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BARBARA DiBERNARD

ZAMI:

A PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST AS A BLACK LESBIAN

FEMINISTS have learned to critique language in which “man” supposedly represents all human beings, but which actually means “male,” erasing women and women’s experience. Similarly, feminist psychologists have begun to critique theories of human development and morality, finding in them the same assumption of the male as universal, ignoring women’s experience and judging them to be stunted, immature, and incapable of sophisticated moral reasoning. Recent feminist studies by Gilligan, Miller, Chodorow, and Belenky, et al. assert that there is a female way of being which is not a stunted or immature way, but a different way.

Literary texts are a rich source for documentation and exploration of female development and experience, especially the growing up story or novel of development, the *Bildungsroman*, and the related *Künstlerroman*, the novel of development of the artist. Feminist critics have done much significant work on these genres, pointing out once again how our models for the hero and the artist-hero have been male, while female texts reveal very different patterns and experiences.¹ However, the only two book-length studies on the female *Künstlerroman* generalize about female artists on the basis of books by white heterosexual women. Linda Huf, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*, and Grace Stewart, *A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine 1877–1977*, consider only books by white authors. Huf quotes from May Sarton’s *Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing* three times, but never addresses the main character’s lesbianism. Stewart deals with both *Mrs. Stevens* and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, but not as lesbian stories. As feminist critics, we cannot continue to ignore differences in race, sexuality, and class when we write about women; we should heed Adrienne Rich’s critique of her own earlier work, that she will never again write of the “faceless, raceless, classless category of ‘all women’” (“Notes Toward” 219). Aware that my work will be partial and limited, I would like to explore Audre Lorde’s *Zami* as a portrait of an artist as a black lesbian. In doing so, I hope to suggest areas where we must open up our conception of the female *Künstlerroman* so that we are taking account of Lorde’s black lesbian experience, yet without generalizing in such a way as to erase other women’s experience. Although *Zami* is largely autobiographical, I feel I can appropriately use the literary categories of the *Bildungsroman* and the *Künstlerroman* in analyzing it. Lorde herself

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says of the book: "It's a biomythography, which is really fiction. It has the elements of biography and history and myth. In other words, it's fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision" (Tate 115).

In *Zami* we find an alternative model of female development as well as a new image of the poet and of female creativity. The image of the poet as black lesbian encompasses continuity with a familial and herstorical past, community, strength, woman-bonding, rootedness in the world, and an ethic of care and responsibility. The image of a connected artist-self who is able to identify and draw on the strengths of women around her and before her is an important image for all of us to consider. What we learn may be as significant for our individual and collective survival as it has been for Audre Lorde.

The artist as black lesbian challenges both pre-feminist and feminist ideas. In a major study of the *Künstlerroman* from Goethe to Joyce, Maurice Beebe asserts that "comparative study of many portraits of the artist enables us better to understand the artist in general." Nevertheless, the artist he finds through his study is distinctly male. The artist-hero, he writes, "attains this state only after he has sloughed off the domestic, social, and religious demands imposed upon him by his environment. Narrative development in the typical artist-novel requires that the hero test and reject the claims of love and life, of God, home, and country, until nothing is left but his true self and his consecration as artist" (5-6). Although Beebe's idea that "quest for self is the dominant theme of the artist-novel" may hold for women's as well as men's novels, women's novels usually, and *Zami* certainly, show the woman artist fully engaged with others. Hers is most often an artist-in-relation rather than the "artist-as-exile" posited by Beebe.

The idea of connection as central to women's experience comes out of recent work on the psychology of women, most notably Jean Baker Miller's *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering*, and Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*. These feminist psychologists, drawing on object relations theory, have looked to the pre-Oedipal, rather than to the Oedipal, stage of development as crucial to the development of gender identity formation. In this stage, infants both identify with and are dependent on their primary caretaker, in almost all cases the mother. Ego boundaries between the two at this stage are not fixed, but fluid. However, development after that point must proceed differently for males than for females, since a male must eventually distinguish himself from his mother to develop his gender identity, while the female does not have to make such a break. Thus, the context for development of female gender identity continues to be relationship.

Gilligan is careful to say that the "different voice" of being-in-relationship that she describes is not necessarily tied to gender. "Its association with women is an empirical observation. . . . But this association is not absolute, and the contrasts between male and female voices are presented here to highlight a distinction between two modes of thought and to focus a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex" (2). Nevertheless,

many literary critics have been able to apply these ideas fruitfully to literature by women, particularly the *Bildungsroman*. In doing so, they have elucidated a female experience previously hidden by assumptions about "human" experience based on male texts. *Zami* can certainly be examined in this context with rich results. For Lorde, the connection is to other women. In the Prologue to *Zami* she denies the Oedipal configuration as the only or most important one in the development of her identity:

I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with 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. (7)

Aside from her father, who "is a distant lightning," Lorde answers the questions "To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become? . . . To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival? . . . To whom do I owe the woman I have become?" with the names and stories of women (3-4). In fact, the first question above contains the first words of the book, coming even before the Prologue. *Zami* begins (and, indeed, ends) with connection-connection with women.

