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821.111(73).09-3 Лорд О.  
141.72

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## “THE LOVE OF WOMEN, KIND AS WELL AS CRUEL”: FEMINIST ALLIANCES AND CONTESTED SPACES IN AUDRE LORDE’S *ZAMI: A NEW SPELLING OF MY NAME*

**ABSTRACT** Audre Lorde’s biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* is a politically engaged feminist work reflecting Lorde’s activism and dedication to social transformation. This essay reads *Zami* as a compelling and visionary text relevant for numerous contemporary concerns surrounding whiteness and its pervasiveness, erasure of black women’s voices, intersectionality and forming feminist alliances across differences. Drawing on Victoria Burrows’ elaboration of ambivalence as resistance to fixture and closure, the essay investigates Lorde’s portrayals of women’s networks and alliances as contested spaces. The essay highlights the ways in which Lorde utilises difference and ambivalence to capture the challenges in forming feminist alliances and invite dialogue, engagement and social action. I maintain that Lorde’s emphasis on embracing differences is premised upon dismantling and de-centering whiteness and its oppressive reproduction in feminist politics. This in turn enables a truly intersectional and transformational feminist activism built on multiplicities. The essay concludes that the biomythography resists closure and prescription and enables spaces of negotiation and critical thinking, allowing for mutual recognition, dialogue and growth.

**Keywords:** Audre Lorde, black feminism, alliance, ambivalence, difference, whiteness, oppression, intersectionality, contestation

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*In a world of possibility for us all, our personal visions  
help lay the groundwork for political action.  
The failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial  
strength is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson.  
In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower.*

(Lorde 1996b)

On Tuesday, February 18, 2014, *The Feminist Wire* marked the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of Audre Lorde by creating the Audre Lorde Forum. In her inaugural post, Aishah Shahidah Simmons wrote that the Forum was envisioned as an opportunity to widen the net and highlight some of the many voices who knew Sister/Mother/Teacher/Poet Audre Lorde; while simultaneously celebrating the amazing Lordean scholarship, cultural work, and activism that has happened or is happening (Simmons 2014). As a part of the Forum, *The Feminist Wire* published a range of widely accessible and thoughtful posts celebrating Lorde's life, art and courageous activism. For many Forum contributors, Audre Lorde and her work provided the spiritual nourishment and strength in difficult times, as well as survival strategies. As Cassandra Ellerbe-Dueck writes in her compelling "A Love Note to Audre": "Times are tough, but I know in my heart and soul that your Spirit is still amongst us. And that Audre – makes me smile and gives me peace" (Ellerbe-Dueck 2014). The very timelessness of Lorde's work attests not only to her artistic talent but also to the ongoing need to challenge oppression, erasure and dehumanisation. Reflecting on the risks of mythologising Lorde, Aishah Shahidah Simmons tellingly asks:

"But what does it mean if we are only talking the talk and not walking the talk? ... We don't remember that she often told us that she transformed her silence into language and action in spite of her fears and not feeling secure" (Simmons 2014).

Lorde's work brings together that very "talk" and "walk", merging theory and practice through emotionally resonant language and attesting to the ability of art to effect social change. Simmons' comment aptly identifies the process of working through conflicting states and frames those as a crucial part of Lorde's feminist activism.

As a politicised and socially engaged text, Audre Lorde’s biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* from 1982 testifies to the ongoing relevance of her work (Lorde 2003). Over 30 years after its publication, it remains a compelling feminist work which describes not only the growth of a black feminist and artist but also contains feminist “tools” for strategising against oppression.<sup>2</sup> Detailing numerous instances of countering different ideologies of oppression, Lorde articulates through her biomythography what AnnaLouise Keating calls “threshold theories” which cross genres, mix codes, combine language with action, activism with aesthetics and individual identity formation with collective cultural change (Keating 1996, 15). The biomythography’s dedication exemplifies its commitment to effecting social change, stating: “In the recognition of loving lies an answer to despair” (Lorde 2003). This simple yet compelling line indicates the motivating force behind this work, where the act, or rather, the activity of *loving* enables mutual recognition of common humanity and a simultaneous acknowledgement of differences. Lorde’s emphasis on *loving*, echoed by the contributors to *The Feminist Wire*’s Audre Lorde’s Forum, is therefore a conscious action; an ongoing and accountable opposition to inequalities, hierarchies and mechanisms of exclusion.

