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Biomythographical Tradition and Resistant Subjectivities in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

Dissertation Abstract

In the struggle for voice and representation, marginalised black /lesbian women writers have often drawn on and reinvented the auto/biographical in their work in order to create new sites of multiple resistance as well as their own aesthetic and socio-political literary spaces. Audre Lorde's self-named 'biomythography' *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, first published in 1982, offers a complex narrative that undermines many preconceptions of biography and memoir as stable genres of rhetorical or objective 'truths'. In naming her text a biomythography, Lorde deliberately refutes canonical notions of a 'purity of form' and objectivity in order to instead reaffirm a radical tradition of black and / or lesbian feminist women's writing.

My key concern in this dissertation will be to investigate the approaches and significances of *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* in shaping literary representations of black/lesbian subjectivity and collective resistance. I will also explore a number of questions about genre, identity and political transformation that recur in *Zami* and that could be counted as evidence of a literary 'tradition' within a broader political and social context. Bringing together diverse theoretical arguments from a black feminist perspective, my study of Lorde's biomythography, essays and poetry demonstrates how in invoking both the personal and the political alongside inventive mythical symbolism, she creates biographical 'fictions' that perform as powerful narratives of transformation. In conclusion I will further examine how the legacy of Audre Lorde's only full-length work of prose, unapologetically positioned as it is within a black/lesbian feminist literary tradition, still has the power to challenge contemporary manifestations of intersectional oppression and the continued deletion of black/lesbian voices.

Biomythographical Tradition and
Resistant Subjectivities
in Audre Lorde's
Zami: A New Spelling of My Name

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2016

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“Books kept connecting with books, that’s what made them live....”

Samuel R. Delany

Introduction: Emerging Subjectivities and Traditions of Resistance

“Because there was a gap, *Zami* was written, and so *Zami* is not only an autobiography, but mythology, psychology, all the ways in which I think we can see our environment. And this is what I think good fiction does. And it is fiction. I attempt to create a piece of art, not merely a retelling of things that happened to me and to other women with whom I shared close ties. I define it as biomythography because I’ve found no other word to really coin what I was trying to do.”

(Lorde interviewed by Jay, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.110)

“If there is a single distinguishing feature of the literature of black women - and this accounts for their lack of recognition- it is this; their literature is about black women.”

(Helen Washington, in Gates Jr., ed., 1990, p.35)

CONSTRUCTING THE CONTEXT

Audre Lorde’s self-named ‘biomythography’ *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (from herein titled *Zami*), published in 1982, was and continues to be a pivotal text in representing new or emerging subjectivities of resistance.¹ There has been much analytical critique of twentieth century ‘black’ literary texts including those by Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Alice Walker and Langston Hughes in the three decades since *Zami* was published, but the black/lesbian feminist literary voice has been largely neglected, receiving mostly piecemeal rather than full-length critical attention. Engagement with black/lesbian texts² and indeed Lorde’s own work by critics such as Chinosole and Barbara Smith reveals a wealth of interconnected contemporary black/lesbian feminist texts that have been

¹ Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, 1982, Watertown:Persephone Press.

² By ‘black/lesbian’ texts I refer to texts by self-identified black and / or lesbian women, identifying in both political and personal ways.

marginalised or relegated to historical accounts of ‘second wave’ feminisms rather than afforded the status of canonised literature.³

Audre Lorde’s *Zami* is among these often neglected and misinterpreted feminist texts. Lorde has rightly become a literary icon to a new generation of young black feminists in the twenty-first century but there is still a danger of her work being de-historicised, as the output of an individual literary genius, rather than seen as representative of a feminist literary and social movement that worked towards political and structural change.⁴ What if, as Gloria Anzaldúa has suggested in revision of Virginia Woolf, “writing is a collaborative, communal activity not done in a room of one’s own... an act informed and supported by the books the author reads, the peoples she interacts with and the centuries of cultural history that seethe under her skin” (Anzaldúa, in Warland, ed., 1991, p.255)? Seen from this perspective, *Zami* is a cultural and social text of great importance, one that forms part of a distinctive tradition of women’s writing.⁵

In the context of an ongoing backlash against radical feminist cultural work, it is crucial to contextualise a feminist text such as *Zami* that is constructed *both* as polemic and as fiction. One instance of this backlash is Anna Wilson’s critique of instrumental feminist texts, *Persuasive Fictions*,

³ Although there is not room within this study to further elaborate, I refer to ‘second wave’ feminisms as an often dismissed set of active political texts and movements. The intellectual social reach and impact of second wave feminism, in an age of post-‘isms’ (post-structuralism, -modernism, -colonialism, -feminism) has been downplayed in favour of a gender-neutrality that has significant political and social consequences.

⁴ A new wave of scholarly critiques of Lorde’s work that appeal to a contemporary generation of readers include *Race, Gender and the Activism of Black Feminist Theory: Working with Audre Lorde (Concepts for Critical Psychology)* and *Audre Lorde’s Transnational Legacies* (see bibliography), in which Paul. M. Farber, refers to Lorde’s ‘concise phrasings’ fueling both ‘public dialogue and Internet memes’ (Farber. P. in Bolaki. S. and S. Broeck. (eds.), 2015, p.148). These new interpretations of Lorde’s work provide a twenty-first century contextualization of her writing that demonstrates her enduring appeal to intergenerational readers and activists today. It should be also noted that references to Audre Lorde’s work online often rehash quotes that are abstracted from her lengthier political and social analyses.

⁵ This interpretation of tradition, which Chinosole also refers to in her study of the “matrilineal diaspora,” underpins Audre Lorde’s work, which features “Black women worldwide [who enable] us to experience distinct but related cultures while retaining a special sense of home as a locus of self-definition and power” (Chinosole in Braxton and McLaughlin, ed., 1990, p.379).

which includes an analysis of *Zami*. Wilson downplays the role of feminist literature in historical feminist movements and social changes, regarding it as “cultural fiction rather than history” (Wilson, 2001, p.129). Wilson’s diminishment of the transformational power of feminist literary texts has the effect of de-legitimising and silencing them. This typifies a strand of liberal feminist critical theory that chooses to decontextualise and/or eradicates the political and social potential and context of radical (black/lesbian) women’s literature. This kind of critique also tends to project a form of paternal individualism onto these texts that further culturally negates the *collective* resistance and power that radical literature has often reflected, inspired or created.

Zami’s rich, diverse and playful language signals it as an experimental narrative whose structures reflect multiple black/lesbian philosophies, theories and semiotic transferences. Too often the dialogical nature of black/lesbian feminist work is used to supplement a hetero-normative analysis of themes and motifs in literature, further marginalising the space of the ‘other’ within critical studies. In contrast Barbara Christian asserts that black/lesbian texts positioned as the ‘other’ may not refer to or draw on ‘theory’ but in fact *are* a representation of theory as active engagement.⁶ This position undermines the post-modern vision of the ‘death of the author’ (Roland Barthes), hierarchical binary oppositions and the importance of the ‘critic’ (T.S. Eliot), often considered to be a white male heterosexual with authority. Patricia Hill Collins echoes Christian’s views by defining this “Eurocentric masculinist worldview,” that she argues likewise “fosters black women’s subordination” (Hill Collins, 1990, p.221).⁷ She also highlights how communal texts, ones that refer to and represent collective understandings and social movements, have too long been abstracted from their political and historical contexts.

⁶ Here I reference Barbara Christian’s 1985 study of black feminist texts, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, in which she regards black women writers such as Walker, Lorde and Shange to be “attempting radical social transformation” through “intense literary activism” (Christian, 1985, p125)

⁷ By ‘defining’ I refer to the socio-historical and political context of black/lesbian feminist work, in recognition of the impact and influence of its cultural and political production both in active and theoretical terms.

Lorde's biomythography- I will come back to this term- and its development should also be considered as part of an intertextual and collectivist movement. Parts of *Zami* were written in advance of the volume's completion and published in numerous feminist journals at the height of a feminist small press revolution (whose importance has not yet been fully analysed). *Zami* itself participated, as did Lorde, in the burgeoning public visibility of gender and gay rights struggles in the 1980s amid sweeping right wing, anti-gay and sexist rhetoric/violence. The context for the publication of Lorde's biomythography includes the heightened media attention generated by such struggles in late twentieth-century North America, running parallel to the acceleration of state/interpersonal violence against minorities and women, western imperialism on a global scale, and 'freetrade' neo-liberalist capitalisms. In this light, *Zami* can be seen to be simultaneously questioning the legitimacy of personal, institutional and supra-structured power in an age of hegemonic metanarratives.

DEFYING GENRE, REWRITING TRADITION

Zami's narrative trajectory undermines many preconceptions or defined understandings of biography and memoir as stable genres of rhetorical or objective 'truths'. In naming her text a biomythography, Lorde deliberately refutes canonical notions of a 'purity of form' and objectivity in order to consciously reaffirm a radical tradition of black and / or lesbian feminist women's writing. This tradition predates *Zami*, and may also intertextually reference a myriad of women's literary forms including slave narratives, spiritual autobiography, poetry and early twentieth-century women's modernist literature.⁸ What differentiates the biomythographical in black and / or lesbian feminist literature from black male semi-autobiographical writers such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin is, I believe, how it transcends the individual hero as the focus of the narrative. Lorde eschews individualism in favour of an understanding of collective

⁸ Here I elaborate on Barbara Christian's premise in her text *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976 (Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies)* (see bibliography) that there is a cohesive tradition to be found in black women's writing that amongst other things addresses intersectional oppression through their use of recurrent symbols, themes and shared subject matter.

sisterhood, situated within a context of dynamic struggle that is implicitly evidenced within the biomythographical text by multiple subjectivities of resistance.

Zami is a work that both mythologises and biographically reframes black women's identities, using 'hybridised' language, form and genres to develop counter-narratives of emergence, resistance and representation still relevant to women relegated to the margins of society today. As Carol Boyce Davies observes, black women's writing can often demonstrate a "critical relationality," with "synchronic, multiply articulated discourses which operate braid-like or web-like as a series of strands are woven" (Boyce Davies, 1994, p.56). This better describes the intersecting and wide-ranging work of Lorde and her contemporaries who would interweave social, personal, political, historical and 'in Lorde's case' mythical strands into their work to sustain a black feminist critical consciousness within their art.

In *Zami*, Lorde re-enacts a continuing 'tradition' of black feminism, one that deconstructs the structural/political through an exploration of the personal to create a 'new' set of narratives that reinterpret 'knowledge' whilst creating and furthering what Alison Assiter refers to as "Feminist Epistemological Communities" (Assiter, 1996, p.77). As Patricia Hill Collins goes on to elaborate:

One distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought is its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change. New knowledge is important for both dimensions to change. (Hill Collins, 1990, p.221)

Audre Lorde as author shifts this (critical) consciousness and uses her text to bear witness to and simultaneously construct this social and political 'transformation'. She does this within a theoretical *and* narrative framework, referring to subjectivities that "instinctively, without particular theory or political position or dialectic ... recognised oppression as oppression, no matter where it came from" (*Z*, p.221). This "critical

relationality” (Boyce Davies, 1994, p.56) of the macro/micro political, personal and social forms the basis upon which biomythography as a narrative strategy of resistance can be further developed.

Focusing on *Zami* as an especially rich casestudy, this dissertation will explore a number of questions that recur in self-named black/lesbian feminist texts and that could be cited as evidence of a ‘tradition’ within these texts: How is the writer or narrator recalling the memories of a community or recovering silenced voices through her text? How can this be articulated whilst adhering to Rose M. Brewer’s sense that “gender as a category of analysis cannot be understood or decontextualised from race and class in Black feminist theorising” (Brewer, in James & Busar, 1994, p.17)? Within the representation of ‘self as biography’, how is the struggle for the self, for Lorde’s lesbian ‘I’, situated within a black/lesbian collectivist context? Do the multiple contradictions inherent within a genre that has historically been aligned with the truth (but is actually subject to internalised surveillance and mediation) rearticulate the need to further unravel biography as a set of public, private, personal, collective, social, and historicised narratives and fictions? These questions inform my approach to *Zami* as a text in which multiple genres and subjectivities operate.

Just as Lorde has created what I term a ‘polyvocal genre’ in writing *Zami*, engaging multiple dialogisms in order to elucidate “stories that had to be told, not only my stories but the stories of many black women” (Lorde interviewed by Jay, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.109), so my own analysis of *Zami* will employ a polyvocal theoretical approach to echo Lorde’s own text. In bringing together diverse work from a black feminist perspective, my study of Lorde’s text examines how she uses socio-historical contextualisation, mythical symbolism and invention, and obfuscated biographical fictions. It also examines how these elements relate to its political import for social transformation and re-envisioned literary characteristics. In following Lorde’s example, this dissertation will trace Lorde’s posing of newly voiced subjectivities that actively resist deletion through a rigid lens of black feminist ‘tradition’. As Barbara Christian explains, “‘Tradition’ as I would mean it, then, is an active verb, rather than a retired nominative, and we

are now its subjects and objects” (Christian, in Pryse and Spillers, eds., 1985, p.260). In considering the wide-reaching impact and legacy of Lorde’s work, her continued influence on black feminist theory and thought can also be viewed as a tradition in its own right.

THEORISING BIOMYTHOGRAPHY

Although I adopt black feminist scholar Hazel Carby’s theoretical approach, in that this dissertation is a “materialist account of cultural production[s] ... within the social relations that inscribed them” (Carby, 1987, p.17), I would simultaneously reject any one theoretical methodology. In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Hazel Carby negates the idea of a presupposed tradition in black literature as this “narrative constitutes a canon from [particular] essentialist views of experience” (Carby, 1987, p.16). As I am against a monolithic reductionism in the form of a narrow tradition, I make the case for retaining and developing multiple, parallel and intersecting ‘traditions’. Barbara Christian suggests that collectivising strands of experience, ideas that coalesce and intersect, can help us to recognise intertextuality as a resistant response to subjugation and marginalisation. In these terms, ‘tradition/s’ allow the dominant narrative to be interrupted in historical and contemporary ways, inform places of collectivity that are transformative and supportive, and further identify ways to gather rather than reduce and confine these multiple histories.

Both Hazel Carby and Cary Nelson, in their reading of nineteenth- and twentieth-century black literature, dismantle notions of metanarratives and have an acute awareness of the effects of discrimination and the deliberate repression of ‘people’s literature’ in the formation of elite literary canons.⁹ My aim, in this dissertation, of “recovering and situating the neglected fiction of black women writers” (Carby, 1987, p.9) serves to further critique what Cary Nelson cites as “the master narratives we have been

⁹ See bibliography for Carby and Nelson’s 1990s texts, both different in their subject matter and foci, but similar in their understanding of the politicised intentions of the canon and exclusion of marginalised voices from ‘valued’ literary spaces.

given so far ... heavily exclusionary and distinctly interested politically” (Nelson, 1989, p.7).

I will show how *Zami* can be located within a number of black literary theoretical frameworks and active social movements (past and present), demonstrating that the work does not stand alone as a representative book of distinguished genius. I will elucidate how *Zami* can be seen to form part of an alternative literary canon of neglected and subjugated black/lesbian epistemologies and texts, whose far-reaching influence and historical significance has been woefully occluded.¹⁰ I hope to do this whilst opposing what Rose M. Brewer has defined as the “metalanguage of race in which internal issues of gender and class are subsumed into a Unitarian position of African-Americans” (Brewer, in James & Busar, eds., 1994, p.18). Considering how Lorde has often suffered from a politicised decontextualisation of her work where critics have, in order to make it somehow more ‘literary’, divorced her writing from the complex political struggles that are enmeshed in its materiality, - I will avoid adopting positions that abstract *Zami* from a lesbian/feminist context, or focus on it as a singular ‘cultural’ or ‘ethnic’ black literary text.¹¹

If -as both Carby and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak claim- the black female body has been “colonised by white male power and practices,” outlining a link between “economic/political power and economic/sexual power” (Carby, 1987, pp.143-4), then *Zami* uses female subjectivity in order to subvert a master narrative that has excluded and subsumed the black/lesbian/female body.¹² In this dissertation, I will examine the ways in

¹⁰ My position is that alternative or extended canons can be ‘part of’ the struggle for black/lesbian literary recognition but that these are arguably only a sticking plaster, and what is required is a radical transformation of the way in which literature and art are made, viewed and consumed in a capitalist imperialist patriarchal culture - and these should be part of a wider evaluation of the need for societal transformation.

¹¹ Lorde continues to be politically decontextualised in rationales for singular identity movements, or within ‘depoliticised’ literary criticism that, in fact, is deeply conservative and exclusionary.

¹² See the *Post-Colonial Critic*. In these interviews, Spivak refers to a need to research the “historical institutionalisation of specific subject positions” (Spivak, in Harasym, 1990, p.43). I interpret this to mean that any investigation of the

which *Zami*'s biomythographical subjectivities dominate the text and are the impetus for change, providing an alternate narrative that also resists the language of domination. Prioritising the agency of black/lesbian subjects who struggle to resist domination and deletion within the text but remain socio-historically placed, Lorde as narrator/biographer intentionally undermines the authoritative (male) individual biographer as sovereign historical actant. Lorde acknowledges that the reception of resistance and transformation within any text is also dependent upon an exchange between the writer and the reader. This in turn reflects a set of shifting cultural identities, which challenge and emphasise intersubjectivity as an *active* process, both within and external to the text.

REFRAMING THE SUBJECT: A POSITIONAL STATEMENT

I will unfashionably reframe and centralise the 'subject' and subjectivity in this dissertation, bringing to the fore difficult notions of relativism, realism and the unitary self (which I argue can still be multiple and ever-changing). This dissertation explores these theoretical and philosophical questions within the context of *Zami* and Lorde's wider work, with the proviso that this is received as part of a dialogue, a work in progress amongst other studies of Lorde, and one that has brought me full circle back to the black/lesbian/feminist texts of the late 1970s to early 1990s. Although my dissertation references broader literary approaches, it does so through the lens of black feminist and lesbian cultural critics or theorists, as influenced by the work of Barbara Christian, Patricia Hill Collins, Chinosole, Carol Boyce Davies, Rose M. Brewer, Gloria Anzaldúa and Deborah Mae Henderson - all critical thinkers, writers and activists at the time that *Zami* was published. I will also frequently reference the extensive writings of Lorde and her insightful interviews. This historically contextualised focus is not chosen nostalgically but from a need to better understand how this neglected era of black/lesbian/feminist work can further unfold Audre Lorde's literary contribution and *Zami* itself. It should also be noted that I write this dissertation in the belief that there are still

subjugated subject must be in line with a profound understanding of the ways in which institutional structural oppression is formulated and activated.

numerous theoretical and literary understandings from this era to be unravelled and critically determined.¹³

My examination of *Zami* takes a socio-historical approach, with my dissertation attempting to articulate what I determine to be significant and largely under-critiqued aspects of Lorde's work. I do this while trying to establish what I believe to be the critical role that Lorde's self-named genre, biomythography, played in the way the text was written and received. In deference to the anti-linear genre of biomythography and its political implications, I have carefully considered the structure of the dissertation. In Chapter 1, I focus on Lorde's construction of subjectivities that resist domination and their literary impact, which in Chapter 2 inform Lorde's adoption and continuation of a literary tradition she names biomythography. In Chapters 3 and 4, I further unpack the elements that make up Lorde's innovative genre, analysing the use of biography as a potentially fictive and radical genre, and the use of reclaimed and invented mythology to further delineate the narratives of people that have been excluded from literature, as well as the role of maternal subjectivity and the erotic in shaping these narratives. In Chapters 5 and 6, I take a more instrumental look at the way *Zami* advances representations of black/lesbian identities and their relationship with political resistance. In conclusion, I surmise that biomythography is a literary tradition rooted in narratives related to female resistance and the undermining of literary and social hegemonies.¹⁴

¹³Although I recognise that the post-'isms' render more complex analyses and are diverse in their political and philosophical opinion about 'female' subjectivities, I would additionally observe that the post-'isms' have played a part in the deletion of radical feminisms and second wave feminisms. They have destructively promoted a gender-neutral approach (in part politically driven) that negates the disproportionality of gender-based discrimination, bias and violence. Again a much fuller analysis is needed.

¹⁴ My use of binary terms such as 'woman', 'man', 'male', 'female', etc. throughout this dissertation has been considered and used in opposition to a post-modern leaning towards gender as an obsolete term. I feel this is a politically constructed argument that in no way bears witness to the experiences and structures that remain discriminatory to the sex/gender/identity category of 'woman'. This is not to articulate disrespect for trans, intersex or queer communities who may avoid or 'play with' gender descriptives or people who wish to avoid binary terms but to adopt a black feminist positioning that wishes to bear witness to, document and corroborate the need for transformation based on material experience and the transnational oppression of the gender category 'women'- which I would note includes both cis and trans women.

I acknowledge my own double consciousness in the sequential use of binary oppositions and multiple theoretical and cultural criticisms - Western/non-Western, black/white, male/female, lesbian/non-lesbian, feminist/non-feminist. Despite this, I aim to move towards an intersectional, polyvocalised and holistic critiquing of *Zami*, one that takes into account multiple identities and framings, leading to the emergence or development of new insights into Audre Lorde's work as a whole. I also recognise and believe I must locate my own positionality as a mixed race/heritage European black/lesbian woman, without direct experience of migration or strong cultural roots in non-European dialects, who is a feminist activist, searching for her own critical space within a collectivist feminist context. That is to say: a reader who identifies with and understands herself to be a part of, whilst simultaneously external to, the complex cultural and literary matrix that informs, places and contextualises *Zami*. With this in mind, I strive to make present so far silenced or unobserved aspects of *Zami*, and to contribute towards structuring a new black/lesbian feminist canonical framework that marks out literary and theoretical gaps for those who are *so far* culturally, socially and politically absent.

CHAPTER 1: LITANY *OF* SURVIVAL: The Subjective Self

“What are the words you do not have yet? What do you need to say?”

(Lorde, 2009, p.40)

“My critics have always wanted to cast me in a particular light...But I have always felt I cannot be categorized.”

(Lorde, 2009, pp.160-161)

“Literature ...was created with the deliberate exclusion of many classes of people- so the concept of a ‘neutral third person voice’ is a sham.”

(Chrystos, in Warland, 1991, p.241)

SUBJECT/S OF SURVIVAL

In her poem ‘Litany for Survival’, taken from her 1978 collection *The Black Unicorn*, Lorde transforms a mantra of personal fear into the articulation of collective survival. As fear moves into the past tense by stanza three of the poem (from ‘fear’ to ‘afraid’), the reader or ‘those of us who were imprinted with fear’ (Lorde, 1997, p.256) know that in her fears and isolation the speaker is not alone, that collective voices have not only the power to survive but an ability to ‘speak’ of that survival:

So it is better to speak
Remembering
We were never meant to survive
(Lorde, 1997, p.256)

Every repetition of fear in this poem is transformed into an articulation of hope that speaks into the absence of voicelessness. In *Zami* Lorde utilises words of transformation and survival through the texts’ subjects, which are multiple representations of the narrator’s self and subjectivities that often reflect that narratorial self. For the biomythographical subject words both

symbolise and represent physical and psychic survival and are testimony to that survival.

In Barbara Christian's *The Race for Theory* is her critique of what she terms the "metaphysical language of the New Philosophy" (Christian, 1996, p.315). She claims that, just as people of colour and the multiply silenced and oppressed started to gain a voice within the mainstream and academia, so the attack on the stability of language and relativity took shape, theory was talked down as prescriptive and elitist, and -most telling- it stopped being "rooted in practice". Lorde ensures *Zami*'s subjectivities are rooted in the practice of resistance; they are subjects that do not merely exist within the pages of the text but resonate psychologically and physically as socio-historic actants, often engaged in change and movement. The subjects of Lorde's text - like those of her novel writing contemporaries Gloria Naylor, Nzotake Shange and Paule Marshall - represent lives in action, from communities that manage to exist, survive *and* thrive in the strength of their dynamic and multiple cultural orientations.

The Prologue and *Zami*'s opening pages not only question the stability of literary genres and Eurocentric narrative traditions but in introducing a text of black/female subjectivities, the stability of the subject itself. Black/lesbian women feature in *Zami* as fully-realised characters who tap into epistemologies of desire and being through experiential realities that are often shared with other women, whilst they struggle against unified forces of oppression and interlocking forms of violence. In this chapter I will argue that, in *Zami*, Lorde is presenting subjectivities that may be unfamiliar in the literary imagination but have a long material history, connecting the biographical to the fictive. By reclaiming the 'subject', Lorde resists both historical and fictive definitions of black female subjectivity as absence, objectified through a lens of deletion. In effect repeated female subjectivities and their motifs/symbols bear witness to and are a litany of survival in *Zami*.

As I have said these subjects can also be connected with Lorde's own rendering of a biomythographical 'self', an identity that is articulated within

the text by multiple female voices and narrators. These multiple selves should not be seen as either fractured or dissolute but dynamic and resistant. Each 'self' is a reflection of Lorde's commitment to her composite literary genre 'biomythography' and an attempt to represent fictional subjectivities that are rooted in black lesbian reality. As Lorde further explains in 'Self-Definition and My Poetry':

No poet worth salt writes of anything other than those various entities she or he defines as self. How aware I am of those selves, and how much I accept those many parts of me will determine how my living appears within my poetry. (Lorde in Byrd, Betsch Cole and Guy-Sheftall, eds., 2009, p.156)

As I suggest in the title of this chapter and chapters that follow, the articulation of the self and the expression of that self through Lorde's own words *are* the symbols and a litany of survival, as they *re*-create and repeat the subjugated stories of black women's lives.

Carol Boyce Davies, Barbara Christian, Margaret Homans, bell hooks and other black/lesbian and or radical feminists have drawn attention to how the use of the word 'subject' and its ongoing destabilisation often elicits a disconnect between high theory and the multiple experiences of black women situated within and struggling against the structures of capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism. In *Zami*, the narratives of Lorde's protagonist, Audre, and her lovers, family and friends, bring together objects and symbols of survival that linguistically and materially locate the subject. Boyce Davies goes on to elaborate in *Black Women, Writing and Identity* that there can be multiple "meanings of subjectivity" (Boyce Davies, 1994, p.37), allowing the subjective self to exist within a matrix of cultural and social realities and documented experiences. Subjectivities in *Zami* are rooted in the experiential but are also often representative of a migratory self. The authorial, narratorial and biographical 'I' is therefore a multiple subject that reconnects with ancestors and mothers as "black women dislocated by space and time" (Boyce Davies, 1994, p.4).

POLITICISING THE PROLOGUE

The power of the narrated subject in *Zami* has been discussed; now, turning back to the beginning, I examine how the naming of the Prologue is significant in its clear delineation of authorial power and intent. Audre Lorde as a writer *and* political activist both references and repudiates a 'singular' tradition of female writing by including a pre-emptory memoir or prologue at the outset of *Zami* (pp.3-5), followed by the eponymous Prologue (p.7). It is neither coincidence nor oversight that *Zami's* Prologue begins seven pages into the book; Lorde is making a specific statement about the positioning (absence) of the black/lesbian subject within the confines of a Eurocentric literary tradition. Introducing a black/lesbian discourse in this way is, at the same time, Lorde's challenge to prologues associated with a retrospectively 'endorsed' female genius. I contrast this form of confessional memoir associated with individualised or isolated female autobiography with the mythical collectivist subjectivities or black/lesbian experience we find in *Zami*.^{15 16}

Zami starts by subverting an established genre and form while reassembling an outsider tradition, alerting the reader to Lorde's intentional genre-bending throughout the book. The text plays with and exploits the reader's familiarity with narrative forms and classical genres such as the Bildungsroman/kunst at the same time as deliberately undercutting these forms, which are referenced but never fully deployed in *Zami*. The author and narrator constantly undermine the security of familiar literary modes by putting at centre stage those visible subjectivities that internally and externally resist genre (biography, memoir, the novel), as much as they resist socio-historical subjugation.

¹⁵ Philippe Lejeune names this the 'autobiographical pact' and associates autobiography with confessional truth telling, 'the identity of the narrator and the principal character that is assumed... often by the use of the first person' (Lejeune, 1989, p. 3)

¹⁶ It is worth noting here that Lorde first introduces a range of black female subjectivities (that I will discuss later in the chapter) before formally introducing her Prologue and her own subjective authorial 'I'.

The vivid opening statement in *Zami* transcends its own intentionality, its italicised poeticisms underpinning Lorde's focus on identity, subjectivity and power:

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? (Z, p.3)

Written as a rhetorical question, the opening of *Zami* claims a sense of immediacy and urgency, and like "the bruised skin's blister" it indicates a contested site, a visceral response to the physical and psychic harm of black/lesbian silence. Lorde, as both author and narrator, establishes the tone of a text where multiple black/lesbian and female identities will co-exist. This is where the author/narrator introduces a set of experiences (black/lesbian, urban, female, working class), and where the power (muted and evoked) of black women is acknowledged in the face of capitalist exploitation, racism and endemic violence against women and girls.

"To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?" (Z, p.3), is a question that reverberates throughout *Zami*, silently and repeatedly referenced by the author/narrator's focus on the fine line between survival as existence and survival as power or a movement *towards* power. The symbols of survival in *Zami* are personified by the black and, or lesbian women who are imprinted throughout the text, their narratives and their visibility validated beyond the page. The symbols of Lorde's survival are entwined with her need to document and mythologise that which has remained absent and yet psychically and physically embedded in so many women's lived realities such as:

Images of women flaming like torches [who] 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 (Z, p.3).

Here Lorde as narrator announces the way in which women's subjectivities "define the border of *my* journey," that is the connection between the self

and a set of migratory experiences that are shared between generations of women. To Lorde, each woman is passing on the torch of existence, or becoming a beacon in the darkness, a buffer between the isolation and “chaos”. Even in their complexity, even though they can be both “kind and cruel,” women will “adorn,” “define” and guide the narrator’s and the reader’s journey throughout *Zami*.¹⁷ The experiences of other women define “home” to the narrator and to Lorde, and their subjectivities inform her survival strategy against “the chaos.”

The Prologue also reveals *Zami*’s subjectivities to be partly fictive and mythical constructs. This does not make them outside of reality but instead disrupts the power of the received Eurocentric imagination to dominate literary epistemologies. Lorde as author and Audre as biographer/subject occupy a biomythographical space that is imprinted with a black/lesbian feminist critical relationality. *Zami* acknowledges the symbols of the biographer and narrator’s survival, and additionally, in writing the text, Lorde reveres the women who have created a space for *Zami* as a literary text. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has pointed out that a text that resists domination in any form is often a counter-narrative and is “the means by which groups contextualise that dominant reality and the framework of assumptions that supports it” (Gates, Jr. in McQuillan, ed., 2000, p.22). Lorde’s counter-narrative often emerges simultaneously from the experiential, the biographical, the mythical and the imaginary, and so arguably, as I have mentioned, serves as a text of resistance within these genres.

DEFINING THE GENDERED POST-MODERN SUBJECT

Alison Assiter rebuts post-modernism and post-modern feminisms in *Enlightened Women*, comparing and critiquing the contemporary analytical philosophers that draw on Hume and Locke with the late twentieth-century French school of philosophy that largely discredits the notion of the unitary or rational subject. I agree with Assiter’s positioning and her intolerance of,

¹⁷ It is worth noting that the phrase “flaming dyke” was used in the 1980s and 1990s to stress an ‘out’ LGBTQI visibility that resisted a closeted invisibility and silencing.

in Luce Irigaray's term, the "phallogentrism" of an often-humanist construction of the subject. But, in my view, it is also crucial to disrupt a 'white' Eurocentric philosophical positioning which replaces subjectivities of difference with an either/or dichotomy placing anything outside of these closed knowledge systems as being contradictory and 'other', thus inferior and less than.¹⁸ The interconnected theoretical stance of the post- 'isms' has become a strong force in literary criticism and academia, displacing texts that deal with socio-historic material reality or eliding this element of them.¹⁹ *Zami* exemplifies the groundbreaking black/lesbian and or feminist texts of the later twentieth-century that have disrupted what Boyce Davies terms a "post-European modernism" and a "post-European(-colonial)ity" - referring to the way black/lesbian and / or feminist texts represent, address and narrate "the many colonialities and resistances to them throughout history." (Boyce Davies, 1994, p.86).

