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Queering Dominant Modes of Writing and Identity Formation in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New
Spelling of My Name*

By

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Abstract

As part of a historical formation of marginalized authors who interrogate dominant modes of writing and identity formation in their work, self-described “Black lesbian mother warrior poet” Audre Lorde remakes and reimagines dominant conventions of identity and literary genres in her novel *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* to articulate her unique subjectivity as a Black American lesbian writer. Drawing on the work of scholars and activists in the fields of queer theory and feminism, including Cheryl Wall, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Audre Lorde herself, Charlie Martin uses textual and contextual analysis to examine the indelible link between Lorde’s intersecting identity as a Black feminist lesbian and the work that she does to subvert or “queer” dominant modes of storytelling and reductive conceptions of identity in *Zami* and her other work. Martin contends that through the deployment of both traditional narrative forms and poetic techniques in tandem with each other, *Zami* presents an alternative mode to the traditional novel that refuses to confine itself to one rigid way of being by insisting upon a hybrid approach to writing and an intersectional conception of identity. In doing so, *Zami* as an emergent text is able to convey moments of deep affect and erotic knowledge about self-identity and identity formation.

Keywords: queer literature, identity politics, subjectivity, trans-genre, intersectionality, feminism, erotic, Audre Lorde, *Zami*

Introduction

Audre Lorde's bending and mixing of the conventions of genre in her transcendent work *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* poetically mirrors the content and subject matter of the book itself, which exemplifies Lorde's non-traditional, complex, intersectional conception of intersecting identities. Of course, many other writers creating on the margins of society have dabbled with this work of artfully defying the dominant modes of writing and identifying in their novels, including Virginia Woolf with *Orlando*, Leslie Feinberg with *Stone Butch Blues*, and more recently Justin Torres with *We the Animals*, to name just a few. Audre Lorde and her book *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* exemplify this cohort due to the trans-genre approach to writing/storytelling which led to the inception of a new kind of hybrid genre in *Zami*, the skillful fusion of literary techniques such as poetry with prose and biography with myth, and Audre Lorde's constant underlying insistence upon an intersectional conception of identity in her own life and within the text of her novel *Zami*.

In a similar fashion to the innovative authors mentioned above, Audre Lorde interrogates dominant modes of self-identity and brings an alternative approach to the conventional novel or story format in *Zami*. Lorde effectively subverts traditional expectations of genre, form, and identity formation in her unusual novel through the skillful deployment of the forms of prose and poetry and the genres of biography and myth in tandem with each other to tell the story of her life through fragments of formative memories and detailed portraits of the women who were most important to her. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* is worthy of deeper examination for a multitude of reasons. For one thing, despite being so ambitious in terms of innovative writing, *Zami* is unpretentious in tone and very much accessible to the casual or non-academic reader. *Zami* is certainly an example of what Stuart Hall has dubbed "ordinary" culture, not elitist or in

any way interested in using any kind of obscure language and tropes. The down-to-earth nature of *Zami* strikes me in a way that other texts which subvert traditional genre and notions of identity do not, for example *Orlando* or Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. These two texts, though nearly 40 years apart, share the trait of being somewhat more literary in terms of language, and neither are so boldly personal as Audre Lorde's novel. The autobiographical aspect to *Zami* makes it feel that much more "real". Further, Lorde builds a strong mythos in *Zami* encompassing everything from womanhood, America, family relations, love, the erotic, etc. through the detailing of her experiences, making heavy use of memory as well as history to create her own kind of myth.

Zami: A New Spelling of My Name was first presented to me when I was a sophomore in a queer literature class exposing its students to a sampling of queer-aligned narratives, which included Lorde's *Zami* alongside other, possibly more well-known titles such as the previously mentioned *Orlando* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* among others. Out of the texts we studied in that class, Audre Lorde's *Zami* in particular has remained at the forefront of my mind. I related to *Zami* personally as a woman and a queer person who struggled with hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality growing up. Lorde's experience of wanting to be both man and woman, of wanting to be more than either rather than confined to one or the other, really stuck with me when I first came across her words at a formative time in my life when I was trying to figure out what kind of person I wanted to be. So the concept of complex, intersecting identities is close to my own heart and the promotion of living one's truth through recognizing and embracing all aspects of their identity is one of my passions. Further, there is a need to amplify the voices and stories of marginalized people that disproportionately go unheard, which I am very aware of my responsibility to do in my position as a white person in academia. For these reasons taken

together, I feel that the work I am doing with Audre Lorde's book in this capstone is important and valuable.

First published in 1982, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* is told from the point of view of the author herself. In this unconventional book, Lorde chronicles her own life experiences in a variety of forms (including prose, poetry, memory, myth, biography, history) that mesh together to produce one coherent narrative. Unable to categorize it with existing terms, the word that Lorde coined to describe the book's hybrid of genres was "biomythography," combining elements of biography, history, and myth. Although it is very accurate and descriptive, this term can still be somewhat insufficient as there is not really anything in the word "biomythography" to indicate how the book deploys the forms of both prose and poetry on top of fusing those different genres of biography, history, and myth. In order to emphasize the text's forays into poetry as a narrative tool and the marbling of forms and genres, I tend to use terms like hybrid and trans-genre in order to describe what is happening in *Zami*. In an interview with scholar Claudia Tate, Audre Lorde herself describes *Zami* as "really fiction. It has elements of biography and history [and] myth. In other words, it's fiction built from many sources." (Tate 115).

In *Zami*, Lorde eschews some of the more restrictive conventions of narrative writing, switching quite fluidly between forms of straight matter-of-fact narration, bits of poetry, lyrics, memory fragments, and thoughtful prose that is not unlike a stream of consciousness. All of these differing literary techniques are combined in this one text, fusing Lorde's memories of history with memories her life, from her childhood in Harlem, New York in the 30's and 40's through her adulthood in Connecticut, Mexico, and finally back to New York. Throughout all of these different transitions, the book is devoted to creating detailed portraits of the various strong and important women in Lorde's life, especially her mother, Linda, an immigrant from Grenada.

There is also Gennie, Audre's best friend, until she dies in their adolescence. The impact of this loss is felt throughout the rest of the text, manifesting in waves of poetic grief and flashes of italic memory even as Audre's life continues and she begins new relationships. As I will discuss, the deployment of italics in *Zami* is a vital component of the trans-genre nature of the text. As a poetic technique, the italics function on various levels simultaneously: to evoke specific emotion or memory, to break up the narration, and to construct the unique mythos of the text. Finally, the last woman we get to know in *Zami* is Afrekete, an important lover of Audre's whom she meets in a lesbian bar upon her return to New York from her time living in Mexico. Distinctly reminiscent of Audre's mother Linda, Afrekete affects Audre in ways wholly different from any of her other handful of lovers over the course of the novel. Through these feminine portraits, Lorde's reverence for women-centered relationships as well as her insistence upon multiplicity and intersectionality of identity is concurrently built a mythos in her novel *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. The deployment of poetry and poetic prose becomes particularly important in constructing this mythos of an instinctual, ingrained sense of feminine love and connection that is an integral part of Lorde's racial identity, not just the sexual and gendered aspects of her identity.