With its resistance to prescriptiveness, the very form of biomythography facilitates Lorde’s exploration of contradictions and contested spaces inherent in women’s relationships and feminist alliances. The word’s very etymology signals Lorde’s merging of the(auto)biographical and mythological and thus surpasses the usual definition of autobiography as a history of a person’s life narrated by himself or herself (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2014) for its complexity. Merging the sensual, mythological, personal and political, *Zami* moves through various stages of Lorde’s life through a poetic and cyclical plot. In an interview with Karla Jay, Lorde underscores her motivation for writing *Zami* as a biomythography:

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2 See Audre Lorde’s landmark essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” for a critique of white feminism, its exclusion of diverse voices and an emphasis on political action and difference as a strength (Lorde 1996b).

“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” (Jay 2004, 110).

Here, Lorde envisions her biomythography as a creative and transformative work. As AnnaLouise Keating suggests, Lorde uses “revisionist mythmaking” to “delegitimize” – alter and rearrange – the narrative events” (Keating 1996, 18–19). Thus, mythmaking allows Lorde to explore the complexities and ambivalences in her relationships with other women, as well as revise and reimagine them on her own terms. Breaking away from monolithic portrayals of women’s communities, the biomythography reveals the complexity of “working together” implied in its title, *Zami*, “a Carriacou word for women who work together as friends and lovers” (Lorde 2003, 223). Discussing transnational feminism, Caren Kaplan recognises *Zami*’s emphasis on women’s networks, alliances and strategies and suggests that “the bridging of disparate and shifting concerns and identities raised in biomythography echoes the political affiliations forged through the coalition work that engenders transnational feminisms” (Kaplan 1992, 130).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, *Zami*’s most compelling aspects originate from its nuanced exploration of these disparate concerns encountered in the process of forming transnational and transracial feminist alliances.

My reading of *Zami* as a politicised feminist biomythography takes particular interest in the role of disparate identities and diversities in shaping Lorde’s feminist vision. Within this context, I focus on Lorde’s portrayals of women’s networks and alliances, and investigate the roles of difference and contestation in constituting the ongoing relevance of Lorde’s intersectional feminism. In her discussion on whiteness and trauma, Victoria Burrows highlights the role of ambivalence as “the great unrecognised dynamic in

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3 For discussions on Audre Lorde’s transnational feminist alliances and influences, see Broeck and Bolaki [in press].

feminist theory” (Burrows 2004, 11). She further suggests that the negative implications of ambivalence stem from its use in positivist psychology and psychiatry where it is conceptualised as a situation in which a person overwhelmingly experiences both negative and positive emotions and is unable to choose between opposed attitudes (ibid.). Challenging ambivalence’s pathologisation, Burrows states:

“The term merely signifies that a person can experience oppositional emotions that co-exist and can remain in fluctuating opposition to each other. ... Contradictory ideas / emotions / wishes transgress and disrupt polar opposites that idealise fixity and closure” (ibid., 11–12).

Burrows’ elaboration of ambivalence is particularly applicable to Lorde’s exploration of the contradictions and complexities involved in forming relationships with other women. More specifically, Burrows’ emphasis on ambivalences which serve to transgress and disrupt fixity, closure and thus oppressive dichotomies and discourses aptly describes the challenges of forming feminist alliances. However, the ambivalences in *Zami* are not merely passive states of contradiction and opposition but they invite dialogue, engagement and social action. Acknowledging complexities in her transracial and transcultural relationships, Lorde’s feminist vision in *Zami* resists reductive labelling and reinstates the centrality of reflexivity and individual and collective accountability. In their compelling analysis of transnational feminism, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan suggest that “practices are always negotiated in both a connected and a specific field of conflict and contradiction” (Grewal and Kaplan 1999, 358). This field of negotiation, where conflicting states meet and interact is precisely what Burrows highlights in her reading of ambivalence. In *Zami*, ambivalence emerges as an innovative strategy for destabilising hegemonic discourses. However, Lorde’s exploration of ambivalences and contestations is premised by her sustained critique of whiteness and its persistent and oppressive reproduction. Exploring feminist alliances, *Zami* provides a compelling critique of white hegemony; questions the problematic assumption of togetherness or the homogenising “we” prevalent in contemporary white feminism; and exposes the role of privilege in assuming alliances and sisterhood. As Valerie Amos and Pratibha