Yet in most female *Künstlerromane* studied by feminist critics up to this point, the protagonists, socialized into patriarchal norms, attempt to transfer their primary erotic and emotional attachment to men in traditional heterosexual relationships. Chodorow states that this transfer will be problematic, the resulting relationship less emotionally satisfying: "the mother remains a primary internal object to the girl, so that heterosexual relationships are on the model of a nonexclusive, second relationship for her. . . ." She goes on to say that women "have learned to deny the limitations of masculine lovers for both psychological and practical reasons" (198-99). Oddly, although Chodorow's analysis seems to call for an examination of lesbian relationships, relationships in which women do not transfer their erotic and emotional attachments to men, she does not provide one.²

A woman with a traditional heterosexual relationship or marriage experiences tremendous pressure, from inside and outside, to be a proper "helpmeet" and put aside her own physical and emotional needs for those of her man. Not surprisingly, then, a main theme of feminist criticism on the *Künstlerroman* has been the irreconcilability of the protagonist's identities of woman and artist. In order to be an artist, the woman has to go against her socialization as a woman, as primarily someone who cares for others and puts their needs first. Novels such as *The Story of Avis*, *The Awakening*, *The Bell Jar*, and *My Brilliant Career* present this conflict starkly, often with dire results for the would-be female artist. Critics Susan Gubar and Rachel DuPlessis suggest that there is a reconciliation of the "artist-woman" and the "mother-woman" in some twentieth-century women's *Künstlerromane*, but neither critic explicitly includes sexual orientation or race in her analysis.³

Never once in *Zami* does Lorde express a conflict between herself as a woman and herself as an artist. As a lesbian, she never transfers her primary emotional and erotic intensity to a man. As a lesbian, all of her relationships with women partake to some degree of that first loving, sensuous, nurturing relationship with a mother. And as a lesbian poet, her muses are women. Women support her, nurture her, enable her to write. This has profound implications. There is a long literary tradition of the muse as female for male poets, but obviously it is very different for a female poet to have a female muse. The muse exists for the male poet". . . as a series of opposites: he is subject, she is object; he is lover, she is beloved; he is begetter, she is begotten upon" (DeShazer 2). In contrast, for the lesbian,

because the muse is female, she is not Other but Familiar, maternal, and sororal, a well-known face in the poet's immediate community. Their relationship is not one of possession but of communal bonding. (Carruthers 296)

Since the muse is not Other, but a woman like the artist herself, "lesbian myth provides a way of seeing the poet in the woman, not as alien or monstrous, but as an aspect of her womanhood" (Carruthers 296). Not only does Lorde feel no conflict between herself as an artist and as a woman, but the women she loves—as relatives, friends, and lovers—sustain her as a writer rather than thwart her. In each relationship there is an element of eroticism as Lorde defines it, of "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" ("Erotic" 53).

While Lorde loves other women sexually, she defines lesbian broadly to include strong, women-centered women who have not had sexual relationships with other women. In "The Uses of the Erotic," Lorde states:

The erotic cannot be felt secondhand. As a Black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. This deep participation has often been the forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before.

But this erotic charge is not easily shared by women who continue to operate under an exclusively European-American male tradition. I know it was not available to me when I was trying to adapt my consciousness to this mode of living and sensation. (59)

In a 1980 interview with Karla Hammond, Lorde goes even further, in naming all black women as lesbian:

While Black sisters don't like to hear this, I would have to say that: all Black women are lesbians because we were raised in the remnants of a basically matriarchal society no matter how oppressed we may have been by patriarchy. We're all dykes, including our mommas. Let's really start getting past the shibboleths and taboos. They don't really matter. Being able to recognize that the function of poetry is to ennoble and empower us in a way that's not separate from our living, that belief is African in origin. (21)

While other black women, including Alice Walker have challenged Lorde's construction of black women as lesbian,⁴ Lorde's definition is important to read-

ing *Zami* as a black lesbian text. Claudine Raynaud asserts that Lorde creates a "lesbian Utopia" in *Zami* in which "a plurality of identities (black, female, lesbian), a line of women (her ancestors, her mothers, her lovers) coalesce into one name." This is, she asserts, mythmaking as a "conscious political act" (223).

Lorde's identity as *Zami*, a black lesbian poet, is formed through her relationships with other women. In a female version of an initiation rite into storytelling, Audre learns from her sisters, especially Helen, that she can tell her own stories. She even learns from Helen what kinds of stories to tell—her stories were "filled with tough little girls who masqueraded in boys' clothing and always foiled the criminals, managing to save the day" (46). Lorde's sisters Phyllis and Helen tell their stories to each other at night, in bed; it is only when Audre gets to share a bed with them on vacation that she finds out "What my sisters did at home at night in that little room they shared at the end of the hall . . ." (46). Helen is the first of the three women to whom *Zami* is dedicated: "To Helen, who made up the best adventures."