When I was researching this project, I found that although many scholars have written about Audre Lorde's *Zami*, none have stressed the function of the style of the novel itself and the variation in literary techniques the way that I have here in this project. I find that the hybrid, trans-genre structure of the text itself, including the strategic use of poetry and italics at times of deep affect and great spiritual importance, works alongside the content, which stresses the importance of an intersectional approach to self-identity. There is a double-emphasis upon a multiplicity of methods, both in terms of writing and self-identity, within the text of *Zami*. That

reinforces the queer, intersectional nature of the novel in a way that elevates the text beyond other comparable narratives, which do similar work with subverting dominant modes of identity and writing but do not construct such a boldly personal, honest mythos as Audre Lorde artfully does in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*.

Theoretical Framework/Methodology: Intersectionality is Feminist and Queer

In this capstone, I am conducting a critical textual and contextual analysis of *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* within a framework that draws from various thinkers working at the intersection of feminism and queer theory in order to interrogate the ways in which Audre Lorde subverts dominant modes of writing, genre, and identity, both through technical aspects of her work and the incorporation of her own complex, multiple identities into her writing. Here, feminism and queer theory taken together inform my position of analysis and emphasize both the need for self-reflexivity as well as the need to think historically and spatially.

The lens of queer theory is vital to my argument about the act of “queering” in my reading of Lorde’s mythical, semi-autobiographical book, drawing from the work of queer theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. One aspect I am careful of is that Audre Lorde was proudly and vocally a lesbian, a word that she assigned to herself very deliberately. Additionally, queer theory as a field of thought didn’t really start to gain traction until after Lorde died in 1992, so it’s very much a contemporary lens that did not exist when Lorde was alive and writing. It is vital to keep in mind that Lorde would have resisted being labeled “queer” because such a vague term has the tendency to erase the part of her identity which she was particularly insistent upon the importance of: she was a lesbian, a woman-loving-woman first and foremost. So, for clarification: it is specifically Lorde’s writing and the work done within the text of *Zami: A New*

Spelling of My Name that I am using queer theory to talk about and claim the text as queer in this analysis, not Audre Lorde as a historical figure.

First, I look at Hélène Cixous's 1976 essay "The Laugh of Medusa." Here, Cixous provides a perspective on the history of writing as being deeply patriarchal and tied with the phallogocentric tradition as well as issues a call for women to reclaim their bodies, desires, and their very identities from patriarchal politics through writing. She posits that writing, much like many other disciplines, has been run by "a libidinal and cultural- hence political, typically masculine- economy," in which the repression of women has been perpetuated over and over in ways that are hidden by the "mystifying charms of fiction" (879). Cixous rejects the patriarchal norms of writing and calls for other women to do the same by writing themselves, as she puts it:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text- as into the world and into history- by her own movement (875).

She advocates for a uniquely feminine perspective as an alternative to traditionally masculine or patriarchal writing and discourse, but also as a way of critiquing that dominant, exclusionary writing discourse. She makes an important distinction between what she calls feminine writing and writing that is simply done by women:

It is well known that the number of women writers has always been ridiculously small. This is a useless and deceptive fact unless from their species of female writers we do not first deduct the immense majority whose workmanship is in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women as sensitive, intuitive, dreamy, etc. (878).

For Cixous, feminine writing presents a highly dimensional portrait of woman by woman that differs wholly from traditional writing. Cixous's thinking in terms of feminine writing and feminine identity that she was writing in the 70's very much mirrors the link between queer writing and queer identity that comes up later on in the 90's.

Queer studies and queer theory as a field of thought really started to develop in the 1990's with the work of scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, but Lorde passed away in 1992 just as the field was coming into its own and therefore never had the chance to lend her voice on that subject. So even though there was a bit of overlap, queer theory is still very much a contemporary lens that did not exist when Lorde was writing, which is vital to keep in mind. In his book *Female Masculinity*, queer theorist Jack Halberstam writes that anyone writing about the past must carefully consider how contemporary notions and constructions of desire and identity can easily be imposed on past persons, incidents, or issues, because it can oversimplify the complex historical reality. Halberstam proposes a corrective methodology for this called perverse presentism, which he describes as "not only a denaturalization of the present, but also an application of what we do not know in the present to what we cannot know about the past" (53). In order to study the past, one must denaturalize the present in an effort not to impose our own contemporary norms and values. Halberstam's work focuses primarily on nineteenth century lesbians whereas mine is about a late twentieth century lesbian, so my source material is much more contemporary, but I think this approach of denaturalization of the present is extremely useful for generating insights about the past and making thoughtful connections to the present. The purpose of this history and my wariness about the word "queer" is not to devalue the importance of queer theory in this project, because this lens gives me the important tools and language to talk about the nature of Lorde's work in *Zami*, the relationship between her and her

writing in this specific text, and the work of decoding that is being done when people read it. In this context, “queer” is not just about sexuality and gender, it is also very much about intersectionality.

This brings me to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s 1993 essay “Queer and Now.” Here Sedgwick, a leading scholar in the field of queer theory, talks about what “queer” is and what it means. The sense one gets whilst reading is that “queer” (which she puts in quotes) is expansive for Sedgwick, and it isn’t the kind of objective, empirical category that many consider “lesbian,” “gay,” “heterosexual,” etc. to be. She says that “queer” is more about the difference of dimensions in sexual and gender identity, and now even other dimensions such as race and ethnicity, that don’t line up perfectly with the societal prescriptions of traditional identity categories. Sedgwick writes that “queer” can refer to: “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (8). She argues that “queer” isn’t just about sexuality or gender:

A lot of the most exciting recent work around “queer” spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example... Thereby, the gravity (I mean the *gravitas*, the meaning, but also the *center* of gravity) of the term “queer” itself deepens and shifts (9).

Sedgwick cites intellectuals Isaac Julien, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Richard Fung as examples of scholars doing this work of exploring the intersections of race, ethnicity, and postcolonial nationality with sexuality and gender, which Sedgwick aptly refers to as “identity constituting,

identity fracturing discourses”. Based on this expansive definition of “queer” as being about much more than just gender and sexuality alone, I argue that Audre Lorde is also doing this work of complicating identity and examining the intersections of multiple identity-constituting and identity-fracturing discourses in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. There are undeniable parallels between what Sedgwick defines as “queer” and the work that Lorde does with an intersectional approach to identity in the text of *Zami*. This concept of intersectionality is the exciting junction between queer theory and feminism that my argument about Lorde’s subversive work in *Zami* is predicated upon.

In addition to queer theory, I am also using feminism to keep my analysis historically grounded in Lorde’s world at the time of *Zami*, which came out in 1982, and to turn a critical and self-reflexive eye to my position as a white queer college student imposing the contemporary lens of queer theory upon a historical Black lesbian feminist. To do this, I reference the work of various thinkers that draw upon intersectional Black feminism, including Audre Lorde herself. I will start with *Black Feminist Literary Criticism: Past and Present*. The book is a collection of six essays that map Black feminist literary theory and critique. The essays that interest me in particular are Cheryl A. Wall’s “The Writer as Critic in the Emergence of Black Feminism” and Nagueyalti Warren’s “*Home Girls and Sister Outsider: The Roots of Black Feminist Literary Criticism.*” These two pieces map the history and definition of Black feminism as emphasizing the intersections of identity factors that are often overlooked in mainstream feminism and conventional identity politics. Their oppressions like sexism, racism, and classism are not sequential; rather, they occur simultaneously and continuously, and are overlapping. In “The Writer as Critic,” Wall writes:

The theory and praxis of black feminist criticism is premised on the intersectionality of

race, gender, and class as factors in black women's experience. It answers another question that was commonly posed in the 1970's: are you black first or a woman first? Most black women could not answer this question, because their racial and gendered identities were inextricably bound together. They were always both... These oppressions did not occur sequentially; they were continuous and overlapping (18).