In creating a text that focuses on black/lesbian experience and women whose lives rarely include men, and with little reference to or acknowledgement of male power as an impetus for the narrative, Lorde re-envisions female subjectivity. She also challenges traditional biographical subjectivity and the 'greatness' of that historically entrenched tradition, replacing the historical master of war, honour and nationalism with female heroines. Lorde's opening subject is De Lois who, as a fat, black sex worker, is antithetical to classical literary heroine status and yet Lorde has, in the first few pages, created what Johnetta Betsch Cole would term an alternative "sheroe" (Betsch Cole in Byrd, Betsch Cole and Guy-Sheftall, eds., (2009), p.233).²⁰ Just as De Lois' "big proud stomach moved her on," so the "Hot noon threw a ring of sunlight like a halo on top of De Lois's stomach." (Z, p.4). The halo, as a recognised symbol of sanctity, is not often

¹⁸ As I go on to argue in Chapter 2, 'Eurocentric' philosophical absolutism is critiqued by Gloria I Joseph's definition of "Afrocentric" philosophical traditions, which could be seen to permeate both Audre Lorde's and other black/lesbian writing of the time. This is not to create polar oppositional philosophical traditions but to disrupt the notion of European philosophy as being universal.

¹⁹ By post-isms I refer to post-modernism, post-colonialism and post-structuralism.

²⁰ In *My Sheroe, My Teacher, My Sister Friend*, Johnetta Betsch Cole writes 'we all need the real kind of sheroes...whose greatness and vulnerabilities convince us that we too can help to advance a just cause' (Betsch-Cole in Byrd, Betsch Cole and Guy Shaftall, eds., 2009, p.233).

associated with black sex workers. Lorde names De Lois and affords her prime place as a symbol of survival and resistance *because of* not in spite of the fact that “she was big and Black and special and seemed to laugh all day” (Z, p.4).

Throughout *Zami*, Lorde recognises the contradictions of the subject’s intersecting differences, articulating through her prose the pain of these differences at an interpersonal and structural level. For Lorde, this is due to:

[an] inability to deal with the very real issues of homophobia, racism, and ageism [that] has in many respects led to the kinds of fractures which weaken our ability to resist

(Lorde/Savern & Robinson, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.81)

From the opening prologue, Lorde creates a space for complex subjectivities, including women who oppress others. She documents the lives of the marginalised, who often oppress through ignorance or a lack of choice; “the white woman I dreamed standing behind me in the airport, silently watching while her child deliberately bumps into me over and over again ... I see she’s been punched in the mouth already” (Z, p.4). These women are societal outsiders who cannot find safety in their physical universes. Lorde is able to recognise and name their pain but does not stop critically analysing their role in the further oppression of others. When she stops her car to rescue a distressed woman, who then baulks at her offer of survival, Lorde asks, “What could she have seen in my black face that was worth holding onto such horror? Wasting me in the gulf between who I was and her vision of me” (Z, p.4). Here the narrator removes herself from the prose while understanding the cause of the white woman’s fear of support from a black woman. Lorde replies to her own question with a dismissive retort (a self-protective linguistic retreat often used to deal with pain in *Zami*), for she has no need to sacrifice herself or explain her existence; ‘I drove on, knowing she would probably die stupid’ (Z, p.5).

NAMING DESIRE

To have sexuality is to have narrative; to have narrative is to have sexuality.
(Roof, in McQuillan, ed., 2000, p.219)

In *Zami*, female eroticism and desire are processes through which subjectivities emerge and women radiate aspects of power in their private lives that may not be evident in their public lives. Rosi Braidotti cites this as being where:

Sexuality as a social and symbolic, material and semiotic institution ...[is] singled out as the primary location of power, in a complex manner, which encompasses both macro- and micro-relations
(Braidotti, 2002, p.33)

The language of female desire forms part of a poetic synthesis and set of aesthetics in *Zami*, reflecting aspects of lesbian sexuality and a politicisation of the many political struggles that Lorde took part in as an activist. For Lorde, the focus on black women's lesbian sexuality is rooted in her belief in a "lesbian continuum," in tandem with Adrienne Rich's thinking and a politicised feminist move toward lesbianism as both sexual desire and a powerful set of political choices.

I suggest that the 'lesbian continuum' as a concept allows a better way of describing intimacy and non-sexual desire between women who are exploring 'feminine and masculine' expressions of that desire. In Lorde's words, to "*be both man and woman*" (*Z*, p. 7) and express multiple positionalities of desire opens in the text a complex set of questions about gender, and subsequently a well-developed and synthesised matrix of political theories about lesbianism. Lorde articulates this by anchoring her language in the erotic experiences of the text's subjects and executing a prose permeated by a linguistic simultaneity, which Gwendolyn Mae Henderson defines as "speaking in tongues":

black women must speak in a plurality of voices as well as in a multiplicity of discourses. This discursive diversity or simultaneity of discourse, I call “speaking in tongues” (Henderson, in Gates, 1990, p.122)

Desire is the connective thread that runs throughout *Zami*; erotic exchanges or wishes affect the protagonist’s decision-making and the reader’s understanding of multiple perspectives within the text. There is as Henderson suggests “a multiplicity of discourses” for black/lesbian women in *Zami*, reflecting the complexities of interlocking identities that may be imposed, adopted or assumed. Lorde as author/narrator recognises female desire as extending beyond the boundaries of the physical realm and into that of the spiritual, psychological and mythical - a creative poetic continuum of lesbian love and desire.²¹ This encompasses a deliberate subversion of the hetero-centric chivalric romance genre alongside the polyvocal act of writing through multiple narrators and stories.

GENDERING THE EROTIC I

The complexity of Lorde as narrator, and Audre’s desire, is merged with an inextricable sense of her cultural heritage, extended family and her reflections on being raised in an environment dominated by women but informed by an equal power dynamic between her mother and father ²²:

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 (Z, p. 7).

As Lorde goes on to explain, the impetus for the erotic comes from early childhood experiences as she associates her sexuality with her family

²¹ This is also developed in Lorde’s poems and essays, some of which are referenced in this dissertation but there are other examples throughout Lorde’s work such as ‘On a Night of the Full Moon’ from the poetry collection *Coal* and “‘Never Take Fire from a Woman’” from *The Black Unicorn*

²² It could also be contested that ambiguous references to the narrator’s gender acknowledges the socio-historical and cultural gendering of the credible ‘poet’ or ‘biographer’ as male.

upbringing. The narrator's sexuality is neither abnormalised nor othered as Lorde shares with us the biographical construction of Audre's desire and erotic impulses. There is a connection between her mother's poetic sensibility and her father's strong yet silent force of being that gives us a clear insight into the development of the narrator's writing and the narrator's desire to write. It could be suggested that Lorde replaces the 'age-old' triad of Father/Son/Holy Spirit and the family unit of the 'western' liberal imagination ('mother father and child') with a womanist understanding of lesbian desire and sexuality as a female intergenerational triad (grandmother, mother, daughter):

the 'I' at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter with the 'I' moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed (Z, p.7).

The poetic undulations of the 'I' "moving back and forth and flowing" mark a female sexual response; cyclical and rhetorical, the waves of desire correspond with a rhythmic interplay that the narrator controls. Here Lorde's descriptive personal sexual subjectivity is tied into the poetic in both word and intent. This excerpt reveals a contradictory struggle between the impetus of desire and the impetus of survival, which is also the " 'I' at its eternal core," constituting a biomythical rendition of the struggle of the subject to desire without dominating another.

The Prologue (pp.3-7) could also be seen to show an instability/fissure in the text, opening up Lorde's work as a site of personal and political struggle in terms of the socio-historic context of butch/femme relationships in lesbian culture. In the Prologue the poeticism and sensuality of the passage does not detract from a clear message that Lorde equates sexuality with power:

I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered-to leave and to be left- to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving. (Z, p.7.)

The expression of the narrator to desire and be desired, to have ownership over her own sexuality, and to engage in the sexual practices she chooses to, contrasts with Lorde's own ambivalent attitude toward representations of what was considered to be the adoption of 'male' desire as a negative and dominating part of female sexuality and lesbian sexuality at the time of writing.²³

SCRIBING THE EROTIC

In *Zami*, the acts of writing and physical desire become part of an extended language of the erotic. This is explicitly posed in the opening pages of *Zami* where the narrator connects female subjective desire and masturbation with the power of being able to articulate female desire.²⁴ The omniscient narrator recalls that her need to 'fantasise' is at the core of 'I', and imagination becomes an integral part of this desire: "*Other times I like to fantasise the core of I, my pearl, a protruding part of me, hard and sensitive and vulnerable all at the same time*" (Z, p.7). The narrator's fantasy is explicit, written from a female point of view where desire and sexuality is 'feminised' and associated with the clitoral rather than the phallic. This is a female-driven desire and sexuality that is clitorally engaged, the female narrator's "pearl" is not internalised, as suggested by Freud, but instead becomes a protruding part of the narrator's sexuality, a physical as well as psychic sexual response. This sexual response is one that the narrator repeats to be inherently deep: "*When I sit and play in the waters of my bath I love to feel the deep inside parts of me, sliding and folded and tender and deep*" (Z, p.7). Here the subject must have an interface, contact with other forces, a sensual response -in this case with the

²³ Audre Lorde's anti-S/M (sado-masochism) stance is well-documented in her essays. In an interview with Leigh Star, Lorde clearly outlines her position: "Sadomasochism is an institutionalized celebration of dominant/subordinate relationships. And, it prepares us either to accept subordination or to enforce dominance. *Even in play*, to affirm that the exertion of power over powerlessness is erotic, is empowering, is to set the emotional and social stage for the continuation of that relationship, politically, socially, and economically" (Lorde, 1996, p.243)

²⁴ This is a taboo that Lorde dispels throughout *Zami*, recreating and affirming desire as a core part of the female identity that resists deletion. I return to this again in Chapter 4 of my dissertation.

water- to fully exist. Lorde reminds her audience that lesbian sexuality is a visceral and physical act, even when shared in language.

Lorde closes her Prologue by describing sexuality and the erotic as “a *living representation of other life older longer wiser*” (Z, p.7). Although this closing paragraph may evoke essentialist ties of women’s sexuality with the earth, nature and birth, the passage should also be read within its biomythographical context. Lorde is connecting the primacy of desire and human expression with an ancient birthright, as archaic and fundamental as “*The mountains and valleys, trees, rocks. Sand and flowers and water and stone*” (Z, p.7). “Woman forever” is able to imagine and enact desire, to relate to desire as being as constant and physically present as nature.

It is desire, and that associated with the erotic subject -love, will to power and transformation- that characterises Audre-as-biographer’s relationships. Subjective desire also informs the development of the narrative and use of language (poetic, sexy, dramatically dynamic), the subjective ‘I’ being an agent of that desire but also the focus for the text. Where subjectivity is often expressed both physically and imaginatively in *Zami*, desire is a central tenet and is intimately linked to the development of the text’s subjects and the power of their resistance. As I go on to elaborate in the following chapters, desire evokes multiple physical and psychic connections and reactions; it is often the catalyst of change and transformation, substantiating the subject’s development within the text and permeating the narrative.

THE SUBJECTIVE RESISTANT SELF

Zami does not recount a singular emergence of identity but rather the emergence of the ‘many’ as a collective set of experiences that remain simultaneous, parallel and interwoven. Lorde suggests that the many identities women have had to improvise in marginal spaces have formed a socio-historical and physical site for her to write her text. In *Zami*, Lorde thanks a line of matrilineal subjectivities that she identifies *with* (the spiritual and creative) “others who helped, pushing into the merciless sun-

I, coming out blackened and whole" (*Z*, p.5). These "others" are the black/lesbian women who have forged Lorde's text and her existence as a futuristic subjective self, as the ontological 'I'²⁵:

... *the journeywoman pieces of myself.*

Becoming.

Afrekete. (*Z*, p.5)

The subjectivities we are introduced to before the Prologue (pp.3-5) foreground subjectivities in the text; the text, in itself, owes its existence to women who have gone before. *Zami* as a title cites the matrilineal ancestors, the women, the friends and lovers, who have created a space for Lorde's text and Audre's journey.

In relation to *Zami*, we may view Lorde's use of subjectivity as a way to portray, in Carol Boyce Davies's words, "the many locations of the black subject ... refusing to be subjugated" (Boyce Davies, 1994, p.36). In other words, as Anzaldúa has also suggested, black/lesbian subjectivity cannot be individualised but must be recognised as a multiple or collective movement against the dominant discourses and geo-political borders that it resists. In *Zami's* case, subjective resistance also defies the nihilistic destruction or deconstruction of the black/lesbian self or subject. Echoing Gates's theory of simultaneity in black discourse, Boyce Davies asserts that "black women's writing cannot be located and framed in terms of one specific place, but exist/s in myriad places and times" (Boyce Davies, 1994, p.36). Lorde is not writing from the margins but declares an authorial power that determines, as Boyce Davies puts it, a "radical black female subjectivity" that "asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates" (Davies, 1994, p.37).

While material forces may affect the subjective self, the *resistant* self is able to improvise beyond survival into individual and collective action or movement; this is what I understand by *subjective resistance* (a key term in

²⁵ Lorde's ontological 'I' or 'self' in *Zami*, is represented by multiple narrators both within, and external to the text. This can be seen through the interlocutors or author as narrator's interruptions and the dream sequences of italicised poetry as prose.

my title). As I suggested in the opening of this chapter, repeated resistance to deletion as exemplified in 'A Litany for Survival' and the (re)-centring of the black/lesbian voice throughout *Zami*, informs Audre Lorde's creative genre invention, biomythography. Lorde ensures that in the formative pages of *Zami* the reader is introduced to the narratorial subjective self, an attempt to interject the subjective presence of the black lesbian self into literature whose pages, like our own lives, are often 'imprinted with fear' (Lorde, 1997, p.25). ²⁶As I shall go on to demonstrate, *Zami's* subjects through an articulation of the self manage to survive fear, pain and death. For Lorde it is the sensual and the erotic that is often a means of survival and often transforms survival into pleasure ²⁷. In the following chapter I will discuss the way that Lorde's biomythographical framework allows the black/lesbian self to exist, to ensure that Lorde's and other black/lesbian voices will 'be there' especially if we consider this absence to be a form of politicised deletion.

²⁶ The brevity of the chapters could be seen to be both stylistic (in step with Lorde's fast paced poetic style) and a structural part of her self elected literary genre.

²⁷ In the Bikini Kill song 'I Like Fucking' taken from the single *I Like Fucking/I Hate Danger* (released by the record label Kill Rock Stars in 1995), Kathleen Hanna (musician and feminist activist) reiterates the transformational power of sexual pleasure and its importance in the configuration and development of feminist movement, activism and women's psychic and physical survival- especially for women who have been sexually abused and traumatised. As the song closes Hanna cites 'I believe in the radical possibilities of pleasure babe' after viscerally screaming 'I want it now!'

CHAPTER 2: MY WORDS WILL BE THERE: The Biographical Self

The act of writing about oneself involves the construction of identity. With the recognition of a tension between the writing 'I' and the written 'I'.

(Kosta, 1994, p.16)

If any form of literature is capable of aiding in the Black woman's attempts to correct the record, it is autobiography, for nowhere does one find literature as a celebration of life more than here.

(Burgher, in Bell, Parker & Guy Sheftall, eds., 1979, p.107)

All our storybooks were about people who were very different from us.

(*Zami*, p.18)

BIOMYTHOGRAPHY AS A POLITICAL GENRE

This chapter will explore elements of Lorde's reinvention or interpretation of narrative form and life writing through the connection of stories about black/lesbian subjects and the creation of her own genre - biomythography. In Lorde's 1983 essay 'My Words Will Be There' she discusses her duty to 'speak the truth' in a cultural landscape in which:

There are very few voices for women and particularly few voices for Black women, speaking from the center of consciousness, for the *I am* out to the *we are*. (Lorde in Byrd, Betsch Cole and Guy Shaftall, eds., 2009, p.168)

In creating a genre of biomythography that hybridises literary forms, Audre Lorde deliberately obfuscates what traditional biography would anchor in a fixed spatial-temporal reality or in a literary space that has excluded black/lesbian subjectivities and social relations. Doreen Massey refers to the

interrelated connection of “space, place and gender” as a “dynamic simultaneity,” “a configuration of social relations ... imbued with power and meaning and symbolism” (Massey, 1994, p.3). If these social relationships have so far been determined by a canon of literature that neither recognises nor represents black/lesbian subjectivities, then Lorde’s adoption of “dynamic simultaneity” in the form of biomythography is –I would argue– politically as well as aesthetically determined. *Zami* owes its coherence to the author’s execution of a gendered language that prioritises the experiential in order to articulate polyvocal conversations, internalised utterances, poetic meditations, politicised commentary and reflective analysis. Lorde’s prose is dialogical and intertextual; her multiple narrators defy any sense of temporal order. That is to say, by the very successive and sometimes simultaneous interjection of multiple subjectivities, conventional understandings of singular linear progression are disrupted. As this chapter will attempt to explore, in both her representations and her mode of representation Lorde sets out to shape genre (the biomythographical) anew. In particular the focus here will be the charting and staging of the sensuous, defiant, transformative emergence of the self *as writer* and as writer on behalf of many.

Selwyn Cudjoe, in his critique of Maya Angelou’s autobiographical series, explores the racist contradictions that African American writers face in approaching autobiography as literary genre and form:

Afro-American autobiography has been subjected to the question of how authentic a statement it has been and whether or not the Afro-American has the ability or capacity to make such a statement.
(Cudjoe, in Gates Jr., 1990, p.274)

If, as Cudjoe suggests, the narratives of black people and the oppressed and marginalised of history have had their own truths doubted, manipulated or dismissed, this inherently questions notions of universal values and biographical truths. Lorde undermines the presumption of such universal values in *Zami* with her deployment of multiple authorial roles representing “not so much a unique statement of a particular individual but part of the

signifying practices of an entire people” (Cudjoe, in Gates Jr., ed., 1990, p.277). In obfuscating ‘the truth’ through biomythography, Lorde is protecting elements of the biographical self while deliberately subverting notions of any singular grand narrative of absolute truth where black/lesbians are not considered to be reliable or authentic narrators. If “‘Truth’ and ‘reality’ are ... the primary authoritarian weapons of our time” (Keller, in McQuillan, ed., 2000, p.279), then Lorde’s reinvention of the master narrative in the self-defined genre of biomythography becomes a radical political act to destabilise biography as a genre of literary truth-telling.

BIOMYTHOGRAPHICAL MARK-MAKING

I really do believe I learned ... from my mother ... The important value of non-verbal communication, beneath language. My life depended on it.

(Lorde, interviewed by Rich in Hall, ed., 2004, p.47)

Unlike traditional autobiography or memoir where the author is presumed to be the stable subject of the text, the author of *Zami* may be the mark-maker but she is not necessarily the narrator who voices and revoices the narratives. Lorde consciously documents, in Dorrit Cohn’s words, “the fact that autobiographical narrators also have inner lives (their own past inner lives) to communicate” (Cohn, in McQuillan, ed., 2000, p.254). The author’s narrators become polyvocal subjects: whether they be the protagonist, Audre; the mythical interlocutor, Zami; or Lorde, as omniscient narrator; they give agency to black/lesbian subjectivities through the use of insertion, improvisation and re/iteration. Each subject within the text has a history and myth of her own, a back story, their agency subject to a set of shifting truths within the text, affected by- but not resigned to or compliant with- external regimes.

The act of mark-making has a primary and instinctive role in young Audre’s life. It is not yet the ritual it will become in her teenage years and adulthood but is still a wonder she intimately engages with. The formation of words from individual letters is a metaphor for identity and the

constructed self: “I used to love the evenness of AUDRE LORDE at four years of age” (Z, p.24). Despite her personal enthusiasm for creative learning and development, she discovers that kindergarten and primary school are places where “ability had nothing to do with expectation” (Z, p.24). This enforces a set of barriers to her development as a poet, which she defiantly rejects: “I couldn’t follow directions, and I wouldn’t do as I was told” (Z, p.27). As the still-mute Audre races ahead of her classmates to write her name, the narrator and Lorde as author document a key moment in the artist’s emergence in dropping the ‘y’ from her name. With this act, Audre defines herself as being outside the known dominions of family, friends and society, as creatively birthing her poetic identity. Audrey becomes Audre Lorde, poet and writer, in one act of creative rebellion, self-defined and self-narrated. Her childhood awareness of the familial and societal ‘other’ is transformed into an act of art, political rebellion and aesthetic genius. As she writes:

A		L
U		O
D		R
R		D
E		E

into her school notebook, Lorde and the narrator simultaneously and figuratively spell out the poet’s name in the written text. Physical mark-making becomes an external process, where the internalised ‘I’ is made actively and socially visible.

SYNTHESIS & VISION

The poet has always been a synthesiser... whether she is aware of it or not.

(Christian, 1985, p.12)

Nobody wrote stories about us.

(Z, p.18)

Merging her matrilineal ancestry with her connections with oral storytelling traditions, Lorde ensures that girls telling stories remains a narrative in itself in *Zami*. The importance of storytelling in Audre's life, even at an early age, has an urgency: "I made bargains with god to keep me awake. I bit my lips and pinched the soft fleshy parts of my palms with my fingernails, all to keep myself from falling asleep" (Z, p.45). Lorde recalls this in detail when she describes a family holiday to Connecticut that allowed her to share a space with her sisters and their secret vocal subversions. Audre anxiously waits up for her sisters to come and tell their stories, "I felt the bed sag under the weight of both their bodies, one on either side of me" (Z, p.45); the physical presence of Helen and Phyllis is the promise of inclusion in their girl-bonding moments: intrigue and night-time fervor.

In placing the storytelling in bed, in close physical proximity with her sisters, Lorde highlights the sensual and erotic intimacy of sharing the recesses of the imagination with others and affirms what should superficially be obvious - that fantasies often come from personal desires and wishes. Repeating the first line unveils a tradition of storytelling amongst girls: "They told each other stories. They told each other stories in endless installments, making up the episodes as they went along, from fantasies" (Z, p.45). The intimate imagination of women and girls can be perceived to threaten societal norms and expectations, which Audre recognises at an early age. She threatens to expose the girls' midnight fantasies to the ultra-pragmatic disciplinarian Linda Lorde, who "ever fearful of her daughters' possible improprieties and having little time for play and discussion" asks her to "tell her what among-you doing in bed every night!" (Z, p.45).

For Lorde, storytelling negotiates the spatial politics of women's writing, women's stories creating spaces where the polar oppositions of 'truth' or 'untruth' can be challenged. Here, the unspeakable is fantasised into the mouth of another, the experiential and the biographical removed from its historical and often fixed positioning. If, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. has determined, "people arrive at an understanding of themselves and the world through narratives" (Gates Jr., in McQuillan, ed., 2000, p.290), then in

writing these narratives, Lorde has also fictionalised her biographical stories or elements of her own biographical truth/s.

Lorde's biomythography further develops a tradition within women's literature where disclosure is often coded, layered and secreted through multiple narratives. The story of Audre and her sisters is a narrative within a narrative *because* she is writing biographical fiction through a gendered lens. When Lorde asks, "What do we want from each other/after we have told our stories?" (Lorde, 1997, p.409) in her poem 'There Are No Honest Poems About Dead Women', she reminds us that there is no absolution or completion to be found in stories alone. Without a connection with the process of life and its ongoing narratives, words are just a "pale blister of air" (Lorde, 1997, p.409).

Lorde, as narrator, is conscious of this process throughout the text, with young Audre reflecting: "I felt I was being inducted into the most secret of societies" (Z, p.47). Here she marvels in the delight of storytelling as a way to voice and question such truths. "I thought that the very idea of telling stories and not getting whipped for telling untrue was the most marvelous thing I could think of" (Z, p.46). Even though the storytelling session goes awry as Audre's chosen counter-narrative destroys Helen and Phyllis's own version of the story, the insight into the possibilities and power of sharing narratives with other girls/women leaves Audre with a kind of clarity of vision. That vision is materialised in a physical way, one that is also complex and painful because of Audre's visual impairment and sensitive eyes. In the below passage, Audre's senses become poetically synthesised - no distinction is drawn between her sensory experiences:

Staring up at the ceiling ... I relished the quiet, the new smells of strange bedclothes and sea-salty air, and the frank beams of yellow sunlight pouring through the high windows like a promise of endless day. (Z, p.48)

This synthesis enables Lorde, as biographer and narrator, to emerge from her childhood and forge her own creative path: "Right there and then,

before anybody else woke up, I decided to make up a story of my own" (Z, p.48).

Audre's relationship with her sisters, Helen and Phyllis, is one of textual and emotional distance. Audre sets herself apart, and is set apart from her sisters by their actions. Helen and Phyllis are portrayed in *Zami* as being a unified double entity, with Audre seen always to be outside of their intellectual scope and sisterly comfort. Significantly, Helen and Phyllis are not recognised as being part of Lorde's ancestral matrilineal heritage; instead, they act as further agents of power and control over Lorde's life. When Audre's sisters hang her outside of the window of the Lorde family's tenement block apartment, to them she is as weightless and unimportant as the detritus and minutiae of urban New York City. Comically suspended from the window by her sisters, Lorde contrastingly recalls Audre's feelings of alienation and family abandonment: "Until this day, the essence of sorrow and sadness ... forever living, is the forlorn, the remembered sight of a discarded silk stocking –brick-caught" (Z, p.42).²⁸ Like this discarded remnant of female identity, young Audre hangs poised on the bare brick - dangling powerlessly, waiting to be rescued, portrayed in the text as an inanimate object. Audre's fear of her mother's retribution for her sisters' cruel behaviour is more pressing and urgent to her than her immediate physical danger:

I remember the whipping... More than that, I remember the sadness and the deprivation and the loneliness of that discarded, torn and brick-caught silk stocking, broken and hanging against the wall in the tenement rain. (Z, p.43)

The symbolic "brick-caught" stocking is as helpless as Audre - caught by chance, snagging on the raw external brick and implying a woman's intimate un-sheathing. The repetition of the phrase "brick-caught" in this

²⁸ Although this scene represents Audre's feelings of alienation and abandonment by her family, it has highly comical moments; as in much of *Zami*, Lorde underlines the most tragic or embarrassing parts of the book with wry humour, disrupting potentially self-indulgent leanings.

passage personifies the stocking and its erstwhile abandonment.²⁹ The stocking is also a wasted precious commodity in post-war America - it is abandoned inexplicably, exposed to an environment that savagely juxtaposes its intent. The repetitious facades of the Harlem tenements intensify its abandonment, the stocking's faux natural colouring blending with the monotony of tenement brickwork. Lorde then follows the "sadness, and the deprivation and the loneliness" of the "discarded" stocking in the next line of prose. The silk stocking becomes "*torn and brick-caught*," a metaphor for Audre who, like the abandoned stocking, feels simultaneously abandoned and torn from her family through her internalised sense of estrangement and isolation.

Lorde's later rejection of stockings, when shopping with her lover Ginger in Stamford, echoes the intonations of racial exclusion and pain that Lorde associates with nylons. This association intersects feminine apparel as representative of identity with the default colouring of the "neutral" nylons that are usually a light tan colour:

"I hate nylons. I can't stand how they feel on my legs." What I couldn't say was that I couldn't stand the bleached-out color that the so-called neutral shade of all cheap nylons gave my legs. (Z, p.132)

Lorde's memory of the tenement stocking, her feelings about it associated with the abandonment and distrust of her sisters and family, and the fear bound up in that experience become a negative sensory memory that she verbalises:

The dry slippery touch of nylon and silk filled me with distrust and suspicion. The effortlessness with which those materials passed through my fingers made me uneasy. (Z, p.132)

²⁹ The nylon serves a dual purpose of historically placing this scene and gender-identifying this symbol of young women's maturation into womanhood; as discussed this is a problematised notion for Lorde as narrator, both racially and personally.

The stocking becomes part of a sensual and emotional trajectory in *Zami*. It expresses a range of feelings that engage the reader, who is then able to share those experiences and emotions.

THE SENSORY MEMORY

Touch, feel, sight and sound merge and are distorted, distilled and re-presented by a young Audre whose failing eyesight painfully re-orders her worldview. This creates visions that other children and her family do not see, in particular where colours are refracted and become sensual signifiers. Some of *Zami*'s most aesthetically sensuous passages involve a fragmented reading of light and colour as seen through Audre's weakened sight, which is physically partial and yet sensuously whole. In Audre's near-blind world of heightened sensory perception and hyper-sensuality, light is an internalised feeling as well as a physical sensation, and is perceived to have a magical status. Audre's visual disability advances rather than impedes her visions - Audre's trip to Connecticut is recollected as: "glistening childhood summers that sparkled like the thick glass spectacles I could not wear because of the dilating drops in my eyes" (*Z*, p.43). Lorde is able to narrate the wonder and magic of light as well as its coarse pain.

Audre's visual disability separates her from her family and surroundings in Connecticut, the light often too much to bear: "my memories of those early summers are of constantly squinting against the piercing agony of direct sunlight" (*Z*, p.43). Audre's family sees her disability as clumsiness, creating a nervous physical hyper-vigilance in Audre that forces her into a world of sensuality and language.³⁰ As Audre Lorde herself reflects in an interview with Karla M. Hammond:

³⁰ In queer, disabled academic scholar and activist Jennifer Barager's study of disability in Audre Lorde's *Cancer Journals*, she cites the importance of understanding disability by using an intersectional approach informed by black feminist pioneer, Kimberly Crenshaw. Critiquing scholarship that does not have an intersectional approach, she reminds us that people of colour and the marginalised poor are at most risk of developing a disability. As she says of mainstream disability scholarship: "This approach neglects the complex interrelation of oppressions experienced by people of color with disabilities, as well as the ways in which racism and able-ism are linked but not always analogous." (Barager, 2009,p3-4)

When I was a kid I'd take words apart and fragment them like colours ... Lights were surrounded by haloes of color because my eyes were so bad, every light was a prism. Words were like that. Every word would pop out and it would have all of this energy and color. (Lorde, interviewed by Hammond, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.30).

Yet still the overriding memory that young Audre has of her summer holiday is that "everything was dazzled by light" (Z, p.43).

Audre's Connecticut trip with her family, like many of the chosen narratives contained within *Zami*, marks a turning point; the use of colour is a way to describe and differentiate mood and focus in tandem with Audre's own social and personal mis/alignment. Light has an emotional, visual and visceral life in *Zami*, one that blurs external reality in parallel with presenting an emotional synesthesia. Seeping into Audre's visionary world are "the watery colours of the twilight ... to terrify me," the "watery" light "shining greenly" (Z, p.44), preempting the colour of the seas of unhappiness when she moves to Brighton Beach in Chapter 15. As the material barrier of "the buff-colored window-shades" mutes the light, her imagination transforms and personifies them into "closed eyes above my bed" (Z, p.44). The bright responsive light is adjusted by the shades, by the falling dusk and fading light of Lorde's interpretative childhood. Like the metaphor of the abandoned stocking, "those yellow-green window-shade twilights" also become "the colour of loneliness for me, and that has never left me" (Z, p.44). The narrator echoes the feelings of isolation that Audre experiences in this passage, intimately connecting Audre as her younger self and subject of her own narrative, to Lorde as omniscient biographer. Both biographer/narrator appear to be outsiders and recite feelings of abandonment; even in the company of her family, Audre is alone, unable to interpret the world and light in the same way her family does.

When Audre eventually gets her eyeglasses, these are also part of her magical visual/sensual world. They become "magical circles of glass that were rapidly becoming a part of me, transforming my universe, and remaining moveable" (Z, p.30). Just as Lorde, as narrator, improvises, plays

with and re-orders language throughout *Zami*, so the visualisation involved in Audre's language-making becomes part of that process:

I amused myself by counting the rainbows of color that danced like a halo, starburst patterns of light ... I played secret games with the distorted rainbows of light. (*Z*, p.31)

The refraction and tonalities of light are used as a literary motif in *Zami*. They define moments of spatial and temporal change for reader and narrator, outside of the archetypal revelatory moments of clarity and divert the reader from the punctuated linearity of biographical prose. When Lorde recalls, "everything is lost from the Connecticut trip," it disrupts the narrative of her childhood as well as the memories of one particular narrative. Lorde's only proof of the Connecticut trip is the production of a biographical narrative and "the two photographs which show me, as usual, discontent and squinting up against the sun" (*Z*, p.44).

POETIC SYNTHESISATION

The black mother who is the poet in every one of us.

(Lorde, interviewed by Rich, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.63)

Audre's emergence as a poet (and her desire to be recognised as a poet) is a recurring motif in *Zami*. The poetic synthesis of the text and multiple speakers who interject also transform understanding, perception and experience, following Linda Lorde's mantra that, "If you can't change reality, change your perceptions of it" (*Z*, p.18). Linda Lorde, Audre's mother, is both a familial muse and nemesis, erotically and creatively enmeshed with Audre's development as a poet and Lorde's as a biographer. This is juxtaposed with Audre's relationship with her mother in her early years, which is one of adoration and love: "I would have walked over rice on my knees to please Mother" (*Z*, p.25). Later, in her childhood and teens, this is tempered by the reality of her mother's personal strictures, public privations and angry outbursts.