Sustaining female relationships at the all-girl Hunter High School fed the developing poet in spite of the racism of the white students and faculty:

For four years, Hunter High School was a lifeline. No matter what it was in reality, I got something that I needed. For the first time I met young women my own age. Black and white, who spoke a language I could usually understand and reply within. I met girls with whom I could share feelings and dreams and ideas without fear. (82)

Some of that sustenance fed Lorde's belief in herself as a writer:

Writing poetry became an ordinary effort, not a secret and rebellious vice. The other girls at Hunter who wrote poetry did not invite me to their homes, either, but they did elect me literary editor of the school arts magazine. (82)

Gennie is another friend whose connection sustains Lorde as a woman and a writer. Lorde's friendship with Gennie is crucial to her developing sense of herself as a creative and, significantly, political person. Lorde says of her friend, one of the only five other black students at Hunter: "Gennie was the first person in my life that I was ever conscious of loving. She was my first true friend" (87). Together they put on costumes and roles, going out into the world as bandits, gypsies, foreigners, witches, whores, Mexican princesses, workers, and Africans. They go to Central Park to watch the bears, hold hands and walk through the streets of Harlem, talk and drink coffee at Gennie's house, or lie naked on Gennie's mother's bed and listen to the radio.

The first creative writing of Lorde's included in *Zami* is a poem she wrote after Gennie's suicide (97). A couple of years later, although she is dead, it is Gennie who enables Lorde, alone in a strange city, to begin writing after months of silence. "Gennie was the only companion with whom I shared those first few weeks in Stamford, and sometimes, for days at a time, she was the only person to whom I spoke" (124). Gennie and Audre never make love, but their

relationship is charged with eroticism, and is a source of creative affirmation and strength for Lorde. In an interview in 1975, Lorde said of her friendship with Gennie: “We used to playact a lot. We used to cuddle up in bed and playact at loving so we wouldn’t have to deal with the real thing. Or rather, we thought we were playacting, but we really weren’t, you know? We never verbalized our feelings” (Cornwell 43). Gennie’s suicide affected Lorde profoundly and has been a major impetus for much of her work. In the same interview, she said, “I think about Gennie a lot, sometimes. I felt terribly sad, and I vowed that no one would ever be important to me again. But what is most important is that I never forgot. Genevieve helped me always to remember. I’ll never forget what it is to see young waste and how painful it is. And I never got over wanting to help so that it would not happen again” (42-43).

Ginger, Lorde’s first woman lover, does not seem to be a direct influence on or support for her writing; however, she provides physical, emotional, and moral support in those months Lorde works in Stamford, away from home and high school friends. Lovemaking with Ginger “felt right and completing, as if I had been born to make love to this woman, and was remembering her body rather than learning it deeply for the first time,” writes Lorde (139). In an interview years later Lorde makes explicit the connection between herself as a poet and as a lesbian lover: “The first time I ever made love to a woman was crucial to my poetry. I was able to recognize the connections that existed between myself and my lover. It was crucial to my poetry in terms of power, strength, risking . . .” (Hammond, “An Interview” 21).

Ginger also introduces Audre to Muriel, largely because they both write poetry. At their first meeting Audre and Muriel bring each other a sheaf of poems “as an introductory offering” (185), and their writing remains an important part of their relationship when they become lovers and live together. With Muriel, Lorde makes a commitment that she feels is a kind of marriage. The making of the metal mailbox tag with both their names “felt like a ritual joining, a symbolic marriage” (201). Yet even in this relationship, Lorde never questions whether she can have and be a lover and an artist too. She and Muriel write, read, and study together, sharing their notebooks as well as their lives.

Primary in all of these relationships is a definition of the lesbian that “does not depend on women loving each other genitally but, rather, on the presence and attention of women to other women that is analogous to the act of loving sexually another like oneself (Farwell 110). There is continuity among Lorde’s relationships with women, a continuity based on the fact that she has not transferred her emotional and erotic energy to a man, a continuity that nurtures the artist in the woman, and that accepts the artist as part of the woman.

Lorde’s maternal Black West Indian heritage also encourages her to feel whole as a woman and poet. The chapter “How I Became a Poet,” which I will consider in more detail later, is wholly concerned with Lorde’s mother’s “special

and secret relationship with words,” a legacy of her Grenadian origins, and the erotic connection between mother and daughter (31-34). Lorde’s mother works alongside her father, is a mother and wife, does her civic duty by working at elections and looking for enemy planes during World War II, and helps friends and strangers. Similarly, it never occurs to Lorde that she must choose among the parts of herself. She is a daughter, sister, friend, lover, poet, worker, activist. Toni Morrison suggests that this is a difference between black and white women which naturally manifests itself in their writing:

It seems to me there’s an enormous difference in the writing of black and white women. . . . Black women seem to be able to combine the nest and the adventure. They don’t see conflicts in certain areas as do white women. They are both safe harbor and ship; they are both inn and trail. We, black women, do both. We don’t find these places, these roles, mutually exclusive. That’s one of the differences. White women often find if they leave their husbands and go out into the world, it’s an extraordinary event. If they’ve settled for the benefits of housewifery that preclude a career, then it’s marriage or a career for them, not both, not *and*. (Tate 122-23)

Obviously, Morrison’s analysis rests on class and historical context as much as on race. The white women for whom “it’s an extraordinary event” to “leave their husbands and go out into the world” are middle-and upper-class women living in North America in the twentieth century. Certainly in the history of the world, most white women have not had the luxury of “choosing” whether or not to work.