Parmar note in their discussion on Western feminism, positing white middle class woman's experience as normative contributed "to the predominantly Eurocentric and ethnocentric theories of women's oppression" (Amos and Parmar 2005, 49). Challenging the centrality of whiteness in feminist discourses, *Zami* counters, in Lorde's own words, the "assumption that the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background" (Lorde 1996a, 69). Destabilising whiteness in spaces of contestation thus enables mutual recognition, dialogue and growth. Reflecting on whiteness studies and Lorde's work, Sara Ahmed rightly argues that any critical genealogy of whiteness studies must begin with the direct political address of Black feminists such as Lorde, rather than later work by white academics such as Frankenberg and Dyer who explore the representations of whiteness or on how white people experience their whiteness (Ahmed 2004). Positing Audre Lorde's work as a starting point while acknowledging the contributions of other scholars, Ahmed's critique affirms the need for re-centering the work of black feminists in discussions on racism and thus challenging the dominance and centrality of white scholarship. Thus, *Zami's* unflinching engagement with whiteness and its traumatic effects upon the black psyche represents a crucial contribution to black feminist considerations of whiteness and its persistent reproduction in contemporary America. Finally, reading *Zami* as a politically engaged feminist work, I maintain that the biomythography does not offer a *conclusive* strategy or "solution" to racism, sexism and intersecting oppression nor does it offer a prescriptive "recipe" for forming alliances across difference. What *Zami* provides as a politically engaged feminist text are the "tools", instruments or building blocks for critical thinking and reflexivity outside proscriptive and hegemonic frames, thus offering spaces of movement, negotiation and reclamation of circumscribed subjectivities.

Reflecting on the women who influenced her work in an interview with Karen Nölle-Fischer (2004), Lorde states that the writing of *Zami* helped her survive difficult periods in her life, calling it a "real recollecting":

"And, of course, again and again, the motif returns: it is the love of women, *kind as well as cruel*, that drives me; not only fantasy relationships but, in fact,

all the women who in the course of my life have been involved in strengthening my resolve or have come and helped me in difficult times form the motif. That is one of the strands that became obvious to me during the creation of *Zami*” (Nölle-Fischer 2004, 154; emphasis added).

Lorde’s use of the collocation “kind and cruel” frames the contradictory impulses present in her engagement with women in her life. These oppositional emotions which “can co-exist and remain in fluctuating opposition” (Burrows 2004, 11) form a feminist dynamic in *Zami* which is never conclusively framed but rather incorporated into Lorde’s evolving feminist vision. Acknowledging contradictory emotions, Lorde is nourished and strengthened rather than defeated by them. Placing emphasis on women in her life, Lorde subverts masculinist authoritative discourses and turns to matrilineal subjectivities, or mothers, friends, lovers, sisters and working class women for guidance and support. The diversity of these women affirms Lorde’s notion of empowerment through difference as “that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged” (Lorde 1996b, 112).