Audre's delayed speech as a child becomes an indicator of her alienation from her family, her resolve in the beauty of words and their ensuing sensuality becoming "the only thing I could hold onto ... knowing I could read ... that could get me through" (Z, p.22). The librarian, Mrs. Baker, intuitively understands Audre's need to be told a story: "... here was this strange lady offering me my own story" (Z, p.22). Mrs. Baker makes a public space for Audre's right to read, reflect and, in turn, tell her own story. The only possible barrier to this white woman's transgression is Linda Lorde's approval: "I didn't dare look at my mother, half-afraid she might say no, I was too bad for stories" (Z, p.22). Even the embarrassment of Audre's public temper tantrum at her mother still doesn't interfere with her right to read, to her future vocation and calling: "I took the books from Mrs. Baker's hands after she had finished reading, and traced the large black letters with my fingers" (Z, p.23).

The emergence of Audre as poet coincides with the addition of the omniscient narrator as a regular interlocutor in *Zami* towards the end of Chapter 3, subtitled *How I Became a Poet*. Lorde's poetic synthesis intimately connects with the mythical evocations of her mother as warrior/poet/matriarch,³¹ where the quasi-spiritual is poetically imbued with reflective counter-narratives:

"When the strongest words ... come out of me sounding like words I remember from my mother's mouth, then I either have to reassess the meaning of everything I have to say now, or re-examine the worth of her old words." (Z, p.31)

This is a delicate re-envisioning, by Lorde the adult poet/writer, of the influence her mother has played in her creative life.

³¹ This is fully explored in the next chapter.

The intricate interplay of power, words and emotions, and the harsh way they can close down avenues of creativity as well as open them up, are familiar to the narrator as poet in *Zami*: “I am a reflection of my mother’s secret poetry as well as her hidden angers” (*Z*, p.32). The narrator recognises the role of the mother in helping her child to articulate many languages that are both learned and intuited, and may also be linguistic and sensual. The narrator as author, and Linda Lorde, captivate young Audre in an intimate secret world of language: “My mother had a special and secret relationship with words, taken for granted as language because it was always there” (*Z*, p.31). For Lorde as narrator, the process of writing parallels her own desire for intimacy, associated with her mother’s “secret relationship with words.” Audre the young poet learns that language holds in addition to powerful truths coded channels of life and relations.

Later in *Zami*, the interlocutor’s italicised poeticisms become a space of reflection; written in a filmic and dreamlike way, the scripted scenario in Chapter 25 evokes a psychic breakdown in the text. As the security of Audre’s relationship with her long-term lover Muriel comes to a close, she separates her identity and her sexuality from her relationships with white women, moving toward a greater sense of her identity as a black/lesbian woman. The psychic shift into full womanhood that she undergoes is marked by the end of her relationship with a white woman and significantly becomes a short story in its own right:

The Last of My Childhood Nightmares

My Mother’s House

July 5, 1954

(*Z*, p.199)

Formally corresponding with her earlier nested narrative, *How I Became A Poet*, the omniscient author cites and dates the most fictional passages of text as a record of dreams. *The Last of My Childhood Nightmares* provides one of the most dreamlike and overtly psychological sequences in the book. The Blakean “*hickory-skinned demons with long white hair and handsome demonical eyes*,” represent elderly sexless demons, whose age spots are

described as hickory, wood-like, solid in matter. The elderly creatures' arms are "wide as all tomorrow," barrier-like, blocking the past and any future escape or "doorway exit from a room through which I run, screaming, shrieking for exit" (Z, p.198). The house in which the dreamscape takes place is familiar to the narrator and yet the environment rejects the person in the dream, where *Zami's* former subjective 'I' is no longer welcome:

Everything is hostile to me. The doors refuse to open. The glass cracks when I touch it. Even the bureau drawers creak and stick when I try to close them. (Z, p.199)

The narrator is now able to distance herself from the past, from Audre's childhood, this psychic landscape of rejection now becomes one she simultaneously rejects. The sequence readies the narrator for her subsequent journey, distancing her from all she has known. The author is able to shape the subject's future within the text, removing an aspect of the protagonist's subjectivity from her own biography: "*This is no longer my home; it is only of a past time*" (Z, p.199).

CULTURAL MYTHOLOGIES AND THE BIOGRAPHICAL 'I'

If we keep speaking the same language together, we're going to reproduce the same history.

(Irigaray, 1985, p.205).

While biography is undoubtedly, as Shari Benstock affirms, a "feminine artform", the act of writing or 'mark-making' externalises thought and becomes a public and intersubjective process with an existence beyond the life of the scribe. Biographical writing in the form of letters, diaries, journals, excerpts, memoirs and other ephemera is socio-historically associated with the private and feminine. As Benstock has observed, autobiography reveals "not only gaps in time and space or between the individual and the social, but also a widening divergence between the manner and matter of its discourse" (Benstock, in Benstock, ed., 1988, p.11). The 'gaps' between the matter and manner of a discourse often reflect the

social and political positioning of the writer of that discourse. As Benstock explains, women's writing, especially writing associated with expressions of the self (confessional and otherwise), is not considered to be part of the public 'male' sphere. In this way Lorde uses biomythography to close the gap of discourse and politicise the private as a legitimate public concern.

In 'After a first book', a poem taken from Lorde's 1968 collection of poems entitled *The First Cities*, Lorde exposes the social construction of race and gender and how that construction is used as an absolute that discriminates at multiple levels. In the poem, Lorde subverts the idea that literature or writing is a *tabula rasa*, a space of originary depoliticisation. The blank page pre-imprint, so imbued with racialised meaning, is contrasted with the colour of the speaker's brown skin. The bar of her arm cutting across the vast expanse of the literary page also serves as a metaphor for what could be viewed as the whitewashing of literary history:

Paper is neither kind nor cruel
only white in its neutrality
and I have for reality now
the brown bar of my arm
moving in broken rhythms
across this dead place
(Lorde, 1997, p.36)

The use of biomythography in *Zami* and other black/lesbian feminist texts is often explicitly about the process of writing and the engagement of multiple authorial and narratorial voices in that process. This is against a context where Lorde herself noted: "There are very few voices for women and particularly very few voices for Black women, speaking from the center of consciousness, for the *I am* out to the *we are*" (Lorde in Byrd, Cole, Guy-Shaftall, eds., 2009, p.168). Lorde was part of a movement of black/lesbian women who were politicising their cultural production, giving visibility to and further developing black feminisms. As Rose M. Brewer has theorised, black feminists were always acutely aware that the "polyvocality of multiple social locations is historically missing from analyses of oppression and

exploitation in traditional feminism” (Brewer, in James & Busar, 1994, p.13). The importance of *Zami* in naming an emerging literary tradition of biomythography, and in its separation from and yet intertextual allegiance to black *and* feminist literary traditions, is pivotal to understanding its significance.

Lorde’s biomythographical approach centres on female subjectivity and deliberately mythologises that subjectivity in numerous ways; this enables the author to reveal multiple truths and intertextual connections without totalising these experiences. In doing this, Lorde’s writing challenges what Teresa De Lauretis believes to be Barthes’s universalisation of myth and narrative, a tendency to “end up de-historicising the subject and thus universalising the narrative process” (De Lauretis, in McQuillan, ed., 2000, p.206). The biomythographical allows subjectivities to occupy temporal *material* spaces- spaces that are fictitiously constructed and yet remain socio-historically anchored -synthesising material phenomena with the trans-historically mythical to create multiple bio-fictional realities. This disputes the notion of the sovereign masculine author and highlights a previous failure to recognise “that subjectivity is engaged in the cogs of narrative and indeed constituted in the relation of narrative, meaning, and desire” (De Lauretis, in McQuillan, ed., 2000, p.206). Biomythography does not subscribe to the individualist template of traditional auto/biography but is instead informed by a collectivist understanding of emerging representational myths that are written and unwritten, and relate to wider narratological concerns.

Queer theorist Shane Phelan’s study of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* posits Anzaldúa’s “rejection of ‘ontological separatism’ ” (Phelan, in Phelan, ed., 1997, p.83). Separate spheres of existence are shunned in favour of “understanding that oppression and resistance are lived as unities” (Phelan, in Phelan, ed., 1997, p.75). Lorde, as author, facilitates *Zami* as a biomythographical text, directly challenging the notion of patriarchal originary myth/s and creatively analysing identity and power. *Zami* foregrounds biographical inversions and articulations of the self within framed counter-narratives, with Lorde as the biographical subject

often mythologising her own existence. Throughout *Zami* the narrator/s are telling stories *about* themselves, fictionalising the biographical by adding realms of other worldliness that are sensual and visionary, associated with aesthetic codes such as colour and touch and reflected through dream like childhood memories that collapse an understanding of traditional biography. In presenting these lapses in stability through the genre of biomythography Lorde uses mark-making, language and recollection to mythologise or restore the often collective experiences of marginalised women.

The writer and cultural critic Gayl Jones has observed that, in black literature, “the voices of the less powerful group, ‘the other’, always must free themselves from the frame of the more powerful group, in texts of self-discovery, authority and wholeness” (Jones, 1992, p.192). Lorde makes visible black/lesbian bodies as subjectivities that resist Eurocentric narrative spaces of colonisation and patriarchy. She creates textual biography in a black female tradition that Bernice Johnson Reagon terms “cultural autobiography.” (Johnson Reagon, 1982, p.81). It has also been observed that, in writing her biomythography, Lorde is acknowledging “‘a paradox’ – that there exists another kind of reality which is neither exclusively internal nor external” (Burack, C., in Phelan, ed., 1977, p.37).

In *Zami*, Lorde redefines the meaning of biography by composing partial and fictively constructed memories that self-consciously reiterate their narrator’s multiple selves.³² *Zami* is not only a narrative of self-construction but *collective reconstruction*; the subjectivities are projected into a black matrilineal lineage that forms a synthesised aesthetic. In *Zami*, these subjectivities are represented as part of the narrator’s and Audre’s memories and recollections, which are often simultaneously sites of struggle and contradiction. Lorde is self-conscious about this act of turning the individualist ‘auto’ into a collectivist myth that goes beyond canonising individual selves. She attempts to challenge the exclusion and authority of the autobiography in order to change and evolve the hierarchies of power inherent within any discourse.

³² It could of course be argued that every memory or biography is both fictive and subjective.

At the time that it was written, *Zami* revealed a set of evolving and emerging truths in parallel with a feminist movement that was re-imagining narratives and the written text as ambiguous and multiple sites of “new consciousness” (Anzaldúa/Phelan). Nowhere is this more apparent than when Lorde articulates the simultaneity of the self and the gendered subject through the very processes of writing, expression and narrative creation. Here Lorde is declaring that not only will her ‘Own Words Be There’ through the act of writing but that the subjects of whom she writes will also be there. As I explain in Chapter 3, a pivotal element of Lorde’s self-titled genre is the multi-faceted way in which she creatively uses myth to construct what may not present, and to make present that which is literarily and culturally absent.

CHAPTER 3: THE DARK DIVINE: The Mythical Self

To embrace the ancient dark divine is to engage the political and the spiritual.

(hooks, in Byrd, 2009, p.243)

I think we need to weave myths into our world.

(Lorde, interviewed by Kraft, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.149)

There are myths of self-protection that hold us separate from each other.

(Lorde, 1996, p.212)

TEMPORAL MYTHMAKING

Myth provides us with absolutes in the place of ephemeral values and with a comforting perception of the world that is necessary to make the insecurity and terror of existence bearable.

(Morford, Leanardon, Sham, 2011, p.5)

Audre Lorde's interpretation of the mythical in *Zami* is closely linked with a reconsideration of women's role in formal monotheistic religion, ritual and spirituality. Lorde uses resistant subjectivity to re-interpret the way in which myth has been inscribed into our understanding of the mythical. Her interpretation of myth as referring to Afrocentric Goddesses, rather than androcentric Gods, reclaims spiritual Goddess matriarchs and the black divine matriarch.³³ Spirituality³⁴ is present in many feminist autobiographical texts from the 1970s onwards. In particular, black and / or lesbian women's narratives have reclaimed a feminist embodiment of

³³ I use "myth" in relation to Lorde's work by referencing a diverse set of narratives that can inform our understanding of Lorde's work today. It includes religious texts and other narrative genres or texts that refer to subjective archetypes.

³⁴ I use "spirituality" broadly, as meaning a complex esoteric site of those things that are hard to explain, divine or realise.

spirituality.³⁵ For many black girls brought up in early- to mid-twentieth-century America, church attendance and religion were central parts of community and family life (as *Zami* cites in Chapter 7). Although Christianity's patriarchal strictures on gender and sexuality informed many women's anti-monotheistic standpoints, its influence still permeated their cultural and social visions.

In *Zami*, Lorde plays with the received idea of myth. If the socio-historical premise of our times has been determined by ancient mythical subjectivities, representations and inherited rites of engagement and ritual, Lorde can -in re-presenting a matriarchal, female, dark and divine set of mythologies- subvert the patriarchal grip of the colonial mythical mind. Lorde acknowledges in the text the axis and influence of myth in contemporary society but also manages to re-orient myth to make it of use to black/lesbian women and girls as a tool to facilitate social and personal change. Lorde also questions her audience, building a collective feminist viewpoint and challenging literary structures by asking just who these myths comfort when subjugation, violence and terror are still the everyday experiences of the world majority. As Lorde goes on to express in a pivotal 1979 interview with her friend Adrienne Rich, she feels that black/lesbian feminists and women must:

never close our eyes to the terror, the chaos which is black which is creative which is female which is dark which is rejected which is messy

(Lorde/Rich, 2004, p.64)

Like her contemporaries Joan Nestle, Cheryl Clarke and Pat Parker, Lorde is re-presenting core aspects of women's lives and identities (individually and collectively). In *Women as Mythmakers*, Estella Lauter clearly genders this mythical visioning as a female entity, one that supports women to "re-envision our cultural mythology" (Lauter, 1984, p.3), re-

³⁵ Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker and Chinosole, amongst others, shift away from spiritual biographies and slave narratives as texts of redemptive monotheistic religious salvation and point to a more radical consideration of these texts as sites of politicised spiritual awareness.

inventing foundational narratives that focus on the female, the maternal and the ancient dark divine. This “dark divine” is –according to bell hooks (and, I would argue, Toni Cade Bambara and Chinosole)– a politicised female spirituality which, in its atemporal and transhistorical fluidity, marks a space that accommodates multiple ontological experiences that may be of a non-linguistic orientation.

Zami articulates this spirituality through some of the book’s major themes: desire, power and creativity. These themes are not represented in a mystical way but are strengthened through mythologising Lorde’s subjects’ personal narratives.³⁶ For instance, Audre’s encounter with Afrekete (as explored later in this chapter) brings spirituality into the physical realm through her lovemaking with Afrekete. The creativity of their union as artists (a poet and a musician) engenders new female subjectivities and representations still unfamiliar in literature. The women who populate *Zami* also *engage* in the mythical, recreating their own symbolic rites through archetypes –such as the matriarch and the lover– reinterpreted as the matrilineal symbolic. The mythical is often articulated vis-à-vis objects and subjects’ interaction with those objects; for example the pestle and mortar scene, where desire is associated with the intercultural relationship between food and the receptacles that transform these raw ingredients.

RECLAIMING THE MYTHICAL: THE DARK / THE DIVINE

This is one of the functions of myth: To underline the fact that even in our dreams and our visions we are not alone

(Lorde, interviewed by Pache and Dackweiler, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.168).

If myth is fundamental to an understanding of the ontological self in relation to lived experiences and the conscious/unconscious, then Lorde’s authorial resistance is against what she terms the “mythical norm” and what Boyce-Davies goes on to describe as representing the “white, male, monied,

³⁶ The deification of women in *Zami* becomes a motif: the sainthood of De Lois; the Goddess-like stature of Afrekete; the haunting presence of Gennie, even after her death; references to the mythical African Goddesses of Dahomey; and the reference by Eudora to the pagan rituals of the women of St. Cristobel.

propertied, middle/upperclass, thin, young, blonde, Christian, heterosexual” (Boyce-Davies, 1997, p.30). Atemporal and transhistorical “dark/divine” spirituality could be considered an element of black/lesbian experience but it can also be seen as a structural device in *Zami* – a device for writing cohesively about the socio-economic, political and social realities of black/lesbian and other marginalised people’s lives through time. These lives embody multiple responses to intersectional oppressions, and the struggle to survive what bell hooks terms the domination of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Black/lesbian agency is not wholly defined by struggle or survival; it is also exemplified by multiple experiences that are communicated numerous ways. *Zami* uses the mythical to reclaim and rename those experiences; in making the nuances, exchanges and concerns of a group of black/lesbian women visible, Lorde is critically engaging herself (as author), the narrative’s subjects, and readers in what could be loosely termed an expanded ‘universal’. This universal does not exclude nor solely belong to what Toni Morrison refers to as the “western” or Eurocentric literary imagination.

The ‘literary value’ of black/lesbian outsider women’s writing has often been subject to a criticism that has abstracted black identity from lesbian identity, disembodiment black/lesbian subjectivities and individualising collective experiences. In creating a mythical, semi-biographical and fictive set of subjective histories (for these are not Audre/Lorde’s stories alone), the text is able to communicate, collectivise and resist being silenced in intertextual and intersubjective ways. In one of Lorde’s early Afrocentric poems, ‘The Winds of Orisha’³⁷, Lorde proselytises the Yoruban Goddess/es of storms and the “Impatient legends that speak through my flesh” (Lorde, 1997, p.91), including intercultural mythical creators such as Tiresias (the clairvoyant Greek transwoman), Mother Yemonja (mother of all Orisha forms) and Oshun (a sensual Orishan deity representing feminine sexuality). Opening *The Winds of Orisha*, Lorde outlines the focus of the poem, the sentiment of which extends to much of Lorde’s written work including *Zami*:

³⁷ Taken from Audre Lorde’s poetry collection, *A Land Where Other People Live*, 1973.

This land will not always be foreign.
How many of its women ache to bear their stories
Robust and screaming like the earth erupting grain
(Lorde, 1997, p.91)

If *Zami* is written into a space of black/lesbian invisibility, where women “ache to bear their stories,” then the mythical becomes a way to create a continuity of expression and form for delivering narratives and histories that have not been afforded a literary space. These literatures can be seen as occupying, both socially and in literature, what Homi Bhabha refers to as a “Third Space”:

which makes structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is continuously revealed as an integrated, open expanding code (Bhabha, in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, ed., 1995, p.208).

In relating the biomythographical with Bhabha’s Third Space concept, narratives are no longer tied to written or evidential forms - they can also be ephemeral and interchangeable. Just as Lorde has recounted the almost erotic sensuality of intimately sharing stories with her sisters earlier in *Zami* in Chapter 5 by Chapter 8, these experiences become interchangeable with the narrator’s adult worldview and the development of the text itself. Audre’s narration in this chapter connects dark and divine mysticisms about her own undisclosed sexuality with the goddesses of Dahomey - “I grew Black as *Seboulisa*”. (Z, p.58). Audre’s sexuality and the differences she associates with it destroys any linear timeframe in the text. A poetical ambivalence in the early passage’s phrasing parallels her life as an adult lesbian whilst it evokes the pain and loneliness of her family life in the past as a child:

*I lie beside my sisters in the darkness, who pass me in the street
unacknowledged and unadmitted’ (Z, p.58)*

The use of the word 'sister' and its multiple connotations becomes a space of interchangeable meaning structured and held by Lorde's biomythographical framework.

PHILOSOPHISING THE MYTHICAL

Lorde's work was influenced by sources beyond black/lesbian feminism and the radical feminist movement. In her formative years, she was exposed to the poetry of the Romantics, the Beats and her classical education at Hunter College. Yet *Zami* unarguably reflects Lorde's involvement in black/feminist political discourse and intertextual understanding of black narratives.³⁸ The author idealises her Grenadian, Carriacou ancestry and heritage, through an Afrocentric³⁹ lens framed by imperialism and colonialism. She juxtaposes this with her upbringing in a working class migrant family and urban northern U.S. environment – as opposed to the black feminist idealisation of the 'south' as locus and metaphor for black experience. Lorde's inherited and adopted use of colonial language often reflects what Homi Bhabha refers to as the:

problematic boundaries of modernity ... enacted in these ambivalent temporalities of nation-space. The language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past. (Bhabha, in Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, ed., 1995, p.177)

Lorde's ancestry and racial identity/ies both differentiate and associate her with African American struggle, the European colonisation of the Caribbean, and the subsequent migration of colonised peoples to 'free' America. All this intensifies the complex racial and social dynamics of the U.S.'s African diaspora.

³⁸ As discussed and referenced in Alexis De Veaux's detailed biography of Audre Lorde, *Warrior Poet*.

³⁹ See previous notes (footnote 18) on the use of the word Afrocentrism in Chapter 1 and an expansion of this in my reference to Gloria I. Joseph's work later in this chapter.

In talking about Sojourner Truth, Professor Gloria I. Joseph (who was Lorde's partner from 1984 until her death in 1992) discusses her belief in an Afrocentric worldview and speaks of an "African reality in which the material and the spiritual worlds are one" (Joseph, in Braxton and McLaughlin, ed., 1990, p.45) and what Sojourner Truth names "the infinite spirit-symbolic imagery" associated with it. This reframes bell hooks' reference to the "dark divine" which hooks also believes engages "the political and the spiritual" (hooks in Byrd, Betsch-Cole, Guy Shaftall, eds., 2009, p.243) as a way of bringing together matter and meaning, the tangible and the ephemeral. It defies a set of binary categorisations, rooted in philosophical or theological meanings that may have little relevance to or bearing on the experiences of black lesbian women. There is a tradition in black women's writing of the merging of the poetic, the spiritual, and the political which is arguably continued in *Zami*, one that is -again in Joseph's words- "grounded in African epistemology and cosmology, this is the same power Black feminists are reasserting by reclaiming their African roots" (Joseph, in Braxton and McLaughlin, ed., 1990, p.44). At the same time the many influences and the complexity of *Zami* prevent an exclusively Afrocentric interpretation, or one that reductively seeks to diminish American realities.

In *Zami*, Lorde, as omniscient interlocutor (signalled by italics in the text), reconnects with her spiritual ancestral foremothers, "*Oh mother of the word incarnate... hear me and answer me now*" (Z, p.10). She also recovers a physical and subjective connection with the incarnate mother of all. This mother is neither defined as God nor is she eternal and unmoving. If continental phenomenology relates subjectivity to consciousness, then Lorde also relates subjectivity to a spirituality where, as Toni Cade Bambara believes:

reality is also psychic. That is to say, in addition to all the other things, for example the political, we live in a system that is guided by the spiritual order. (Bambara, interviewed by Chandler, in Braxton and McLaughlin, ed., 1990, p.347)

For Lorde, this Afrocentric worldview is pivotal to her politics and her writing. It defies continental philosophy and aesthetics and rewrites the dark and the divine into black/lesbian consciousness and literature, merging, in Toni Morrison's words, "the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world ... with neither taking precedence" (Toni Morrison, in Braxton and McLaughlin, ed., 1990, p.300).

DIASPORIC LEGITIMACY & ORIGINARY MATERNAL MYTHS

The first time I came to Grenada I came seeking 'home', for this was my mother's birthplace and she always defined it so for me

(Lorde, 1996, p.220)

The crux of the narrator's dislocation throughout *Zami* is based on a sense of separation from the maternal; this is articulated with reference to her birth and spiritual mother's homeland, as well as her return to a diasporal home, mythological in origin, in both Grenada and West Africa. The narrator opens *Zami* with an indigenous originary myth: "Grenadians and Barbadians walk like African peoples. Trinidadians do not" (Z, p.9). The comparison between Grenadians and Trinidadians is an historical reference to the roots and heritage of the islands, as well as to socio-political concerns that were affecting the contemporary Lorde family. The Grenadians had suffered years of post-colonial civil and political conflict, high unemployment and continued exploitation from foreign powers. The People's Revolutionary Group came to power in 1979, investing in black-led industry within the island, bettering the island's infrastructure and seeking guidance from Paulo Freire to educate the islanders.

It is this Black Nation ethos and revolutionary activism that Lorde believes leads the U.S. in 1981 to rehearse "the invasion of Grenada openly" (Lorde, 1996, p.225). The connection of Grenada to Africa through centuries of slavery, and its connection to the sugar trade under British (and later U.S.) colonialism is a point of differentiation from the mostly East and South Asian workers in Trinidad who came to the islands between 1845 and 1917 as indentured labourers, after the abolition of slavery in the colonies. Lorde

makes use of the cultural and racial differences between the people of Grenada and Trinidad to reveal different colonial pasts. Indian migrants were paid (albeit poorly and in substandard, quasi-slave, conditions), whereas islanders of African descent continued to be the dominant population and yet were exploited and enslaved. This heritage of oppression differentiated each island culturally and, according to Lorde, spiritually.

The very gait of the Grenadians of African descent connects Lorde's mythology to West Africa, and the people of Dahomey -one of the greatest cities of ancient Africa- to a heritage of slavery, colonisation and 'Third World' ancestry. Lorde goes on to de-colonise these connections through the appropriation in her work of the recurring female deity, Seboulisa, mother of all Orisha deities. As Lorde explains in her poem 'Dahomey', taken from the consciously Afrocentric poetry collection *The Black Unicorn*, published in 1978:

It was in Abomey that I felt
The full blood of my father's wars
And where I found my mother
Seboulisa
(Lorde, 1997, p.239)

This indicates what Lorde meant by "the injection of Africanness into the socio-political consciousness of the world" (Lorde, in Byrd, Cole, Guy-Sheftall, 2009, p.72). It also intersects with a gendered and cultural approach in her writing where she references Dahomey. In addition to being the site of the Dahomey Amazons, a unit of powerful eighteenth-century female soldiers, it was a non-religious artistic practice that was fully supported by the state prior to colonisation. This sense of heritage underpins the Afrocentric philosophy that threads itself throughout *Zami*, rooting the text in a spiritual and ancestral consciousness specifically linked to Lorde's African heritage. As Chinsole notes, "The cultures of people of African descent are dialectically linked in origin and destination. Most blacks of the diaspora have West African ancestry, and now they resist in similar ways Western political systems that have colonised, segregated, marginalised, and

continue to discriminate against them” (Chinosole in Braxton and McLaughlin, ed., 1990, p.380). Lorde goes on to define her version of a feminised ancestry, as women of African descent who are neither a monolithic group nor culturally appropriated but maintain their own subjectivities:

There is a softer edge of African sharpness upon these women, and they swing through the rain-warm streets with an arrogant gentleness that I remember in strength and vulnerability. (Z, p.9)

This mythical questing relates *Zami* to other genres such as the framed narrative and the chivalric mode; Lorde consciously rewrites the mythical herstory of black/lesbian marginalised women into a literary frame of reference.⁴⁰ But there is also a sensual and individual connection that Audre as biographer yearns for, the connection to the maternal, the foremother, the mythical matriarch, whom Linda Lorde –in her work ethic, strength and brief moments of power– will demonstrate but not be able to maintain in her relationship with her daughter Audre. Linda arrives as a migrant in New York, working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week; homesick the moment she arrives from the “tiny spice island” (Lorde, 1996, p.221). In *Zami*, the narrator often connects back to an identified Caribbean heritage that her mother does not represent in twentieth-century North America, owing to her light skin tone and upwardly mobile outlook. Audre is dark like her father Byron Lorde and identifies with his strength, his silence and his intellect. Byron Lorde leaves a “psychic print on me, silent, intense and unforgiving” (Z, p.3). Audre does not share her mother’s “Spanish” looks that help her initially to pass as European when she arrives in New York, work as a chambermaid and find a level of racial acceptance. The sway and power Lorde invests in the Granadian women connects Audre to her blacker female

⁴⁰ By the use of the word ‘questing’ I am referring to a repeated motif in *Zami* that occurs in nested narratives within the text where the protagonist is seen to be seeking out various end goals, rather than passively experiencing life. Audre is constantly searching for poetic words, exciting experiences with Gennie, parading New York City streets with her sisters in search of real and comic book adventures, looking for lovers and allies in lesbian bars and so on. I would interpret this motif as Lorde subverting the chivalric mode and by doing so thus reinserting black/lesbian female experience into a gendered genre and literature in general.

ancestors, and yet Audre also connects with the power of her lighter-skinned mother's anger and outrage.

There was also a political element to Lorde-as-author's need to 'return' and search for ancestry that was neither appropriated nor sentimentalised. Lorde had ongoing issues with white, academic, middle-class, liberal feminists, the iconography of the white goddess, and the refusal of white radical feminist lesbians (Mary Daly, Barbara Walker *et al*) to engage with black women's experiential realities. As Lorde writes in an open letter to Mary Daly:

To dismiss our Black foremothers may well be to dismiss where european women learned to love. ... What you excluded from Gyn/Ecology dismissed my heritage and the heritage of all other non-european women, and denied the real connections that exist between all of us. (Lorde, 1996, p.119)

What Lorde sees in Daly's views stands for a more general sense of white feminists' refusal to acknowledge black women's experiences, and the need for black women to reclaim and rewrite their own herstories. *Zami* is a deliberate attempt to write a version of black women's history with references to a rich black ancestry. Lorde's Grenadian heritage gives her this opportunity, a way to fictionalise the truth of the experiential.

'AUTHENTICATING' THE DIASPORA

As the opening chapter of *Zami* demonstrates, Linda Lorde is Audre's connection to a diasporic maternal 'home'. She may represent a form of alienation for Audre but the text's narrator contradicts the sentiments of the young Audre. The narrator observes the relationship between Linda's longings for home and Lorde's own newly defined connections with the island (which Audre Lorde herself first visited in 1978). Audre, as protagonist, has not yet been to Grenada but Lorde, as narrator, has a deep connection with the island because of her mother's metaphorical tongue, "Once *home* was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out

of my mother's mouth" (*Z*, p.13). *Zami* in a sense re-writes Audre Lorde's own biographical future as much as her inherited past, with Lorde settling in Grenada a decade after *Zami* was published, and eventually having her ashes scattered there after her death.

This sense of dislocation from a diasporic home, that runs from beginning to end of Audre's quest, is coupled with her physical, sexual and romantic journeying. By the end of *Zami*, Lorde has answered Audre's questions of belonging; she knows that home lies in another woman's arms. Linda's "little secret" of hoping eventually to go 'home,' which she never achieves, is represented by her yearning for the authentic foodstuffs of tropical fruits, fried bananas and fish to be found "under the bridge." This is replicated in Audre's encounters toward the end of *Zami* with Afrekete, her spiritual and ancestral lover. These maternal and matriarchal connections to 'home' extend beyond the physical realm and in turn connect Audre as *Zami* with Afrekete – mother, artist and lover.

Just as Linda Lorde's language connected young Audre's physical domestic world with her Grenadian ancestry, so this same language connects Audre to her own matrilineal ancestry. As the narrator explains when Audre and Afrekete become lovers:

"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 close to home- that is to say as authentic- as was possible. (*Z*, p.249)

Lorde states that an attempt at authenticity is one of many material signifiers that become part of Audre's experiences. Black heritage is immemorial, with no beginning and no end; it is etched into the narrator's psyche and is, like Afrekete, "an emotional tattoo" (p.253). Lorde reiterates that this experience is as authentic "as was possible," suggesting her own problematics with notions of authentic cultural experiences as monolithic cultural imperatives.

After the death of Gennie, *Zami* depicts Audre living for a long period without an intimate relationship with another black woman. Audre's return to a psychic and sexual orientation that involves another black woman (Afrekete) is significant as it emphasises Lorde's own personal ongoing struggle with white lovers throughout the main body of the text. The emphasis on black women as mythical warriors parallels Lorde's belief in a matrilineal African diaspora, as represented by multiple references in Lorde's work and poetry to the women of Dahomey West Africa (discussed above), where "women can be both: warriors and mothers" (Lorde, in Byrd, Cole and Guy-Shaftall, eds., 2009, p.168). Lorde names the warriors as friends and lovers as well as mothers: "*Madivine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Granada, and so is their strength and their beauty*" (Z, p.14), in an attempt to disavow a white feminist history that excludes intercultural and migrant women's experiences.