Still, if we compare the relationships of black and white women writers who are middle-to upper-class, educated, primarily from North America, we do find some differences. The feminist critics who have studied white women’s *Kunstlerromane* from this group have found that the mother stands as a barrier to the development of the artist-poet, who must physically or psychologically escape from her if she is to become an artist. Linda Huf claims that a mother or mother-substitute who acts as a foil to the artist-heroine is a staple of such works: “This Everywoman, who represents the traditional role against which the artist heroine invariably rebels, looks darkly on the aspiration of the headstrong heroine. She would bring up her daughter, niece, or ward to be as fundamentalist a mate, mother, and mop-wielder as herself (55). As examples she gives Avis’s Aunt Chloe in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Story of Avis* and Esther’s mother in *The Bell Jar*.⁵

In these cases, the mother has been socialized into the norms of patriarchal society, and takes responsibility (some call it vengeance) for socializing her daughter into those norms, male definitions superseding the primary female connection of the pre-Oedipal bond, causing a disruption of female continuity. But such generalizations do not hold when we consider race as a context in analyzing relationships between mothers and daughters among this class of women. Mary Helen Washington is particularly disturbed at white critics who

assert that mother-daughter hostility and generational discontinuity are universal. She states: "Many black women writers have testified to the existence of . . . generational continuity between themselves and their mothers, and they write that continuity into their texts "(148). Primary to that generational continuity is what it takes to survive in a racist society.

For black women in the United States the mother-daughter relationship is complicated by racism and the history of blacks here. That is true for Audre and Linda Lorde. But unlike many white protagonists, Lorde finds the relationship with her mother ultimately affirming. The "new spelling of [her] name" that *Zami* chronicles celebrates her survival and an identity that encompasses artist and lesbian, all from her matrilineal heritage.

Lorde's parents, especially her mother, deal with racism with silence and attempt to protect their children from the realization of it. Audre grows up thinking that her being spit on is "totally random," the result of "low-class people who had no better sense nor manners than to spit into the wind" (17-18), as her mother had told her. Only years later did she discover the truth: "But it was so typical of my mother when I was young that if she couldn't stop white people from spitting on her children because they were Black, she would insist it was something else" (18).

Even worse, out of her own pain, Linda Lorde often punishes Audre for her expectations of being treated fairly and her hurt when she is not. The most painful example in the book is when Audre, against her mother's advice, runs for class president in the sixth grade. Audre's mother knows the reality of racism that will keep her from winning even though, according to the announced criteria, she should be elected. But that's not what she conveys to her daughter:

"What in hell are you doing getting yourself involved with so much foolishness? . . . What-the-france do you need with election? We send you to school to work, not to prance about with president-this and election-that." (61)

When she finds her daughter shrieking and sobbing after losing the election, Linda Lorde beats her, in her anger coming closer to expressing the real source of her rage: "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?" (64-65)

The relationship between mother and daughter deteriorates into a war when Lorde is in high school; Lorde's imagery in describing this period in her life is relentlessly militaristic. Two weeks after she graduates from high school, Lorde moves away from home, taking her things in the middle of the night, when her family is asleep. When *Zami* ends, some five or so years later, there is intermittent communication but no real reconciliation between Lorde and her family.

Yet Lorde comes to an understanding of the importance of her mother's surviving and enabling her children to survive in a society that does not value them. As Lorde writes of blacks in her poem "A Litany for Survival": "we were never

meant to survive" (*Black Unicorn* 31-32). This theme of survival echoes throughout black women's literature and interviews, and has become one of Lorde's most central themes. *The fact of survival matters*. Although her tactics for survival are very different from her mother's, Lorde does not denigrate her mother's tactics or blame her for the racism she tried to protect Audre from. She acknowledges the cost to her mother of her tactics, yet acknowledges what she learned from her:

I grew black as my need for life, for affirmation, for love, for sharing—copying from my mother what was in her, unfulfilled. . . . My mother's words teaching me all manner of wily and diversionary defenses learned from the white man's tongue, from out of the mouth of her father. She had had to use these defenses, and had survived by them, and had also died by them a little, at the same time. (58)

By her senior year in high school Lorde can see her mother as an individual. A couple of years later, seeing her mother's "pain, and her blindness, and her strength," after her father's funeral, Lorde can "see her as separate from me, and . . . feel free of her" (143). Yet, although Lorde has to feel free of her mother, she acknowledges and celebrates what she learned from her and is not afraid to admit their similarities. Her mother taught her how to survive:

When I moved out of my mother's house, shaky and determined, I began to fashion some different relationship to this country of her sojourn. I began to seek some more fruitful return than simple bitterness from this place of my mother's exile, whose streets I came to learn better than my mother had ever learned them. But thanks to what she did know and could teach me, I survived in them better than I could have imagined. I made an adolescent's wild and powerful commitment to battling in my own full eye, closer to my own strength, which was after all not so very different from my mother's. (104)

Others have noted that black women often respect their mothers' strength and ability to survive. In Gloria Joseph's 1979-80 nationwide survey on the relationship between mothers and daughters, 94.5% of the black women who responded to the question "What about your mother do you respect the most?" gave answers that "expressed respect for their mothers in terms of strength, honesty, ability to overcome difficulties, and ability to survive" (94).⁶ Joseph states:

Black daughters learn at an early age that their mothers are not personally responsible for not being able, through their individual efforts, to make basic changes in their lives or the lives of their children. This recognition enables daughters in later life to be more appreciative, understanding, and forgiving of their mothers when they are unable to fulfill and meet the daughters' expectations and needs for material and emotional comforts. . . . This reality must be interpreted and evaluated in light of the culture of Black families within a society that has denied Black parents the opportunity to offer their children a protected status comparable to what White parents can offer their offspring. (96)⁷

Ultimately, Lorde not only comes to appreciate her mother's survival and understand their similarities, but also to recognize that her voice as a poet owes much to her mother:

When the strongest words/or what I have to offer come out of me sounding like words! 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. (31)

Lorde celebrates her mother's language: "My mother had a special and secret relationship with words . . . Out of my mother's mouth a world of comment came cascading when she felt at ease or in her element, full of picaresque constructions and surreal scenes" (31-32). "*I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers,*" writes Lorde (32).⁸

Lorde acknowledges Her mother's West Indian speech patterns and poetic language as part of her literary inheritance. She finds in her relationship with her mother "the key to the release of [her] creative powers" (Washington 144). Barbara Christian asserts that black women writers are "immersed into their communities' ways of making meaning through their mothers." Their novels become, then, "the literary counterparts of their communities' oral traditions" (239). In a reciprocal relationship, her mother or mother figures support the black woman writer, while as a writer she gives literary form to her mother's and her community's stories.

As part of the generational continuity among black women in the United States, then, the mother, even if illiterate, passes on the creative spark. Gloria Joseph ascribes this continuity to the particularities of African-American history and its effect on the family, contrasting it to the experiences of white United States women, where historical circumstances encouraged a rift between parents and children (89-90).⁹ Joseph found among the white women who responded to her survey something which was "rarely, if ever, mentioned by the Black daughters. The response was, 'I fear I might be like her'" (125).

Lorde's continuity with her mother includes a deep understanding of the connection between poetry and the erotic, of the erotic connection among women, and of the connection between poetry and survival, as well as of the ways in which as a black woman her voice as an artist continues her mother's. In "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" and "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde links female eroticism and creativity. Poetry and the erotic are both female resources within us. The erotic is not simply the sexual, but "an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire" ("Erotic" 54). Lorde speaks of it "as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" ("Erotic" 55). Poetry can put that ancient woman-knowledge into words "so it can be thought" ("Poetry" 37). And once thought, it can be—indeed should be—acted upon. For Lorde both the erotic and poetry are means toward genuine change. They are important because "the aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible" ("Erotic" 55).

The poet for Lorde is "the Black mother within each of us" ("Poetry" 38).

That "Black mother" is she who survives, who enables her children to survive, and who demands, in accord with her "erotic" internal sense, that the world become better. Accordingly, the chapter "How I Became a Poet" in *Zami* consists of Lorde's description of her mother's "special and secret relationship with words" (31) and two erotic scenes between mother and daughter. The first shows Linda Lorde's attempt to make Audre "presentable" to the racist outside world, which she knows is ultimately impossible. She seems to imply that it is Audre's responsibility to be acceptable rather than society's to be accepting. Yet within is the intimacy, the shared erotic connection that lets her daughter know she is loved, cared for, and accepted for who she is:

Sitting between my mother's spread legs, her strong knees gripping my shoulders tightly like some well-attended drum, my head in her lap, while she brushed and combed and oiled and braided. I feel my mother's strong, rough hands all up in my unruly hair, while I'm squirming around on a low stool or on a folded towel on the floor, my rebellious shoulders hunched and jerking against the inexorable sharp-toothed comb. After each springy portion is combed and braided, she pats it tenderly and proceeds to the next. . . .

"Hold your back up, now! Deenie, keep still! Put your head so!" Scratch, scratch. "When last you wash your hair? Look the dandruff!" Scratch, scratch, the comb's truth setting my own teeth on edge. Yet, these were some of the moments I missed most sorely when our real wars began.

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. (32-33)

The second scene between mother and daughter in this chapter again portrays this physical and emotional intimacy. By taking place in the parents' bed it seems to suggest the daughter's return to a very early relationship with her mother as well as a continuity of sensuality and eroticism for the lesbian who never transfers her primary emotional bonds to a male. In this scene Audre crawls into her mother's bed on the rare morning when her mother can stay in bed late, alone.

I get up and go over and crawl into my mother's bed. Her smile. Her glycerine-flannel smell. The warmth. . . . A hot-water bottle wrapped in body-temperature flannel, which she used to quiet her gall-bladder pains during the night. Her large soft breasts beneath the buttoned flannel of her nightgown. Below, the rounded swell of her stomach, silent and inviting touch.

I crawl against her, playing with the enflanneled, warm, rubber bag, pummeling it, tossing it, sliding it down the roundness of her stomach to the warm sheet between the bend of her elbow and the curve of her waist below her breasts, flopping sideward inside the printed cloth. Under the covers, the morning smells soft and sunny and full of promise.