In essence, she says that black women are never just black or just women, rather they are always both at once and attempting to choose just one or the other is impossible. Lorde says something similar about feeling pressured to choose one aspect of her identity in her essay "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" from *Sister Outsider*. Lorde writes: "I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live" (120). This is a key concept from intersectional feminism, which is that ignoring certain aspects of identity in favor of others is a mistake that only hurts us and makes our differences suspect. For Audre Lorde, the only healthy and truthful way to live is by claiming and integrating her multiple intersecting subjectivities. She believed that the personal and political were always connected and impossible to separate, and her insistence upon the integration of multiple layers of subjectivities gave her the voice and power to deftly navigate the world as a marginalized person. In "The Writer as Critic," Wall writes of Lorde: "Implicit in her analysis was the belief that individuals who were able to live out their full and complex identities strengthened the collective" (24). This illustrates that Lorde believed feminism is stronger and more effective when difference is recognized and celebrated, and when people advocate for the rights of all other people, not just themselves.

In Nagueyalti Warren's piece "*Home Girl and Sister Outsider: The Roots of Black Feminist Literary Criticism*," she traces American black feminism from its beginnings, which she says most likely began during the period of slavery and has evolved continuously over the years since then. She writes that Black women have always been aware of the racism of mainstream (white) feminism: "African American women had no problem identifying as feminist, working for women's rights *and* for the freedom and justice of black people. Nor were they unaware of the racism that existed in the white feminist movement" (30). Here Warren is referring to black women feminists of the 19th century, the abolitionist, suffragists, anti-lynching crusaders, temperance supporters and advocates for gender and sexual equality: a history that was largely erased and not at all commonly known in the 1960's with second-wave black feminism. Current Black feminist criticism, Warren says, emerged within the context of second-wave feminism, "which developed in the waning days of the Civil Rights Movement and within the context of the burgeoning Black Power Movement" (31). Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Black Arts Movement is the exact context within which Lorde conducted much of her life's work. So it's not surprising considering the exclusionary methods of the white feminist movement even in the 1960's, that Black women (and other women of color) like Lorde had the need for a separate kind of feminism that actually addressed their oppressions. Hence, Black feminism and its emphasis on intersectionality is what is most relevant to Lorde and her writing.

Going further into Audre Lorde's own thinking on feminism, I will look at two of her essays "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" and "Age, Sex, Race, and Class: Women Redefining Difference" from *Sister Outsider*. These are not the only works of Lorde's that I will examine other than *Zami*; later in this project, I will also discuss a third essay from Lorde entitled "Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power", also from *Sister Outsider*. In "The

Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House", Lorde starts by saying that any discussion of feminist theory that ignores differences between women and lacks significant input from poor women, Black and Third World Women, and lesbians is weakened by this absence.

(110) The essay can definitely be read as calling out white feminists for not seeking out knowledge about women of color because white women benefit from the oppression of non-white women, and it is not the job of the oppressed to educate the oppressor. Lorde writes:

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... *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the masters' house as their only source of support (112).

She makes it clear that until we can embrace our differences, from which that "raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged," and stand up for those who are different from us then feminism will never benefit everyone or those who need it most because not all marginalized people have the power or luxury of a voice the way Lorde and other scholars/academics do. This intersectional Black feminist, and now queer, notion of living with and through difference crops up repeatedly in Lorde's creative and scholarly literary endeavors.

In "Age, Sex, Race, and Class: Women Redefining Difference", Lorde discusses the various categories of difference that separate us as human beings, and the ways in which the fear and revulsion of difference that we all have internalized affects white and black people differently. She argues for human difference as a source of strength, and that only by acknowledging these differences between us can we begin to address the different problems and

issues facing women. In this essay, Lorde states a simple truth: “Refusing to recognize difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women.” (118) She goes on to write on the personal importance she places on living with difference and intersectionality in her own life:

My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all of my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition (121).

There is a sense of empowerment that comes from claiming her own identities or selves for Audre Lorde that is very resonant of the way she speaks of the erotic; it’s an instinct and a necessity to integrate all her different selves on top of being a deliberate choice that she makes.

The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recrimination, lamentation, and suspicion. For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures (123).

I see a resonance between this quote from “Women Redefining Difference” and “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”, and it I think can certainly extend from practices in real life to the way that we create art. The concept of having to devise new tools to address and fix existing structures of oppression extends to the work Lorde does in *Zami*, where she does unusual and innovative work with the text in order to build a unique mythos and set the work apart from conventionally structured/written books that more often than not tend to come from white Euro-American people, mainly men. In similar spirit to the idea that the “master’s

tools will never dismantle the master's house," perhaps the restrictive dominant ideas of what form writing should take and what a narrative should look like will never be enough to tell every person's story without some kind of experimentation or deviation from the expected.

Queer theory, ideas about queer writing, and in fact the history of the term "queer" itself, are absolutely fraught with what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes in *Tendencies* as "so many social and personal histories of exclusion, violence, defiance, excitement" (9). It is quite difficult to pin down and define "queer" as one thing, other than that it can be defined as something fluid, constantly in movement, impossible to reduce to a list of prescribed traits. It's incredibly important also to keep my work in a historical context, acknowledging that I am extending a contemporary lens to a writer of the past, and that use of the term "queer" has sometimes served to erase the identities of historical lesbians and women-loving-women. But I also want to eschew that fear of erasure in favor of embracing the exciting possibilities for an intersectional approach to identity in Sedgwick's more expansive definition of queer, which says that queer theory "spins the term [queer] outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses." (Sedgwick 9) By incorporating the lens of Black feminism and intersectionality which Lorde was a passionate advocate for in her life and shone through in her writing alongside this expansive conception of "queer," I hope to ground my analysis in its historical context without over-imposing present values and norms on this historical work while at the same time making valuable connections between the work and contemporary ideas.

Mythologizing Race, Gender, and Sexuality in *Zami*

The untitled pages of the book that come directly before the prologue are both highly poetic and deeply mythic, making use of italics and assigning importance to women right off the bat as an answer to the following question:

To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from under the bruised skin's blister? ... Images of women flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey, stand like dykes between me and the chaos. It is the images of women, kind and cruel, that lead me home (3).

Audre's mother is one of these women, these "torches" and "dykes". There is also Audre's childhood friend Gennie, many of her lovers from Ginger to Eudora to Muriel and more, as well as her lover Afrekete, a woman who reminded Audre distinctly of her own mother and with whom Audre had an incredibly brief yet very important relationship that remains imprinted on her mind and soul "with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo." (253) This passage uses poetry as a technique to express the importance of women in her life. The use of language like "my journey" and "the chaos" serve to invoke a mythic aspect, elevating the content beyond pure biography or memoir. The italics also function to elevate this narrative to a mythic status, utilizing a more literary tone to emphasize the importance of this question: "*To whom do I owe the power behind my voice?*" (3) The poetic technique here changes the nature of the text, making it read much differently than it would if Lorde had simply written in plain narrative that the women in her life have been key to the navigation of her own identity. Instead, there are small poetic pieces alluding to that truth like this one, and later on in the book there are dedicated portraits and memories of these important women in Audre's life.

Much like the pages preceding it, the prologue of Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* is also very poetic, reading almost like a prose poem. The passage partially written in italics for emphasis, to show it is set apart from the rest of the text in style and form, as well as setting up some of the ideas about identity which the novel is predicated on. This section reads as very queer to me personally as a young queer person myself:

I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me- to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does hills and peaks. I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered- to leave and be left- to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving (7).