The interfacing opening and closing chapters of *Zami* (1 and 31 respectively), and their parallel examination of Linda Lorde and Afrekete, symbolically materialise the mythical in *Zami*. Caribbean foods become associated with a sensual, complex and eroticised diasporic experience. Linda Lorde is "trapped" in a "stranger's country" (Z, p.10); no matter how she searches for the staples of her beloved Grenada, she is only able to find the synthetic "Paradise Plums- hard oval candies, cherry-red on one side, pineapple-yellow on the other" (Z, p.10). Rather than savour their sweetness, young Audre notices how they sting her tongue, just as Lorde-as-narrator observes that they stymie young children's supplications. But when -twenty years later- Afrekete and Audre, as adult women, buy their fruits as part of an erotic ritual that will be used in their lovemaking, these Caribbean foods are easier to source. Food thematically unites Audre and Afrekete with their foremothers, whose struggles have simultaneously made both Caribbean fruits and the young women's lesbian identities more accessible and realised by the end of the book.

The fruit trees so symbolic of home to Linda Lorde -and that could never be grown in New York's climate- become fruits of a diasporic home that can be:

half peeled then planted, fruit-deep, in each other's bodies until the petals of skin lay like tendrils of broad green fire upon the curly darkness between our upspread thighs (p.249)

Linda Lorde, to whom sexuality is a forbidden fruit, does not share this interpretation of home; the tongue that will lick delicate fruit from the skin of Afrekete was warned away from such indulgence by the "wicked Arabic gum" (p.10) of the Paradise Plums. The poor replicant of the Grenadian fruits that "cut through the tongue's pink coat" (p.10) is a warning to the young Audre from her staunch Catholic mother.

Ideas of a mythical diaspora permeate *Zami*, initially through the loss and longing of Byron and Linda Lorde for their Grenadian Carriacou home, and then through the subjectivities developed vis-à-vis the maternal ancestry that Lorde invokes in her encounter with Afrekete. Audre's father Byron "did not like to talk about home because it made him sad, and weakened his resolve to make a kingdom for himself" (Z, p.12). This stoic resolve parallels Selina Boyce's father, Deighton, in Paule Marshall's novel *Brown Girl Brownstones*, destroyed by his need to recreate a kingdom or to return home to his imaginary Caribbean idyll. It likewise parallels and outlines Linda's idealisation of her ancestral and native land: "my mother's geography was a fantasy or crazy or at least too old-fashioned" (Z, p.14). Audre herself associates home with trauma, an understanding of the family apartment and her mother intertwined with positive and negative ideas about her childhood environment: "I spun visions of sapodilla and mango as a net over my Harlem tenement cot in the snoring darkness rank with nightmare sweat" (Z, p.13). The visions of the sweet fruit of an ancestral home, "spun" from childhood utopias, contradict the reality of Audre's cot that is surrounded by adult dystopias and the fraught realities that connect her adult fears to childhood experience.

THE SPIRITUAL MATRILINEAL

The sexualised ritual of Afrekete and Audre's lovemaking in Chapter 31 is also Audre's rejection of formal religion, which she displaces with the worship of women and her matriarchal ancestry, or what Chinosole names "the matrilineal diaspora." Linda's Catholicism and religious devotion to the Virgin Mary is also offset by her herbal knowledge passed on from her maternal foremothers and a Caribbean adaptation of Catholicism: "She knew about mixing oils for bruises and rashes ... About burning candles before All Souls Day to keep away the soucouyants" (Z,p.10). Here there is an intercultural disjunction between an imperialist Catholicism and a syncretic Caribbean folklore.⁴¹ The soucouyant represents a shape-shifting woman or spirit that masquerades as an old woman by day and turns into a blood-sucking hag by night. Despite Linda's inability as an adult to embrace matriarchal folklores, veiled as they are by her devout Catholicism, her ancestry and roots are ever-present.

Michael Herzfield, interpreting Don Handelman's Strauss-inspired theories on ritual, suggests that "in transforming the condition of a group or individual, the performance of a ritual may also transform the way in which its underlying assumptions are perceived or conceptualised ..." (Herzfield in Herzfield, ed., 2001, p.8). In this light, Lorde seems to portray the merging of Linda's ancestral syncretic heritage with the adopted religion imposed on the Caribbean colonies- Catholicism- as being a part of the spiritual matrilineal legacy. Both the syncretic matrilineal belief system and organised religion are seen to have equal weight in Linda Lorde's life: she can neither escape nor return to her island, all she can do is stave off the European soucouyant imports, the vampiric colony remnants.

In *Zami*, ritual is linked to the sensual, to the physical manifestation of a person's psychic and spiritual life -something that Lorde will repeatedly and symbolically reframe throughout *Zami*.⁴² It is interrelated with

⁴¹ Catholicism was brought to the Caribbean with sugar trade imperialism and European missionaries.

⁴² See reference to Chinosole and Toni Cade Bambara, in Chapter 2.

hierarchical or ordered systems of power: intercultural, social, personal, and metaphysical moments of transformation. In further developing anthropological ideas about ritual practice, Herzfield goes on to say: “Rituals, often associated with the reproduction of systems of power, may also serve as vehicles of change” (Herzfield in Herzfield, ed., 2001, p.8). Ritual is used in *Zami* to evoke these periods of change, to mythologise the absent and thus make present a continuity of existence. Women are the producers of change in *Zami*, and this allows women to retrieve power, both contemporaneously and ancestrally. Lorde retrieves the black/lesbian narratives of those whose lives have been subjugated or, as in Grenada, historically lost to slavery.

As narrator, Lorde invokes spiritual exchange and physical change simultaneously – rituals are performed and serve to spiritually transform the performer or subject. Lorde demonstrates this by adopting the ancestral as mythical in order to ground her narratives. Although this ritual and exchange can be seen through her deployment of the erotic, Lorde deliberately gives this an historical grounding through female subjectivities. She deploys and refers to “the root truths” taught by her foremothers - her grandmother Ma-Mariah and her mother’s sisters Ma Liz and Aunt Anni - who “remembered the root-truths taught her by their mother, Ma-Mariah and learned other powers from the women of Carriacou” (Z, pp.12-13). The root-truths of Lorde’s ancestry found subjectivities beyond myth, writing into existence what has been silenced or determined as non-existent. The knowledge of these root-truths has passed between women; it is not just historical but bound to a continuation of women’s relationships with one another. These relationships are often determined by circumstance, hardship and struggle, but they are also lived, embodied ontologies and ways of being that defy categorisation.

BLACK LESBIANISM & ORIGINARY MYTH

Lorde relates the narration of Audre’s female ancestry in the contemporary world in a deliberate attempt to rewrite black/lesbian narratives. Just as Lorde connects the psychic life of female intimacy to her

childhood relationships: “the emotional aspects of lesbianism have to do with my mother, although the life-death struggle I felt for my father was also a factor” (Lorde, interviewed by Shapiro, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.23), she also names and historicises lesbianism. Lorde asserts, in the opening of Braxton and McLaughlin’s ground-breaking collection of black women’s critical thought on literature, that black/lesbians are not a new phenomenon: “It’s not that we haven’t always been here since there was a here” (Lorde in Braxton and McLaughlin, ed., 1990, p.xi). But Lorde also interrupts the notion of lesbianism as a purely physical act, emphasising the need to acknowledge Adrienne Rich’s idea of a lesbian continuum (as discussed in Chapter 1).

In expanding a consciousness around lesbianism, an identification with separatist cultures and ways of living, Lorde as author and narrator connects with a set of women’s traditions that inform and underpin her writing. Lorde writes and works, just as generations of women before her:

built their women’s houses and the rainwater catchments, harvested the limes, wove their lives and the lives of their children together. Women who survived the absence of their sea-faring men easily, because they came to love each other, past the men’s returning (p.14).

For Lorde ancestral symbols are lived processes with a material history. In redefining ontological understandings of both gender and sexuality, Lorde shifts the axis of the metaphysical world and of the material world –by recentering the experiential within an Afrocentric worldview:

African tradition deals with life as an experience to be lived ... we see ourselves as a part of a life force; we are joined, for instance, to the air, to the earth. We are part of a whole-life process. (Lorde, in Hall, 2006, p.98)

As the concluding narrative in *Zami* illustrates, Audre’s encounter with Afrekete brings together Lorde’s thematic and subjective mythologisation of black/lesbian lives.

AFREKETE

Myth is a meta-language, an allegory in that it gives structure to a gap between its surface and its content, and history is mythologised by its subservience to irresistible narratology.

(Keller, in McQuillan, ed., 2000, p.277)

Sexuality and desire are the connectors that transport Audre, *and* Lorde as narrator, to an estranged 'home', a spectrum of women-centric communities where "the language for learning [is] woven into the tongue of the mother" (Christian, in Pryse and Spillers, eds., 1985, p.260). Often, in descriptions of active embodied desire and sexuality, mythical symbolism is connected with Afrocentric idealisms and figures, and an interconnected matrilineal mythology that Chinosole has referred to as the "matrilineal diaspora: the capacity to survive and aspire, to be contrary and self-affirming across continents and generations" (Chinosole, in Braxton and McLaughlin, ed., 1990, p.379).

Much has been written about *Zami's* pestle and mortar scene (Chapter 11 of *Zami*), also entitled 'My Mother's Mortar'.⁴³ As a stand-alone narrative it was and continues to be published in articles and books, and has a far-reaching impact in its engagement with female sexuality. Chinosole's theoretical descriptor of the matrilineal diaspora, in which she cites the pestle and mortar narrative, can be compared with Lorde's conclusion of *Zami* and what I will term the Afrekete scene (Chapter 31) - when the identities of Lorde as author and narrator, and Audre as biographer, are interwoven with mythical representations of the self.

This comparative reading of both sequences elucidates the symbolism revolving around the "infinite spirit-symbolic imagery" that I explored earlier in this chapter, and extends Chinosole's theory of the matrilineal diaspora into a wider Afrocentric world context. My approach follows

⁴³ 'My Mothers Mortar' was published in the feminist journal *Heresies* in 1978, and is one of the first of *Zami's* framed narratives.

Barbara Christian's assertion that black/lesbians "now consider our shared symbolic economies in light of patriarchist *and* heterosexual hegemony" (Christian, in Pryse and Spillers, ed., 1985, p.258). Lorde chooses symbols that pertain to rituals of sexual identity and uses a matrix of spiritual and esoteric references, alongside her critical inquiries into performativity, power and the text's emerging subjectivities of resistance. In doing so she significantly challenges the often white focus of queer performative theory where, in Homan's view:

black women are used by white post-structuralist and post-modernist feminists to function as an 'alibi' for a dematerialising agenda, aimed specifically at dematerialising the female body. (Homans, in Lane, 2013, p.673)

This remains an important subtext in Lorde's work, to which I return in Chapter 5 of this dissertation when further exploring lesbian subjectivity.

In Chapter 11, or 'My Mother's Mortar', *Zami's* eroticism is extolled in tandem with the power of Audre's desire. The pestle, a phallic symbol, resonates throughout the chapter, pounding out and counteracting both Oedipal and Lacanian sub-narratives.⁴⁴ The mortar represents a form of communication with the maternal, a symbolic object that connects generations of women⁴⁵: "a whole powerful world of nonverbal communication and contact between people was absolutely essential and

⁴⁴ Psychoanalysis, according to Alexis De Veaux's biography, can be seen to inform Lorde's thinking and writing in the late 1970's when other forms of feminist consciousness raising and therapy were also being popularised as an alternative to the patriarchal medical psychoanalytic models. Here I reference both Freud and Lacan in a non-specific way to represent models of thinking that dominated notions of the 'self' in the twentieth century and like other systems of knowledge and thinking considered to be patriarchal-often created 'subnarratives' about women that articulated an inferiority derived from gender identity alone.

⁴⁵ As Jacqueline Rose has commented in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, a book that illuminates the way women poets have been historically considered and oppressed by society (especially female poets that are seen to subvert gender norms) feminist criticism has often been divided about the self being either whole or fragmented. Either way Jacqueline Rose argues that this often "remove[s] women form the historical process" (Rose, 1991, p.27). By inscribing objects within a historicized context Lorde effectively interjects women into the 'historical process', in this case she does so with the inclusion of the pestle and mortar in this sequence.

that was what you had to learn to decipher and use” (Lorde, interviewed by Rich, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.47).

Lorde places ‘My Mother’s Mortar’ at a juncture in the text where her relationship with her mother is becoming untenable and her sexual desire can no longer be hidden, creating what Chrysanthi Nigianni claims to be a “shift from a psychoanalytic thinking about lesbianism as identity corresponding to a certain psycho-social mode of ‘being a lesbian’ ” (Nigianni, in Lane, ed., 2013, p.612). Her experiences are related to her autonomy and her own invested desire, one that is also connected to a social and ancestral lineage and a matrilineal diaspora. Audre and Lorde as narrator are able to trace their maternal ancestry through material objects, the pestle and mortar additionally representing the socio-historic relationships between objects, trade and exchange, reciprocity and value; the meaning is subjective and simultaneously objective.

‘My Mother’s Mortar’ opens with a recollection of Lorde-as-narrator’s childhood, spatio-temporally distancing herself from remembered events. Feminist scholar and activist Jane Marcus reflects on the role of co-productive memory-sharing that presents a greater insight into *Zami* as a text of cultural remembrance:

If we agree that the writer resurrects herself through memory, then the reader also resurrects the writer through reading her. This *collaboration* is a reproduction of women’s culture as conversation. (Marcus, in Benstock, ed., 1988, p.137)

Lorde, as narrator, invites us to share her sensual memory: “When I was growing up in my mother’s house, there were spices you grated and spice you pounded, and whenever you pounded spice and garlic and other herbs, you used a mortar” (*Z*, p.71). Significantly, the sensual ways to approach the pounding of the spices are linked to a delicate play on words where ‘salt’ becomes both a descriptor of value and worth, and spices become something of import that denote the value of her mother’s heritage and a differential value to a capitalist exchange. “Every West Indian woman worth

her salt had her own mortar” (Z, p.71). This knowledge of the spice trade is a projected memory that connects a shared ancestral heritage with the colonial exploitation of black slaves in the Caribbean.

The mortar itself is a direct link to Audre’s own interpretation of ‘home’ and her maternal diasporic heritage, an object Audre feels deeply connected to:

an elaborate affair, quite at variance with her other possessions ... It stood, solid and elegant, on a shelf in the kitchen cabinet ... and I loved it dearly. (Z, p.71)

The object takes on an emotive set of experiences, ritual and exchange connecting Audre to her mother’s matrilineal ancestry and the many selves of Lorde as narrator that are connected to Linda Lorde. To Audre, the mortar’s presence has a strong bearing on her emotional responses; it is a vessel that carries Audre’s experiential and sensory self. The clear role that the pestle as object has in physically breaking down and preparing matter also symbolises power and the metaphysical. The pestle and mortar retains its place as an intercultural object, one that crosses continents and cultures, preparing different foodstuffs, matter for consumption or for sensual and spiritual reward. The mortar serves to symbolise and extenuate what Gwendolyn Mikell in *African Feminism*⁴⁶ refers to as:

The continuum [which] appears to be grounded in African communal, historical, symbolic, and experiential constructs, rather than in cultural constructs based on Western individualism and competition. (Mikell, in Lane, ed., 2013, p.699)

If the mortar is also associated with Lorde-as-narrator’s, or Audre’s mother then it could be presumed that the pestle is associated with Audre’s father. Yet I agree that Lorde in fact escapes Oedipal determinants, as Chrysanthi

⁴⁶ This is an essay in which Mikell explores an African continuum of feminism that she differentiates from ‘Western’ feminism.

Nigianni has suggested of black lesbianism in her Deleuzian analysis of black lesbianism. The pestle in this scene, in symbolising the phallic, symbolises erotic exchange *rather than* phallic power, recreating such psycho-sexual ‘social coding’. Nigianni elaborates on this in *Butterfly Kiss: The Contagious Kiss of Becoming-Lesbian*:

schizoanalysis... aims at a reinceptualisation of both desire and body in non-psychoanalytic terms. More precisely, schizoanalysis argues for a desire which is anoedipal, spontaneous, free from social coding’. (Nigianni, in Lane, ed., 2013, p.613)

Lorde, as narrator, reclaims the female experiential as a site of desire, rooting the black lesbian erotic in a polyvocal matrix that allows for dynamism, exchange and difference.

Lorde-as-narrator goes on to clarify at length the role of her mother’s mortar and its visual qualities in detailed and romantic terms. The Victorian poeticisms she uses remind the reader of Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market* but the dark and vibrant sexuality of the fruits of temptation are not associated with “goblin men” or the threat of male sexuality where girls and women are traded and “pluck’d”. Instead, Lorde reclaims an active female sexuality where the mortar is realised as the female symbolic, something associated with female desire and eroticism, in an intertextual frame of reference. The mortar becomes ‘foreign’ and fragrant, exoticised and ritualised by the pubescent Lorde who imagines such aspects to be ingrained into the rich dark wood. The phallic and vulvic imagery carved into this shared ‘female’ object declassifies gender from external power structures and separates gender from sex and desire:

The mortar was of a foreign fragrant wood, too dark for cherry and too red for walnut. To my childhood eyes, the outside was carved in an intricate and most enticing manner. There were rounded plums and oval indeterminate fruit, some long and fluted like a banana, others ovular and end-swollen like a ripe alligator pear. (Z, p.71)

The swollen and elongated imagery, the sexual swell of the carved fruit embeds desire into a material object, into a set of rituals that are associated with that object, carved with the rounded, tactile shapes of what Audre imagines to be a non-cartographic homeland.

Audre engages with the mortar as an object of desire: "I loved to finger the hard roundness of the carved fruit." The sensual description of the object conveys "visions of delicious feasts both once enjoyed and yet to come," and she explains the heavy "sturdiness of this useful object always made me feel secure and somehow full" (Z, pp.71-72). Lorde acknowledges her response is the result of so many cross-cultural experiences that become associated with the sensual tastes and flavours that "it conjured up from all the many different flavors pounded into the inside wall", (Z, p.72). The mortar has a specific Caribbean use in the pounding of "souse- onion, garlic and pepper". Lorde describes the sensual tastes she craves and associates with her mother's mortar and consuming souse - a traditional Caribbean marinade or sauce for pigs' or chicken feet, cooked until the meat and bone is softened and tender: "I would always ask for souse. That way, I knew that I would get to use my mother's mortar, and this in itself was more treat for me than any of the forbidden foods" (Z, p.73). Lorde electively wants to partake in the routines of her mother's cooking, recreating the matrilineal ritual as a written narrative that is mythical as well as biographical. Re-enacting the universal experience of food preparation whilst allegorising the specific experience of female teen eroticism, Lorde is mythologising a narrative constructed by female desire. In validating, using and recollecting her mother's mortar she continues an untold historical narrative, fully aware of its cultural significance: " 'Oh I'll pound the garlic, Mommy!' would be my next line in the script written by some ancient and secret hand" (Z, p.73).

The pestle may be seen from a psychoanalytic point of view to be phallic, Oedipal and associated with patriarchal desire, but *Zami* reframes that desire as being a part of lesbian sexuality. Separated from male desire or the penis, the phallus is removed from its patriarchal axis. It becomes something that is used in the rituals of Sapphic want, reconnecting the experiential with the spiritual. The curve of the mortar, carved and seasoned

by years of use, is divine and mysterious without being exoticised; it is connected to female sexuality - further symbolised by the repeated reference to the avocado or “alligator pear.” The reference to avocado in relation to sexual praxis in the pestle and mortar chapter and the Afrekete chapter is significant and profound. This symbol of lesbian, matrilineal sexuality is conveyed spatio-temporally and ancestrally through the reading of the avocado as an object of symbolic exchange, its figurative shape rounded and curved, its protective shell withholding the soft and creamy inner flesh. The symbolic avocado in the pestle and mortar scene prefigures Audre’s desire for Afrekete. The avocado can also be seen to be connected to an atemporal ‘before’ -a time predating the text itself- that is not ‘archaic’ but archaeological; Lorde’s sexuality and her bonding with other women constituting a matrilineal continuance.

AFREKETE AND THE MYTHOLOGY OF DESIRE

Audre’s encounter with Afrekete echoes the text’s pestle and mortar sequence; the fruit she associates with her mother’s mortar becomes the “pale yellow green fruit” she mashes onto the body of a lover. In Audre’s eyes, Afrekete “taught me roots, new definitions of our women’s bodies- definitions for which I had only been in training to learn before” (Z, p.250). When Afrekete and Audre make love it is Kitty (Afrekete) who purchases rare fruits from “under the bridge” - from “West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue” (Z, p.249). There are the “red delicious pippins, green plantains” and the “ripe red finger bananas stubby and sweet” (Z, p.249), which leads to a ritual exchange between the lovers. As part of this lesbian intimacy the ‘exotic’ is reframed as familiar. As the sun filters through the “green plants” and the alligator pear becomes part of their lovemaking, she associates the fruit with a matrilineal homeland, a universal land of women, and a land she and Afrekete share whenever they are together. As Audre squeezes the “yellow-green fruit juice in thin ritual lines back and forth” over her lover Afrekete’s “coconut brown belly” (Z, p.251), it becomes “a mantle of goddess pear” rather than an ordinary fruit, symbolic of the depth of their union.

In using eco-referential language, Lorde -as narrator and author- is both politicising *and* depoliticising lesbian sexuality. She endeavours to portray lesbian sexual exchanges as variegated and responsive aspects of wider female sexual concerns. The “stubby sweet bananas” inserted into the “grape purple flower” of Kitty’s vagina become an erotic metaphor. Lorde’s matrilineal diasporic mythology opposes the originary myth of Adam and Eve and becomes, as Gates Jr. has proposed, a counter-narrative. The narrator disrupts the language of forbidden desire by subverting an acculturated language that has been used to allude to female desire (as in Rosetti’s ‘Goblin Market’). Lorde grounds this desire in what Margaret Homans terms the “specific material experiences of Black women” (Homans, in Lane, ed., 2013, p.682). Nigianni further elaborates on these experiences as an embodied desire between women:

lesbian desire is no longer considered to be springing from an originary loss (the maternal body) or lack (the phallus), but constitutes instead one among other expressions of their desire to become-woman-other that leads to a process of serial differentiation. (Nigianni, in Lane, ed., 2013, p.613)

The process of penetrating her lover Afrekete echoes Audre’s earlier pubescent imaginings with the pestle and mortar. Lorde, as narrator, re-imagines her biographical subject’s desire, realising it more fully through the metaphor of the pestle and mortar; the phallic and the vessel, symbols of female and male eroticism, are reclaimed and stripped of their hetero-normative imaginings. “After all the ingredients were in the bowl of the mortar, I fetched the pestle and placing it into the bowl, slowly rotated the shaft a few times” (p.74). Audre is depicted by Lorde, the narrator, as controlling the phallic symbol of the pestle, she is not subjected to phallic power but embraces that power and uses it to resist imposed subjectivities. In the hands of Audre, the pestle becomes a symbol of power; she is determining her own desire that she will continue to invest in other women and in her relationships with women. As Judith Butler observes, “Inasmuch as the phallus signifies, it is also always in the process of being signified” (Butler, 1993, p.89). In *Zami*, Lorde charts Audre’s journey to Afrekete

through multiple signifiers, which include the phallic as a black/lesbian symbol of power, of ownership, as part of an intersubjective set of experiences.

THE MYTHICAL 'I'

Embracing what hooks refers to as “dark divine” -the union of the political and the spiritual- Lorde challenges what Margaret Homans in her theoretical essay ‘Women of Colour’ determines as “white theoretical writing.” While according to Homans, “black women function to re-embody the otherwise dematerialised conceptual theoretical text of argument” (Homans, in Lane, 2013, p.673). Audre’s sexual experiences are both black and lesbian, and relate to the narrator’s worldview of a “whole-life process,” the African tradition of “an experience to be lived” (Lorde, interviewed by Tate, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.96). Lorde creates a black lesbian space that is holistic, that reflects multiple black lesbian experiences, that negates the universal by allowing difference, and infuses the textual with a lesbian erotic that is visible. Lorde points out, in interviews from the 1980s⁴⁷, that much of her work is about visibility: “The system destroys us by either making most lesbians invisible or by making a few too visible, objectified and lonely ... I know what it feels like to be invisible” (Lorde, interviewed by Calvin, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.108). In this dissertation, I go on to analyse how, for lesbian desire to be fully represented, Lorde makes black/lesbian desire and the erotic visible in multiple ways, and politicises this act. The internalised/private subject, as we discover in the following chapter, is always intimately connected with the external/public subject.

Examining the use of myth in *Zami* is fundamental to understanding the multiple layers of the text. Lorde’s interpretation and use of the symbolic-spiritual within a greater socio-historic framework rewrites black/lesbian experience in ways that avoid mystical religiosity but still

⁴⁷ This refers to Joan Wylie Hall’s compilation of interviews, which sheds great light on Lorde’s own views about her work and her cultural activism.

represent complex exchanges of meaning.⁴⁸ Fears of essentialism and racism, and the exclusion of black women from mainstream feminism, have together created a void. This prevents the symbolic-spiritual from having any place in wider critical theory debates or representations of diverse experience, and has led to a critical dismissal of literature that references the symbolic-spiritual/dark divine aspects of black women's experiences. This means many black/lesbian writers have been unable to fit into constructed genres or familiar literary theories in their lifetimes.⁴⁹

Lorde's use of multiple and nested narratives in *Zami* creates mythological references that are able to depict a greater truth than biography alone. If related to a set of self-determined political 'truths' or radical expressions of these 'truths' as experiences that inspire and activate social change, then hooks' reference to Lorde's work as the "dark divine" can be adopted without hesitation. "Conjuring" (to use Spillers and Pryse's term) a set of maternal mythical and sexual spiritual connotations within a biographical premise, Lorde has adapted a literary space to be receptive to her use of more abstract poeticisms and metaphors. In the next chapter, I further develop the role of the maternal in *Zami*, which has strong ties to Lorde's representations of desire and myth. Although much has been written about the maternal in *Zami* and Audre/Lorde's relationship with her mother, there has been less focus on how the maternal (and her relationship with Linda Lorde) is closely tied to the narrator's formative desire and sexuality and Lorde's interpretation of the erotic.

⁴⁸ A full analysis of the use of myth in *Zami* is needed, with additional avenues to be explored such as the influence of Lorde's classical education at Hunter High and her reference to poets or writers that used myth (in a way to deconstruct or reinterpret its use) in their work, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay.

⁴⁹ Namely texts and work by 'better known' black and or lesbian writers such as Ntozake Shange, Toni Cade Bambara, Jewelle Gomez, Sapphire, Sonia Sanchez, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde, have had little attention paid to what I would argue is the symbolic spiritual in their work. This also extends to black/lesbian writers who have had little critique or attention.

Chapter 4: USES OF THE EROTIC: The Maternal Self

My mother was a very powerful woman. This was so in a time when that word-combination of woman and powerful was almost unexpressable in the white American common tongue, except or unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind, or hunchback, or crazy, or Black.

(*Zami*, p.15)

Against a background of racial and sexual myths-breeder, provider of numbers for the race, stabilizer for the community, matriarch- Black women autobiographers consistently expand motherhood into a creative and personally fulfilling role.

(Burger, in Bell, Parker & Guy Shaftall, ed., 1979, p.115)

Indeed, black women's writing ... is one tradition amongst the various feminisms that have developed in these last decades where the mother is prominently featured in complex and multiple ways.

(Hirsch, in Gates Jr., ed., 1990, p.415)

In *Zami* Lorde continues to defy cultural relativity and the negation of women's lives through her use of the erotic to convey a place of female connection and spirituality beyond the sexual alone. Lorde speaks of the erotic as:

...an assertion of the lifeforce 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.

(Lorde, 1996, p.108)

This holistic use of the word 'erotic' redefines the way that women are seen by Lorde to relate to one another, the complexities of love and desire reframed within a black feminist cultural matrix where patriarchal definitions of

familial roles (mother, grandmother, aunt, sister) are reinvented. These roles are reconvened within a broader and subtler set of inter-relationalities, which could be perceived to be breaking taboos in their raw honesty and candid detail. This is no better examined than through the various interpretations of the maternal in *Zami* and the texts' subjectivities who often defy traditional female roles, as well as Audre and the narrator's relationship to their mother Linda Lorde. In this chapter I will explore the connection between the maternal and the erotic and the way that Lorde challenges this taboo. As she has previously re-ordered the symbolic through her interpretation and reclamation of female subjectivity, so Lorde re-centres the complexities of maternal love and desire in the formation of girls and young women's formative experiences and for the purposes of her biomythography, the female poet.

THE MATERNAL ARCHETYPE

Joanne M. Braxton has identified the outraged mother as the most common ancestral figure in black women's writing, speaking through the "narrator of the text to bear witness and to break down barriers between the artist and audience" (Braxton, in Braxton and McLaughlin, ed., 1990, p.300). In *Zami*, Lorde as narrator also plays a maternal role in nurturing the text as well as nurturing her subject Audre, whilst defining her own biographical alienation from her mother in an effort to escape Linda's ever-present rage. As with another Caribbean literary matriarch, Silla Boyce in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Linda Lorde is a complex and unfamiliar subject in literature - neither the eternal mother nor the mother of nurturance as an ancestral figure "who passes on her feminine wisdom for the good of the 'tribe', and the survival of all Black people" (Braxton, in Braxton and McLaughlin, ed., 1990, p.300). In this chapter I argue that it is Lorde as narrator who becomes the omniscient maternal nurturer, supporting, protecting and instructing young Audre as well as discovering it to be a way to heal and protect herself. In *Zami*, Lorde's representation of the maternal and motherhood in all its complexity is crucial to the text, and also to countering the erstwhile misrepresentation of black women as maternal 'mammies' across literatures. Like Linda Lorde who "knew how to make virtues out of

necessities" (Z, p.10), Lorde as narrator is working with the fictive and biographical present, creatively endeavoring to ensure that black women's struggles and identities are represented in their entirety.

Through an alternative representation of the maternal black female archetype, Lorde articulates a set of experiences far more complex and nuanced in their emotional dis/connections. The narrator associates words with her own mother and the greater maternal as referenced by Linda Lorde in her incantations to a universal Holy/Virgin Mary or mother: "As a child, I remember often hearing my mother mouth these words softly, just below her breath, as she faced a new crisis of disaster" (Z, p.10). ⁵⁰ Linda Lorde is a mother who teaches her daughter the rhythm and tonal beauty of poetry, whose harsh survival and sacrifice is tempered by the words she carries from her ancestral Carriacou home that Audre yearns to hear: "My child's ears heard the words and pondered the mysteries of this mother to whom my solid and austere mother could whisper such beautiful words" (Z, p.10). Lorde deploys black matriarchal archetypes as subjectivities that resist stereotype and containment and have agency within the text to inform her prose, acknowledging the "very definite ways in which African women, women of African descent, raise children ... that does in fact reflect the sources of our power" (Lorde, interviewed by Kraft in Hall, ed., 2004, p.149). The outraged mother may also be an archetype of non-lesbian texts, but Lorde ensures that Audre, her mother and all the complexities that inform their relationship are present, including the taboo of desire.

⁵⁰ In italics the narrator recites her mother's words to the Holy Mother /Virgin Mary of all as being:

Remember, oh most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy intercession, was ever left unaided. Inspired with this confidence I fly into thee now, oh my sweet mother, to thee I come, before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful. Oh mother of the word incarnate, despise not my petitions but in thy clemency and mercy oh hear and answer me now. (Z, p. 10)

NAVIGATING THE MATERNAL HOME

Being Black and foreign and female in New York City in the twenties and thirties was not simple, particularly when she was quite light enough to pass for white but her children weren't. (Z, p.17)

Lorde's admiration and understanding of her mother's need to protect and control her family in order to survive is tempered by the harsh reality of Linda being homesick, as well as her lonely isolation in bringing up three girls amid poverty, racism and a lack of (cultural) familiarity. The reader is never given an insight into the social world of Linda Lorde; there is instead the referenced connection to her 'cultural' roots as a rural idyll, a mythical homeland, an alternative feminist utopian vision that Lorde-as-narrator questions and explores through Linda's presence in the text.

The family's home, a Harlem tenement, is Audre's mother's only context, central to her dominion of control, a fortress of surveillance over her too-sensitive daughter's every poetic, sensual or deviant move, where "a request for privacy was treated like an outright act of insolence for which the punishment was swift and painful" (Z, p.83). Audre is excluded from her sisters' spatial freedom within the Lorde home; she is subjected to personal invasion and to the suspicion of having an innately devious nature that her sisters are never subject to: "Phyllis and Helen led a magical and charmed existence down the hall in their room ... I was never alone, nor far from my mother's watchful eye" (Z, p.43).⁵¹ The Lorde family home is a place where there is never any privacy and the doors are never closed, where roles are ascribed according to pragmatic need and 'nonsense' never tolerated.

Audre compares her sanctioned home life to an exterior world that is a blur of necessitous functioning. Her mother is constantly full sail to the wind, like Silla Boyce (in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*), she is constantly battling to protect the sanctity of her private domain, to retain order in a new world of urban chaos, away from the crystalline undulations of her

⁵¹ This 'deviance' can be seen to be connected to Audre/Lorde's/the narrator's lesbian sexuality, or indeed adolescent sexuality, which would have itself been a taboo.