The first woman Lorde pays tribute to is DeLois, whom Lorde describes as a woman “who never had her hair done, and all the neighborhood women sucked their teeth as she walked by, her hair twinkling in the summer sun as her big proud stomach moved her on” (Lorde 2003, xiii–xiv). Lorde admits to loving her for she “moved like she felt she was somebody special”, ignoring the harassing comments thrown at her in the streets (ibid., xiv). Here, DeLois embodies that very recognition of loving from *Zami*’s dedication and becomes explicitly politicised. Her ample body moves within and against harassment and counters the street harassers’ dehumanisation through its relentless self-love. Reflecting on the divisive and alienating effects of internalised self-loathing, Lorde tellingly asks:

*“I lie beside my sisters in the darkness, who pass me in the street unacknowledged and unadmitted. How much of this is the pretense of self-rejection that became an immovable protective mask, how much the programmed hate that we were fed to keep ourselves a part, apart?”* (ibid., 45)

This passage metaphorically signals the erasure of black women by a society which privileges whiteness. It also reveals the divisive effects of self-rejection or “programmed hate”. Using the notion of consumption (“we were fed”) and bodily metaphor, Lorde depicts the psychic and physical fragmentation caused by racism and the historical reduction of black women to stereotypes, embodiments, or even rhetorical devices for achieving political aims.<sup>4</sup> Thus, DeLois’ self-love and Lorde’s love of DeLois function as resistant political acts which counter internalised racism and negation of black women’s subjectivities.

Lorde’s further descriptions of her lovers affirm her conceptualisation of feminist alliances permeated with ambivalences and contestation. As she tellingly writes:

“Every woman I have ever loved has left her imprint upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me – so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognise her” (ibid., 223).

Her lovers form an important and indispensable part of her subjectivity and frame her feminist vision as an erotic and contested site of continuous growth. This complex negotiation of disparate subjectivities and eroticism is particularly articulated during Lorde’s visit to Mexico where she meets Eudora, a white woman who underwent a mastectomy and starts a relationship. Eudora insists on turning off the lamp during their lovemaking but Lorde catches her wrist and whispers to her: “In the light” (ibid., 144). This deeply affective moment in *Zami* forms yet another counter-narrative to the white supremacist and misogynistic culture and reclaims the female body while challenging normative constructions of wholeness and femininity. Leaving the light on, Lorde not only demonstrates a loving reclamation of Eudora’s body, but also enables Eudora to work through her bodily shame and apprehension. Apart from her relationship with Eudora, Lorde finds Mexico an affirming environment where she sees her own color reflected upon the streets in great numbers (Lorde 2003, 133). Lorde’s emphasis on the diversity of people in Mexico is thus juxtaposed to the centrality of whiteness in the United States,

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4 For discussions on black women’s corporeality used as a metaphor in white feminist discourses, see Burrows 2004 and Sanchez-Eppler 1988.



where she feels more exposed. Delineating transracial and transcultural alliances, she is able to inhabit complexity and explore her “diverse selves” which resist classification. As Lorde tellingly writes: “I always felt that I cannot be categorised. That has been both my weakness and my strength” (Lorde 2009, 161). Thus, Lorde’s travel and transracial relationships frame her as a mobile subject of her own experience which actively refutes fixity or limitations brought by racist stereotyping, homogenising and victimisation.

Apart from her diverse lovers, Lorde’s relationships with the women in her family serve as a basis for her feminist vision which embraces contradiction, difference and continuous growth. *Zami* dedicates deeply affective passages to describing Lorde’s loving and frequently vexed relationship with her mother Linda, whom she calls “a very powerful woman” (Lorde 2003, 6). It is through her mother that Lorde envisions a sense of belonging, drawing on Linda’s idealised descriptions of Grenada, its music, songs and beauty.<sup>5</sup> Apart from affectionate, their relationship is permeated with generational and ideological conflicts. This ambivalent relationship sees Lorde situating herself within an empowering matrilineage, as well as opposing her mother’s silence and political stance surrounding the effects of racism and sexism in America. Lorde’s complex relationship with her mother is comparable to Lorde’s contemporary Octavia Butler and her transformed stance towards her mother’s disadvantaged position. Discussing her positionality as a black feminist writer of speculative fiction, Butler describes blaming her mother for her supposed servility as she ignored the humiliation and abuse heaped upon her by her co-workers (Butler 1997, 51). As she grew up, Butler’s resentment transformed into a deeper form of understanding as she realises that such actions kept her fed and sheltered. Moreover, she understands the survival strategies which the older generations developed, stemming from a different set of social and political circumstances. It is precisely this understanding and respect, along with its contradictions that Lorde’s depictions of her mother illustrate.