I frolic with the liquid-filled water bottle, patting and rubbing its firm giving softness. I shake it slowly, rocking it back and forth, lost in sudden tenderness at the same time gently rubbing against my mother's quiet body. Warm milky smells of morning surround us.

Feeling the smooth deep firmness of her breasts against my ears and the sides of my cheeks. Tossing, tumbling, the soft gurgle of the water within its rubber casing. (33-34)

In putting these scenes in the chapter "How I Became a Poet," Lorde shows us what she tells us in her essays; that poetry is "an assertion of the life force of women" which comes from the "Black mother"¹⁰

For Lorde, the strong mother is the lesbian. She is the powerful black woman who survives, who enables her children to survive, and who has "a particular kind of determination. It is stubborn, it is painful, it is infuriating, but it often works" (15). Such women are the "dykes" between their children and a violent racist world. In this, Lorde's black woman's view differs from that of white critics like Wittig who see the mother and the lesbian as absolute antitheses of each other (108-09); or who believe, as Showalter does, that in the 80s the lesbian and feminist aesthetic differentiated from each other, and "the figure of the mother replaced that of the Amazon for theorists of the female aesthetic" (7).

As a child Lorde struggled to articulate what she perceived and experienced in the inadequate language her society had given her:

My mother was a very powerful woman. This was so in a time when that word-combination of *woman* and *powerful* was almost unexpressable [sic] in the white american common tongue Therefore when I was growing up, *powerful woman* equaled something else quite different from the ordinary woman, from simply "woman." It certainly did not, on the other hand, equal "man." What then? What was the third designation? . . . Since my parents shared all making of policy and decision, in my child's eye, my mother must have been *other* than woman. (15-16)

Lorde's answer to the question is that the powerful, different, woman-identified woman who is "not-woman" is lesbian:

As a child, I always knew my mother was different from the other women I knew, Black or white. I used to think it was because she was my mother. But different how? I was never quite sure. . . . But that is why to this day I believe that there have always been Black dykes around—in the sense of powerful and women-oriented women—who would rather have died than use that name for themselves. And that includes my momma. (15)

There is a strain within black feminist literary criticism which names strength and woman-identification in black women as "lesbian." Barbara Smith, Lorraine Bethel, and Wilmette Brown all take this approach. In this view, as well as in Lorde's, the lesbian is "not-woman"; that is, she is a female who does not play out her societally defined role as powerless, giving primary allegiance to men. Such a view harks back in white criticism to Simone de Beauvoir's observation that we are not born women, that "woman" "is a product elaborated by civilization" (725).¹¹ However, in her 1851 speech "Ain't I A Woman?" Sojourner Truth forcefully pointed out that black women have *never* been considered as "women" in the United States. They have never been accorded the same

respect and treatment as white women.¹² It is natural, then, for Lorde to find a continuity between black, mother, and lesbian in coming to terms with her own matrilineage and in defining herself as an artist.

Lesbianism is also part of Lorde's West Indian matrilineage. Her mother, who was from Grenada, was born on the island of Carriacou. Lorde writes, "When I visited Grenada I saw the root of my mother's powers walking through the streets. I thought, this is the country of my foremothers, my forebearing mothers, those Black island women who defined themselves by what they did" (9). When she lists the women "who helped give me substance" (255), she always includes these West Indian foremothers.

A central part of this matrilineage is lesbianism. "*Madivine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty*" (14). The men of Carriacou must often migrate to make a living, being away for years at a time. In her husband's absence, a woman often becomes a zami or madivine, a lesbian. Anthropologist Donald Hill writes:

Zamis are lesbians and are said by male informants to be mostly married women whose husbands have been abroad many years. One informant claimed that virtually every wife whose husband had been gone several years or more is a zami. (280)¹³

Although the anthropologists see lesbianism on Carriacou as the women's reaction to the men's absence, they also admit that when the husband "returns from abroad it is said to be difficult for him to regain his wife's sexual favors. He must therefore permit his wife to remain a zami, hoping that she will become bisexual" (Hill 281; Smith 200).

"Zami" thus becomes for Lorde "a new spelling of my name." The last words of the book express the power of her Carriacouan matrilineal heritage: "There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood" (256).

Thus, for Lorde, "home" changes in *Zami* from "a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mothers mouth" (256), to "this house of myself (43), the poet "recreating in words the women who helped give me substance" (255). She becomes Zami, a black woman artist who loves women. Significantly, "coming home" in the book is usually connected to loving women. Of her first experience of physically loving a woman, Lorde writes: "Loving Ginger that night was like coming home to a joy I was meant for" (139). Of Bea, she writes: "I made love to a woman for the first time in my very own bed. This was home . . ." (150). Of Eudora: "Despite all the sightseeing I had done, and all the museums and ruins I had visited, and the books I had read, it was Eudora. . . who showed me the way to the Mexico I had come looking for, that nourishing land of light and color where I was somewhere at home" (170). "It is the images of women, kind and cruel, that lead me home," writes Lorde. And

these images “stand like dykes between me and the chaos” (3). Lorde’s homecoming becomes then not a physical journey, but her journey to herself as a woman-loving black woman.

