the opportunity to show what Audre Lorde and her artistic and political work had set in motion.

Her last decade drew her back to the Caribbean, her parents’ home. In 1987 she moved to St. Croix, one of the US Virgin Islands. In the 1980s, she and Gloria I. Joseph, with whom she now lived, had founded the “Women’s Coalition”, an organization of initially Black, later Black and white women. On St. Croix, her relationship to the United States changed. “The existence of the USA influenced our entire lives here, our habits, our political opinions, our environment,” she said in an interview. “And there are certain things over which we have no control. That is where the difference lies, when compared to U.S. residents. That changed my consciousness.” (*tageszeitung*, 5.8.1989)

Some of Audre Lorde’s poems reflect this consciousness, as for example “Coast Market”:

Coast Market

Hibiscus bright
the sun is rising over Christiansted.

Gouts of plastic litter

along the delicate shoreline
the building shadows lengthen
but the sand is going away
sea corals hauled to build a pier
for cruiseships
a racetrack instead of a Junior High
mud flows from the schoolyard fountains
our seniors fail or emigrate

At sunset
the ginger weeps
for what is growing
and the precious coin we pay
for making
change.

(January 30, 1989)

At the same time, she was part of a Black community that appreciated beyond measure her generosity, warmth and engagement: In St. Croix they gave her the African name “Gamba Adisa” – she who makes her meaning known. When I visited St. Croix, I was surprised to see the hearty and unhibited way people of all different backgrounds greeted Audre Lorde. This environment, the warm climate, the relationship with Gloria I. Joseph as a partner and co-activist with whom she also shared bee-keeping and honey production did a lot to ensure that, in spite of her illness, her life as a “traveling cultural worker” and her creativity could continue.

Not only because of illness did Audre Lorde stand both at the margins and in the center of her own life. In 1989 hurricane Hugo tore through St. Croix. After a single night, not unlike a thirteen hour bombing, Audre and Gloria came out of their room to find their house half destroyed and the island brown and leafless, as though burned. No water, no electricity, no foods for her prescribed diet – and yet Audre Lorde stayed even after the planes began flying again. She wanted to struggle with the islanders for a new beginning – 90 percent of all houses had been damaged or destroyed – and she spoke out against president Bush’s decision to send the army because of the plundering of supermarkets instead of providing the population with badly needed supplies. She contributed to the book *Hell Under God’s Orders*, edited by Gloria I. Joseph, which told about surviving Hugo and its ecological, economic, social and psychological after-effects.

Life with cancer – this meant for Audre Lorde living with heightened consciousness and understanding death and dying as an integral part of her life. My friendship with Audre Lorde was strongly conditioned by her struggle with cancer. In 1984 I suggested that she visit a woman doctor, an anthroposoph. Yet I had not counted on being the one who had to tell her what the doctor found: liver metastases, a diagnosis she had already received by her doctor in New York, but not talked about. In the following eight years I accompanied Audre from near and far as well as I could in her struggle. In 1987, Manfred Kuno, naturopath in Berlin, began treating Audre, which meant for her that she often had to defy the counsel of her New York physicians. I experienced her struggle close-up: she neither denied her illness, nor

did she place it in the center of her life, but got to know her body better and better, striving to overcome its weaknesses and limitations. Just as she did everything with intensity and a thirst for knowledge, so too, did she approach her illness: she knew more about cancer and therapeutic methods than did many medical-school trained doctors, and she gave her experiences to many women throughout the world.

Her last summer she spent with Gloria, Ika Hügel-Marshall and me in Berlin in our apartment. This season showed us that her life would not be much longer. Ika and I learned how to talk with her about her coming dying. At the same time, we also talked about developments in the women's movement and political events. The night after the pogrom against refugees in Rostock Ika and I went to a demonstration while Audre and Gloria drafted a protest letter to Chancellor helmutKohl which appeared in Newspapers a few days later. They had written: "What do these events tell us Afro-americans? What do they say to the 7/8 of the world who are people of ccolor? In the coming months, in the coming years, when we are in new Zealaned, in England, in japan, in South Africa teaching and lecturing and the question is asked, how was your last visit to Germany, how are things in Berlin these days – what will we be able to tell them?" (*Tagesspiegel*, 19.9.1992)

Her last reading took place in our apartment. She read her newest poems in which she was addressing death. A recording of the reading, which she dedicated to women in Soweto, was sent to South Africa. A few weeks later, Ika Hügel-Marshall, May Ayim and I flew to St. Croix to be with Audre in her final hours.

Audre Lorde had always been on the offensive with her illness, not without fear and anger, but determined to keep control of her body and to continue leading her life as she conceived it should be lived. Already in 1978, after the amputation of her breast, she had begun designing jewelry and clothing for women who refused a breast prothesis. Exactly six years before her death Audre wrote in her diary: "Living fully – how long is not the point. How and why take total precedence." (Lorde, 1988, 126) The how and the why meant living with intensity on the front lines. On the front lines she declared her lesbian identity, whether in New York, St. Croix or Dresden. She was in the avant garde against racism, antisemitism, homophobia, discrimination against the disabled, wherever she found them. Intensity marked her political work, her relationships, her encounters with people in many nations, her love of children, and her happiness with flowers and rocks. Given any rock, she could tell you its place of origin and narrate with enthusiasm its history. Shells and stones could be found in the artistic necklaces she wove. Living with intensity also meant that she rowed on an inflatable boat on a Berlin lake wearing a T-shirt with Emma Goldman's motto: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." In this spirit we all often danced till dawn.

I learned a lot from Audre Lorde. One sign of her friendship was her challenging me, both as a person and a friend. Being with her taught me that, as a white woman, I could not just assume the existence of trust on the part of a Black woman, but that I had to build it up and be ready to reaffirm it. Audre became for many women, Black and white, both a friend and an elder. As Gloria I. Joseph said in her commemorative speech: "When you read her work, when you hear her speak, you know that her talent cannot be imitated, because the way in which she moves her listeners' hearts and souls is unique and cannot be reproduced. Audre cannot be taken as a role model, but rather as a touchstone."

Audre has bequeathed us her oeuvre and vitality, her trust in the ability of people and societies to change, her love for women and her untiring spirit of struggle. This heritage can grow in us, to be used for ourselves and to benefit others.

Notes

¹ A slightly changed version was published in German in: *beiträge zur feministischen theorie und praxis*, no. 34, 1993 and in: Audre Lorde, *Auf Leben und Tod. Krebstagebuch*. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000. Translated by Tobe Levin.

² People of African and Afro-american descent have lived in Germany for generations. Their history is told in the book: Oguntoye, Katharina/Opitz, May/Schultz, Dagmar (eds.): *Farbe Bekennen. Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*. Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1986/1991. (English translation: *Showing Our Colors. Afro-German women Speak Out*. Amherst, Mass.: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1991)
Twenty years ago, Afro-germans founded the organizations “Initiative of Black Germans” (ISD) and “Afro-german women” (Adefra).

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