Lorde’s relationship with her sisters serves as another microcosm symbolising wider social relations, along with its conflicting perspectives and

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5 For a compelling exploration of *Zami* in the context of home and belonging, see Bolaki 2011.

mechanisms of exclusion which contributed to Lorde's feminist vision. Lorde admits being jealous of her two sisters for being older and "more privileged", having each other as friends, leading "a magical and charmed existence down the hall in their room" (Lorde 2003, 31). As the family grows more economically disadvantaged, the sisters have to share a bedroom. This proximity allows the sisters to be closer but also facilitates their frequent conflicts. Intrigued by her sisters' secrecy, Lorde soon discovers that her sisters tell each other imaginative stories in installments every night behind closed doors, inspired by various radio adventure shows. Lorde enthusiastically joins their night-time activities, listening to stories "filled with tough little girls who masqueraded in boys' clothing and always foiled the criminals, managing to save the day" (ibid., 34). Interestingly, Lorde continuously disrupts her sisters' narratives and asks questions, contributing or challenging their plots. Annoyed with Lorde, her sisters decide to stop sharing stories and thus exclude her from further participation. The next morning, Lorde concludes the incident with the following words: "Right then and there, before anybody else woke up, I decided to make up *a story of my own*" (ibid., 36; emphasis added). What Lorde's experience delineates is the process of turning a conflicting situation into an inspiration to author her *own* story. Despite being excluded from her sisters' activities, Lorde locates the potential for rebuilding and resisting. Moreover, making up stories with her sisters reaffirms the importance of mythmaking, personal vision and creativity in Lorde's life. As Lorde states in an interview with Ilona Pache and Regina-Maria Dackweiler, the function of myth is

"to underline the fact that even in our dreams and our visions we are not alone. And to have them be black women, because I am tired of seeing only white Christs and white Virgins and white goddesses – all the time I was growing up" (Pache and Dackweiler 2004, 168).

Making up stories with her sisters affirms the role of mythmaking in re-centering black women's voices and thus "permitting the woman silenced in traditional accounts to tell her side of the story" (Keating 1996, 19). Moreover, the sisters' differing perspectives encapsulate the role of contradiction and contestation in forming alliances and facilitate Lorde's growth as a feminist and an artist.

Exploring the complexities of forming connections across racial and cultural differences, *Zami's* visionary feminism engages with whiteness, its attendant privilege and its situatedness in contemporary American society. The role of whiteness is crucial to Lorde's considerations of feminist spaces of contestation and contradiction. In this regard, *Zami* functions as a politicised call for social action and individual accountability. This is particularly discernible in sections of *Zami* dedicated to Lorde's childhood. Growing up "fat, Black, nearly blind and ambidexterous in a West Indian household" (Lorde 2003, 14), Lorde experiences societal mechanisms of exclusion from a very early age. As a black child in a predominantly white school, she details being spat on by random strangers, mocked for her weight and eyesight, and numerous other painful instances of injustice. Her childhood experiences not only attest to the devastating effects of racism, but also to the ways in which children are exposed to and adopt explicit and more insidious racist ideologies. Significantly, Lorde's class is divided into Fairies and Brownies, which Lorde describes in the following words:

"In this day of heightened sensitivity to racism and color usage, I don't have to tell you which were the good students and which were the baddies. I always wound up in the Brownies, because either I talked too much, or I broke my glasses, or I perpetuated some other awful infraction of the endless rules of good behavior" (ibid., 17).

These rules that hinder Lorde's progress are symbolic of a wider social context or the inequality of an oppressive system created for the privileged by the privileged. Lorde's race and gender automatically relegate her to the positionality of the "rule breaker". Another experience of injustice occurs in St. Catherine's school, where Lorde is exposed to an "unadorned, unexcused and particularly painful" racism as the first Black student (ibid., 46). Despite being objectified, exoticised, mocked and made to work twice as hard, Lorde decides to run for class president, naively believing her teacher's emphasis on meritocracy which highlighted "effort, class spirit and marks" (ibid., 47). Finally, she experiences a "rude awakening" when she realises that two of her fellow students were chosen instead of her: a white boy, automatically relegated to the role of class president, and a white girl as the vice-president (ibid., 49). Through these experiences, Lorde learns the illusive nature of assumed "meritocracy",

as her keen intellect and good behavior ultimately amount to nothing. Placed in a chapter entitled “How I Became a Poet”, these injustices prove formative for Lorde and her awakening to white privilege and its reproduction.