Caribbean 'home': "Full-bosomed, proud, and of no mean size, she would launch herself down the street like a ship under full sail" (Z, p.17). Prowess and pride determine Linda Lorde as much as she determines them; Audre recognises her mother's strength and unique ability to remain in control, despite the traditional gender roles in the household: "... my mother must have been *other* than woman. Again, she was certainly not man" (Z, p.16). Here the narrator reflects upon her mother and father's unique relationship, one that is both equal and hierarchical in being above that of the children. Linda and Byron's Caribbean patois is a unified voice of authority in the family home, a way to stymie the Americanisation of their children, to retain control, to define their unique difference in a world where they are spat upon and reviled for the colour of their skin. In the Lorde home, power can be synthesised with difference and -to Lorde- the power of difference can be recognised and embraced. Yet despite Linda being "different from other women" (Z, p.16), which made Audre as a child "... think she had a great deal more power than in fact she had" (Z, p.17), she is still powerless to undo the wrongs of a racist society in one fell swoop.

Audre's teenage life, driven by a struggle for power, is further impacted upon by her being the youngest sibling of three, clumsy and inarticulate until she is given glasses and taught to read, still regarding herself as the "Lesbian poet fat, black, nearly blind, and ambidextrous" (Z, p.24). The need to have control over herself and her life initiates Audre's mythical struggle for power within a corrupt and unequal system. This is represented by her relationship with her mother, a physical battle in her teenage years that parallels an ongoing rift with the outside world. Linda's powerbase is her New York apartment. This is a domain of authority where she enforces a regime that Lorde baulks at and does her best to refute. Here, Linda is depicted as warlord, as the head of the family drawing up the battle lines and sending out the marching orders, with Audre very much in the role of teenage heroine, victimised and terrorised by Linda as head of the household and the family: "Relationships with my family had come to resemble nothing so much as a West Indian version of the Second World War" (Z, p.82). Audre reinvents herself as a romantic questing heroine, subverting Eurocentric liberal feminisms in adopting the guise traditionally

adopted by 'white' female martyrs: "I fantasised all my dealings with them against a backdrop of Joan of Arc at Rheims or the Revolutionary War" (Z, p.83).

The physical and emotional impact of Linda's abusive tongue and ways go on to define Audre's dreams: "When I finally went to bed, scenes of violence and mayhem peopled my nightmares," the partisan struggle simplified into two opposing sides "like black and white pepper." The fear covers all aspects of Audre's lived reality, leading to both a physical and psychological response: "Frequently I woke to find my pillowcase red and stiffened by gushing nosebleeds ..." (Z, p.83), colour used graphically to exemplify the effect of such abuse, the bloody interiority that does not "pepper" but "splatters" her pillows.

Audre as biographer's analysis of Linda Lorde as a subversive and confrontational mother is one of the ways in which *Zami*, to a reader and critic in the twenty-first century, becomes what Carol Boyce Davies refers to as an "uprising textuality." This is a text that can be viewed to be beyond the Western paradigm of post-colonial theory and resists its domination of discourse to "re-engage the spirit of a number of resistant articulations" (Boyce Davies, 1994, p.108). Linda Lorde is a familiar character in black women's literature, her narrative that of the migrant searching for a better economic life while yearning for home as a place of spiritual belonging. Her journey and narrative are emotionally complex, culturally fractured and ideologically flawed, but her articulation remains enmeshed within a dominant imperialist discourse that only allows one version of the 'migrant narrative' to exist. Through her mother's recollection of her own past and ancestry, Audre's second-generation unravelling of a maternal family narrative is examined through the fictionalising of the biographical while contextualising the truth of her own 'versioning' of events. Lorde disrupts the master narrative/s and dismantles the patriarchal version of the 'migrant narrative', where women are often voiceless companions of the male worker who moves to improve his socio-economic status. As I shall go on to outline Linda Lorde's character defies any submissive stereotypes within a familial context and in this way Lorde moves "the imagination

away from dominating authorities ...[that] accept their existence as fact” (Boyce Davis, 1994, p.87).

Zami's narrator is cognisant of Linda's struggles and her fallibilities, as in the text Linda is often gripped by her need to survive the overwhelming multiple oppressions she and her family face. Despite her often abusive ways, Linda Lorde is given humane vulnerabilities by Lorde: “Sometimes when my mother was not screaming at me, I caught her observing me with frightened and painful eyes. But my heart ached and ached for something I could not name” (Z, p.85). Linda controls her daughters by demanding that all follow her strict regime and never allowing her children the indulgence of public shows of affection. It is through Linda's hard work and action, as she engages in her civic duty during the war watching for enemy planes, that we learn of her daughter's sense of pride in her mother:

I could see my mother and her severe Cuban-heeled oxfords, a rakishly brimmed but no-nonsense hat shading her hawk-grey eyes. Her arms were folded across her ample chest as she frowned up at the sky intently from under the brim of her hat, daring any enemy plane to appear. (Z, p.55)

Linda's stern and functional “oxfords” contrast with her “ample” gendered chest, further embellishing the import of Linda's “hawk grey” eyes powerful enough to double dare “any enemy plane to appear.”

Linda Lorde is also portrayed as being vulnerable when Audre confides in her high school counsellor about the household ‘terrors’ of her mother's abusive outbursts. Linda's powerlessness amidst the dominant hegemony of institutional, structural and personal racism is revealed by the narrator to be a vulnerability that shapes her emotional integrity. When Audre complains about her mother's treatment of her to the school counsellor, it is apparent that the white woman is in a position of authority over Linda. This act of betrayal apparently defeats every lesson Linda has tried to teach Audre: that there is a greater battle to be fought, one of

survival in a white world. The protective layers of denial that Linda Lorde has impressed upon her children in order to avoid the very real exposure to racism, oppression and psychic death come crashing down. Trust is a coded pledge in the Lorde household never to be betrayed: “There was no fury in her voice, only heavy awful pain ... ‘How could you say all those things about your mother to that white woman?’ ” The disappointment curtails the flow of the page as a singular line disrupts the Lorde narrative. “Mrs. Flouten had repeated all of my words to my mother” (Z, p.85).

RACIALISING THE MATERNAL

The racial schizophrenia that pervades the text and informs Audre’s relationship with her mother is nowhere better reflected than in Linda Lorde’s own denial and lack of ability to confront racism, trapped as she is within her own fears in a cultural climate that is not of her choosing. While Linda has the memories of her Caribbean idyll to escape to, Audre does not have this luxury; instead she has the urban streets to contend with, everyday racism, and the schism of split experiences and fragmented identities. Linda is shown to be unable to either empathise with Audre or to protect her from the stark reality of endemic racism. These experiences lead Audre to become critically conscious. Unlike Audre, Linda Lorde inverts this critical consciousness; her lack of structural power leads to a misdirection of her anger in the world: “When I complained at home about my treatment at school my mother would get angry with me” (Z, p.60). The text presents Audre as politically transitioning through her relationship with her mother, the sense of injustice that Audre feels and endures becoming a part of her wider political education. This mythographical invention in the narrative enables an elder Lorde to protect her younger self and other black/lesbians through the text, saving the younger Audre from her destructive environment.

When Audre participates in small-scale institutional governance by entering into an election for class president, power becomes gendered as girls are demoted before they even begin their campaign, in which they “... would only be vice-president” (Z, p.63). The immoral small-scale corruption

of Audre having to pay her classmates to vote for her with her own father's 'black' money is an irony she is aware of: "The only way I could get attention from my classmates in the sixth grade was by having money ... I made sure I had plenty" (Z, p.61). Linda's disapproval is a means of protecting herself from the potential pain of her daughter losing. It is also a way to control her daughter's ambition, deliberately limiting the possibilities for a black girl in New York. Her own possibly thwarted dreams of a new and free life in New York are irritated by the passion of her daughter's ambition:

I told her about the election, and how I was going to run, and win.
She was furious.

'What in hell are you doing getting yourself involved with so much foolishness?' (Z, p.61)

As Audre loses her chance at the vice-presidency, significantly to a white girl, her dreams are shattered, as are her hopes of regaining some power in the dynamic of her class/school. Reflecting on the injustice and the impact in her life of such a loss, she reveals: "I felt I had been destroyed ... Something was terribly wrong. It wasn't fair" (Z, p. 63). Audre retains her mother's pride, signifying that she is still her mother's daughter - black and too proud to reveal pain to any white person: "I was too much my mother's daughter to let anyone think it mattered" (Z, p.63). More significantly, Lorde's insecurity and belief that she could never really win reflect Audre's later insecurities as a writer, surrounded as she is by the reinforced societal indicators that she would be unable to achieve her ambition: "... the very act of my wanting it was an assurance that I would not get it" (Z, p.63). Audre's demands for justice and a fairer society do not impact upon her mother: "It's just that it's not fair, Mother." ... "Fair, fair, what's fair, you think? Is fair you want, look in god's face" (Z, p.65). Linda's ensuing rage at the "foolishness" of her daughter is as much about controlling pain and external forces as controlling her daughter's willful and supposedly irrational ways - the rage of Linda never reverts to empathy or understanding:

Through my tears, I saw my mother's face stiffen with rage ... I stopped in my tracks as her first blow caught me full on the side of my head. (*Z*, p.64)

Lorde as narrator heightens the tension in recounting and visualising the abuse that Linda's misguided protective frustration incites. Here, the metaphorical bird of creative maternal visioning depicted in Audre's relationships with Gennie and Eudora is inverted. The difference between Lorde/Audre and her mother is exemplified by a split understanding of the metaphor of the bird, a creature that can fly and migrate but whose delicate composition is too easily crushed and trapped. "See, the bird forgets, but the trap doesn't!"; Linda's control and conjecture becomes anger and frustration:

'What kind of ninny raise up here to think those good-for-nothing white piss-jets would pass over some little jacabat girl to elect you anything?' Smack! 'What did I say to you just now?' She cuffed me again, this time on my shoulders, as I huddled to escape her rain of furious blows, and the edges of her pocketbook. (*Z*, pp. 64-65)

But in an ever-complex and contradictory mother-daughter relationship, the violence often gives way to calm: "Child, why you worry your head so much over fair or not fair? Just do what is for you to do and the rest take care of themselves" (*Z*, p.65). This self-explanatory philosophy is one that we know Audre will never adhere to in the future, showing how different their outlook is and, as I demonstrate in Chapter 6, how determined young Audre is to achieve change.

DETACHING FROM THE MATERNAL

Audre's final separation from her mother after Gennie's death ends a battle of wills between Lorde the narrator matriarch and Linda the narrative's subjective matriarch. Linda is defeated and has no more immediate influence or ability to enact authority over the teenage Audre. The final freedom from Linda's authoritarian grip is alleged to take place after Audre father's death. As Linda's status within Audre's life diminishes,

she effectively disappears from the rest of the text, in temporal stasis along with Lorde's sisters, whose lives without Audre's presence have no continued relevance in *Zami*. Biomythography does not have a familial conscience. Released from her mother, a woman who "... treated any act of separation from her as an indictment of her authority" (Z, p.83), Audre is now able to journey toward becoming the black/lesbian warrior poet and the narratives' foci. This separation from her mother in narrative and text becomes Lorde's ultimate biographical act of defiance.

In order to fully envision her own identity, she must de/construct and detach herself from the biological mother and move the matriarchal into the realms of the spiritual and the mythical. Linda's heritage becomes part of Audre's and the narrator's identity. As I explained in Chapter 3, Linda's Grenadian heritage; her roots in a matriarchal culture; her identity as a powerful black woman (despite her light 'Spanish' skin); her relationship to the mythical sister healers- Ma-Mariah and Ma-Liz; all become re-envisioned by Lorde as a lesbian heritage.

I believe that there have always been black dykes around- in the sense of powerful and women-orientated women- who would rather have died than use that name for themselves. And that includes my momma. (Z, p.15)

It is these mythical foremothers that birth the poet Audre, and enable her to envision *Zami*, giving her a deeper understanding of her cultural heritage.

TRANSITIONS AWAY FROM THE MATERNAL

At home, my mother said, "Remember to be sisters in the presence of strangers". She meant white people. In high school, the girls said, "Be sisters in the presence of strangers," and they meant men. My friends said, "Be sisters in the presence of strangers," and they meant squares.

But in high school, my real sisters were strangers; my teachers were racists; and my friends were that color that I was never supposed to trust. (Z, p.81)

As Audre becomes a teenager and more alienated from her family, so they become less integral to the text's narrative. Friends become the extended family she mythologises and the immediate family she yearned for, assembling as a textual community. Audre now learns to critique difference while developing her female friendships, the conflicting cultural messages of her private and public life as a child often bringing the boundaries of this world into conflict. *The Branded* (a name denoting teenage lesbian rebellion, or a film that has not yet been made) are the first collective by choice that Lorde initiates and participates in, creating a 'refuge' of safety for their girl-bonding and allowing them to experience a women-only space. This goes on to frustrate Lorde, whose lesbianism is connected with her commitment to her sexuality and her desire whilst her friends do not necessarily share this worldview: "I was also beside myself with sexual frustration, given the presence of all the beautiful young women whom I was sheltering like a wounded banshee ..." (Z, p.119)

With *The Branded*, Audre adopts a role she will continually replicate with her lovers in *Zami* -that of matriarchal savior/stronger sister/lone emotional warrior: "these girls who saw my house and my independence as a refuge, and seemed to think that I was settled and strong and dependable which, of course, was exactly what I wanted them to think" (Z, p.119). Audre's independence and bravado is a way to suppress her feelings around the other young women in the group and to avoid aspects of her sexuality being exploded:

I never mentioned how enticing and frightening I found their strange blonde- and red- and chestnut-colored secrets that peeked out from beneath their pulled-up half-slips, in the hundred-degree heat of the small backyard apartment. (Z, p.119)

The Branded provide Audre with a psychic space to write and exist in, allowing her sense of self and identity to be formed and nurtured, outside of the control and terror of her home. The Branded are audience and counsel, an arena for her poetry, alternative truths and sense of reality; that is a reality shared between the friends across the lines of personal, social and cultural differences.

It was in high school that I came to believe that I was different from my white classmates, not because I was Black, but because I was me.
(Z, p.82)

The group comes to represent an intersectional collective, bound together as much by what they are united *against* as by how they choose to represent themselves. They are, in effect, a platform for Lorde's poetry and her political personal understanding of difference:

my best friends were 'The Branded,' as our sisterhood of rebels sometimes called ourselves. We never talked about those differences that separated us, only the ones that united us against the *others* (Z, p.81)

These friendships and affiliations provide new intersubjective experiences, the strength and resilience to be different; Lorde's lesbian identity is forged by the intimacy of the group's social life and time together, which proves to be a lifeline for Audre: "*How meager the sustenance was I gained from the four years I spent in high school; yet, how important that sustenance was to my survival*" (Z, p.82). As Lorde asserts in her essay 'Uses of the Erotic' taken from her 1984 collection of essays *Sister Outsider* "The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling." (Lorde, 1996, p.106). What Audre and Lorde as narrator express in *Zami* is a scarcely documented evocation of women's erotic or sexual power and the role it has in the way that girls and women's relationships are forged. As I outlined in Chapter 3, a deep exploration and understanding of women's sexuality is a taboo that Lorde attempts to shatter.

The Branded become a central part of Audre's world - their experiences with the adult world, with the meta-structures that surround them, foreshadowing future inequalities amongst the group: "But we never ever talked about what it meant and felt like to be Black and White, and the effect that had on us being friends" (Z, p.81). These inequalities are also seen later in the text, as class and further cultural divisions reinforce the struggle between butch/femme and white/black lesbians. This understanding of divisive relationships with other women -where difference is seen as negative interference and detrimental to all relationships- becomes a repeated theme in *Zami* for Audre, who has "no words for racism" (Z, p.81) and an inability to fully negotiate relationships between black and white women.

Whilst the Branded give Audre a set of emotional connections outside of those with her family, it is Audre's relationship with Gennie -and Gennie's subsequent death- that enables Audre to make the final transition toward a broader understanding of the maternal. Gennie supports Audre through maternal rejection, to the point where Audre is able to realise a conscious, loving, whole relationship with another woman.

GENNIE

Gennie was the first person in my life that I was ever conscious of loving.

She was my first true friend. (Z, p.87)

Audre and Gennie, both isolated, become friends at Hunter High School; removed from her other friendship groups, Gennie's presence in Audre's world is a secluded and secret one. She reflects Audre's black girl identity, securing a girl-on-girl bond that mirrors Audre's life within the text. Lorde as narrator challenges the monolithic objectification of black girls when she examines Audre's own insecurities about herself: "You looked enough alike to be sisters, people said. *Except Gennie was lighter and thinner and beautiful*" (Z, p.102). Gennie shadows Lorde's life even after

death. There is an ongoing double consciousness reflected in Gennie and Audre's public and private worlds. Bonding in secrecy, in Audre's own secluded world, Gennie plays a psychic twin; Audre is Gennie:

The other girl was Gennie.

Gennie was the beginning of a double life. (Z, p.85)

Nothing interferes with Gennie and Audre's travels around New York where they -sometimes deviously- create their own meaningful geographical spaces; taking ownership of the streets, without their mothers' knowledge, every act of impropriety represents a strike towards autonomy from their mothers and families: "That summer all of New York, including its museums and parks and avenues, was our backyard. What we wanted and couldn't afford we stole money from our mothers for" (Z, p.88). With stolen money they gain their freedom, eluding the values of their protective superstitious mothers through rebellious risk-taking, the allure of chilled ice cups "made more so by the vehemence with which both of our mothers had forbidden them to us." The chilled ices had contraband status in the communities from which they came: "Ices were suspected by many Black mothers of spreading polio through Harlem ..." (Z, p.90).

Gennie also stimulates change in Audre's life she signals Audre's separation from her mother Linda into a world that Linda would neither approve of nor tolerate. Rebelling against her mother's prudent strictures, her father's stern silence and her sisters' closed off relationship, Gennie brings raucousness and laughter into Audre's life, a make-believe adult world, a world beginning to be politically counter-cultural: "Our budding political consciousness had already soured us on Coca-Cola democracy" (Z, p.86). Gennie and Audre both signify a second generation of young black women who, whilst experiencing racial and gender inequalities, still aspire to an adventurous life, a life of risk and sexual proclivity: "We stole nickels from our mothers' purses and roamed Fifth Avenue singing union songs. We played sexy games with Latino boys up in the bluffs of granite above Morningside Park" (Z, p.86). Most importantly for Audre, who had spent her

childhood mute, fearing discussion and -like many children- hyper-vigilant for fear of retribution, Gennie and Audre “did a lot of talking ...” (Z, p.86).

Despite having a loving mother, Gennie also feels an isolation that mirrors Audre’s, and feels she is outside of society. But whereas Audre refracts and adapts her vision as an outsider, Gennie does not have the same emotional resilience and predicts that she will be unable to survive: “Gennie spoke about killing herself as an irreversible and already finished decision” (Z, p.91). Audre’s first lesson in loving another woman, that she comes to learn in *Zami* with both Bea and Muriel, is that she will be unable to directly change the course of their history or save them from themselves and the decisions they choose to make; the narrator likewise is unable to interfere in their subjective formation, as they live in a textual world that is still connected to external historicisms. Audre has to accept Gennie’s fate in the text over which she as the biographical subject has no control, “I had only to accept it with the finality that accepted approaching winter” (Z, p.91), no matter her pleas: “*Gennie, Gennie, please don’t die, I love you*” (Z, p.97). Gennie is resolute, knowing her place as a trailblazer, confident of herself and her needs and yet as fragile as a baby bird: “Well I guess you will all just have to take care of yourselves now won’t you?” (Z, p.91). Gennie’s first unsuccessful attempt at suicide is still a statement of subversion: “Her grandmother found her, smoking a blood-stained cigarette in a bathtub full of warm and already reddened water” (Z, p.92). Unable to change the course of Gennie’s life, Lorde writes into *Zami* a biographical memorial not only for Gennie but for the countless black female teen suicides that remain private and undocumented. The double consciousness of Lorde being her retrospective knowledge and powerlessness to change the events that lead to Gennie’s death.

Gennie’s decline at the hands of her father, Philip Thompson: “a quick and bitter man of much wit and little love, who preyed upon whatever admiration he could find” (Z, p.91), finally starts to isolate Gennie from her beloved friend. She moves to a different neighbourhood and into a space that is ruled by her father; no matter the privations and acts of fury that her mother bestows on her, the Lorde household is one that is not subject to

patriarchal abuse. This separates Audre from her friend and from the unsaid agreements and codes they shared, and before her death there is a shift in how they engage as sisters. When eventually Gennie's suicide pact becomes a reality, Lorde feels she is complicit in it through her role in buying the gelatin capsules that Gennie goes on to use for storing the arsenic that kills her. Audre is unable to do anything to prevent Gennie's suicide but still feels she could have defied her mother, prevented it from happening through a childish wish for it not to happen: "Don't go Gennie, don't go. *I mustn't let her go*" (Z, p.100). Lorde the narrator tries to prevent the memory of Gennie leaving her, even in the text. When Gennie dies, a part of Audre -along with her childhood and a greater understanding of herself- dies, a pain that cannot be explained or articulated, as Audre recites in one of her poems:

and knew ourselves for the first time
dead and alone.
We did not weep for the thing- weep for the thing-
We did not weep for the thing that was once a child
(Z, p.97)

The young Audre is unable to reconcile the cruelty of such a loss with childhood innocence. The fact that no one could see that Gennie was a child in pain makes her suicide a futile act of resistance as the poet repeats, "we did not weep," in accusation of a society that does not value young black women or children.

The death of Gennie marks a transition in Audre's becoming a woman and a self-actualised poet. Lorde as interlocutor and author plays a role in the staged development of Audre's identity; like Gennie's guitar that Audre moves from apartment to apartment, she carries Gennie's subjectivity with her -even after Gennie's death- as a part of her own identity. Lorde, from an adult perspective and with authorial power, is able to merge Genevieve into her adult life, as a fully realised black/lesbian. Audre as biographer opens Chapter 14 with a bucket list:

Things I never did with Genevieve: Let our bodies touch and tell the passions that we felt. Go to a Village gay bar, or any bar anywhere. Smoke reefer. Derail the freight that took circus animals to Florida Write THE BOOK. Make love. (Z, p.97)

Here, the political and personal merge poignantly, as Lorde the narrator lists THE BOOK that Gennie and Audre as biographer vowed to write. In effect it is Lorde as author who actualises THE BOOK through *Zami*, which contains Gennie's narrative as part of her own. As Audre's muse and would-be lover, Gennie suspends time in *Zami* through her poetry, as recited by Audre:

and in the brief moment that is today
wild hope this dreamer jars
for I have heard in whispers talk
of life on other stars
(Z, p.100)

When Gennie is eventually successful in her suicide attempt and lies in hospital dying, Lorde the narrator reverts to a child-like lilt, grammatically stultifying the text. The softness of the repeated 'you' rhythmically lulls Gennie as she sleeps, the soft chastising of her friend contrasting with the textual narrator: "*Gennie Gennie Gennie I never saw you asleep before. You look just like you awake except your eyes are closed. Your brows still bend down in the middle like you frowning*" (Z, p.99). Lorde the narrator is the poetic observer of the debris and fallout of Gennie's death; in hospital she observes "a crumpled flower on the hospital bed" marking the end of their romance. Gennie's death, akin to Madame Bovary's poisoning, becomes intertextual – Lorde's use of the cyclical descriptors "corrosive," "lingered," "metallic," juxtaposed with a wet blackness dampening the acidity, echoes Madame Bovary's death at her own hands by arsenic: "Arsenic is corrosive. She lingered, metallic –melting foam at the corners of her mouth, blackened and wet" (Z, p.99). Like Madame Bovary's death, Gennie's is tinged with the Romantic ideologies of the self-destructive creatrix, but rather than this being at the hands of the male writer Lorde

creates a matrilineal space, where female subjects have agency and a voice through their relationships with other women.⁵²

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. (Z, p.103)

The interlocutor's italicized observations of Gennie's funeral present a synthesised poeticism where the sensory, the aural and the textual echo previous metaphors and symbols - particularly that of the bird, a symbol that marks Lorde's arrival as a poet in Chapter 3. It is significant that the birds "*who knew death as no reason for silence*" reluctantly witness Gennie's death. The repeated use of "sound" to mark the momentary and fragmentary poignancies of a spiritual life and its movement, which are impossible to physically hear, facilitates an aural reading that takes the narrative beyond the page. The priest's presence: "*black-clad man mouthing words in a foreign tongue*" has no bearing on Audre's love for Gennie; his words make no sense, not only because of Audre's disbelief at Gennie's death but also because the language he articulates holds no relevance to young U.S. black girls and is unable to recite their grief. It is, after all, only Lorde as narrator that is able to sound out the girls' experiences, the "dirt clods," "weeping women," "birds who knew death," "the grass growing." The sounds of Audre's grief become abstracted noise that can only be placed within a tradition of poetics; the sound of grass growing is immeasurable, reaffirming that despite a burial where there is "*no hallowed ground for suicides*," no burial could ever be enough to mark the end of Gennie's life, the pain of a world without Gennie is not audible. The clods of dirt against the white coffin that made a rhythmic noise are no longer hollow as the grave fills up; Gennie's death becomes a reality, nature carries on and human intervention merges

⁵² It could be argued that Flaubert silences Madame Bovary through his own mastery of the text as narrator.

with the sound of nature. The repetition of “the” materialises the factual elements of this sequence and punctuates the rhythm of the earth that buries Gennie.

MATERNAL DESIRE AND THE EROTIC ‘T

The cartography of Audre’s desire is connected with her desire for the maternal, replacing the loss of a nurturing relationship with her mother by her own need to nurture her lovers and her friends. Linda Lorde’s role in young Audre’s life is one of ambivalent intimacy; Audre desires her mother’s intimacy and love, but her primary object of love so often rejects Audre. Whether this is inventively reminiscenced or biographical, the text crosses the boundaries of the real and the fictive: Audre’s desire for her mother is deeply rooted in her need for intimacy, and that this intimacy be fulfilled without the “anxiety/pain” she feels around her mother:

I remember the warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of our physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain like a nutmeg nestled inside its covering of mace. (*Z*, p.33)

Here, young Audre’s feeling of unequivocal love for her mother is represented by the warmth of inner nutmeg, revealing a proximity to her mother that is internalised but still covered by the bitterness of the mace. If the reader is to decode the text, as Gwendolyn Mae Henderson suggests, in order to evoke “strong and revisionary methods of reading” (Henderson, in Gates Jr.,ed., 1990, p.117), she can again extrapolate a “simultaneity of discourse” (Henderson in Gates Jr.,ed.,1990, p.117) that is a set of contradictory meanings or textual narratives. Lorde the narrator refers to Audre’s negative experience of being Linda Lorde’s daughter, in parallel to Lorde as author’s biographical mythology of the black matriarch: “they were nurturing, they were cherishing ... but they were also really tough warriors” (Lorde, interviewed by Kraft, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.149).

In extending Henderson's interpretation of a "simultaneity of discourse" to Audre and Linda's relationship within *Zami*, we find a way to develop an analysis stemming from what Henderson terms as the "assumptions of internal identity (homogeneity) and the repression of internal differences (heterogeneity)" (Henderson, in Gates Jr., ed., 1990, p.117). These oppositions reinforce ambivalence in Audre's relationship with her mother throughout the text. The uncomfortable disjuncture between Audre's early desire for her mother and her mother's mace-like deterrents derives from external race- and gender-discrimination, as well as those elements that are internalised. These differences between Audre and her mother become complex representations, which Henderson refers to as surpassing "simple and reductive paradigm[s] of 'otherness'" (ibid, p.117). Lorde the narrator's textual slippages and discourse become "an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of the self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity" (Henderson, in Gates Jr., ed., 1990, p.178). This is exemplified throughout *Zami* in Audre's relationship with her mother; it is internal to the narrative drivers of the text and to Lorde the narrator's interlocutory and dialogic writing, involving an external set of forces that are socio-historical, political, and temporal. The primary relationship of Audre with her mother replicates this dialogic of both the same and the other: internalised and externalised just as Lorde's biomythographical text is both biographical and fictional.

In a sequence of subverted sentimental mother-daughter vignettes in Chapter 3, the reader is introduced to the disjuncture that removes the intimacy from the immediate situations being described. Specific acculturated, racialised and gendered memories for the subject that are both metaphysical and phenomenological are invoked instead. There is a dual discourse in this recollection: Audre's memories of having her hair manipulated by her mother is sensually retold and connected to the ancestral voice within two simultaneous timeframes -1930s New York; and an atemporal space of matrilineal time - litany, ritual and rhythm.

The radio, the scratching comb, the smell of petroleum jelly, the grip of her knees and my stinging scalp all fall into – *the rhythms of a*

litany, the rituals of Black women combing their daughters' hair' ... I get over and crawl into my mother's bed. Her smile. Her glycerine-flannel smell. The warmth. She reclines ... (Z, p.33)

The sensuality of her mother's warmth, softness and feminine matriarchal promise belies a desire for young Audre to be intimately intertwined with her mother's breast; secreted away is "her large soft breast beneath the buttoned flannel of her nightgown. Below, the rounded swell of her stomach, silent and inviting touch" (Z, p.33). As Audre's mother tries to interrupt this intimacy, this moment of content, Lorde the narrator does not hear the message that conflicts with her own desire: "I nuzzle against her sweetness, pretending not to hear" (Z, p.34). Young Audre does not listen to her mother's kind rejections, the intimacy informing her own and the narrator's wishes. Just when Lorde announces Audre will become a poet (p.31), the mother withdraws from the intimacy that Audre discovers is possible, the desire that will fuel her connection with other women and the desire that will fuel her writing. As Mae Gwendolyn Henderson has observed "consciousness becomes a kind of "inner speech" reflecting the "outer world" in a process that links the psyche, language and social interaction." (Henderson in Gates Jr.,ed., 1990, p.118); these voices of recognition become a rhetorical echo between the reader and the subjects of the text.

CHILDHOOD DESIRE

Audre's formative sexual experiences outside of her intimacy with her mother, involve an urgent desire for kinship and friendship. "Being the youngest in a West Indian family had many privileges, but no rights. And since my mother was determined not to 'spoil me', even those privileges were largely illusory" (Z, p.35). The recognition that Audre has for intimacy, for warmth, and for kindness coincides with clarity of vision when she receives her first pair of glasses: "When I was three-and-a-half and gotten my first eyeglasses, I stopped tripping over my feet" (Z, p.35). The need for intimacy, love and a kindred soul in a family she finds loveless, austere and alienating is transformed into the dream of another little Lorde, Audre's very own little sister or plaything:

I really believed, however, that my magical endeavors, done often enough, in the right way, and in the right places, letter perfect and with a clean soul, would finally bring me a little sister ... my little person would appear like a dream made real, waiting for me in my bed by the time I got home ... And she never appeared. (Z, p.35)

In a fairytale-like way Audre envisions and romanticises a friend, a companion; this is the start of the protagonist of the narrative's quest for desire and love.

Audre's mother is portrayed as the original creator: "...my mother made the three of us a little clay out of flour and water and Diamond Crystal Shaker Salt. I always fashioned tiny little figures out of my share of the mixture" (Z, p.35). Audre's reference to clay people invokes the originary myth of the first people made from clay, itself a cross-cultural global monotheistic and syncretic myth. It is also a textual reference to Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and Audre plays a part in manipulating and shaping both the retelling of the myth and the figures, the vanilla extract tanning the pasty figures, the vanilla reference a further connection with her ancestry: "I would beg or swipe a little vanilla extract from my mother's shelf in the kitchen" (Z, pp.35-36). "I loved the way the rich, dark brown vanilla scented the flour-clay; it reminded me of my mother's hands" (Z, p.36). Audre's creations do not come to life, though; no matter how much she wills it to happen, she remains powerless to embody the human she requires to fulfill a loving role in her own figurative life:

No matter how many intricate rituals and incantations and spells I performed, ... the vanilla-tinted clay would slowly shrivel up and harden ... No matter how hard I prayed or schemed, the figures would never come alive. (Z, p.36)

As if in a dream, in that space of freedom external to her house on the stoop, without her mother being present, Audre meets her mythical girl. The girl's eyes resemble, in young Audre's mind, her mother's eyes: "Her honey-

brown skin had a ruddy glow that echoed the tones of her hair ... reminded me of my mother's eyes ... they flashed alight in the sun" (Z, p.38). Her observations refer back to her desire for her mother, framing her own need for affection as the little girl she desires also has lighter skin like her own mother's. This is Audre's first self-initiated intimacy with another girl, a being that Audre wants to own physically and emotionally. She repeats the need to own and objectify the girl before exaggerating her need and desperation to have something that no one could take away from her: "I wanted her for my very own- my very own what, I did not know- but for my very own self. I started to image in my head where I would keep her" (Z, p.38). The idea of the little girl as a 'pet' is repeated before they have even spoken or touched. Audre wishes to have power over the little girl to fend "off nightmares of the devil riding me" (Z, p.38); she doesn't envisage the little girl's own needs - prefiguring one of the things that will occur in her later adult relationships that further isolates Audre from her lovers.