Kitty/Afrekete, the last lover Lorde writes of in the book, is especially important to this journey to herself; she is central to Lorde’s process of bringing together all the different parts of the woman she is. In writing about her, Lorde draws not on the Demeter/Persephone myth which some white feminist critics see as central to women’s experience, but on her heritage of African Dahomeian myth.*⁴

Afrekete is the daughter of Seboulisa, the “Mother of us all.” In the pre-Yoruban tradition she is the goddess who “makes connections, is communicator, linguist, and poet” (Grahn 125). Afrekete reminds Lorde of Ann (242), the nurse she worked with when she first left home, with whom she used to flirt in the nurse’s pantry, and the first to say out loud, “I thought you was gay!” (108). She also reminds Lorde, surprisingly, of Ella, Gennie’s stepmother, “who shuffled about with an apron on and a broom” and who sang a “tuneless song over and over and over.” At the time, Gennie said to Audre, “You know, sometimes I don’t know whether Ella’s crazy, or stupid, or divine” (251). But now, through the mediation of the poet/linguist/communicator Afrekete, Lorde knows that “the goddess was speaking through Ella also.” And she knows that for black women, “our survival might very well lay in listening to the sweeping woman’s tuneless song” (251). Gennie has already been lost. Afrekete helps Lorde realize that black women cannot afford arrogance, silence, and separation from each other if they are to survive.

Afrekete also strengthens Lorde’s connections to her West Indian and African past, significantly through Lorde’s mother. The water and natural imagery connected with Afrekete is very reminiscent of Lorde’s mother and her longing for Carriacou, the “sweet place” they could get back to if they only “lived correctly and with frugality” (13).

Linda knew green things were precious, and the peaceful, healing qualities of water. On Saturday afternoons, sometimes, after my mother finished cleaning the house, we would go looking for some park to sit in and watch the trees. Sometimes we went down to the edge of the Harlem River at 142nd Street to watch the water. Sometimes we took the D train and went to the sea. Whenever we were close to water, my mother grew quiet and soft and absentminded. Then she would tell us wonderful stories about Noel’s Hill in Grenville, Grenada, which overlooked the Caribbean. She told us stories about Carriacou, where she had been born, among the heavy smell of limes. (13)

Afrekete is constantly identified with spices, tropical plants, and the sea. She has a “spicy herb-like odor” (243), and her hands are “coconut-spicy” (245). Plants fill the windows in Afrekete’s apartment, plants which filter the light and which Afrekete tends “religiously” (250). Her thirty-gallon fish tank “murmured softly, like a quiet jewel . . . glowing and mysterious” (248). And Afrekete herself is identified with the sea—Lorde dreams “the roll of

this woman’s sea” (246), feels at their first kiss that “her hips moved like surf upon the water’s edge” (248), and experiences the “tidal motions” of her body (249) as they make love.¹⁵ Afrekete also brings “magical fruit” from “under the bridge” as Lorde’s mother had done, meaning “that whatever it was had come from as far back and as close to home—that is to say, was as authentic—as was possible” (249). But for Zami, fruits do not represent a faraway home she might someday be able to return to, but are part of the “new spelling of my name,” as the lovers use the fruits in their lovemaking. On the Midsummer Eve’s Moon Zami and Afrekete make “moon, honor, love” on the roof of Afrekete’s building, their “sweat-slippery dark bodies, sacred as the ocean at high tide” (252). They have consecrated themselves and each other as women-loving black women dedicated to survival.

In this portrait of an artist as a black lesbian, Audre Lorde shows us how to claim all the parts of ourselves. She is not like the female protagonists of the *Künstlerromane* who feel or who are made to feel they can’t be both women and artists. For Lorde there is no dichotomy between the woman and the poet, “one’s art and purpose in living being the same . . .” (Cornwell, 39). In insisting on an identity that encompasses all the parts of her self, Lorde claims the parts that make her an outsider, despised, or politically incorrect to others. She is black, she is lesbian, she is fat when she is growing up, she is an artist in the bar crowd, she is a Lesbian among the Left. She will later come to claim even other despised or politically incorrect identities — she is the lesbian mother of a son, a black woman in an interracial relationship, a survivor of a mastectomy who will not wear a prosthesis. Lorde challenges us to claim all the parts of ourselves also, including those parts which make us outsiders. By her example and her words she tells us what seems to be our greatest vulnerability is our greatest strength. If we cannot make ourselves acceptable to others because we are women or lesbian or black or fat, then we can stop trying to be acceptable and do our work. Lorde says:

Being the outsider makes you terribly vulnerable, but it also frees you from certain expectations. You know that some people are never going to love you anyway, so you don’t have to meet their expectations or demands. . . . But you can be your own woman. (Hammond, “Audre Lorde” 22)

The black lesbian perspective in *Zami* also shows us the falsity of the distinctions between autonomy and relationship and between the political and the personal set up by a patriarchal outlook, distinctions painfully evident in many *Künstlerromane* by women. Lorde writes of the erotic connection among women as “self-connection shared” (“Erotic” 57). Starting with lesbian lives as a place from which to consider women’s experience emphasizes the centrality of women’s relationships with each other, in which they can be both individual

and connected. This is important not just for lesbians, but for all women. It gives us grounding for our own lives, a basis for a political and social activism true to our own values, and the possibility for radical change in society. Bettina Aptheker claims:

A lesbian presence has the potential of rupturing [the patriarchal] system because a lesbian's emotional needs are not focused on men in the same way. She stands outside the established norm. It is precisely for this reason that the fusion of a lesbian and feminist perspective is so potent. . . . To live a women-centered life is feasible, providing a potential political base from which to renegotiate the social relations between the sexes on a mass scale. (94)

Another important lesson we can learn from Lorde is to connect with and respect those who have come before us, who have worked within the circumstances in which they found themselves to ensure our survival. In contrast, in many white, middle-class female *Künstlerromane*, other women, especially mother figures, are portrayed as barriers to the artist's development. In her recent book, Aptheker urges us to redefine resistance from a woman's point of view—not to see it only in what we call political movements, but also in the stories of women who find ways to feed and clothe and nurture their children and others' children in the most oppressive circumstances (167-230). *Zami* gives us examples of such a reclaiming and renaming; the “new spelling of [Lorde's] name” that *Zami* chronicles is a matrilinear spelling.

But as we recognize and celebrate those before us and around us who survived and who gave us the tools for survival, we must also do our work to ensure the survival of others. Lorde realizes that Gennie killed herself “because she was unhappy, because she did not believe that any piece of her world could make it better” (Cornwell 42). She has dedicated her life and work to trying to ensure that future Gennies know it can be better.

The most important thing that Audre Lorde, a black lesbian woman warrior poet, has taught me is to do my work in this struggle for survival. Since I first read her words, I have tried consciously to live so that I could answer her question affirmatively:

I am . . . a Black woman warrior poet doing my work—come to ask you, are you doing yours? (“Transformation” 41-42)

NOTES

¹ The best and most complete study of the female *Bildungsroman* is *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*. Ed. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland.

² Rich criticizes Chodorow as well as Jean Baker Miller for making lesbians invisible and not addressing the compulsory nature of heterosexuality, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 26-35.

³ Gubar does mention Alice Walker's story “Everyday Use” as a recent example of “the Utopian imperative that characterizes the modernist period,” 51. DuPlessis's title, epigraph, and main idea are from Alice Walker's essay “In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens,” yet she uses all white writers in her analysis.

⁴ Walker feels that a new word is necessary to encompass the range of bonding among black women: “The word ‘lesbian’ may not, in any case, be suitable (or comfortable) for black women, who surely would have begun this woman-bonding earlier than Sappho's residency on the Isle of Lesbos. Indeed, I can imagine black women who love women (sexually or not) hardly thinking of what Greeks were doing; but, instead, referring to themselves as ‘whole’ women, from ‘wholly’ or ‘holy.’ Or as ‘round’ women—women who love other women, yes, but women who also have concern, in a culture that oppresses all black people (and this would go back very far), for their fathers, brothers, and sons, no matter how they feel about them as males. My own term for such women would be ‘womanist’” (“Gifts of Power” 81).

⁵ Constance Perry also analyzes Esther's mother's attempts to socialize her into female norms in *The Bell Jar*, 294-303. See also Grace Stewart's interpretation of *Mary Olivier*, 54-55.

⁶ See also Maglin, 262-65.

⁷ In looking at Black, Chicana, Jewish, poor, and lesbian literature which explores relationships between mothers and daughters, Rosinsky finds that an awareness of oppressive social forces operating on them both “very often leads to—at least metaphorically—a healing acceptance on the daughter's part of her mother's victimization. The ‘real enemy’ appears easier to see when more than one oppression united the two women,” 280-81.

⁸ This is common in literature and interviews by black women. See Maglin, 259-60; Walker, “In Search of,” esp. 240; Childress, 111-16.

⁹ Lewis explores the dynamic of white mother-daughter relationships, including the ways in which the mother's having a daughter is “riddled with ambivalence and contradictory responses,” causing anger and misunderstanding between the generations, esp. 131-37, 141.

¹⁰ Raynaud also analyzes this chapter of *Zami*, stating, “The playfulness and the eroticism emphasize the link between the lesbian and the maternal,” 227.

¹¹ For another view of lesbians as “not-women,” see Wittig, 148-52.

¹² For contemporary examples, see Joseph, 27-28.

¹³ In the Acknowledgments to *Zami*, Lorde includes “Donald Hill who visited Carriacou and passed the words on.”

¹⁴ See, for example, Stewart, 40-106. Heilbrun makes this assertion: “Her [Lorde's] struggle to become herself was different from the struggle of white middle-class women. She found African goddesses more empowering, perhaps, than a white woman poet would find goddesses from Greece . . .,” 74. Pratt also finds the matriarchal African inheritance of Afro-Americans more positive and empowering than the white Western tradition for women writers and characters, 33, 68.

¹⁵ The imagery of Lorde's lovemaking with Ginger, the only other black lover she tells us about in *Zami*, is also permeated with spices and the sea. This is not true of Lorde's descriptions of her white lovers.

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