Here, Lorde explicitly expresses her desire to “be both man and woman,” to not have to adhere to the constraints of gender norms, which dictate the both ways in which we are supposed to desire or love and who is supposed to be the subject of that affection. In the above quote, Lorde is rejecting both heteronormative relationship expectations as well as cisnormative gender roles in this fashion. In Cheryl Kader's “The Very House of Difference: *Zami*, Audre Lorde's Lesbian-Centered Text”, Kader explores the concepts of shifting identities related to shifting concepts of “home” in *Zami*. She writes:

While Lorde's writing attends to the complex intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, as the prologue to the text makes apparent, it also testifies to the “naturalness” of lesbianism as the ground of writing, thinking, and acting... [in *Zami*], the lesbian body figures neither as an essential or fixed identity nor as the site for a unified conception of community or home, but rather, as a paradigm for a new kind of writing (181).

This argument about a paradigm for a new kind of writing sounds familiar to me, echoing Cixous's thoughts from *The Laugh of the Medusa* on feminine writing, and contemporary thought on queer writing. Here I want to tie the idea of the "naturalness" of lesbianism to the language of "always" in the previous quote from Lorde about gender – "*I have always wanted to be both man and woman...*" – the word "always" in this quote invoking a sense of encompassing Audre's past, present, and future all together, implying that this desire of Audre's is a kind of instinctual and natural feeling. In "The Very House of Difference", Kader writes that "the problem of gender and the concept of identity politics not only inform the unfolding of Lorde's narrative but are inscribed in writing itself, invoking the possibility of a new discursive and historical subject" (183). In this fashion, through passages like that in the prologue, Lorde builds on this idea of being unable to conform to conventions of sexuality and gender as something that is natural and good, even a spiritual experience for her. Audre herself speaks multiple times to the naturalness of her love for women and the idea of women loving women, most notably with Afrekete towards the end of the novel. They speak of their love for women with a kind of gratitude and reverence that is remarkable: "We talked sometimes about what it meant to love women, and what a relief it was in the eye of the storm, no matter how often we had to bite our tongues and stay silent" (250). Although this aspect of her identity that she is a lesbian is a site of conflict and contention, it also becomes a site of liberation and happiness for her. This is the mythos that she builds surrounding her experiences of her gender and sexuality, both of which are overlapping and continuous with her experiences of her race.

"We never ever talked about what it meant and felt like to be Black and white, and the effects that had on our being friends. Of course, everybody with any sense deplored racial discrimination, theoretically and without discussion. We could conquer it by ignoring it" (81).

This was her attitude throughout high school as one of the only Black women in a primarily white school, and this followed her after she left school sadly. It seems that she only has learned the importance of acknowledging difference in the introspection of her adult life looking back on her memories, because she had to unlearn these pervasive attitudes of willful ignorance and silence. Later in the book, when Audre has returned to New York after living in Connecticut and Mexico, her outlook on the dynamic between white and black gay girls has evolved:

I was gay and Black. The latter fact was irrevocable: armor, mantle, and wall. Often, when I had the bad taste to bring that up in a conversation with other gay-girls who were not Black, I would get the feeling that I had in some way breached some sacred bond of gayness, a bond which I always knew was not sufficient for me (181).

So she always knew that her Blackness was a fact she would not be able to ignore when it came to making genuine connections, but the difference is that she is more strongly sure of that conviction as an adult than she was as a much more vulnerable teenager. For the most part, the white lesbians that Audre is friends with in the novel seem to feel that every lesbian is the same regardless of skin color. But for Audre, the fact that she is Black cannot be ignored because it dominates every aspect of her life before anyone would ever know that she was gay. The following quote seems to succinctly describe the strange dynamic of silence on the topic of race within the gay community: “We would all rather die than have to discuss the fact that I was Black, since, of course, gay people weren’t racists. After all, didn’t they know what it was like to be oppressed?” (180).

Women-Centered Relationships and the Erotic in *Zami*

Audre Lorde's definition of the erotic is nuanced, rooted deeply in the interconnected power derived from the physical, emotional, psychic, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of sexuality. In the essay *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, Lorde writes:

The very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects- born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives (55).

At its core, the erotic is a feminine source of power involving not just feeling deeply, but knowing the capacity and potential for fullness of feeling, for living true to one's instinctual desires. Lorde is vehement that the erotic cannot be equated to the pornographic; for pornography is emotionless sensation, while the erotic is all about our deepest, most primal emotions. The awakening of the erotic inside the individual allows one to feel true depth of feeling and sparks a desire to live according to personal needs, not simply external directives or conventions; it is the power to make your own change. Lorde writes:

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves (54).

According to Lorde in *Uses of the Erotic*, the erotic is not the pornographic, rather it is a different use of the sexual entirely: "Pornography is the direct opposite of the power of the

erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling” (Lorde 54). So the erotic is not about physical sensation, rather it is about the power of love, creative energy, beyond the superficial and into a very abstract idea of a deeper, instinctual kind of knowledge that taps into creative power, passions, and collective strength. There is something distinctly feminine to Lorde’s conception of the erotic. For Lorde, the erotic refers to an instinctual feminine kind of knowledge that informs desire, and if you let it guide your life and seep into every aspect, then you will have a fuller life that is more satisfying.

It is through her erotic relationships with women that the character Audre develops her ultimate political and poetic consciousness in *Zami*, embracing aspects of her identity that have been the subject of her oppression since her childhood. Towards the end of the book, as she is hitting the apex of her peak political and personal consciousness, Lorde writes: “It was a while before we came to realize our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference” (226). This is in reference to the ways in which she repeatedly attempts over the course of the novel to pretend that any of her white lesbian friends were “just the same” as her in terms of the way they are treated in society, ignoring the differences in terms of race because there was an attitude amongst their community that difference was divisive, an attitude that unfortunately remains an issue in the larger queer community today. But it is only over the course of many different relationships with a variety of women, all different in many ways despite being women who love women, that Audre finally realizes the strengths that arise in acknowledging differences between people and advocating for them all accordingly.

In “Age, Sex, Race, and Class: Women Redefining Difference,” Lorde talks about the practicality and accessibility of poetry as an art form as reason for being a major opportunity for marginalized groups like the poor, working class, and women of Color to have a voice:

Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper.

Over the last few years, writing a novel on tight finances, I came to appreciate the enormous differences in the material demands between poetry and prose. As we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women (116).

Perhaps poetry speaks to the erotic because it comes so easily or instinctually, provides a kind of self-satisfaction that can be deep as the erotic. Further, poetry has become a major voice of the poor, working class, and women of color as Lorde pointed out here. The use and integration of poetry and poetic technique in *Zami* helps to subvert dominant modes of conventional storytelling, which tend to reject poetry as abstract or obscure. Rather, poetry functions here as a densely packed emotional tool that is deployed to show changes and resonances in tone, of deep erotic feelings ranging from great sorrow to ecstatic euphoria. The pattern I have noticed is that in *Zami* Lorde tends to skew towards the poetic, especially when she is being very internal and personal or interacting with a close relationship like her mother or her lovers, but the text tends to be more narrative and factual in scenes of her life involving other people who aren't as key to her life. The effect is a sense of urgency, intense emotionality, and a sense of this deep kind of knowledge that invokes the erotic.