However, this unequal system also offers opportunities for forming early alliances. For instance, Lorde’s first ally in the Brownies and Fairies class is Alvin, a child from a disadvantaged family, bullied for his grades, personal hygiene and clothes. Since Alvin is unable to read and Lorde has difficulties with numbers, they form an alliance by working together to solve assignments. They cooperate in order to succeed in an extremely biased and competitive school system, with their bond based on their shared exclusion. These subtle acts of insurgency briefly relegate Lorde to the Fairies, representing a small but significant victory over an unfair system. Working with another excluded child, Lorde uncovers the potential of organising against the “rules” of an oppressive system. In his discussion on blackness, Touré suggests that the “ability to maneuver within white society – and how high you can rise within white power structures – is often tied to your ability to modulate” (Touré 2011, 11). Lorde’s victory based on alliances and drawing strength from differences represents precisely her ability to modulate or adjust to a particular setting. Apart from adjustment, her modulation subverts and challenges power structures by playing the rules of an oppressive system against itself. All of these early events co-create *Zami*’s unrelenting critique of privilege which foregrounded further black feminist discussions on white privilege, racism and intersectionality. Throughout her biomythography, Lorde clearly highlights how the construction of whiteness functions as “an unmarked narrative, invisible category and white privilege as unearned and unmeritocratic” (Solomon et al. 2005, 148).

Another instance of subverting an oppressive system and forming alliances with those marginalised by institutionalised whiteness occurs in Stamford. Lorde moves there after finishing high school in order to earn money and move to Mexico. This transitional stage marks a period of great uncertainty and anxiety, as she struggles to find employment. She finally manages to find a job in Keystone Electronics, a small factory which processes and delivers quartz crystals. She instantly notes that all the employees in the plant are

Black or Puerto Rican, apart from those in positions of power (Lorde 2003, 106). Moreover, she reveals the dangers behind such a highly exploitative job:

"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 even in those days. Keystone Electronics hired Black women and didn't fire them after three weeks. We even got to join the union" (ibid.).

Lorde's emphasis on the race of the people working there serves as a stark indicator of minorities' continuing economic disadvantage. Lorde's critique also exposes how the affluence of the white elites is founded upon the unethical and dehumanising exploitation of vulnerable minority workers. Running the x-ray machines in order to earn money and survive, Lorde is thus exposed to harmful radiation. As Elizabeth Alexander suggests, "the x-ray chrystals have stained her fingertips, leaving her marked with the work of her class status and for the illness she will eventually develop" (Alexander 1994, 709). Since the workers received a bonus for reading the crystals, Lorde tries to work as fast as she can and manages to earn only three dollars bonus. She soon finds a way to earn much more by slipping the crystals in her shoe and secretly chewing them and disposing of them in the toilet, risking her health in order to earn a living wage. Working within a community of diverse women, Lorde shares their struggles with discrimination and poverty as they are relegated the most exploitative and hazardous jobs in the factory. This community of women is not represented as unified nor is their joint struggle romanticised in *Zami*. Lorde continuously questions their alliances, noting her own implication, self-interest and various acts of compliance and resistance. In this way, she articulates a sense of feminist solidarity based on heterogeneous and frequently conflicting voices and interests. Most importantly, by refusing to idealise their shared oppression and sisterhood, Lorde not only acknowledges the women's differences but also allows for continuous learning and introspection.