THE MATERNAL 'I'

Ambivalent representations of motherhood throughout *Zami* reflect the insecurity that Lorde as narrator feels about her own mother while growing up that are often related to her formative erotic experiences. Audre's emotional, physical and psychological dis/connection with her mother is tacit and impossible for her to separate her own identity from, until Gennie's and her father's death. The lack of emotional engagement with her mother at the level Audre wants is seen to be crippling to a girl who is the eternal outsider and yearning for lesbian/women centred emotional connections. Lorde's depiction of a complex matriarch is much needed in re-envisioning a female-focused subjectivity, the representation of mother ever-conflicting with Lorde's own biographical relationship with her biological mother.⁵³ For Audre and Lorde as narrator, the experiential and spiritual realms are clearly defined by the relationship with her mother and the pain she causes Audre throughout her life; this is tempered by an understanding

⁵³ As De Veaux points out in her biography of Lorde, Lorde also had ambivalent struggles with her own children and long-term partners that were often in relation to her inner world as a poet and her external world as a public person and activist.

of the reasons for her behaviour, the structural relations that govern her mother's life as a black migrant woman.

The simultaneity of a connection between complex maternal relationships (both as a daughter and then briefly as a potential mother when pregnant) and Audre's formative sexual experiences with her mother, Toni and Gennie, informs Audre's relationships with women as an adult. Through detailed studies of complex female lesbian subjectivities, Lorde-as-narrator evidences and elaborates subjectivities that resist deletion. Yet we are also shown that this resistance against deletion is often forged at great expense to a personal sense of being. As I will unpick in the next chapter, the lived theory of lesbian love is often tempered by and subject to the structures it speaks out from.

Chapter 5: SISTER OUTSIDER: The Lesbian Self

We were certainly the first to have tried to work out this unique way of living for women, communal sex without rancor. After all nobody else talked about it ... So we knew there was a world of our experience as gay-girls that they left out, but that meant we had to write it ourselves learn by living it out.

(*Zami*, p.213)

Female sexuality has always been conceptualised on the basis of masculine parameters.

(Irigaray, 1977, p.23)

THE LESBIAN SUBJECT

As a collection of essays *Sister Outsider* (1984) brings together Lorde's views on the connectedness of her multiple identities as a black lesbian poet, activist, lover and mother, refuting what Nancy Bereano terms in her introduction to the essays as "The white western patriarchal ordering of things" one that creates an "inherent conflict between what we feel and what we think – between poetry and theory" (Nancy Bereano in Lorde, 1984, p.70). Lorde's notion of the 'outsider' as part of a sisterhood that is self-supported and co-productive, challenges the patriarchal literary canon that is littered with lone male outsiders who are often portrayed as anti-heroes battling against the world alone.

According to Lorde's definition her Sister Outsider is one that reifies an understanding of communal living and loving, of creating art and changing the world. For as Lorde observes in 'Ages, Race, Class, and Sex: Women redefining Difference', "Institutionalized rejection is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people" (Lorde, 1996, p.163) and where black lesbians are seen to be without social economy in a hetero-normative world. As this chapter will examine, *Zami* depicts a new set of black lesbian subjectivities that resist hetero-normative deletion or domination. Although the lesbian subjects in *Zami* often struggle

within structures that multiply oppress them and deny their existence, Lorde as both narrator and author foremostly gives them agency and voice.

Lorde as narrator appropriates 'gay girl' vernacular as a signifying trope, doing so in a way that accords with theoretical ideas about the representation of language in black literature. In reference to Barbara E. Bower's reading of Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. locates the specific uses of language structure, such as call and response, and repetition, as part of the "signifying of black difference." Gates Jr. speculates about the way that "literary language ... peculiar to the Afro-American tradition" is also able to "signify a new cultural myth" (Gates Jr., 1984, p.19). What Lorde achieves in *Zami* is the creation of a new set of cultural myths or archetypes that signify black/lesbian experience and difference that has been marginalised or deleted from black literature.

Lorde also directly challenges feminism's -and what would later become queer studies'- focus on 'Western' literary representations of sexuality⁵⁴ while further challenging the use of binary logic with regard to sexuality.⁵⁵ Lorde does this specifically through the representation of complex subjectivities which, while resisting binaries, retain a collective sense of "identification/'signification" rather than singular identities/individuation. In effect, Lorde recognises the multiplicity and interconnection of social, historical and cultural identities; the different national, social and dynamic contexts that sexuality resides within. The politics of identity, especially prominent in the 1980s, came to the same conclusions, locating the significance of personal and collective subjugation

⁵⁴ For example, Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* -presumed to mean 'white', largely 'male' and 'Eurocentric'.

⁵⁵ Queer studies is no doubt indebted to the cultural work of second wave feminisms, but while theorists such as Christian, Nigianni, Homans and Lorde have been part of its development, it could be argued that the focus on post-modernism/s has silenced many women and any tangible focus on the subjugation and positionality of 'women' due to the questioning of gender stability. Homans has also argued that Queer theorists such as Butler (1992), Halstrom and Kosofsky Sedgwick have often marginalised and failed to recognise the theory, concerns and experiences of people of colour. Alexis D. Gumbs has also observed that Queer studies is 'anti-identitarian' and 'anti-ontological' (Gumbs, 2010 pp11-12), which complicates any 'inclusion' of subjectivity in that theory.

within a structural context. As the Combahee River Collective stated in *Political Organising in the Seventies and Eighties*:

We believe the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end someone else's oppression. (The Combahee River Collective, 1986, p.12)

BLACK/LESBIAN IDENTITY

Zami often articulates Audre's experiences of her sexuality in clearly defined ways: "I was gay and Black. The latter fact was irrevocable: armor, mantle and wall" (Z, p.180). Defining her identity as "armor" recognises Audre's need to build fortresses and find ways to defend those fortress walls, in order to exist in the world. This clear sense of identity is in synergy with both her 'real' biographical life and textual portrayals of that life, but Audre's experiences in the text also reveals a complex set of emotional ambiguities. These strengthen the work but remain unanswered, forming part of an ongoing intertextual dialogue about desire, love and power. Just as there are multiple tongues in *Zami* and multiple narratorial layers, so there are multiple identities and subjectivities woven into the text. Lorde is able to articulate intersectional oppression and the power of collective representation throughout *Zami*; in her constant referral to the political, social and structural dimensions of cultural and identity formation, she also reminds us of what Judith Butler recalls as the "specific histories" of these subjects, "their construction and elaboration" (Butler, 1993, p.18).

The dialectical representation of Lorde's own sexuality and theories of difference, as articulated in many of her essays, are shown in *Zami* to be that which defines the self and should be embraced⁵⁶:

⁵⁶ As one of Lorde's most recited quotes demonstrates-taken from *Our Dead Behind Us: Poems*-her theories about difference underpinned all of her work: "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."

In a paradoxical sense, once I accepted my position as different from the larger society as well as from any single sub-society- Black or gay- I felt I didn't have to try so hard. To be accepted. To look femme. To be straight. To look straight ... To be approved (Z, p.181).

"Differences" could be seen to interrupt a set of political structures and personal identities, thus reflecting the lack of inherent cohesion between people and the structures that govern and ideologically locate their differences. The subjective formation of the 'I' in *Zami* emphasises that it is inexorable power relations within these structures of authority that create artificial divisions to categorise, criminalise and colonise difference. In *Zami* difference is epitomised by the multiple lesbian identities that occupy its pages and defy social and cultural expectations and norms:

But in this plastic, anti-human society in which we live there have never been too many people buying fat black girls born almost blind and ambidextrous, gay or straight. (Z, p.181).

Heidi Mirza comments in *Black British Feminism* that, for black women, "power is not diffuse, localised and particular. Power is centralised and secure as it always has been, excluding, defining and self-legitimising" (Mirza, 1997, p.20). In *Zami*, Lorde attempts to defy these powers by structuring her *own* power while acknowledging that power is inextricably linked to ideologically repressive social orders.

Nowhere in *Zami* does Lorde, as author and activist, more keenly differentiate black female experience than through representing lesbian-identified women or subjectivities that resist hetero-normativity. Lorde often merges a rhapsodic and poetic style with a political entrenchment in her essays, where the personal and political create a definitive style that uses metaphor and symbolism to reframe the emotional/psychic and formerly invisible worlds of black/lesbians into public spaces. As Lorde's only full-length piece of prose, *Zami* enables her to transform multiple ideas and aesthetic realisations into a cohesive, sustained form. It also enables Lorde to write about the emotional dimension of lesbian love and sexuality in ways

that, according to Alexis DeVeaux in her biography of Lorde, she was not able to through a mainstream poetry publisher.

Alexis D. Gumbs has observed -in her radical poetic thesis on the vital power of the black maternal in late-twentieth century black and / or lesbian feminist texts- Lorde's writing becomes a "birthing process, an embodied mode of production" (Gumbs, 2010, p.395). In looking at how Lorde's lesbian subjectivities are developed in *Zami*, it is important to recognise their holistic import, the connection of Audre's lovers to the wider cultural work that Lorde as author is engaging in, as well as to the maternal and spiritual self. In her poem 'Recreation', taken from her 1978 collection entitled *Black Unicorn*, Lorde refuses to disconnect the personal from the political, or the political from her identity as a poet and a lover of women:

Coming together
it is easier to work
after our bodies
meet
(Lorde, 1997, p.296)

In considering black/lesbian subjectivities, I will now consider three of Audre's central lesbian relationships in *Zami*: Ginger, Eudora and Muriel. I will also examine the complexities of Audre as a self-identified black/lesbian in often mixed-race relationships, and the broader spectrum of collective lesbian experiences that demonstrate support and division within the lesbian/feminist movement.⁵⁷.

GINGER: SEXUAL RESISTANCE AND ENACTED DESIRE

⁵⁷ Ginger Eudora and Muriel make up three of Audre's central lesbian relationships in the text. In this chapter I also reference Audre's relationship with Bea in the narrative context of her relationship with Rhea (her heterosexual friend). I do this to further illuminate the historical and social context of Audre's lesbian relationships and desire within a hetero-normative hegemony that closed down possible relations between self defined heterosexual and lesbian women. Audre's relationships with Afrekete and Gennie as discussed in Chapter 3 are also prominent. Note that Lorde's central intersubjective referents after her mother are her lovers.

Geographical movement in *Zami* (as I will go on to further elaborate in Chapter 6) allows Audre to recreate herself, to foreground aspects of her lesbian identity, and create lesbian personas that witness black working class lesbian desire. Audre's economic move to Stamford enables her to experience her first sexual lesbian encounter with another black woman- Ginger, who "walked like Fats, with a swing-bopping step." The narrator views Ginger's black cherubic figure as a thing of immense beauty:

Snapping little dark eyes, skin the color of well-buttered caramel, and a body like the Venus of Willendorf. Ginger was gorgeously fat, with an open knowledge about her body's movement that was delicate and precise. (Z, p.136).

Ginger is a new literary subject, fat, black and visible, positively identified with a self-awareness that is not paralleled by Audre's own self-consciousness. Lorde is able to revere Ginger; as in her portrayal of De Lois that I refer to in Chapter 1, she creates a space for fat black women and their sexual desires that have been excluded in received literature. When Audre reaches Stamford, the reader is given an opportunity to share in the mythical reshaping of Audre the individual, within a collective understanding of lesbian identity that is socio-historically placed and enacted. Audre's self-mythologisation is both performative and introspective, representing a proposed set of subjectivities. Ginger has her own set of mythologies about Audre, based on her ideas around lesbian sexuality and a kind of modern confidence she associates with city girls: "That's right. Blue jeans and sneakers on Atlantic Avenue on Thursday night! I said to myself, who's this slick kitty from the city?" (Z, p.129). This gives Audre the chance to reinvent herself intersubjectively - Ginger has created mythologies of Audre that reflect her own desire, her perceptions building upon the expectations of the other. The reader of *Zami* shares this expectation: "She built up an incredible mythology about me and what my life had been in New York, and I did nothing to dissuade her" (Z, p.133). This mythologising presents Audre with a place-related power that is also sexual, her assumed identity forging and maintaining a performative space, fulfilling Ginger's own speculative needs; their desire is constructed within a set of mythologies

of the other, of the mythical lesbian subject.

Audre's actual vulnerabilities will remain silenced throughout her relationship with Ginger. This is a physical and sexual relationship, one built upon performed roles, projected stances and presumed identities: "Ginger talked, and I listened. I soon discovered that if you keep your mouth shut, people are apt to believe you know everything, and they begin to feel freer and freer to tell you anything, anxious to show that they know something, too" (Z, p.129). Audre becomes what Ginger wants her to be; the traditional male gaze and lens is annulled. Audre and Ginger, as black lesbians, are controlling their definition of one another, outlining the differences between butch/femme and heteronormative male/female roles. In the text, Lorde transgresses normative social codes, the repetition of "freer" inscribing black lesbian sexuality into the narrative. This suggests a set of female sexual subjectivities, written by a black lesbian, engaging in black lesbian semiotics. Ginger's view of Audre is also geographically based on her idea of New York City as an urban metropolis and its black/lesbian inhabitants as sophisticates: "Ginger...was convinced that I had everything taped. She saw me as a citified little baby butch - bright, knowledgeable" (Z, p.133).

Returning to Stamford to work echoes Audre's childhood, her newly realised autonomy strengthening her sense of identity, becoming the Audre she chooses to be, the black/lesbian that Ginger chooses to desire: "A piece of me was invested in her image of me as the gay young blade, the seasoned and accomplished lover from the big city" (18, p.141). Just as Lorde as narrator and author can control the mythologies contained within *Zami*, so Audre as subject can manipulate and remember that manipulation as "illusory." The narrator can mythologise her own role as the swashbuckling hero of her relationship with Ginger: "I enjoyed paying court to Ginger, and being treated, in private, like a swain. It gave me a sense of power and privilege that was heady, if illusory, since I knew on another level it was all play-acting" (Z, p.142). The play-acting is the experimental performance of sexuality and gender within the text and in Audre's relationship with Ginger. The expectations of chivalric courtship are subverted by Audre and

Ginger's immediate desire; the codes between them read and understood, Ginger always the more vocal about that desire. Audre's shyness and ambivalence at voicing and naming her sexuality shows when Ginger asks her: "'Are you gay or aren't you?' she takes another deep breath". This contradicts Audre's instinctual sexual proclivity and appetite, when they do eventually make love: "I smiled up at her and said nothing. I certainly couldn't say *I don't know* ... I had never made love to a woman" (Z, p.135).

Audre's relations with Ginger prioritise the sensual and material, rather than language or a verbal declaration of desire. Audre is unable to imagine what making love to a woman will be like: "I only knew, dimly, it was something I wanted to happen, and something that was different from anything I had ever done before" (Z, p.138). Touch signifies an innate response to Ginger and her body, a protective role, one that holds and values Ginger's beauty and her own vulnerable sexuality: "I took her into my arms, and she became precious beyond compare" (Z, p.138). This protective role frees Audre from her own self-conscious desires; she is able to invest her desire in another black woman and, once she is given that opportunity, is able to enter into this open exchange between adult women: "Uncertainty and doubt rolled away from the mouth of my wanting like a great stone, and my unsureness dissolved in the directing heat of my own frank and finally open desire" (Z, p.139).

Desire is related in rich language in the narrative of *Zami* but it is through the subject's engagement with another subject and shared sensual experiences that personal transformation takes place. In recognising the distinctiveness of *Zami* in literary terms, Lorde as narrator is able to observe Audre's desire and create a narrative space for both desire and sexuality, as a mythobiographic entity rather than a fictive projection. Unlike Ann Bannon's books and lesbian pulp fiction of the period, in which lesbian desire is still portrayed as deviant, Lorde opens out the narrative of lesbian desire, to include a visual, aural poeticism that names lesbian desire.⁵⁸ Sensual and

⁵⁸ Anne Bannon's books along with other covert lesbian texts of the time such as *The Ladder*, are directly referenced within the narrative. Their relevance to the

graphic, the lovemaking with Ginger parallels the later episode with Afrekete, but whereas Afrekete will connect Audre on a deeper spiritual level, Ginger inspires a physical awakening and raw lust. Audre's sequential movements: "I felt and tasted her so deeply, my hands and my mouth and my whole body moved against her" lead to a realisation of her own desire. Being intimate with her lover - giving to another woman- only heightens her pleasure: "Her flesh opened up to me like a peony and the unfolding depths of her pleasure brought me back to her body over and over again..." (Z, p.139). This synthesised sensual exchange connects Audre to the narrator's initial prologue of desire, materialising her projected desire, through Ginger's subjectivity. In relating sexuality to desire, Lorde demystifies lesbian sexuality, making it a holistic experience, a process devoid of shame. Audre's and women's sexuality takes a central place in the text:

I dove into her wetness, her fragrance, the silky insistence of her body's rhythms illuminating my own hungers. We rode each other's need, her body answered the quest of my fingers, my tongue my desire to know a woman, again and again, until she arced like a rainbow (Z, p.139)

The urgency of Lorde's writing reinforces that desire is a cyclical process, one that is reciprocal and depends on response. This sexual experience is so opposite to Audre's previous experiences with Peter, led by an ill-expressed male desire, where there is no place for female subjectivity.⁵⁹ The cyclical immediacy and erotic imagery lead to Ginger's orgasm, embodied as a rainbow, an arched back; the imagery is of a diffused and radiant desire, one with multiple strands. In almost biblical refrains, the narrator reinterprets the preciousness that Audre felt when she and Ginger first embraced; the sensual pleasure, the couple's shared bodily fluids are described in a language that is direct, erotic and yet tender, visualising lesbian sexual intimacy in a way that differentiates it from heterosexuality:

intertextuality of black and / or lesbian writers of the late 1970s/80s must not be underestimated.

⁵⁹ The end of Audre's relationship with Peter and subsequent pregnancy leads to Audre's breakdown and re-evaluation of her life and sexuality whilst living at Brighton Beach.

“I surfaced dizzy and blessed with her rich myrrh-taste in my mouth, in my throat, smeared over my face...” (Z, p.139). The narrator and Lorde’s understanding of their sexuality is transformed by the physical experience of this level of intimacy with another black woman.

EUDORA : BUTCH DESIRE

Audre’s trip to Mexico marks a significant turning point in *Zami* as it is the first time that Audre has travelled outside of North America: “Not until I looked down and saw the lights of the city spread like electric lace across the night, did I actually believe I had gotten out of New York in one piece and under my own steam. Alive” (Z, p.153). The confidence of travelling alone, of making her own decisions, the freedom from the overbearing environment of her mother, releases in Audre a new heightened sense of her own sexual power. Audre’s budding sexuality is portrayed by the extended use of plant metaphors that convey Audre’s unfurling eroticism and sensuality:

the ripe luscious bougainvillea with their flame-red voluptuous flowers, and the delicate and persistent showers of jacaranda blossoms with their small white and pink and purple petals. (Z, p.159)

Audre takes on the subjectivity of a black/lesbian travelling alone to a ripe and luscious land full of sexual metaphors and vulvic scenery, but even as Audre idealises her surroundings she recognises that there is a façade “behind which all of these anxieties flourished” (Z, p.159) - in herself and in the “idea” of Mexico’s exoticness. The freedom of travelling away from home appears to be fleeting. The freedom Audre feels in Mexico amongst other brown and black people, and her deep sexual relationship with an older woman, Eudora (significantly a writer herself), marks a turning point in Lorde’s maturation as lesbian and artist. Audre’s relationship with Eudora symbolises her coming into her identity as a lesbian, despite their differences, Eudora’s class privilege and white racial identity.

Just before Audre's love affair with Eudora, the bird returns (a metaphor for creative visioning are discussed earlier). After being silenced by Gennie's death, its reappearance marks a new heightened sensuality and audacity, vibrancy, pulsating rhythmically through nature's spaces in Mexico and not just through the man-made radio of the younger Audre's urban Harlem. As Audre takes in the "breathtaking dawns and quick hill-twilights of Cuernavaca" (Z, p.160), where it is "easier to be quiet in the woods," she is able to truly listen, without the distraction of urban noise that has formerly dominated her into silence. In Mexico, her life emerges in tandem with her poetry as sensory, erotic, complex- all that she had so far been unable to express. These previously elusive sensory impressions and permutations that flooded her childhood are materialised in Mexico. The bird signals Audre's emergence and coming into being, a lesbian and transcendental awakening as a poet, an artist:

The birds suddenly cut loose ... I had never heard anything so beautiful and unexpected before. I felt shaken by the waves of song. For the first time in my life I had an insight into what poetry could be. I could use words to recreate that feeling, rather than to create a dream, which was what so much of my writing had been before. (Z, p.160)

Eudora as Audre's lover is aligned with the beauty of Mexico: "*Eudora, Mexico. Color and light and Cuernavaca and Eudora*" (Z, p.161), and provides the opportunity for Audre to transgress against her upbringing. Eudora is butch and irreverent: "She was the only woman I'd seen wearing pants in Mexico ..." (Z, p.161) and, importantly for Lorde, an outsider. Even in the expat community where many are "victims of the McCarthyist purges" (Z, p.159), Eudora signifies an "unexpected and welcome surprise" (Z, p.162). She is a woman who is able to express herself performatively in a non-conventional way. As a butch, the gender codes are clear informed by the: "freedom and authority with which she moved" (Z, p.162), and she bears imperfections with a self-assuredness that comes with age, experience, and the challenges of a life lived at the margins. The signifiers of 'outsider' status and her sexuality are evident to Audre:

“Eudora’s bright spacious room was comfortable and disheveled” (Z, p.161), leading Audre to “know Eudora was gay” (Z, p.162).

Eudora is one of the most fully rounded characters in *Zami* and, along with Afrekete, appears to be the least biographically sourced and yet to have an Amazon-like mythical stature in the narrator’s memory:

There was an air about Eudora when she moved that was both delicate and sturdy, fragile and tough, like the snapdragon she resembled when she stood up, flung back her head, and brushed her hair back with the palms of her hands. I was besotted. (Z, p. 164)

Like a male character from a Hemingway novel, Eudora is a hard drinker and a straight talker. She epitomises the rogue, damaged genius of so many American adventure and beat novels and to Lorde “the most fascinating woman I had ever met” (Z, p.162). Eudora also brings with her a characteristic sadness, “a force field around her I did not know how to pass, a sadness surrounding her that I could not breach” (Z, p.165), which underlies her flamboyance - something that Audre thinks she will never personally experience or understand.

Audre describes a freedom that comes from making love with a woman who is twice her age: “Eudora knew many things about loving women that I had not yet learned” (Z, p.169). She revels in simple erotic pleasures of the flesh, and unlike in the sexual and personal dynamics with Ginger and Muriel, Audre does not have to be in control or take charge. She feels she has met her equal, someone with the confidence to recognise her own desire: “The comfort and delight of her body against mine. The ways my body came to life in the curve of her arms, her tender mouth, her sure body-gentle, persistent, complete” (Z, p.169). A renewed focus on light is connected with a shift in Audre’s development and ways of thinking, a new perspective; the light on the adobe walls of Eudora’s apartment, are warmer in tone than the harsh midday sun, replicates the glow of their erotic flush: “The pleasure of our light flushed over me like a sun on the walls of the light-washed colorful room” (Z, p.168). Audre insists on light as they make love, despite

Eudora's hesitation: "No" I whispered in the hollow of her ear. "In the light."
(Z, p.168)

The experience of Audre Lorde as biographer/narrator is ever present, in that while Eudora is depicted as a survivor of breast cancer, Lorde's own battle with cancer was a driving force in completing this biomythography, her first full-length work. Alexis De Veaux, Lorde's self-appointed biographer, observes that: "As a breast cancer survivor ... she integrated within her multiple identities yet one more identity" (De Veaux, 2004, p.230). Lorde again breaks another taboo, that of the ongoing desire of women who are cancer survivors, Eudora's own sub-narrative materializing an experiential commonality amongst women rarely represented in text. In this sequence, the narrator intimately describes Eudora's scars with an eroticism that comes from trust and intimacy:

In the circle of lamplight I looked from her round firm breast with its rose nipple erect to her scarred chest. The pale keloids of radiation burn lay in the hollow under her shoulder ... She took my hand and placed it there, squarely, lightly, upon her chest (Z, p.167).

Like the women cited in the opening narrative of *Zami*, Eudora takes her place as a questing survivor, a writer and documenter of women's lives, a scholar of women's ancient artifacts and a lover of women. Akin to the women in San Cristobel, whom Eudora describes as disguising their goddess worship (as the worship of Catholic saints) to afford them the space for their matrilineal heritage; Eudora has created a space for other women to exist. In her complex way of living she bears: "The mark of an Amazon ... Beloved" (Z, p.169), that is the very real physical and emotional scars of her journey, as an outsider, an exile from her home country, and of living as an open lesbian.

Eudora has a considerable impact on Audre, affirming her sexuality and visibility as a lesbian and an open lover of women. "Eudora had not ignored me. Eudora had not made me invisible. Eudora had acted directly towards me" (Z, p.175). When Audre leaves Mexico, Eudora has already

turned her away, descending into a spell of alcoholism - the emotional hurts and complexities of loving women and the additional pressures of societal rejection, like the keloid scars she bears from her breast cancer treatment, do not heal so readily. For Audre, Eudora is a passageway, a transition - aided by the translucent light and vibrant colours of Mexico- into full womanhood: "I felt myself pass beyond childhood, a woman connecting with other women in an intricate and complex and ever-widening network of exchanging strengths" (Z, p.175).

BEA AND RHEA: DISRUPTING LESBIAN UTOPIAS

For Audre Lorde's generation, lesbianism was not just a matter of sexuality and identity, but psychic survival, the invisibility of lesbianism in the public domain silencing and isolating lesbian-identified women. "Meeting other lesbians was very difficult ... One read *The Ladder* and *Daughters of Bilitis* newsletter and wondered where all the other gay girls were" (Z, p.150). Lorde justifies her relationships with white women, especially Bea, in terms of this loneliness, Lorde as narrator comparing being a lesbian in the 1950s with her own synonymous feelings of isolation: "Often, just finding out another woman was gay was enough of a reason to attempt a relationship ... Such were the results of loneliness, and this was certainly the case between Bea and me" (Z, p.150). Lorde's racialised view of Bea is that she is sexually impotent and restrained by her white upper class background, in opposition to Audre's superior sensuality: "Her family was old, mainline white, and monied ... Sexual expression with Bea was largely theoretical satisfaction" (Z, p.151). Here Bea's narrative and subjectivity is the antithesis of Lorde's own vibrant and vital sexuality - Bea is sentimentally and emotionally attached to Lorde, and yet sexually repressed.

Rhea is another character in *Zami* who brings the politics of lesbianism to the fore, as interpreted through an oppositional homophobia. Rhea represents Lorde's quandary about idealised friendships and sexual

relationships, which form part of a lesbian continuum.⁶⁰ Audre and Rhea's close relationship is marred by Audre's sexuality, Lorde having to acknowledge Rhea's homophobia. In *Zami*, Audre allows herself a clear and demanding sexual identity and appetite. To Rhea this presents a set of issues with Audre that interrupt her friendships and her relationships. Within this dynamic lesbianism is so marginalised and politically repressed that it becomes divisive, revealing a binary determinism between heterosexual and lesbian women that reflects -as Bonnie Zimmerman has pointed out- the political rift amongst feminist women in the 1970s. Lorde's sexuality is explicit and yet hidden: "But on the surface, Rhea did not *know* I was gay, and I did not *tell* her" (Z, p.195). It is Rhea's homophobic stance that distances Audre from her friend, despite their comradeship, as radical revolutionaries: "Homosexuality was outside the party line at that time; therefore, Rhea defined it as 'bad'..." (Z, p.195) Lorde contemporaneously reflects upon this schism by re-identifying herself as a "lesbian," where lesbian codes and signifiers become guttural, communal signs - something that 'straight girls' won't understand: "I have never found straight women physically appealing. Self-protective as this mechanism is, it also has served me as a sixth sense" (Z, p.196).

The need to survive makes Audre's friendship with Rhea a site of conflict and loss. When Rhea walks in on Audre and Muriel naked together, explaining their love, this presentation of lesbianism contradicts her own situation and grief at losing her boyfriend to a younger woman. Seeing Audre and Muriel together appears to shatter her own illusion of femininity, as constructed by heterosexual practices that continue to repress women's sexuality even when exclusive of male involvement. (Rhea's own sense of femininity is constructed within a leftist set of ideologies). "In other words, Rhea had been denounced for her association with me. A progressive in good standing could not afford such questionable company in 1955. I had become an embarrassment" (Z, p.198).

⁶⁰ See Chapter 1 for a further explanation of the lesbian continuum that was promoted by many radical feminists, and politicised lesbianism as a set of personal choices rather than sexuality alone.

Lorde translates this occurrence as being about Rhea's own social positioning, whereas to the reader and narratorial observer it has more subtle implications. Rhea's own subjectivity within the text is questioned, her sexuality marginalised by the political lesbian narrator and the author, and the heterosexual subject is decentred. Judith Butler has outlined that the "heterosexual matrix proves to be an *imaginary* logic which insistently issues forth its own unmanageability". (Butler in Phelan, 1997, p.24). The contemporary reader of the text does not find Lorde an embarrassment, instead Rhea's pathetic reaction engenders her empathy: "And then without warning, Rhea burst into tears. She stood over us sobbing wildly as if her heart was being broken by what she saw" (25, p.197). Rhea's predicament results from occupying a male space that isolates and makes fragile the female subjective experience.

MURIEL AND THE POLITICS OF LESBIANISM

Muriel and I loved tenderly and long and well, but there was no one around to suggest that perhaps our intensity was not always too wisely focused.

Each one of us had been starved for love for so long that we wanted to believe that love, once found, was all powerful. We wanted to believe that it could give word to my inchoate pain and rages ... that it could free our writings, cure racism, end homophobia and adolescent acne. (*Zami*, p.209)

In *Zami*, Muriel can be seen to represent the schizophrenia of segregation in America, not only in terms of the mental health issues that Muriel faces but also in the representation of race in 1950s America. Muriel recounts the institutionalised torture of mental health 'treatment' imposed upon middle class white sexual deviants where "electric shock treatments are like little deaths ... They broke into my head like thieves with official sanction and robbed me of something precious that feels like it's gone forever" (*Z*, p.200). Audre's experiences as a black lesbian are another kind of polarised reality – in a segregated and racially constructed 'white' America, the institutions of racism are externalised and visible. Setting the

hierarchies and cultural benchmarks of a 'white' America, race becomes a set of binary oppositions, which Muriel and Audre have no choice but reify.

Muriel is institutionally defined as schizophrenic. Lorde as narrator meanwhile examines the social, political and experiential schizophrenia whilst navigating her way through a racist society, responding to her experiences of being in an interracial relationship in New York in the 1950s. This division of the self and desire becomes more evident when time and space shifts to present a retrospective rendering of black lesbianism back in the 1950s:

During the fifties in the Village, I didn't know the few other Black women who were visibly gay at all well. Too often we found ourselves sleeping with the same white women. We recognised ourselves as exotic sister-outsiders ... That was the way it was Downtown. And Uptown, meaning the land of Black people, seemed very far away. (*Z*, p.177)

Clearly forced into a split between two identities as black and as lesbian, Audre reckons with the colonisation of the black lesbian body on which borders are presumably imposed via ways of relating that are deeply embedded within hetero-normative hegemonies. The notions of "Downtown" and "Uptown" become spatial signifiers alluding to sexuality and the poverty of lesbianism as downtown and the cultural and spiritual affiliation of black communities with a higher order uptown. This also exemplifies Lorde's own struggle between her political, social and personal affiliations - with black identity being in opposition to her love of women and identity as a lesbian.