Audre's Mother, Linda

In the beginning of the text *Zami*, the narrative seems to be dedicated largely to the mythologizing of Audre's mother. Lorde spends many lengthy passages painting images of her

mother, Linda, and moments from their relationship that had lasting effects. Audre's mother Linda is a powerful, iron-willed woman that Lorde describes as "shy, but with a very imposing, non-nonsense exterior. Full-bosomed, proud, and of no mean size, she would launch herself down the street like a ship under full sail, usually pulling me stumbling behind her" (17). Linda is, without a doubt, the strongest influence and presence in Audre's earliest memories of her life. As the youngest child with two siblings both close to each other in age and much older than Audre, Audre often found herself being towed around by her mother whenever she had to leave the house on errands or any other reason. Due to this near constant contact, Audre has a special relationship and tension with her mother that doesn't seem to be matched in any of her other familial relationships. Through the text, it becomes evident that Audre has a great deal of reverence for her mother as a child.

Often throughout the text, Linda is positioned as being somehow different from "other" women: "As a child, I always knew my mother was different from the other women I knew, Black or white. I used to think it was because she was my mother. But different how? ... I never knew" (15). The primary differences seem to be that her mother, at least in Audre's eyes, has a great deal of authority and perhaps masculine power than the typical expectation of "woman". She even notices the differences between the way her father would treat women and the way he would treat her mother, saying "he certainly responded to my mother in a different fashion... They spoke all through my childhood with one unfragmentable and unappealable voice" (15). For Audre her parents' status as equals in the home meant her mother must have been other than woman, for she was so different and was treated differently from all the other women as far as Audre could see. Thinking of her mother as other than woman speaks to young Audre's internalized notions from the external culture that women aren't strong, a taught misconception

which she spends her entire life in the text seemingly unlearning. But everything that Audre saw pointed to her mother being somehow different from other women; rather than being passive and gentle as women and mothers are expected to be, Audre's mother is large and strong and physically imposing as well as being on an even playing field (at least to Audre) with her father.

There are also lots of small comments that happen frequently throughout the narration, like: "My mother never forgot and rarely forgave" (21). This quote in particular helps to construct the mythos of Audre's mother as an exceptionally strong-willed woman with unwavering convictions. At one point, Audre even talks about how the butcher would defer to her mother when a total stranger would ask her opinion on the quality of a certain cut of meat at the public meat market (17). So there are many instances in her childhood that make Audre think her mother is much more powerful and in control of far more than she truly is, helping to elevate Linda to a mythic status in Audre's story. Her mother came to embody her own definition of what a powerful woman looks and acts like.

Thanks to the powerful influence of Audre's mother in her life, there is a sense in the text that "home" is a foreign place to Audre during her childhood:

Once *home* was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother's mouth... [Harlem was] Made bearable because it was not all. This now, here, was a space, some temporary abode, never to be considered forever nor totally binding nor defining, no matter how much it commanded energy and attention (13).

So although Audre grew up in Harlem, it was never really home to her because the influence of her mother and that heritage was so strong and present in her life that they always thought of the islands as home. This sense of "home" as a distant land is largely because Audre's mother instilled all of her own memories that home in Audre as she grew up: "Little secret sparks of [the

dream to go home] were kept alive for years by my mother's search for tropical fruits "under the bridge," and her burning of kerosene lamps, by her treadle-machine and her fried bananas and her love of fish and the sea" (10). Not only did her mother keep the dream of her old life alive by bringing parts of that into their physical home in the form of foods and technologies native to her island home, but she would also tell the children "wonderful stories about Noel's Hill in Grenville, Grenada, which overlooked the Caribbean. She told us stories about Carriacou, where she had been born, amid the heavy smell of limes..." (13). So there were many ways in which Audre was taught not to think of their apartment in Harlem as "home", because until she was a teenager and World War II brought everything crashing down, the dream of returning to Grenada had seemed very real and close for their family.

Another important facet of Audre's relationship with her mother is the many ways in which Linda actively attempts to shelter her children from the harsher aspects of reality, with varying levels of success. For instance, there is a story that Audre tells remembering how white people would spit on her as a child and her mother would make it out to seem like an accident, simply wiping her coat clean and continuing on their way:

It was not until years later once in a conversation I said to her: "Have you noticed people don't spit into the wind the way they used to?" And the look on my mother's face told me that I had blundered into one of those secret places of pain that must never be spoken of again. But it was so typical of my mother when I was young that if she couldn't stop white people from spitting on her children because they were Black, she would insist it was something else. It was so often her approach to the world; to change reality. If you couldn't change reality, change your perceptions of it (18).

This passage easily conveys a complex story from Lorde's childhood about how her mother used to attempt to shelter her children from the racist abuse of white people. She was so successful in doing so that Audre didn't realize until much later in her adult life, when she brought it up in a conversation with her mother and recognized her silence and the pain on her face for the truth. The passage elevates Audre's mother, Linda, to a mythic status by asserting that in this fashion she would "change reality." She was trying to change her children's perception of reality because she could do nothing to actually change it. This says a lot about the power of Audre's mother's influence over Audre's outlook and perceptions of the world and people around her.

Audre and her mother share many tender scenes of affection throughout the book. In comparison, there is really only one scene in the whole book where Audre is able to bond with her father alone. Although she cherished that time, it was certainly not as intense nor as formative for Audre as the extensive time she spent with her mother. Audre's mother is a strict disciplinarian, and often reacts to Audre's issues growing up with (at least what Audre interprets as) anger or reproach rather than sympathy. For example, Linda attempts to comfort Audre after Gennie dies of her second suicide attempt, but it backfires when she doesn't really sympathize but seems to place the blame on Audre for associating with the wrong kind of people. Lorde writes:

The merciless quality of my mother's fumbling insights turned her attempt at comfort into another assault. As if her harshness could confer invulnerability upon me. As if in the flames of truth as she saw it, I could eventually be forged into some pain-resistant replica of herself (101).

This was a really painful moment in the text where Audre is really at odds with her mother, now almost a foreign entity to her in comparison with their closeness during Audre's childhood at the

beginning of the text. All Audre wants is comfort, but what she hears is “I told you so.” This difficult moment illustrates an alternate, dysfunctional dimension of the dynamic between Audre and Linda that complicates their relationship and knocks down Linda from the status of perfection, humanizing her as a flawed mother and adding to the complexity of that mythos built in the text. But in addition to this dynamic of tough love in the above quote, there are also moments of great softness and erotic knowledge that happen, formative instances which are key to Audre’s notion of what it means to be a woman and loving a woman from that positionality.

Perhaps the most important of these scenes of mother-daughter affection that inform Audre’s erotic knowledge is a soft mother-daughter scene between young Audre and her mother on a rare Saturday morning of her childhood:

I wake in the cot in their bedroom, knowing only it is one of those lucky days when [Mother] is still in bed, and alone. My father is in the kitchen... The click of her wedding ring against the wooden headboard. She is awake. I get up and go over and crawl into my mother’s bed. Her smile. Her glycerine-flannel smell. The warmth... A hot water bottle wrapped in body-temperature flannel, which she used to quite her gallbladder pains during the night. Her large soft breasts beneath the buttoned flannel of her nightgown. Below, the rounded swell of her stomach, silent and inviting touch... I frolic with the liquid-filled water bottle, patting and rubbing its firm giving softness. I shake it slowly, rocking it back and forth, lost in sudden tenderness, at the same time gently rubbing against my mother’s quiet body... Her arm comes down across me, holding me to her for a moment, then quiets my frisking. “All right, now.” (33-34).