Another articulation of *Zami's* visionary critique of whiteness is shown in passages detailing American historical amnesia, processes of national mythmaking and the centrality of whiteness to discourses on American nationhood. *Zami's* exposure of whiteness and its effects voices what Homi

K. Bhabha aptly terms as “minority discourse” which “contests genealogies of ‘origin’ that lead to claims for cultural supremacy and historical priority” (Bhabha 1994, 157). In these passages, Lorde also recounts her parents’ protectiveness and their willingness to shelter their children from racist realities. Reflecting on Lorde’s self-defining, Margaret Kissam Morris notes that

“when Lorde names herself by identifying her multiple subject positions, she customarily begins with race; thus, she privileges the term that has been the source of her earliest experiences with prejudice” (Morris 2002, 169).

This is exemplified by particularly moving passages of *Zami*, where Lorde remembers her mother complaining about “low-class people spitting in the wind” (Lorde 2003, 9) as an attempt to hide the fact that they were spitting at her own child. Lorde concludes that her parents “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” (ibid., 55). Lorde’s spelling of the word America is another example of her deliberate re-spelling (highlighted in the biomythography’s very title) or, as Elizabeth Alexander phrases it, “exercising her prerogative as maker of the body of the book and letting her spelled language bear her perspective on the world” (Alexander 1994, 704). Her spelling of the word also reflects her disillusionment with “America”, constructed through hegemonic cultural discourses and white supremacist notions of national belonging. This is particularly evident from Lorde’s recounting of a family trip to Washington, where they spend the day contemplating American history and admiring monuments. As they stop at a restaurant for some ice-cream, the waitress informs them that they are not welcome there. The family leaves, with Lorde’s parents “straight-backed and indignant” (Lorde 2003, 56). This incident delineates the traumatic erasure of black subjects’ presence and contributions in American history, constructed through mythologised past “victories”. Lorde ends that particular experience with the following lines:

“The waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice-cream that 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 for the whole rest of that trip and it wasn't much of a graduation present at all” (ibid.).

Lorde's repetition of “white” and its suffocating, overwhelming and sickening presence exposes the centrality of whiteness and its effects on the black psyche. In her discussion on whiteness, bell hooks argues that “critically examining the association of whiteness as terror in the Black imagination, deconstructing it, we both name racism's impact and help to break hold” (hooks 1999, 346). Lorde's description of suffocating whiteness performs precisely this function: it names the effects of racism and thus dismantles its dehumanising hold.<sup>6</sup> Lorde's exploration of whiteness is also found in her poem “Fishing the White Water” where she writes: “Men claim the easiest spots / stand knee-deep in calm dark water / where the trout is proven” (Lorde 1991, 57).<sup>7</sup> The very title of the poem is indicative, as it names the water as “white”, making the act of fishing difficult for those who do not “claim the easiest spots”. White men are relegated, or rather, entitled to the best positions, as they *claim* their socially legitimised positions of privilege, taken as a given, unchallenged and unquestioned. The white water corresponds to the suffocating white world Lorde depicts in *Zami*, where black women also “stake claim / in difficult places” (ibid.,58).

The final few chapters of *Zami* see Lorde cyclically return to the women who inspired her work. These meditations are underlined by an introspective examination of her feminist growth, shaped through numerous conflicts, hardships and heartbreaks she outlines in previous chapters. Affirming once again the transformative role of myth in creating spaces of contestation and transformation, *Zami* ends as Lorde merges with Afrekete, the Afrocentric figure of the Black Mother / Goddess, or the unifying force which transcends restrictions and reclaims “the poet”, as the source of inspiration and knowing

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6 For discussions on the centrality of whiteness in nationalist discourses, see Ahmed 2004; Wiegman 1999.

7 For a compelling exploration of Audre Lorde's poetry and trauma theory, see Obourn 2005. Obourn approaches Lorde's poetry through trauma theory “as a highly useful mode for thinking, representing, narrating things that cannot yet be contained within the historical unities and narrative continuities through which US society defines itself” (Obourn 2005, 221–222).

beyond Western masculinist discourses. The beginning of *Zami*, written as a prologue, contains a dedication to Afrekete and anticipates her women-centered ending: “*To the journeywoman pieces of myself. / becoming. / Afrekete*” (Lorde 2003, xv). Similarly, the Epilogue once again pays tribute to the women in Lorde’s life, forming her empowering and compelling matrilineal genealogy:

“*Ma-Liz, DeLois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda and Genevieve; MawuLisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become*” (ibid., 223).

