

Audre Lorde and the Afro-German Movement in Berlin

*“...and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
so it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive”*

- *A Litany for Survival. (1978) by Audre Lorde,
from The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde.*

Music, light-heartedness and community are the first things that come to mind when watching recordings of the formation and the first few meetings of the Black movement in Germany. The movie, “Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984 – 1992”, grants an insight into the beginnings of this movement, as well as Audre Lorde role in inspiring the formation of Black initiatives in Germany (Schultz, 2012).

Lorde first started teaching in Germany after meeting Dagmar Schultz who was at the time teaching at the Institute of North American studies during the 1980’s World Women’s Conference in Copenhagen (Logan, 2020). Inspired by Lorde’s reading during the conference, Schultz asked her to visit the institute as a guest professor, which Lorde accepted and started teaching Black American literature and creative writing at the Freie Universität Berlin. During her time teaching at the institute, Lorde strived to bring Black German women together to discuss their experiences living in Berlin and to build a network of Afro-Germans who were quite isolated from each other at the time. To do so, Lorde explicitly worked on creating spaces in which Black women could share their experiences, get to know each other and develop a sense of belonging (Schultz, 2012). Given that the population of Black German women in Berlin was small at the time and that most individuals lived spread out from each other, this proved to be a challenging endeavour. Nonetheless, Lorde’s lectures started to increasingly attract Black women after some time making way for the formation of an Afro-German community in Berlin. Encouraged by Lorde, Katharina Oguntoye and May Ayim who were frequent visitors of Lorde’s lectures, decided to work on a book reflecting Afro-German women’s stories and redefining the predominant narrative of what it means to be Black and German. In doing so, they made a step towards uniting isolated Afro-German women and reaping the power of collective action by developing a shared consciousness and sense of belonging.

The idea that even though no one person can affect change all by themselves, each individual can contribute to social change in their own way, using their own power was central to Lorde's work in the German context (Schultz, 2012). As Lorde phrased it "*Nobody else is gonna do it. You've got to do it.*" (Lorde in Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984 – 1992). In doing so, Lorde inspired many of the young Black women to speak up and use their voices through writing, community building, as well as developing a new terminology to change the narrative of what it means to be Afro-German (Schultz, 2012).

"I actually find the term "Afro-German" or "Afro-European" quite good. I am declaring that I look different, perhaps move differently too, also in some respects think or feel differently based on my background and the life situations conditioned by it. But I don't want to be put back into a black or white compartment." (Opitz et al., 1986, p. 156)

Early on, Lorde understood that in the German context, Afro-Germans were viewed as the "Other-from-without" in which the African "Other" was typically located outside of Germany's borders, rather than being part of the German culture, language and reality (Wright, 2003). Therefore, Germanness and Blackness were typically seen as representing opposing categories of cultural identity, which are mutually exclusive of each other (Campt, 1993).

"It often happens with me that people have their own expectations and ignore what I say. When I tell them that I grew up here and have spent my entire life here, the question still might come afterwards: "Yes, and when are you going back?" Idiotic! Now and then I have the feeling of not belonging anywhere; on the other hand, I've grown up here, speak this language, actually feel secure here and can express myself as I want. I share a background with these people even if they don't accept me. "Yes, I'm German," I say, perhaps for spite, to shake them up in their black-and-white thinking... I often used to think I had to justify my being here. In the meantime, I've come to realize that I am who I am and now I ask quite boldly if there's something wrong when somebody looks at me doubtfully. Often the person will realize his rigid way of thinking." (Opitz et al., 1992, p.150)

The book '*Farbe Bekennen*' (Showing Our True Colors) written by May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye and Dagmar Schultz, depicts the way in which Afro-Germans coined the self-concept, as well as the narrative surrounding Afro-Germans at the time. The strategy of literal writing and autobiography depicted an important means to reclaim the predominant narrative regarding Afro-Germans and establish a "unified plurality" (Wright, 2003). This idea of unified plurality was crucial to the Afro-German movement—given its diversity, in terms of class, ethnic, geographical, as well as historical backgrounds as well as the variety of experiences of Afro-Germans born and raised apart from one another. By virtue of its diverse composition, the Afro-German movement challenged the restrictive definitions of race and "*redefined the boundaries of Blackness and Germanness*" (Florvil, 2020, p.3).

As Campt (1993) describes it, the Afro-German women's experience existing at the margins of German culture while being affected and shaped by it gives rise to a so-called cultural and ideological "agility" designating the ability to move and switch between different cultural and ethnic identifications enabling them to resist both marginalization and assimilation.

Shortly after '*Farbe Bekennen*' (Showing Our True Colors) was published, the initiative for Black Germans (ISD) started in 1985, as a result of a coffee meet up of friends, who decided to meet other Black people and publicize different manifestations of German racism (Florvil, 2020). The ISD is by now one of the oldest and biggest self-organised initiatives of and for Black people in Germany. This formalized organization of Afro-Germans and the participation in a global movement of Black people further reflects Lorde's idea of "*let us be ourselves, as we define us*", (Lorde in Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984 – 1992), as well as the role of women as a growing force of international change worldwide. Nevertheless, Lorde did not romanticize the challenges coming alongside the development of a movement. On the contrary, she underlined the difficulties and challenges inherent to the first few years of creating a movement, while still pointing out the necessity of engaging in it. Instead, Lorde points out that the main point is not stopping to be scared but prioritizing the self over one's fears.

"When you are born Black and female in a society that defines humanness as white and male, we recognize very early that survival is not a theoretical problem. It is a problem of day to day living." (Audre Lorde – The Berlin Years 1984 – 1992)

As Lorde pointed out, listening and learning from other Black women's lives, while collaborating to create social change, allows us to use differences and express them in an individual's work. It further forces individuals to reconsider and redefine the idea of what it means to be German, thereby strengthening the agency of Afro-German individuals, as well as offering a tool of resistance to the essentialist idea that "German" and *whiteness* are conflated.

"Once you start to speak, people will yell at you. They will interrupt you, put you down and suggest it's personal. And the world won't end. And the speaking will get easier and easier. And you will find you have fallen in love with your own vision, which you may never have realized you had. And you will lose some friends and lovers, and realize you don't miss them. And new ones will find you and cherish you. And you will still flirt and paint your nails, dress up and party, because, as I think Emma Goldman said, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." And at last you'll know with surpassing certainty that only one thing is more frightening than speaking your truth. And that is not speaking."

(Lorde, 1984)

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