This scene, which I have included only small pieces from due to its length, is very languid in tone and is very reminiscent of a baby in the womb with the imagery of child Audre playing with

the hot water bottle near her mother's stomach. It's very poetic, written largely in fragments of observations about sounds, smell, and touch sensations. It is a pure celebration of the sensations during a cherished rare moment of physical affection and closeness between Audre and her mother. There's also an aspect of curiosity on Audre's part about her mother's body, wanting to be close to her and trying to push boundaries the way young children tend to do when they are trying to understand gender and sexuality. The inclusion of this affectionate scene between mother and daughter shows its importance in Audre's life and to her personality, and it's clear that the comfort she got from her mother becomes associated with the comfort she gets from her physical relationships with other large women in her life, particularly Ginger and Afrekete. This scene is formative for Audre, setting the ground for the way she navigates intimacy later in the text. It's no coincidence that it is written so differently from much of the rest of the narration, and I believe that the use of poetic technique and deviation from a conventional story-telling tone functions here to highlight the emotional importance of the scene and fuse the idea of myth with biographical memory.

Another powerful instance of the erotic involving Audre's mother occurs after Audre gets her period for the first time ever, and she describes this memory from that day of the last time she made souse with her mother's mortar and pestle. She describes the motion of the pounding of the garlic and other spices with repetition and reverence:

The *thud push rub rotate up* repeated over and over. The muted thump of the pestle on the bed of grinding spice as the salt and pepper absorbed the slowly yielding juices of the garlic and celery leaves. *Thud push rub rotate up*. The mingling fragrances rising from the bowl of the mortar. *Thud push rub rotate up*. The feeling of the pestle held between my curving fingers, and the mortar's outside rounding like fruit into my palm as I

steadied it against my body (74).

This quote uses the repetition of the motions of the pestle with the “thud push rub rotate up” to emphasize the work of the spice grinding that Audre would do in order to convince her mother to make one of her favorite meals. It’s very reverent of the mortar and pestle as an object, ascribing importance to it by association with her mother and the food of their culture. This description was probably simulated from many memories of making this one dish, but it morphs into a specific memory of Audre’s first period at a certain point. She is too afraid to just tell her mother about her period, so she leaves a blood stain on the toilet seat for her to find and her mother reacts by telling her to go get herself some Kotex, but she also lets Audre choose her favorite meal of souse for dinner on the condition that she pounds the spice while Linda goes out to buy tea. Lorde writes:

When I came back into the kitchen, my mother had left. I moved toward the kitchen cabinet to fetch down the mortar and pestle. My body felt new and special and unfamiliar and suspect all at the same time. I could feel bands of tension sweeping across my body back and forth, like lunar winds across the moon’s face. I felt the slight rubbing bulge of the cotton pad between my legs, and I smelled the delicate breadfruit smell rising up from the front of my print blouse that was my own womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious (77).

During this scene, the souse pounding becomes utterly tied to the onset of menstruation in Audre’s life and it awakens something deep and spiritual and erotic within Audre. She has become explicitly aware of her own body and sexuality and womanhood in a way that she never has been before, and it makes her feel completely new and different. She continues to have an

ecstatic and erotic experience while her mother is briefly away at the store, feeling a deep connection between the pain of fertility in her own body and the pounding of the spices:

As I continued to pound the spice, a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach... The jarring shocks of the velvet-lined pestle, striking the bed of spice, traveled up an invisible pathway along the thread to the center of me, and the harshness of the repeated impacts became increasingly more unbearable. The tidal basin suspended between my hips shuddered at each repetition of the strokes which now felt like assaults. Without my volition my downward thrusts of the pestle grew gentler and gentler, until its velvety surface seemed almost to caress the liquefying mash at the bottom of the mortar (78-79).

This poetic scene evokes a very personal and spiritual erotic awakening in Audre relating to menstruation, linking the pain in her body with the action of pounding spices for a dish that is very close to her heart because she would prepare it with her beloved mother. Lorde refers to her womb as “the tidal basin suspended between my hips,” using incredibly loaded nature imagery to convey the simple biological process of menstruation, making this onset of womanhood seem really beautiful and important. While Audre’s mother is not physically present during this scene of the pounding, she returns as Audre is standing there mindlessly rubbing the mortar and pestle and, seeing that Audre is not all right, decides to finish the meal for her. Audre cherishes the affection given by her mother in this instance of vulnerability, and the connection between her period and the memory of this particular food which she associated so heavily with her mother will be ingrained within Audre forever.

In the article “Audre Lorde’s *Zami*, Erotic Embodied Memory, and the Affirmation of Difference,” Anh Hua talks about how Lorde conceptualizes narratives of her own memories, from erotic memories to childhood memories to her memories of trauma, arguing that “narratives of remembrance, specifically the erotic embodied memories, become an important place for Lorde to narrate self-invention and subjectivity and to rewrite personal and cultural histories” (114). Hua posits that Lorde writes her own subjectivity and history through the embodied erotic memories of women in her life, including her mother. I take it a step further and argue that Lorde does this work in particular with her mother and the narratives of remembrance of their heritage passed down to Audre from Linda. The closing lines of the book are particularly revealing as far as the importance of Audre’s mother influence in her life as a lesbian and a women-oriented woman: “Once *home* was a long way off, a place I had only ever known out of my mother’s mouth. I only discovered its latitudes when Carriacou was no longer my home. There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother’s blood” (256). Here, there are clear ties established between the cultural idea of the mythic land of Carriacou and love between women, which has traditionally existed there. This brings together the identity category of race with the category of gender and sexuality, again illustrating the realities of intersectionality as they manifest in Audre’s life, particularly here in the history of her and her mother’s heritage of women living together in harmony. This is referenced multiple times throughout the text, seen again in this italicized excerpt: “*How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty*” (14). So not only is there this strong association between the motherly affection that Audre rarely received and cherished as a child and the way that Audre understands love later in her life, but there is also this idea that love between women is something ingrained in their culture. This is doubly important because it comes back at the end

of the book with Audre's lover Afrekete. This is interesting in terms of both the queerness of the text and the focus on women loving women, as well as how these really spiritual and important poetic bits sandwich the rest of the text, which is written in a more straight-forward narrative style. Lorde deliberately and carefully, although subtly, deviates into that dreamy, poetic, personal tone that seems to come from a deep creative well within her only at times of great emotion, instability, and flux in her life.

Gennie

Audre didn't really have a woman companion outside of her mother until she was a teenager, and she met her friend Gennie, a Black girl whom Audre attended high school with in Harlem. Lorde writes: "Gennie was the first person in my life that I was ever conscious of loving. She was my first true friend" (87). This vulnerable statement is very open and honest and blunt, something that Lorde doesn't often do in the narrative unless she is saying something very important or serious to her. It is notable that Gennie is the first non-white person that Audre is able to get close to outside of her own family, the first fellow Black girl that she is able to connect with in the book. Gennie, unlike Audre's high school friend group The Branded and her other white friends, was able to relate to Audre on a level that none of those girls could because she too understood what it was like to be oppressed and treated in certain ways because of the color of her skin. Further, she is Audre's first kiss and first of many things; in a way, Gennie is responsible for aiding Audre in loosening up and distancing herself from her mother in her adolescence. For these reasons, it's clear that her friendship with Gennie and the impact of this girl on Audre's life is of the utmost importance. Quickly, however, it becomes apparent that

Gennie's story is going to be a tragic one; she talks of committing suicide as if it is an inevitability, but at the same time she seems to act as though Audre has nothing to worry about:

“Genevieve was fifteen when she first met her father. She was two months short of sixteen when she died... [It was around that time] Gennie began telling me, and anybody else who would listen, that she was going to kill herself at the end of the summer. I both did and didn't believe her. She wasn't pushy about it” (91).