The idea of *becoming* and Afrekete is echoed twice as *Zami* closes its narrative circle through an inspiring and energising feminist interconnectedness. Ending her biomythography with diverse women and merging with Afrekete underscores Lorde’s emphasis on differences and contestations as integral parts of feminist alliances and sisterhoods and necessary prerequisites for strategising against oppression. In her essay “A Burst of Light: Living With Cancer”, Lorde describes a dinner with lesbians of color in the following words: “The whole spread reflected a dreamlike fullness of women sharing color and food and warmth and light – *Zami come true*” (Lorde 1988, 51; emphasis added). It is precisely this vision of togetherness that frames the beginning, end and the affective core of *Zami*: diverse women sharing experiences, learning and growing, continually enriched by their differences - *women who live and work together as friends and lovers*.

Allowing for multiplicity, conflict and contestation, *Zami*’s feminism is figured as an ever-evolving process of growth and change. Lorde’s cyclical narrative, mythmaking and thematic fluidity indicate her rejection of conclusiveness or prescription in her feminist vision. In her discussion of diversity and institutional whiteness, Sara Ahmed remarks: “Recognising the unfinished nature of a social action can be thought of as a methodological challenge” (Ahmed 2012, 11). Lorde’s empowering feminist genealogy, consisting of her vexed, ambivalent and energising relationships with diverse women, exemplifies the ongoing nature of feminist activism and social transformation. Emphasising, spaces of contestation as well as their potential to empower and inspire creativity, *Zami* represents a visionary feminist text



which invites reflexivity regarding power structures, contradictions and differences inherent in feminist politics. For Lorde, feminist alliances are premised upon dismantling and de-centering whiteness and its oppressive reproduction in feminist politics, and thereby enabling a truly intersectional and transformational feminist activism built on multiplicities. For all of these reasons, *Zami* remains an important feminist text providing the tools for rebuilding, reimagining and reclaiming marginalised subjectivities across differences.

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Primljeno: 1.09.2014.

Izmenjeno: 12.10.2014.

Prihvaćeno: 18.10.2014.

## „Ljubav žena, nežna i okrutna”: feministički savezi i prostori sporova u *Zami: novo ispisivanje moga imena* Odri Lord

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**Sažetak:** Biomitografija Odri Lord *Zami: novo ispisivanje moga imena* politički je angažovano feminističko delo koje potvrđuje aktivizam i posvećenost društvenoj promeni autorke. U ovom tekstu čitam *Zami* kao upečatljivo i vizionarsko delo, relevantano za brojna savremena pitanja u vezi bele nadmoći, brisanja glasova crnih žena, intersekcionalnosti i mogućnosti feminističkih saveza koji uzimaju u obzir razlike. Oslanjajući se na razmatranja Viktorije Barous o ambivalenciji kao otporu prema fiksiranju i zatvaranju, u ovom radu ispitujem načine na koje Lord opisuje ženske mreže i saveze kao mesta sporova. Naglašavam načine na koje Lord koristi razliku i ambivalenciju da predstavi izazove u stvaranju feminističkih saveza i pozove na dijalog, angažman i društvenu akciju. Smatram da naglasak koji Lord stavlja na prihvatanje razlika počiva na rušenju i izmeštanju pojma/norme belosti i njegovog/njenog potčinjavajućeg reprodukovanja u feminističkoj politici. Upravo to omogućava uistinu intersekcionalni i transformišući feministički aktivizam zasnovan na mnoštvenosti i mnogostrukosti. Na kraju, tvrdim da se biomitografija opire zatvaranju i bilo kakvom propisu i da omogućava prostore za pregovaranja i kritičko promišljanje dozvoljavajući uzajamno priznanje, dijalog i rast.

**Ključne reči:** Odri Lord, afroamerički feminizam, savez, ambivalencija, razlika, belost, potčinjenost, intersekcionalnost, osporavanje