The patterns of Muriel and Audre's lives and loving are engaged with and yet in opposition to the lesbian bar scene that they frequent and critique. According to the narrator the scene is a place of collective visibility and recovery but one that lacks diversity: "What we both needed was the atmosphere of other lesbians, and in 1954, gay bars were the only meeting places we knew" (*Z*, p.187). Different from their peers even in the lesbian bars, together Muriel and Audre are outsiders within a subculture of

difference. This denotes a shift within the text where difference is contextualized within a set of hierarchised and racialised structures in which Muriel and Audre's identities, as lesbians, must be considered. The ideology of the "real lesbian self" was one that pervaded and divided U.S. and European lesbian theory and communities in the 1980s. This notion of a pure lesbian identity, of static truths and mores, leads Audre to conclude that "we were pretenders, only appearing to be cool and hip and tough like all gay-girls" (Z, p.187). Lorde identifies the ideology of the 'real' lesbian to be exclusionary, destructive and partisan, often used as a way to shortsightedly protect and root lesbianism in biological, racialised and psychological essentialisms. At their worst these tended to echo a jingoistic nationalism of an originary Sapphist feminist motherland populated by white, university-educated, short-haired Amazons.

Despite the lesbian bars' limitations in the 1950s as places of progressive diversity, collective lesbian meeting spaces brought with them a certain amount of safety. As Joan Nestle, lesbian writer and archivist, has observed they were spaces of "survival," of shared codes that helped to protect the women and find ways to exist in public spaces in a pre-Stonewall era.⁶¹ They were also spaces that were dangerous, reflecting how gender and sexuality were policed:

there were always rumours of plain clothes women circulating among us looking for gay-girls with fewer than three pieces of female attire. That was enough to get you arrested. (Z, p. 187)

Here lesbian attire relates to symbolic codes of belonging. The attention to detail that Muriel and Audre give to the aesthetic qualities of the way they dress marks out that divergence and difference, a way of fitting in with - while being apart from - a shared aesthetic that is appreciated but also

⁶¹ Joan Nestle is a writer, Jewish lesbian femme, and founding member of the Lesbian Herstory Archive in New York, which holds some of Audre Lorde's personal archives. Through her own literary work she has also recorded and documented the lives of marginalised working class lesbian women, her work pre-empting much queer theory and post-modern feminisms. Joan Nestle is an active cultural worker who influenced generations of lesbians but has received limited recognition for her work.

signifies safety (shared sexual codes) and roles within their sexuality (butch/femme). As I have noted, this often conflicted with Lorde's and other feminists' politics about what they believed to be the heterosexist nature of butch-femme relationships and dynamics between women.⁶² As Judith Roof explains in her essay, '1970s Lesbian Feminism Meets 1990s Butch-Femme', this anti butch-femme stance came from a generation deeply rooted in the political challenges of ending violence against women and girls and the butch-femme equation with sado-masochism (S/M), and has been abstracted and oversimplified. Judith Roof however fails to contextualise and realise the full socio-historical complexity of Lorde's and others' anti butch-femme stance, as radical black feminisms were struggling for rights beyond gender and lesbian "equality" alone.⁶³

Muriel provides Audre with a space to nurture through a new lens of love and acceptance. Audre is in love with Muriel and values the way she is able to understand and look at the world when she is with her.

Reseeing the world through her unique scrutinies was like reseeing the world through my first pair of glasses when I was a child. Endless and wonderful re-discoveries of the ordinary. (Z, p.190)

The narrator's comparison with her own childhood shows how the relationship with Muriel renews Audre's wonder and interaction with the world. The reader is also given a different insight into the vulnerabilities of these parallel lives, and into the problematics of Audre's repeated role as the caregiver, protector, the strong black woman whose own emotional wellbeing and self is put on hold whilst she supports another: "Slowly but surely, Muriel became more and more like a vulnerable piece of myself. I could cherish and protect this piece because it was outside of me." (Z, p.190). Here

⁶² I believe this 'conflict' was something that Lorde struggled with personally and elements of it are revealed as fissures in her work; Lorde clearly used femme-butch dynamics in her sexual and personal relationships and often adopted a non-gender-defined sexual positioning. In *Zami* she refers to herself several times as both man and woman in relation to the expression of her sexual desire.

⁶³ Judith Roof's essay also fails to recognise the full effects of racism and capitalism on Lesbian identified women, unhelpfully comparing butch-femme relationships to interracial couples and calling the latter an 'alternative'.

Lorde as narrator's ambiguous relationship with power comes to the fore, the dynamic of the relationship, which is possibly obscured by Lorde as biographer's need to 'cherish and protect', can still be read through the text as a need to control. As Lorde recites in her poem 'Power' from her 1978 collection of poetry, *The Black Unicorn*, power is:

...the destruction within me.
But unless I learn to use
the difference between poetry and rhetoric
my power too will run corrupt (Lorde, 1997, p.320)

Audre sacrifices some of her own needs to retain a precious idea of a relationship that replicates the dynamic of nurture, even going on to suggest that Audre is sculpting Muriel out of her own dreams, like the flour-and-water dolls her mother made her as a girl: "With no intent and less insight, I fashioned this girl of wind and ravens into a symbol of surrogate survival, and fell into love like a stone off a cliff" (Z, p.190). But Muriel is not the surrealist-like ideal that Audre yearns for nor a symbol of that "survival," Muriel is an autonomous subject. The wind may signify flight, and the raven's death, but Audre chooses to fall "into love."

The difference between Lorde and Muriel is fundamental: "I was Black and she was not..." The political need for black-only spaces, was an ongoing issue for lesbian feminists in the 1980s - leading to the retraction of an all-encompassing sisterhood, which Lorde the polemicist went on to discuss. Racial difference "colored our perceptions and made a difference in the ways I saw pieces of the worlds we shared" (Z, p.204). Audre's ability to protect herself and to conjure up a way to value herself, is grounded in her black identity. No matter her childhood, her blackness gives her strength and fortification: "it was something that set me apart, but also protected me" (Z, p.204). Lorde's earlier statement that "lesbians were probably the only black and white women in New York City in the fifties who were making any real attempt to communicate with each other..." (Z, p.179) demonstrates a simultaneity of thought and experience, a double consciousness, an allegiance to her lesbian identity and relationships with white lesbian

women, but an acknowledgement that this resides within a racialised, socio-historical context that is complex.

POLITICISING THE 'L' WORD

In the lesbian bars of the 1950s, Lorde finds both refuge and rejection, a schizophrenic self-division, where Audre knows few other black women who are “visibly gay.” Whereas, downtown, the Village represents bohemian opportunism and white subversion, uptown Harlem represents the black seclusion of overpriced tenancies and potential homophobia. The fishbowl world of the lesbian bar is claustrophobic and interwoven: “Too often we found ourselves sleeping with the same white women. We recognised ourselves as exotic sister-outsiders...” (Z, p.177). Lorde differentiates herself as a black lesbian from the black stonebitches: “I remember thinking for a while that I was the only black lesbian living in the Village, until I met Felicia” (Z, p.177). As her sister outsider, Flee offers Lorde a reflection of herself in a subjective black/lesbian mirror - a familiarity she has not experienced since her nights loving Ginger, an affinity of difference: “We were both part of the ‘freaky’ bunch of lesbians who weren’t into role-playing, and who were by the butches and the femmes, Black and white, disparaged with the term Ky-Ky, or AC/DC...” (Z, p.178). The gay-girl vernacular code, “Ky-Ky and AC/DC”, is located spatially within the confines of the butch/femme bars. For the bars’ inhabitants, their lesbian tropes and ontologies constitute a psychological map geographically recalled as being “a state of mind extending all the way from river to river below 14th Street, and in pockets throughout the area still known as the Lower East Side” (Z, p.178).

1950s gay-girl vernacular occupies Lorde’s recollections of the New York City lesbian bar scene, its urban mythologies and reminiscences forming a history of lesbianism which included tales about:

the proper Black ladies who came downtown on Friday night after the last show at Small’s Paradise to find a gay-girl to go muff-diving

with, and bring her back up to Convent Avenue to sleep over while their husbands went hunting... (Z, p.179).

This inversion of the black New York jazz scene's propensity to attract upper class white women resists black objectification and is rewritten back into black/lesbian history through a lens of gender fluidity. The inclusion of this documentary observation is poignant, as Audre and other black North American feminists (including Angela Davis) routinely contested the deletion of black lesbians from jazz history. Black upper class lesbians, leading as restricted a life as their white sisters, had a similar ability to simultaneously oppress others while being oppressed. This challenges Lorde's understanding of sisterhood and collectivism: "We not only believed in the reality of sisterhood, that word which was to be so abused two decades later, but we also tried to put it into practice..." (Z,p.179).

Audre's identity is often built upon what *she is not* within the text, her exclusion from the realms of aesthetic and embodied acceptance. Lorde thus accentuates how capitalism, sexism and racism intersect "in this plastic, anti-human society in which we live there have never been too many people buying fat black girls born almost blind and ambidextrous, gay or straight" (Z, p.181). This reminds the reader that Lorde as narrator not only constructs her own and Audre's outsider positioning, but also reflects a process of socio-historical 'othering'. Black hetero-normative publications (such as magazines *Ebony* and *Jet*) reject all aspects of her sexual identity but in their celebration of black identity still provide an "affirmation of some part of me" (Z, p.181).

Lorde goes on to dispel racist notions of ethnic homogeneity, of an immovable and righteous sisterhood - showing that subjectivities are still informed by a discourse of oppressive beauty ideals that is both internalised and externalised: "Like when your black sisters on the job think you're crazy and collect money between themselves to buy you a hot comb and straightening iron" (Z, p.181). This affirmation of black female identity is echoed in a mid-period Lorde poem, 'Naturally', taken from her 1974 collection *New York Head Shop and Museum*:

Since Naturally Black is Naturally Beautiful
I must be proud
And, naturally,
Black and
Beautiful
(Lorde, 1997, p.136)

Despite the poem's civil rights, black nationalist and panther-like rhetoric, Lorde still refuses to avoid the disproportions of any male-led movement where being a black/lesbian woman means a double jeopardy and threat: "like when your Black brother calls you a ball-buster and tricks you up into his apartment and tries to do it to you..." (Z, p.181). The "Black brother"s' use of sexual and physical threats to coerce and control is also an effort to negate Audre's subjectivity and corporeal presence. Lorde's physicality and colouring have an additional political bearing on Audre and Lorde's identity and transformation. The italicised interjections of the omnipresent interlocutor integrate multiple identities that continue to unfold within the text: "*Besides my father, I am the darkest one in my family and I've worn my hair natural since I finished high school*" (Z, p.182). The association of Audre's dark colouring with her father comes to have more complex gendered implications in Lorde's work when read next to Lorde's poem: 'To the Poet Who Happens to Be Black and the Black Poet Who Happens to Be a Woman',⁶⁴ as it traces the roots of Lorde's identity as a lesbian poet "...born into the gut of Blackness"⁶⁵:

"You were so dark," my mother said
"I thought you were a boy"
(Lorde, 1997, p.359)

⁶⁴ From Lorde's 1986 poetry collection *Our Dead Behind Us*.

⁶⁵ The equation of the 'darkness' of the poet's subject is a direct reference to Audre's biographical identity in *Zami*. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, blackness is associated with the masculine and difference in the Lorde household. This brings to the fore the complexities of lesbian identity which are often termed as being 'masculine'. Joan Nestle eloquently describes so called masculine lesbians or butches in a way that I believe Lorde, even in her rejection of butch-femme identification, would relate to. Joan Nestle asks if butch-femme identities are not in fact, "...a lesbian specific way of deconstructing gender that radically reclaims women's erotic energy" (Nestle in Nestle, ed., 1992, p.14)

THE LESBIAN 'I'

Whilst the lesbian self in *Zami* is identified with the black female subject (as I've already suggested in the Introduction to this dissertation) the word 'lesbian' used in the context of Lorde's work should be understood to have broader political and emotional connotations. This is demonstrated by Lorde's own definition of lesbianism as an identified spectrum of relationality (both sexual and non-sexual) between women and its importance as a tool of political change as well as one of deep spiritual, erotic and sexual connection and/or love (physical and non-physical). This can be explained further by the very title of *Zami*, and Lorde's own belief that⁶⁶:

women identified women- those who sought their destinies and attempted to execute them in the absence of male support – have been around a long time. (Lorde, 1996, p.102).

Lesbian subjectivities and sexuality coalesce in *Zami* as Lorde attempts to address the (white) racialisation of lesbianism within the feminist movement at the end of the twentieth-century, and *redress* the absence of black/lesbianism from the literary pantheon. Lorde, as narrator and author, chooses a discourse that reflects the need to re-code a language that, in Irigaray's terms, has been "politically determined." As Irigaray pointedly asks, "How can women analyse their own exploitation, inscribe their own demands, within an order prescribed by the masculine?" (Irigaray, 1985, p.81). In *Zami*, Lorde disrupts essentialist notions of lesbian identity (white liberal lesbianism) and sexuality (the either/or dichotomy of 'vanilla' or S/M) whilst honouring a diverse black/lesbian culture. Lorde directly confronts these issues by peripheralising male narratives within the text; she does not 'replace' these but instead writes a set of black/lesbian narratives. In summary, I would boldly conclude that Lorde's depiction of these subjectivities in her work arguably founds a tradition of black/lesbian representation in literature from the late-twentieth century onwards.

⁶⁶ As already discussed the name/term 'Zami', according to Lorde, means women who work together as lovers and as friends in Carriacou culture

As I shall attempt to further articulate in Chapter 6, and finally in my Conclusion, this vision or re-centring of black, lesbian voices in the progression of any attempt at societal transformation results in a fundamental re-ordering of not only literary subjectivities but universal political and social structures. I will go on to argue in the following chapter that *Zami* should not be seen as an isolated text of political and social resistance but a transformation of such words into collective empowerment.

CHAPTER 6: TRANSFORMING SILENCE INTO POWER: The Resistant Self

...the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.

(Lorde, 2009, p.40)

For oppressed and oppressor the process of liberation- individual self-realization and revolutionary transformation of society- requires confrontation with reality, the letting go of fantasy

(hooks in Gates, Jr., ed., 1990, p.469)

Lorde brought the perspective of a Black lesbian radicalized within the civil rights movement, the black power movement, the second wave of U.S. women's movement, and the gay and lesbian movement.

(Byrd in Byrd, Betsch-Cole, Guy Shaftall, eds., 2009, p.12)

The power to transform oneself and the society one lives in has always been a central tenet of Lorde's work. Lorde's narratorial portrayal of Audre's bildungsroman and her progression toward a spiritual and creative freedom is traced by the geographical and territorial movement of Audre throughout the text. This exemplifies the power of Audre within a collectivist context (with her lovers, her friends or as part of political movements), to enact change in ways that the narrator attempts to document. In referencing well known historical events such as the Civil Rights movement and the protests against the execution of the Rosenbergs, Lorde envisions the untold stories of social movement and protest; she shows that social and political transformation does not happen without the resistance of individuals and collectives, who support others to build and coalesce their power through movements that make change.

As I shall go onto argue in the first part of this final chapter, Lorde's constant references to the city and her immediate environment throughout the text examine the way that for the black lesbian body: "Racial structuration is [...] imposed by capital" (Gilroy, 1995, p.21) and as Gilroy explains further is also "compounded and deepened by the state institutions and agencies" (Gilroy, 1995, p.21). In *Zami* Lorde's subjectivities transform a silenced erasure through their everyday presence within gendered and "Racial structuration" in the city. This often leads to the self-revelatory understanding that they are able to resist and to exist beyond survival alone.

POLITICISING THE CITY

Lorde as narrator positions Audre on a biographical trajectory whose time scheme appears inherently progressive: Audre grows up, Audre journeys from childhood into womanhood. *Zami's* structure also appears cartographical; *Zami's* emergence is mapped and patterned, embedded in tenement architecture and the gridding of New York City's streets where the physical reality of Audre's life is lived and witnessed. Akin to the women writers of the so-called Harlem Renaissance (Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Alice Dunbar-Nelson), Lorde reimagines New York City and its streets, through her narratives, as a place that harbours many black women's identities. Maria Balshaw has observed this of black women in relation to US cities:

Carrying the double burden of structures of racial and gender oppression women writers have rarely been considered as productively engaged with the city as a site of representation (Balshaw, 2000, p.10)

This multifaceted oppression in the city is structured against the imaginary and spiritual backdrop of Audre/Lorde's matrilineal home: the mythical and cultural paradigm represented by Carriacou. Her biographical recollections are the backdrop to a shift between the internal spiritual ancestral home

and the externalisation of Audre's autonomous life in the city.⁶⁷ Lorde's positioning of the cityscape in the text frames her biomythographical subjects - Audre's seeming fearless approach to the external world developing alongside her internalized world of complex and delicate relationships with women.

Zami is delineated by its cityscapes, gridlines and reference points, each locate a known and physical, conscious and unconscious, 'home'. Referencing the social geographies of New York City and specifically Harlem, Lorde re-establishes a place for a subversive counter-cultural set of memories. Lorde's cultural memory is interpolated with fragments of a matrilineal diasporic originary 'home' (Carriacou) that may be inaccurate, essentialist or partially detailed, but informs her response to and her symbolic registration of New York. The narrator universalizes her New York City experiences when multiple memories intersect. Audre's biographical childhood is rendered in material and phenomenological terms. These remembered experiences connect her with the real world; that is, they are grounded in the geographical references and topography of New York's grid-like streets. For readers, New York City exists in real time, contrasting with Lorde's re-envisioned timeless Carriacou, based on matrilineal memories. In re-remembering Carriacou through her mother's recollections, Lorde as narrator "probes the cosmology of her black maternal ancestors in order to place herself" (Christian in Pryse and Spillers, ed., 1985, p.243). Lorde's mythologised embodiments of the mythical maternal are as vivid as Audre's biographical recollection of the New York City streets.

As Lorde rightly observes, the city is a political space. Balshaw writes about it being a place where gender, class and race converge and are materialised, and where the city streets pattern and structure these differences and oppressions. The politics of the city are beyond the cityscape alone, bearing witness to the history of the people who inhabit these spaces. Balshaw also observes that this urban space is haunted (in contrast to Carriacou) by its urban African American history that Lorde and Audre are

⁶⁷ Which have very different racial and capitalist structures that intersect and coalesce. Again Doreen Massey outlines this in *Space, Place and Gender*.

simultaneously a part of and separated from. Division is embodied in the African American cityscape by:

processes of social restructuring during and after the Civil Rights movement, the experience of de-industrialisation and the solidifying of the post industrial ghetto as the site of an urban underclass, separat[ing] as never before the African American city from the life of the whole city. (Balshaw, 2000, p.4)

In *Zami*, Harlem's cultural geography becomes a female space, where Lorde enacts her teenage fantasies with Gennie and goes on questing adventures with her sisters. Lorde reinvents the city streets, creating a female geographical space that she and her sisters are very much in control of - a girl gang feeling overrides any differences she and her sisters may have, when they walk the streets: "In the Harlem summer of my earliest days, I walked between my two sisters while they plotted the overthrow of the universes..." (Z, p.48). Audre creates a simultaneity of universes - the biographical and fictional merge; she redresses the lack of power black girls have in society through the girls' collective will and ambition on the city streets. Using biomythography to address and disrupt gender discrimination, Audre and her sister adopt, as the narrator does, a language of bravado and a fictive authority - on this occasion "the casual make-believe language of comic books" (Z, p.48). Here Lorde subverts the narrative in a fairytale-like way, repositioning black girls at the center of the adventure, using black cultural signifiers to identify, name and rewrite black female absence in the form of archetypes that have a dissident presence:

Three plump little Black girls, dimpled knees and scrubbed and oiled to a shine, hair tightly braided and tied with threads (Z, p.50)

The girls are described in nursery rhyme like epithets, but the archetype has been reinterpreted by the insertion of the words 'Black girls'. Lorde re-writes this into the collective imagination through a set of familiar description of

little girls with ‘dimpled knees’ oiled by their mothers to ‘shine’, they are figuratively presented as being as neat and ‘tightly’ knit as their braids.

When the girls reach the object of their quest (the comic shop, a place that houses the most fantastical stories and texts in their neighbourhood), the adventurous spell is either broken or perhaps the quest begins in earnest as Audre has to ward off an attack on her by the owner, a grotesque beast at the comic store lair: “The store was run by a fat white [...] with watery eyes and a stomach that hung over his belt like badly made jello” (Z, p.49). The initial innocence of the “three plump little Black girls” is threatened by the comic book shop owner who sexually harasses Audre; again, she becomes the other, the isolated, the vulnerable in the group of siblings. The owner’s stereotypical repulsiveness is multisensory: “I felt his slabby fingers like sausages grab my ribs and hoist me through a sickening arc of cigar fumes” (Z, p.49). The power dynamic of Audre and the shop owner bears witness to a wider history of power and domination, as the white man asserts his sense of entitlement over any young black girl that enters his store, leaving Audre “trapped between his pressing bulges ... dirtied and afraid, as if I had just taken part in some filthy rite” (Z, p.49). Audre also learns that the girl gang she has imagined has a collective strength and political unity, where integrity and rights are prized above individual gain. She learns that self-protection can extend to involve the support of other sisters: “I soon learned to avoid him by staying close to my sisters” (Z, p.49).

On their travels through Harlem, the girls negotiate geographical spaces; namely, spaces that exclude women and girls from being able to freely experience movement and travel. As the comic book storeowner demonstrates, the girls’ world is full of potential intimidation and terrors. It is also physically difficult to navigate, as poor black girls have to travel long distances by foot: “It was a day’s journey there and back again, across the two flat crosstown blocks to Eighth Avenue” (Z, p.49). Lorde gives this journey the feel of an urban pilgrimage, a journey that takes in multiple cartographies and socio-historic snapshots of the environment they traverse. These passages in *Zami* are written like a New York City heritage almanac. Diverse and intercultural, the references throughout *Zami* to specific shops,

buildings, and streets emphasise the authority of Lorde's recollections and biographical detailing, and create a dense topographical structure. Lists and catalogues of items of clothing, buildings, street names and paraphernalia throughout the text provide texture and particularising structures. With little narrative space the objects, items and places interconnect, providing the historical detail needed to locate the text and replicating the dense New York City streets. The geographical references are relevant to the narrative, documenting Audre's travels sequentially, relating them to the narrator's recollection:

We trudged up the hill past the Stardust Lounge, Micky's Hair Styling-Hot and Cold Press, the Harlem Bop Lounge, the Dream Café, the Freedom Barber Shop, and the Optimo Cigar Store. There was the Aunt May Eat Shoppe, and Sadie's Ladies and Children's Wear. There was Lum's Chop Suey Bar, and the Shiloh Baptist Mission Church ... the Record Store ... And on the corner of Seventh Avenue ... Noon Saloon (Z, p.50)

These locations can be seen to represent a shared cultural memory that Lorde reiterates and quantifies; the function that these shops and locations serve is socio-historically pertinent. They can also be seen to refer to her own family's migrant socio-economic positioning, as Audre references the shops relevant to her own cultural milieu. The names of the shops are suggestive of the young Audre's aspirations and anticipation of an adult world – "Stardust Lounge," "Dream Café," "Harlem Bop Lounge" - names that also evoke the contemporary reader's projected memory of 1950s New York. These reside alongside migrant and women's businesses: "Sadie's Ladies" and "Lum's Chop Suey Bar." They refer to a set of constructed memories, positioned into categories of aesthetic and communal practice: hair care, entertainment, churches, clothing. The names Lorde chooses to deploy simultaneously promote multiple understandings and infer biographical, cultural, colonial and creative histories. These places are also fantastically named: "Aunt May Eat Shoppe," "Noon Saloon," "Optimo Cigar Store", referencing the wild west and the last frontier, where ideas of cultural difference, hybridity, necessity and collective communities are a

means of survival. The naming of these locations takes up a compressed space on the page and in the text; for young Audre, whether imagined or real, they authenticate the experience of being a young black girl in the U.S. of the 1950s.

The geographical mapping of Audre's Harlem structures the temporal as well as the spatial. Christian Metz recognises that: "the narrative is, among other things, a system of temporal transformations" (Metz, in McQuillan, 2000, p.87). The process of travelling to these locations with Audre allows Lorde the narrator to fictively create a sequential temporal unity within the text. The numerous street names and references, along with descriptive images of the physical landscape, position the reader in a real world narrative. Her poetic descriptors of physical objects further the meaning that Lorde is trying to convey: "Vertical trolley tracks dissected the hills. The sidewalks were ribbons of pavement and people" (Z, p.50). The narrator makes sculptural analogies that reimagine the urban environment, the words enhancing the reader's imaginative response and engagement with the text. Lorde then curtails the metaphors that imitate the structure of Harlem, to punctuate the text with biographically correct street names which are transhistorical and yet introduce a contemporary audience to Lorde's interpretation of the New York City's landscape and thus Audre's experiences. These locations could also be seen to echo historical experiences, and migrant concerns, through the street names: "... between Broadhurst and Edgecome Avenues ... was Colonial Park" (Z, p.50-51), further articulating a sense of biographical detail. Broad, Edge, and Colonial are all words that suggest an understanding of the city as sovereign, its black 'outsider' subjects become surveyors of the city's grandeur, loyal citizens plaintively being led back to the Bronx, back to black neighbourhoods that are gated by "Colonial Park and Father Divine," that infer geo-political and colonial borders.

As I have already outlined, Lorde creates a geographical counter-narrative, one that foregrounds actualities that have a black historical specificity. She subverts the traditional cultural associations of shared historical myths. Audre Lorde's *biomythography* dispels the historical

mythography of mainstream Eurocentric epistemologies, counteracting these by referencing black historical experiences, ones that have been pressed into narrative non-existence and avoiding what the feminist critic Susan Friedman regards as:

The model of separate and unique selfhood ... a critical bias that leads to the (mis)reading and marginalisation of autobiographical texts by women and minorities in the process of canon formation (Friedman in Benstock, 1988, p.35)

Specific black cultural, social and historical events are interwoven with personal trajectories, the direct experiences of the black working class, black/lesbian and outsider subjectivities. Harlem is not only Audre's home, it is the collective home of many black people, it is a site of historical specificity and knowledge, it is representative of socio-economic division and exploitation; it is also a place where thousands of people exist, live and work; and it houses and defines the multiple identities of black women in all their complexities:

In their struggles and in their achievements, with passion and with beauty, the questions as well as the strengths that we learned ... not all our songs are mourning (Lorde, in McLaughlin, ed. 1990, p.xii).

Lorde conjures high tension and emotion from her surroundings by focalising on young Audre's perspective in the narrative. Audre fears a "sudden spasm of terror" on the bridge. She is sensitive to the transitional space between the imagined public sphere in which "tensions on the street were high, as they always are in racially mixed zones of transition" (p.17) and the private realm of home. She is sensitive to the economic divide, and to travelling back to a world of insecurity in an emotionally fragile home life where "no one would catch me or hold me or save me" (p.52). Lorde has personal connections with Harlem as narrator and as author: it is a place of creative stories, the setting of episodic narratives of experiential and collective cultural fears. Being a poor, black, working class girl, curtails her behaviour and informs Audre's fears - but it does not silence Audre or end

her adventures instead Lorde transforms these fears into the power to speak about the importance of black collective solidarity and the privilege of having sisters and family, unlike:

those hot and dusty Black children with no dime to buy the doors
open into the green coolness of the Colonial Park pool and no sisters
to take them comic-book trading. (Z, p.52)

Later the geographical move away from her maternal home, from New York City to Stamford, is not just a physical shift for the protagonist but also a biographical shift for the narrator. In disrupting the narrative's spatial sequence, it allows Lorde, as narrator, to elaborate cultural memories in another context, celebrating a cultural belonging that she is unable to express while in New York. Looking back, Audre pictures a utopian vision of connectivity found in shared experiences such as cooking and spirituality: "*To the noses on the busy street, religious and dietary separations did not matter*" (Z, p.130). Audre longs for the street foods and smells of her home city; the delectable culinary delights of a specific area of New York are exoticised and culturally relativised. Her metaphors conjure translucent Caribbean seas and colourful open-air markets, through which Lorde re-creates a cultural memory that lapses into an ancestral imagining:

*Bright Sunday morning on the Lower East Side of Manhattan ...
schools of pickles drifted like spiced fish waiting belly up for a bite.
Nearby, sawhorse tables extended onto the sidewalk under a striped
awning, holding flats of dried apricots, dark orange and mysteriously
translucent.* (Z, p.130)

As Audre travels throughout *Zami*, crossing personal, spiritual, geographical and literary borders, she articulates subjectivities of resistance, which however contradictory they may be, disrupt the dominant narrative by their very existence. The synthesis of different geographies allows her to simultaneously address the spatial politics of New York and powerful connections to other homes and sites of memory. Spaces of subjectivity can also provide spaces of consciousness that make social and political

transformation possible through a black/lesbian 'gendering'. These, according to Alexis De Veaux in her biography of Lorde, can create: "a new and different national space, *Zami* proposes notions of home, culture, and community as unbordered, deeply female spaces" (De Veaux, 2004, p.311) . As Stella Bolaki and Sabine Broeck have observed in *Audre Lorde's Transnational Legacies*, "Audre Lorde never stopped crossing boundaries in her life and work" (Bolaki and Broeck in Bolaki and Broeck, eds., 2015, p.2). In spanning these multiple territories that within the text cross geographical, political and social lines, likewise Lorde's adoption of biomythography transforms *Zami* into a text of transnational concern as well as subjective resistance.

GEOPOLITICAL RESISTANCE AND THE POLITICS OF WORK

Geopolitical and social structures that present discriminatory barriers in the real life world of Audre as subject also become sites of resistance for the narrator. Where personal and political oppression is revealed in the narrative, it is contextualised within a counter-historical genealogy; one that cites documented political movements alongside the narratives of individual and collective resistance. The reader's understanding of the text is affected by her own spatio-temporal positioning and knowledge of political struggle in the U.S. Throughout *Zami*, Audre Lorde documents a people's history that intersects lived experience with external structures, "Black and white, old and young, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual" sharing a "war against the tyrannies of silence" [sic] (Lorde in Byrd, Betsch Cole, Guy-Sheftall, eds., 2009, p.40) the power of the text is the transformation into power of these multiple voices. In *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, Marjorie Spillers differentiates black women's literature as:

Focusing on connection rather than separation, transforming silence into speech, and giving power back to the culturally disenfranchised (Pryse, in Pryse and Spillers, ed., 1985, p.5)

In *Zami* these voices are synthesised and multiple, experienced by the individual and the collective; Lorde's text de-individuates the subject and places her within a set of shared, social and re-membered experiences. Lorde translates these experiences through a collective imagination, transporting the individual reader into a shared set of understandings and narratives that reflect a counter-public truth or knowledge. In bringing together *Zami's* subjects' roles, positions and actions within the text, black/lesbian subjectivities are articulated through what Mieke Bal refers to as a "subjectival network" that "articulates the narrative" (Bacchilega, 1997, p.17). This has the effect of focalising and giving agency to the text's representation of collective subjectivity rather than individual subjectivity. In biomythographical work, this subjectivity potentially moves beyond the text, with individual subjectivities informing a place within a collective positioning.

To Audre, geographical movement and relocation are emotionally pragmatic: "The idea of leaving New York, for a while, with its emotional complications, felt good to me ...(Z, p.122). This shift in circumstances precipitates a major change in Audre's ontological affirmation via her first lesbian experience, and a subsequent reconnection with her poetry. Lorde's move to Stamford, Connecticut is guided by the harsh realities and constraint of her economic situation. She travels to where there is work, relocating temporarily but never on a whim she can ill afford. When Audre goes to Stamford, she does so for economic reasons and her need to escape New York. Her employment search in Stamford is affected by political and racist bias: "It was standard procedure in most 'software' factories to hire Black workers for three weeks, then fire them before they could join the union, and hire new workers" (Z, p.123). Here, historical accuracy substantiates the biographical detail of Audre's material circumstances and her existence is placed within a wider socio-economic context. The sudden shift from physical work to creativity often destabilises the text, along with Audre (who has to work to exist). Yet the change of location enables Lorde to get back into writing: "That autumn I began to write poems again, after months of silence" (Z, p.123).

When Audre arrives in Stamford, her search for a job is hampered by the internalised racism of the “starched and cocoa brown” (p.124) Mrs Kelly:

You know, dear, there’s not too much choice of jobs around here for Colored people, and especially not for Negro girls. (Z, p.125)

Mrs Kelly is blunt about what she views as Audre’s lack of skills and experience and undermines Audre’s preference for a medical receptionist’s job when Audre goes to the Crispus Atticus Center looking for work. Audre lacks awareness of the irony of her being denied a position in a centre named after “some local dignitary” - showing how estranged the well-read Audre is from her own black history. As her soon-to-be-lover in Stamford, Ginger, remarks:

Well I’ll be dipped. Slick kitty from the city! What kind of a school was that you-all went to? ... I thought everyone knew about *him*. The first cat to die in the Revolutionary War. (Z, p.131)

Both Audre and Mrs Kelly are united in their ignorance, unable to connect contemporary inequality with the loss of black history and the negation of black epistemologies through a gendered lens. Mrs Kelly also presents the alienating effect of W. E. B. Du Bois’s talented tenth or top ten percent concept, as the presentation of Audre in her “cheap dress” with the “bodice pulled too tightly across my breasts” (Z, p.125) problematises the hierarchies of class that further stigmatise and discriminate against black women. Working class black women are perceived as unskilled ‘negroes’, while the middle class or lighter-skinned Mrs Kellys of this world attain the status of “coloured” skilled ladies.