Gennie does try to kill herself for the first time by slitting her wrists, but her grandmother found her before anything serious could happen. She complains to Audre that she is annoyed with herself for “botching the job” (92). Sadly, Gennie tries it again with rat poison soon after the first incident, and this time she succeeds. When Gennie dies of suicide, we see the first biggest changes in the form of book, switching from narrative style to poetry of considerable length multiple times. Up until now, changes in the narration as far as integration of poetic technique have been relatively subtle, limited to a few lines of italics or poetry or lyrics, so it is notable that these are actually full poems. The first poem appears on the page right before Audre receives a call from Gennie's mother Louisa that her daughter had been found dying from rat poison, and that she wasn't going to survive. It starts as follows:

We did not weep for the thing that was once a child
did not weep for the thing that had been a child
did not weep for the thing that had been
nor for the deep dark silences
that ate of the so-young flesh... (97).

Poems like this and subtler references to or about the tragedy of Gennie's suicide and Audre's unresolved emotions come up more in the book, like again as Audre is having the most difficult

time of her life, struggling to find work and recovering emotionally and physically from her abortion. (118, 124). The use of the phrase “we did not weep” in this poem is striking to me because of course Audre did in fact cry over Gennie a few times in the text. I think this is an intentional reference to the fact that she was never really able to resolve her immense sadness and guilt over the untimely death of her childhood friend, which also comes up again throughout the novel as the loss was a formative part of Lorde’s adolescence.

There is another poem, this time a prose poem, soon after Gennie’s death in which Lorde details her funeral through sensory imagery of the sounds and sights at a burial:

The sound of dirt clods flying hollow against the white coffin. The sound of birds who knew death as no reason for silence. A black-clad man mouthing words in a foreign tongue. No hallowed ground for suicides. The sound of weeping women. The wind. The forward edge of spring. The sound of grass growing, flowers beginning to blossom, the branching of a far-off tree. Clods against the white coffin (103).

This poem is italicized, possibly to emphasize a kind of detachment from the memory, and it’s very prosaic as well as stream-of-consciousness-esque. The details are very clinical and matter of fact, emphasizing the sound of the “clods of dirt” against the coffin. There is also an emphasis on the juxtaposition between the tarnishing color of the dirt against the white coffin, making an apt metaphor out of Gennie’s untimely death. The use of poetry here emphasizes the sorrow and grief that Audre is feeling, allowing the writer to distance herself from the work through the economical form of poetry without diminishing the emotional impact for the reader.

There is another heart-wrenching poem included sandwiched between narrative when Audre is in Stamford, Connecticut. She is living alone, struggling to find work, and basically

living in her grief, seeing and talking to absolutely no living person. She seems to be writing to Gennie directly in the following lines of frank poetry:

And you did not come back to April
Though spring was a powerful lure
But bided your time in silence
Knowing the dead must endure.
And you came not again to summer
Nor till the green oaks were leaving
Traces of blood in the autumn
And there were hours for grieving (124).

These words make it clear that Audre is in despair over the loss of Gennie, dedicating her time to sitting with her grief, for “hours” as she puts it. This poem is shorter than the previous two, but somehow it’s just as packed with emotion, perhaps because there are so few words with which to express her grief so each one carries that much more weight.

It’s certainly true that Audre blamed herself a lot for the loss of Gennie’s life; later in the text, she writes: “I lost my sister, Gennie, to my silence and her pain and despair, to both our angers and to a world’s cruelty that destroys its own young in passing” (251). This reflection, coming from an adult Audre, shows a level of maturity that wasn’t present at the time of Gennie’s death because she is now able to balance her own guilt with the reality that it is not really her fault that her friend died. She is eventually able to reconcile her own guilt with the cruelty of the world because that is something which she knows is beyond her control. However, Audre definitely blames herself for Gennie’s death. This is partially because she did nothing really to take her seriously even though Gennie had openly told her of her intentions to commit

suicide, but mainly because Gennie came to her the night before she was found poisoned asking if she could stay because her father had been abusing her. Audre said no and told her to go to another friend's house, too afraid of what her parents would think and how they might punish her for this, even though she felt in her gut something was wrong. Audre never really forgave herself for it. So Gennie's death is a monumental emotional event in the text for Audre, which is illustrated through the use of the multiple full length poems breaking up the narrative that I have mentioned, since poetry is used at times of heightened emotional resonance, both positive and negative. This distinctive change in style of the writing from regular narration to poetry marks a time of great turbulence for Audre. Somehow, the more abstract and economic form of poetry is able to convey the most emotion here and that is why the deployment is important and useful. It seems that one of the key literary functions of Gennie's death is to make changes in the form and style of the novel, allowing Lorde to make more frequent forays into the form of poetry due to her heightened emotion and sorrow at this time.

Afrekete

Much of the text, like with the other women that Lorde writes about in *Zami*, is dedicated to details that Audre loved about Afrekete: "Kitty smelled of soap and Jean Naté, and I kept thinking she was bigger than she actually was, because there was a comfortable smell about her that I always associated with large women" (243). This is an example of the lovingly detailed descriptions of Afrekete, or Kitty as she calls herself, that the text is full of once Audre meets her. There is an attraction that Audre feels for Kitty that harkens to the erotic and leads to further departure from traditional narrative style in favor of poetic technique on 248-251.

In the article “Writing Power: Identity Complexities and the Exotic Erotic in Audre Lorde’s Writing” by scholar Yakini B. Kemp, the focus is how *Zami* casts Audre as a Caribbean descendant growing up in a diasporic family in 1930’s Harlem and how “constructions of identity with regard to her use of the erotic, especially in formulations of Caribbean identity and lesbian identity... while remaining a site of conflict and contradiction, actually function as a liberating force” (23). This comes up with both Audre’s mother Linda and her lover Afrekete, but especially Afrekete in terms of being a liberating force. Afrekete is one of the most important of Audre’s lovers, bringing the text full circle by connecting back so strongly to Audre’s mother. She is an unapologetic Black woman, in contrast with the majority of Audre’s past lovers who have been white. Not only is she Black but she is also Caribbean; Audre’s mother and Afrekete have in common the passion for things from home, getting traditional fruits and other delicacies “from under the bridge” (10). This phrase is initially used in reference to Audre’s mother’s quest for items from her homeland, but it comes up again when Audre is dating Afrekete and they spend time together:

And I remember Afrekete, who came out of a dream to me always being hard and real as the fire hairs along the under-edge of my navel. She brought my live things from the bush, and from her farm set out in cocoyams and cassava – those magical fruit which Kitty bought in the West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue in the 140s... “I got this under the bridge” was a saying from time immemorial, giving an adequate explanation that whatever it was had come from as far back and as close to home – that is to say, was as authentic – as was possible (249).