In this seemingly throwaway encounter, Lorde as narrator illustrates the way in which black heritage is obliterated and lacks social continuity, owing to internalised and externalised racism (represented by Mrs Kelly, and the lack of education about black history, respectively). Mrs Kelly’s “iron-grey curl” and Audre’s natural hairstyle symbolise the spectrum and the intergenerational tension between an NAACP generation fighting for

“equality” and civil rights, and the Black Power and feminist movements’ politicised struggle for self-determination and autonomy.

I had been taught by some of the most highly considered historians in the country. Yet, never once heard the name mentioned of the first man to fall in the American Revolution, nor ever been told that he was a Negro. What did that mean about the history I had learned. (Z, p.133)

Lorde later elaborates on this political dislocation:

In the 60s many black people who spoke out from a complex black identity suffered because of it, and were silenced in many ways. In the mistaken belief that unity must mean sameness. (Lorde, interviewed by Tate, in Hall, ed., 2004, p.87)

Mrs Kelly represents a generation of black citizens that sought unity and respectability over difference, prizing conformity and an aspiration to joining Du Bois’s ten percent over an objective of radical change and dissent.

As one of the “unskilled people” (p.125), Audre has to take up a position at Keystone Electronics, one of many industrial factories in Stamford whose government contract to “process and deliver quartz crystals used in radio and war machinery” (Z, p.125) represents the onset of transglobal capitalist industries. In these industries the “unskilled” working class are exploited to produce consumables for secondary industries that they will in turn consume or products for the military complex. The toxicity of such an environment, and the noise and human degradation of the plant, embodies a literary Marxist analysis of capitalism and of the constant motion, degradation and exploitation of workers involved in the industrial cycle:

Thirty-two mud saws were always running. The air was heavy and acrid with the sickly fumes of carbon tetrachloride used to clean the crystals. Entering the plant after 8.00 A.M. was like entering Dante’s

Inferno. It was offensive to every sense, too cold and too hot, gritty, noisy, ugly, sticky, stinking and dangerous. (Z, p.126)

Lorde takes a materialist approach to negotiating the intersectional oppressions that inform the machine operations of Keystone Electronics, where its workers embody the consequences of gender, race and class exploitation at a micro- and macro-political level. The narrator focuses on the effect on workers' health, and the health inequalities and premature deaths that ensue. De Veaux's biography of Lorde cites Lorde's time working with quartz and carbon tet as a possible root cause of her cancer. Lorde as narrator interjects the author's own narrative and battle against cancer into the text: "Nobody mentioned that carbon tet destroys the liver and causes cancer of the kidneys. Nobody mentioned that the X-ray machines, when used unshielded, delivered doses of constant low radiation far in excess of what was considered safe..." (Z, p.126).

Class oppression occludes choice for the young Lorde; work connects her to other black working class women who, in their collectivity, vouch for some level of autonomous power amidst the repetitiveness, monotony and drudgery of industrial manual labour: "Keystone Electronics hired Black women and didn't fire them after three weeks. We even got to join the union" (Z, p.126). The alienation that Audre feels feeds into an internal malaise, giving voice to black women workers' subjugation that tends to be represented 'objectively' and without agency in texts, if it is represented at all. The biomythologising of black women's experiences as workers attributes autonomy to these voices. It inverts Realism's scientific objectification of the exploited, turning it into working class biographical self-determination - an agency borne of experience, even when those experiences express the degradation of working conditions that demoralise and do harm:

After the first, I wondered if I could stick it out. I thought that if I had to work under those conditions for the rest of my life I would slit my throat. Some mornings I questioned how I could get through eight hours of stink and dirt and din and boredom. (Z, p.127)

Her exploitation as a working class black woman whilst in Stamford transforms Audre's perception of herself as a poet, ignites a sense of injustice, and affords an insight into her own means of personal and spiritual resistance.

THE COLOUR OF RACISM

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power (Foucault, 1991, p.95)

As a child, race and blackness are categories of difference that Audre neither recognises nor has the vocabulary to articulate, because she has not been acculturated into the constructed myth of race of an adult world founded on racism and discrimination. Her childhood vision and colouring of difference is not based on the politicisation of skin shade. Overhearing her sisters' talk about colour confuses Audre, as her sisters also expose their youthful naiveté about why exactly the family's external lives are defined by the colour of their skin. When Audre asks: "What does colored mean?" to my amazement, neither one of my sisters was quite sure" (Z, p.58). Her sisters - whom she regards as older and thus wiser- are unable to answer this fundamental question, further casting the light of scrutiny on the arbitrary characteristics of difference and the way in which it can be used to oppress through an obtuse set of reasonings. Audre, whose skin colour is darker like her father, then curiously dares to ask: "And what's Mommy? Is she white or colored?"... "If anybody asks me what I am, I'm going to tell them I'm white same as Mommy" (Z, p.58). The narrator reimagines language -the meaning of the term 'white'- an act that points to a deep awareness of the politics of language and race and how they intersect.

It is only the external world that identifies racialised differences between Audre, her mother and her sisters via the colour of their skin; the shades that signify worth- the lighter shades being a key to accessing privileges, as Audre already begins to understand. The ever observant and hyper-vigilant Audre soon learns to avoid discussions about race as a child,

while -in parallel- race is overtly part of the narratives that are interwoven by Lorde throughout *Zami*. Racism silences the family and closes down the discussion: “That was the first and only time my sisters and I discussed race as a reality in my house, or at any rate as it applied to ourselves” (Z, p.58). The narrator thus highlights the overbearing yet unspoken presence of race in children’s lives, in the textual world as well as in a trans-historical and social context. As a family, the Lorde perceives themselves to be in isolation rather than part of a diaspora – an identification often fuelled by the need to survive. The sea exiles them from their roots, from commonality, from connectivity.

Urban racial politics in *Zami* are also a politics of migration, housing and the ghettoization of black communities in 50s New York. Lorde depicts the limitation of choices for Audre and her family in the text, defined by the tensions between the geographical spacing and mapping of New York citizens, where space is racialised. The socio economic politics of housing is exacerbated by the elevated prices of ‘poor’ tenements and housing in New York. The narrator poses politicised fictions that signify and reflect an ongoing set of real-life strictures and oppressions rooted in historical detail within the text: “Our new apartment was on 152nd Street between Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway in what was called Washington Heights ... a ‘changing’ neighbourhood meaning one where Black people could begin to find overpriced apartments out of the depressed and decaying Harlem” (Z, p.59). The politics of urban decay and regeneration - a regime for controlling the poor - is played out in “depressed and decaying” Harlem. Street names and their geographical placements are biographically real, paralleling the truth of the entrapment of the urban poor by external factors such as economic depression, racism and socio-economic inequality.

When Lorde’s family moves uptown to a new apartment, the landlord of the property commits suicide: “Our landlord hanged himself in the basement. The Daily News reported that the suicide was caused by his despondency over the fact that he finally had to rent to Negroes...” (Z, p.59). Lorde interlinks racism and economic structure, and casts the media in the role of both watchful societal panopticon and sensationalist scaremonger. The narrator reflects upon the similarities as well as the differences between

her family and the desperate landlord; the landlord's Jewish identity and historical persecution still fails to create solidarity: "He had been Jewish; I was Black" (Z, p.59). Difference is racialised in the new city neighbourhood, creating a power dynamic between the already settled migrant -who holds dominance- and the newly settled migrant. The cruelty and reductiveness to which migrant communities are repeatedly subject is then used to rationalise racism: "That made us both fair game for the cruel curiosity of my pre-adolescent classmates" (Z, p. 59). The narrator explores both Jewish and black people as vulnerable and "fair game"; the use of "us" parallels oppressions rather than hierarchises them, intersecting and thus delegitimising the power of that oppression. Racist epithets, the circular logic of prejudice and a lack of empathy for the death of the landlord are all adopted intergenerationally, his death a graphic portrayal of racist fears about migrants.

Hypocrisy and racialised ideologies of religion are lampooned throughout Lorde's reflections on her city school: "If the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament at St Mark's School had been patronising, at least their racism was couched in the terms of their mission" (Z, p.59). Lorde as narrator, here interpolates her political and social commentary into the narrative of childhood, something which also signifies Audre's burgeoning political awareness of the "Blessed Sacrament" as:

"a ritual of racism, the terms of their mission the global expansion of western ideologies and religious doctrines. The so-called 'Sisters of Charity' were downright hostile. Their racism was unadorned, unexcused, and particularly painful because I was unprepared for it. I got no help at home" (Z, p.59).

Lorde depicts the double jeopardy of racism and silence, the cyclical repetition of "un," "un"/ravelling Lorde's reflection on how painful that exclusion and othering is for children, especially when that racism denies agency, and when such upset is shamed and thus hidden.

Lorde is able to interconnect hypocrisy and the reactions of the adults in school with the behaviour of the children, and to elucidate how the power dynamics of oppression are institutionalised by the imposition of that racial difference. The cultural distancing of the other becomes a sensory response: “I would come in from recess to find notes on my desk saying, ‘You Stink’”. The lack of interjection from her teachers again shows the hypocrisy of Christian morality, with Sister Blanche (the name denoting whiteness) further demeaning a child in the name of God and privileging of one race over another : “I showed them to Sister Blanche. She told me that she felt it was her Christian duty to tell me that Colored people *did* smell different from white people” (Z p.60). Yet Lorde is able to relieve Audre from the constancy of racism; Audre’s difference allows her to recognise power dynamics. Even through her pain and frustration she still believes herself to be “the smartest girl in the class” (Z, p.61), and she understands that neither mainstream acknowledgement nor popularity are able to make for heroic outcomes in the immediate, “which did nothing to contribute to my popularity” (Z, p.61).

PUBLIC POLITICS AND PERSONAL RESISTANCE

My parents wouldn’t speak to me about this injustice, not because they had contributed to it, but because they felt they should have anticipated it and avoided it. This made me angrier. (Z, p.70)

Politics are taken out of the realm of the home in Chapter 10 as the narration structures a key juncture through a temporary spatial removal to another city - the capital of the U.S., Washington D.C., capital of justice. Poignantly, Audre’s young politicisation takes place here, with her learning to vocalise or at least critically analyse her obligatory racialised position. In this chapter, the narrator switches temporalities; no longer in the present tense of the historically abstracted ‘now’, the reader is introduced to a recollection, a clear memory that is fictional in its detail: “The first time I went to Washington, D.C. was on the edge of the summer when I was supposed to stop being a child” (Z, p.68). In keeping with family celebrations and the centrality of food in the Lorde household: “...my first trip to

Washington was a mobile feast" (Z, p.68). But even the feasting becomes political, as Lorde in retrospect interjects the politics of race with Lorde's neo-historical analysis of childhood: "I wanted to eat in the dining car ... My mother never mentioned that Black people were not allowed into railroad dining cars headed south in 1947." Lorde's mother and her generation are seen to be complicit in their silence about racism. Their way of dealing with racist exclusion is criticised by Lorde but its wide reaching effects is understood by the narrator: "As usual, whatever my mother did not like and could not change, she ignored. Perhaps it would go away deprived of her attention" (Z, p.68).

The trip to Washington D.C. affords Lorde a literary vehicle with which to platform her personal and political beliefs in an explicit way, differentiating her text from biography and taking it into self declared social and political commentary. Her experience as the daughter of migrants, is now framed in the context of American imperialism and the promise of a better life away from 'home': "American racism was a new and crushing reality that my parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to this country" (Z, p.69). Lorde observes the isolation of Caribbean migrants -and of the Lorde's, for whom there appears to be no other community outside of the church to which they belong, with Lorde's mother keeping her private and public lives clearly delineated. In this situation, racism was "handled ... as a private woe." Even the author's awareness of the schism her parents face is complicated by Lorde's own feelings, her disappointment, shame and memories of abandonment on the trip. The abandonment, or failure to provide tools of resistance, on this occasion is due to ignorance and avoidance:

My mother and father believed that they could best protect their children from the realities of race in America and the fact of American racism by never giving them name, much less discussing their nature. (Z, p.69)

The family's distrust of 'white' people extends to a distrust of a country that is not what they expected it to be: "We were told never to trust white people, but *why* was never explained, nor the nature of their ill will." (Z, p.69)

In Washington D.C. Audre perceives the hypocrisy of institutional politics and the dazzling inadequacy of the capital's proclamation of democracy as it is figuratively aligned with her failing eyesight. Truth is translated into light and vision; this is a pivotal moment, a moment of transformation and transition. Audre on the trip is unable to avoid "squinting because I was in that silent agony that characterised all of my childhood summers ... brought about by my dilated and vulnerable eyes exposed to the summer brightness" (Z, p.69). This 'agony' is a political turning point; the dazzling light jolts her senses and so her sense of injustice awakens. It is also the childhood ordeal that transforms her holidays into an "agonizing corolla of dazzling whiteness" at the same time as bringing new, unique insights. Before experiencing the segregated restaurant service in Washington, Audre is already recognisant of the hypocrisy around American values recognising where even public holidays can celebrate the destruction of the 'other' in the founding of U.S. independence; that is the insincerity and duplicity of people celebrating an allegiance to a racist nation state: "and I always hated the Fourth of July, even before I came to realize the travesty such a celebration was for Black people in this country" (Z, p.69).

Chapter 10 offers one of the most linear passages of the book but it also reads as a distinct parable or counter-narrative. As Audre struggles with the light: "squinting up at monuments to freedom and past presidencies and democracy," the pretense of a capital that knows no justice leaves her wondering why: "the light and heat were both so much stronger in Washington D.C." (Z, p.70). The uniformity of the capital -the crisp, clean lines and dazzling summer- is mirrored by the immaculately presented Lorde's waiting to be served in the ice cream parlour they visit, the alliterative repetition of hard vowels further defining the disciplined Lorde family: "Corded and crisp and pinafores, the five of us seated ourselves one by one at the counter." The surface perfection gives way to a lack of grammatical structure betrayed by the waitress. She, in recognition of an

alignment of oppression, is both aggressive and apologetic in what she says; the spokesperson of racism also has no power beyond her whiteness: “I said I kin give you take out, but you can’t eat here. Sorry.’ Then she dropped her eyes looking very embarrassed” (Z, p.70). The waitress shares the family’s shame; her position at the frontline of racism is nothing more than nominal, their socio-economic situations differentiated only by shades of grey. Reversing the shame into denial, the family are regimental in their retaliation at the comment, presenting an immaculate vision like black soldiers on parade at the White House: “Straight-backed and indignant, one by one, my family and I got down from the counter stools and turned around and marched out the store” (Z, p.70). Yet still, in their calm affront, Audre and her family remain docile citizens, upset and shamed: “quiet and outraged, as if we had never been Black before” (Z, p.70). Lorde parallels the isolation of her own experience, the family’s experience and the removal of their pride: ‘Even my two sisters copied my parents’ pretense that nothing unusual and anti-american had occurred” (Z, p.70).

After this incident Audre’s outrage is soon unleashed, as she retorts after the event in the past tense, as if shouting at her parents and the waitress: “But we hadn’t done anything!” This wasn’t right or fair!” The sense of injustice rises up and for Audre intersects with the horrors of the Bataan death march, this recognition and historical reference point mythologising the birth of a black/lesbian radical: “Hadn’t I written poems about Bataan and freedom and democracy for all?” (Z, p.70). The accuracy of Lorde’s timeframe here acknowledges the possible intertextual connection with Leslie Marmon Silko (author of *Ceremony*, a book about this battle published in 1977); Silko is another author who considers the intersections of the politics of race and gender, of the local and global. Lorde’s final protest is equally bursting with poetic emphasis:

The waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice cream I never ate in Washington D.C. that Summer I left childhood was white, and the white heat and the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer made me sick to my stomach. (Z, p.71)

The repetition of “white” – part of a circular mantra along with “and the” - words that rhythmically conjoin the passage - normalises and further exacerbates the bleached white landscape that, to Lorde, epitomises the U.S in the 1950s. When Audre returns to Washington later in *Zami*, it is to protest about the imminent death of the Rosenbergs, and although she will again lose that battle, she will have a presence, a voice and comrades.

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

The subtext of Audre’s life story is an innate will to survive which she underpins with sustained creative activity. Lorde’s move back to the urban centre of New York contrasts with her spatial isolation by the sea in Brighton Beach; Audre has made a decision to be active in a world of women again, and identifies both her role and her need to support others: “There was a constant stream of young women in and out of my apartment, most of them in varying periods and conditions of distress” (Z, p.120). The realities of Audre’s home life are materialised in a post-war rationing lifestyle and the subcultural signifiers of poverty, youth and excitement: ‘I was serving us coffee and cinnamon ice cubes in powdered milk with Dexedrine chasers’ (Z, p.119). The subjective experiences of Audre and her friends are tied up with external social, political and historical counter-narratives: “people were terrorised at the thought of having to answer, ‘Are you or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party’” (Z, p.149); their poverty is framed in a paranoid social climate of post-war fear, in an era of McCarthyist repression.

The Rosenbergs’ execution signifies another political turning point in Lorde’s life: “synonymous ... with being able to live in this country at all, with being able to survive hostile surroundings.” The political and personal are paralleled, with the narrator contextualising macro-political structures - the worldwide phenomenon of the Rosenbergs’ trial - with the individualised fear of punishment for similar treason or “un-American” activities. Lorde refers to Audre as an outsider within this historical moment:

My feelings of connection with most of the people I met in progressive circles, were as tenuous as those I had with my co-workers at the Health Center ...I could imagine these comrades, Black and white...asking me accusingly, “Are you or have you ever been a member of a homosexual relationship?” (Z, p.149)

Lorde’s sexuality is something that removes her from her peers and from participating fully in greater political struggles. She searches for (and creates) spaces in which black/lesbian voices are present and participative whilst being aware that alone she has little power to revolutionise and transform social movements that exclude. Audre the protagonist and Lorde as narrator are both aware that any struggle for freedom or human rights, presents a risk of individual rejection as well as physical harm and state incarceration or condemnation.

THE RESISTANT ‘I’

In *Zami* subjectivities that resist are also subjectivities that have power; as Michel Foucault has observed, where there is ‘power, there is resistance’ (Foucault, 1981, p.95). I argue that this notion of resistance as ongoing struggle informs community led movements and actions and is not dependent upon a sense of effectiveness based on grand historical narratives that insist on a binary logic of win/lose. Such actions are part of gradual transformational change that further perpetuate collective resistance in the ways that I have elaborated: politically, personally, spiritually and through the recreation of myths that mark that change. As Barbara Christian observes in Lorde’s work and other resistant texts by black and / or lesbian women, “The language of fiction therefore becomes a language of protest ...” (Christian, in Pryse and Spillers, 1985, p.241)

Throughout my dissertation I have outlined the way that Lorde’s use of biomythography- as a political genre-radically alters the conventions of narrative and auto/biographical writing. In terming her text ‘fiction’ she simultaneously undermines representations of being and consciousness through an alteration of the subject’s perspective: the city becomes a

black/lesbian space where identities themselves can be transformed through an improvisational relationship with their environment. Lorde does this whilst placing fictitious narratives and biographical snapshots within familiar twentieth century socio-historical contexts that are part of the popular and figurative imagination in order to resist the objectification of those voices that have been erstwhile absent and without textual and social agency. Lorde uses language, genre and narrative in ways that resist the subjugation of black/lesbian women within a collectivist context and one of active social movement that transgresses Lorde's biomythography and affirms it as a groundbreaking transformational text.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, Doreen Massey develops theoretical work around the ways that space, place and gender interrelate by invoking intersectional references that include space, place, gender and, I would add, the construction of race. These constitute a set of power structures and relations that evoke or are defined by meaning and symbolism.⁶⁸ In this final chapter I have explored how movement and location are used to map political and social transformation in *Zami* and the role of the city as a space of transformation. The politics of public space and resistance within and to that space in *Zami* is no better exemplified than by Audre's relationship with the city and the urban built environment. The city can be seen to represent a public visibility that brings with it the possibility (and fear) of public exposure. These tangible psychic and physical fears include "... a fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgement, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation" but as Lorde goes on to explain the city presents, above all, a fear of "the visibility without which we cannot truly live." (Lorde in Byrd, Betsch Cole, Guy-Sheftall, eds., 2009, p.41).

The power of *Zami* is its ability to transform not only genre but also the very subjects of the text; in doing this Lorde has created a transformational literary space that addresses the complexities of lived experience within new narrative forms. As I will go on to conclude,

⁶⁸ As I have discussed in Chapter 2, Doreen Massey refers to the interrelated connection of "space, place and gender" as a "dynamic simultaneity," "a configuration of social relations ... imbued with power and meaning and symbolism" (Massey, 1994, p.3).

transformation within the text is part of a process of *recovery* and resistance, Lorde figuratively transforming our understanding of literature and storytelling in the twenty first century.

CONCLUSION: WE CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT OUR LIVES

Art is not living. It is a use of living.

(Lorde interviewed by Evans in Hall, ed., 2004, p.76)

If one Black woman I do not know gains hope and strength from my story,
then it has been worth the difficulty of telling.

(Lorde, 1996, p.332)

Change will rise endemically from the experience fully lived and responded
to.

(Lorde, interviewed by Evans, in Hall, 2004, p.76)

ZAMI AS A RADICAL TEXT OF TRANSFORMATION

In this dissertation, I have attempted to move toward an holistic understanding and critique of *Zami*, particularly of Lorde's carefully cultivated black/ lesbian feminist focus, aesthetic, and narrative mode. The influence of her intersectional artistic work is far-reaching and continues to cross-fertilise movements, art and –particularly– lesbian feminist texts and narratives. In the *Introduction*, I highlight the fact that black/lesbian feminist cultural work has been minimized, dismissed and shamed, the texts' theoretical and philosophical underpinnings appropriated, and the output denied critical attention and the literary circulation it deserves. I do this in an effort to reassert the importance of this work and its impact and ongoing legacy. In writing a dissertation extolling *Zami* as a text that recovers subjectivities that have so far been subjugated into invisibility, it has been important to use a critical approach that is political, social, historical, literary and intertextual.⁶⁹

In *Zami*, inter-subjective struggles inform undocumented and radical narratives, which include maternal desire, unconventional female subjectivities and a re-inscribed non-theistic black/lesbian spirituality that

⁶⁹ And I would argue *occasionally* objective and impartial.

peripheralises male agency. Lorde deploys the biomythographical text as a site of improvised and creative textuality, where *Zami* defies the expectations or stereotypes of lesbian feminist texts. Like Pat Parker and Cheryl Clarke, Lorde's simplicity and direct speech veil the complexities of her narrative compositions, which are deliberate attempts to further develop a feminist literary movement. Black/lesbian feminist work is often informed by the need to name and transcend the shame projected onto women whose worlds are largely without men. With this in mind, I argue that biomythography constitutes a black/lesbian feminist literary tradition; one that enables the writer to have a presence -no matter her physical and literary absence, that is as much about the process of writing, the existence of the female mark on the page, as it is about resistant narratives, black/lesbian subjectivities, happenings, and the private/public divide.

TRANSFORMING SILENCE INTO RESISTANT SUBJECTIVITIES

An understanding of black/lesbian subjectivities needs to be contextualised within the historical problematics of butch/femme politics and a consideration of lesbianism as a political act rather than a sexual preference alone.⁷⁰ *Zami* presents the reader with a socio-political discourse using material experience and historicised events to evidence the role of transformational change in articulating black/lesbian lives and subjectivities. Lorde reiterates in *Zami* that to be a black lesbian is never an "apolitical" act - her subjectivities mythically and biographically work towards personal and collective transformation; there is never a separation of subjectivities from the political structures in which they exist. It is through a black/lesbian/feminist discourse that Audre (as protagonist) and Lorde (as narrator/author) challenge and -I argue- transform the reader's notion of individualistic relations, codes, values and structures.

⁷⁰ Although radical feminism poses a number of challenges and contradictions and has been accused of transphobia, racism and what is considered to be an anti-sex-positive stance, it should still be recognised and considered to be a feminism of active change that has achieved progressive social transformation for women. It should be remembered that radical feminism is not a 'universal' monolithic set of principles, but a multifarious collective and a multitude of dissenting voices.

We must also recognise that ‘without her choice or agency’ for many Lorde has come to represent a movement, a period of time, an idealised set of feminist philosophies and broadly inclusive social movement theories. This can present a number of difficult and complex questions such as how politically informed a reader must be before they engage with a text; must the reader likewise face a myriad of personal, political, historical and social barriers in order to fully appreciate *Zami*; is Lorde extending literary spaces and possibilities for black/lesbian feminist texts or perpetuating an exclusionary (albeit visionary) set of epistemologies?

REDEEMING THE SUBJECTIVE RESISTANT ‘I’

In the *Introduction* I posed a number of questions that I wanted to explore in this dissertation whilst beginning to consider a tentative theory I wish to expand upon at doctorate level. This theory explores the possibility that Lorde’s self-named genre, ‘biomythography’ carries forward a tradition that can be traced back through women’s literature and continues to be effectively (and resistantly) used. I underpin this by examining how this tradition affects and radicalises subjectivities within *Zami*, the connective trope being their resistance, individually and collectively, to their public and private moorings in social, political and historical terms. My intention is to highlight the radical creative and social potential of texts – in an intertextual dialogue – that continue to be transformative and relevant, in multi-dimensional ways, as this creates exciting spaces for new generations of women artists and activists.

In response to the four key questions I initially posed in the *Introduction*, I offer the following conclusions:⁷¹

⁷¹ The questions I originally posed in the *Introduction* were: How is the writer or narrator recalling the memories of a community or recovering silenced voices through her text? How can this be articulated whilst adhering to Rose M. Brewer’s sense that “gender as a category of analysis cannot be understood or decontextualised from race and class in Black feminist theorising” (Brewer, in James & Busar, 1994, p.17)? Within the representation of ‘self as biography’, how is the struggle for the self, for Lorde’s lesbian ‘I’, situated within a black/lesbian collectivist context? Do the multiple contradictions inherent within a genre that has historically been aligned with the truth (but is actually subject to internalised surveillance and mediation) rearticulate the need to further unravel biography as a

That Lorde as writer and narrator successfully recalls the memories, and recovers generations, of silenced women in her texts through her re-invention and implementation of a tradition of biomythography.⁷²

That Lorde contextualises these subjective voices by narrating -at the intersections of their enactment or materialisation- where gender, race and class converge. I argue that black feminist theory is 'narrativised' and actualised in her brave approach to writing that takes in the structural, the social and the experiential, and situates them historically whilst documenting untold 'personal' stories. In representations of the biographical self or 'I' throughout the text, in the form of multiple narrators and subjectivities that echo elements of the protagonist Audre's subjectivity, Lorde destabilises the positioning of her subjects as the 'other' and the dysphoric isolated self. Here Christian's lesbian 'I' does indeed remain a consistent presence, the ebb and flow of her fluidity measured by the collective subjectivities (known/unknown) that guide and chart the lesbian 'I's' movement. This firmly undermines male biographical traditions and rewrites counter-narratives of resistance.⁷³ Crucially, *Zami* demonstrates that the subjective 'I' or subjectivities that resist domination can never be divorced from their collective or material relations, that the subjective 'I' is always simultaneously the subjective 'we', and that these relationships become catalysts for change and transformation.

Finally, I conclude that Lorde does indeed unravel the genre of biography - deftly characterising it to be a collective position or mode. By reclaiming subjectivities and marginalised spaces the author and narrator/s resist erasure in multiple private and public ways. But most importantly, as I have tried to show, *Zami* functions to develop, perpetuate and articulate a

set of public, private, personal, collective, social, and historicised narratives and fictions?

⁷² Lorde's intertextual references that I cite throughout the dissertation thus connect with other frames of reference and positions that could be seen to validate this claim.

⁷³ I reference this in relation to the male, white, Eurocentric tradition of biography as well as to the black post-Harlem Renaissance writers. For further information about these writers see Introduction.

tradition that is intertextually situated, rightly complicates and challenges singular truths and deploys myth in order to introject black/lesbian or marginalised experience into a space that was formerly one of black/lesbian deletion. Lorde also simultaneously exposes the contradictions of such a ‘universal’ tradition that is in effect an *exclusionary* space.⁷⁴

In her writing, Audre Lorde presents black/lesbian women as having a sexual and emotional visibility, an ownership over their invested desire as black/lesbian women, as portrayed through her use of the subjective ‘I’. In *Zami*, this is grounded in lived experience and socio-historically contextualised. Lorde insists upon black/lesbian desire as a way to counteract the ongoing narrative of black women’s sexual exploitation. For Lorde, the erotic is a key way for the individual to reclaim her subjectivity, to recover a past as present, which the title ‘Zami’ is connected with: women who work and love together, the power of communal autonomy, and the struggle of the marginalised and oppressed majority. This is exemplified by the text’s continual merging of sexuality with the mythologisation of a ‘forgotten’ matriarchal cultural heritage, with a land that is ahistorical in order to avoid supremacist interventions: a timeless space of women’s voiced creativity.

A BIOMYTHOGRAPHICAL TRADITION

Like other prominent feminist artists/activists/writers from the late twentieth-century, Lorde continues a feminist/female tradition of intervention, by creating an inventory of mythologised and thus remembered

⁷⁴ See footnote 14 in my Introduction in which I comment: My use of binary terms such as ‘woman’, ‘man’, ‘male’, ‘female’, etc. throughout this dissertation has been considered and used in opposition to a post-modern leaning towards gender as an obsolete term. I feel this is a politically constructed argument that in no way bears witness to the experiences and structures that remain discriminatory to the sex/gender/identity category of ‘woman’. This is not to articulate disrespect for the trans, intersex or queer communities who may avoid or ‘play with’ gender descriptives or people who wish to avoid binary terms but a black feminist positioning that wishes to bear witness to, document and corroborate the need for transformation based on material experience and the transnational oppression of the gender category ‘women’- which includes self identified cis and trans women.

women.⁷⁵ Rooting female experience in a literary, artistic and political landscape that is otherwise devoid of the feminine creates critical contemporary spaces for women to exist and make change. Lorde's poem, 'Journeystones I-XI'⁷⁶ relays individual female subjectivities that appear to be connected to the speaker's personal experiences. Yet the poem also exemplifies Lorde's⁷⁷ ability to socio-historically embed these women's lives into a literary and social panorama. The multiple subjectivities she names in this poem are neither judged nor defined but instead, more importantly, given a voice that is listened to and documented. A refrain used at the end of one of Lorde's arguably most political poems 'Need: A Chorale of Black Women's Voices' in which she names and mourns the lives of 12 black women killed in Boston in 1979, well describes the intersubjective and transhistorical dimensions of Lorde's work as she echoes the protests of a black feminist movement:⁷⁸

We cannot live without our lives

We cannot live without our lives

(Lorde, 1997, p.354)

I will not lay claim to having offered a definitive understanding of *Zami*, or to have come up with an original set of theories about her work, but I have at least emphasised the richness of her text, the multiple dimensions (explored and yet to be fully explored) of her prose and narratives, and the liberating potential of her work in embracing rather than castigating the merged genres of political engagement, mythical narrative and the poetic. I have sought to recover and elucidate the work of Lorde and other black/lesbian texts that still have the potential to transform contemporary

⁷⁵ As diverse in their tradition are Djuna Barnes, Toni Cade Bambara, Judy Chicago, and Kathy Acker who have written texts (in Chicago's case primarily visual artwork), but simultaneously I believe, have created cultural work that can be considered to be biomythographical.

⁷⁶ This poem is taken from Lorde's 1982 collection, *Chosen Poems Old and New*.

⁷⁷ This continues a tradition of other black and or lesbian feminist writers who have used this technique namely Pat Parker/Cheryl Clarke.

⁷⁸ Here Lorde references feminist lesbian activist and journalist Barbara Deming's 1974 book of the same title demonstrating a collective intertextual dialogue in her choice and placing of this quote. This quote could also be seen to be relevant in light of the ongoing murder of queer, trans and lesbian identified women of colour and the Black Lives Matters movement in the U.S.

women's lives. And in my small contribution to further establishing the significance of Lorde's work -itself a form of mythologising- I have found gratification in elaborating subjectivities that resist deletion, and advancing a critical engagement with the ever-diversifying, radical and resistant black/lesbian text.

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