This idea of delicacies from “under the bridge” is something that was a big part of the mythos of Audre’s mother growing up; she often took Audre marketing, and she often brought home

wonderful things for her from their culture that Audre didn't experience for so long in her life until she was with Afrekete, and this thread back to her childhood and her mother probably helped to cement Afrekete in Audre's life and memory. It continues further, fluidly switching back to italics again without even a paragraph break. In this passage, there becomes a distinct link between the erotic and lesbian sexuality and the fruits of Audre's culture:

There were ripe red finger bananas, stubbly and sweet, with which I parted your lips gently, to insert the peeled fruit into your grape-purple flower. I held you, lay between your brown legs, slowly playing my tongue through your familiar forests... slowly mashed ripe banana into a beige cream that mixed with the juices of your electric flesh
(249).

This is explicitly erotic and sexual, associating these fruits of the ripe red and beige bananas with the act of sex with her lover. It's also another one of Lorde's favored poetic departures from the conventional narrative form. The poetry here is highly charged in terms of emotion and physicality, very imagistic with the use of fruit and flower language, and serves to communicate the emotional weight of Audre and Afrekete's bonding over this cultural food experience. She uses a similar technique with the fruit imagery on 251, swapping the image of the ripe banana for a ripe avocado.

In one of the final scenes of the novel and the last scene between Audre and Afrekete, the two make love on the roof of Afrekete's apartment building in Harlem. It switches from traditional narration to the italicized poetry that Lorde favors as the memory begins to fade:

I remember the full moon like white pupils in the center of your wide irises. The moons went out, and your eyes grew dark as you rolled over me, and I felt the moon's silver light mix with the wet of your tongue on my eyelids. Afrekete Afrekete ride me to the

crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman's power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters, that the discarded evils, abandoned at all crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys (252).

This passage alludes to the brevity of Audre and Kitty's relationship with imagery of the moon, which obviously has phases and often comes and goes. This functions as a metaphor for Afrekete herself and possibly even love as a concept for Audre, showing that this love of their bodies touching has stayed with her and helped her to discard of evils. The language is so poetic and mythic, doing more work with the interpretation of the reader again than plain narration could do. After this episode on the roof, Audre never sees Afrekete again. She goes to the bar where Kitty performs to ask after her only to find out that she's gone back to Atlanta to be with her daughter. The clinical matter-of-factness of this short paragraph where Audre looks for Afrekete stands in contrast with the poetic and mythic qualities of those that have come around and through it, like those above. Lorde writes:

We had come together like elements erupting into an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge, brief and drenching. Then we parted, passed, reformed, reshaping ourselves the better for the exchange. I never saw Afrekete again, but her print remains upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo (253).

She describes their intense relationship in terms of elements, energy, and charge, invoking powerful metaphors of electricity and earthly forces. Audre's relationship with Afrekete leads to a culmination of women centered relationships and the erotic in Audre's life in the novel, harkening back to Audre's mother although she is not outright mentioned at this point in the narrative. There is stark emotional contrast between the incredibly rich descriptions of Audre's time spent with Afrekete as lovers and the rather matter of fact way that Audre learns Afrekete

has left, reading it in a note from a bartender where Afrekete was a singer. Despite this abrupt ending Audre ends on a beautiful note, reasserting the importance of Afrekete's love in her life by saying that they reshaped themselves for the better and that "her print remains upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo" (253). Audre learned how to fully love another woman with Afrekete, and she was able to derive a fulfillment from their connection that elevates Kitty to a mythic status as the love of Audre's life at the culmination of this novel.

Conclusions

In the end, I decided to focus on Audre's mother, Gennie, and Afrekete because I felt these were the women who were most key to the formation of Audre's personality and beliefs as a women-oriented woman advocating for the celebration of differences between individuals as the only way to achieve self-fulfillment. When I started this project last fall, my original intention was to write about all of the different relationships with women presented in *Zami*. However, I quickly began to realize that certain relationships were far more important than others in terms of the mythic nature of the book. The women characters that I examine in this project all function as specific mythical archetypes; Linda is the mother, Gennie is the friend, and Afrekete is the lover. Of course, Audre has numerous other lovers besides Afrekete over the course of the novel. But it's the connections throughout the text between these three women in Audre's life that are particularly important.

The mother, Linda, is particularly important to Audre's journey because their relationship sets up the foundation for how Audre allows herself to love and be loved by women later in the text. The friend, Gennie, is vital to Audre's journey in the text because she was the first true human connection of Audre's outside of her family. The impact of the loss of Gennie is equally

important to the development of Audre's character, because the guilt Audre feels over not being able to, or not trying hard enough to prevent her death, in part motivates Audre in the future to become so outspoken about her beliefs. Finally, Afrekete, the lover, ties back to Audre's mother Linda. Afrekete, or Kitty, functions as a bridge between the Audre from the beginning of the novel who knows only her own mother's influence, and the very different Audre at the end of the novel whose previously beloved mother is practically an alien now. But there is much about Afrekete that reminds Audre of her mother and her historically women-oriented Grenadian ancestors. The character of Afrekete, as a lover, functions as a mode for the character of Audre to find a way to come back and appreciate her somewhat-estranged mother like she did as a child, and as a mode for the writer Audre Lorde to pay homage to the mother who influenced her life so greatly.

In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Audre Lorde builds a unique mythos about what it means to be a Black lesbian woman in her life and her time through a narrative that uses both conventional tools as well as making strategic deviations from those conventions into poetry and prose poetry to convey emotionality and to emphasize important events. Her identity as a Black lesbian woman is inextricably tied to the mythos of her mother and the mythos of sexuality, gender, and race that is built in the experimental novel. Throughout the text, I have deliberately stated that Lorde builds her own myth or "mythos" around her experience of life as a Black American lesbian woman as opposed to using the term "mythology." This is because I am not implying any connection between Audre Lorde's work in *Zami* and existing mythology, I am only referencing mythological archetypes. The function of myth in *Zami* and the overall hybrid technique of "biomythography" is for Audre Lorde to take her own life and memories and make that experience larger than life by immortalizing it in words that form a trans-genre work of

authorship far more complex than a simple, straightforward narrative. The mythos that Lorde builds in this text can certainly be read as queer, because it is one that pushes the boundaries of conventionally reductive modes of self-identity through a trans-genre writing style that subverts dominant modes of writing and storytelling. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's expansive definition of queer which I referenced earlier in this project, the work that Lorde does with emphasizing the intersectionality between gender, sexuality, and race in *Zami* is not only feminist but also queer. This is because queer is not just about sexuality and gender:

A lot of the most exciting recent work around “queer” spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses. (Sedgwick 9).

Based on this quote taken with the text from *Zami* that I have sampled and examined in this project, it is clear to me that Audre Lorde's *Zami* does the difficult work of meshing various “identity-constituting, identity fracturing discourses” that Sedgwick posits as some of the most exciting work in the realm of “queer.” Through this quote, it also becomes quite clear how the ideas of “queer” and “intersectionality” are deeply tied together in nature of the work that those terms center around. Further, I want to suggest that the use of poetry and prose in tandem in this text functions as an intersectional approach to writing and storytelling, because *Zami* insists upon deploying various literary techniques together, from the most straight-forward narrative to the most abstract and poetic of methods.

The nature of this rounded, trans-genre approach is decidedly queer as well as intersectional. The variations in the form and style of the writing in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* work alongside the content and events of the novel to construct a doubly strong mythos of

Audre's life story, which is ultimately about learning to live and thrive through and with difference, rather than in spite of it. Thus, this text successfully subverts the dominant, reductive Western modes of both storytelling and self-identity through its innovative, trans-genre approach to writing about the boldly personal, and also highly political, life experiences of a woman on a mission to redefine reductive ideas of self-identity and identity formation.

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