DRAWING STRENGTH FROM OUR MOTHERS: COLLECTIVE TRAUMA,
HEALING, AND THE WORKS OF AUDRE LORDE

by

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To God,

my parents, Gerald T. and Barbara H. Washington,

the memory of my dear friend, Kamau A. Bakari, 1976-2001,

and to the spirit of The Black Unicorn, Audre Lorde, in whose legacy I write.
# Table of Contents

Cover Page

Dedication ................................................................. i

Table of Contents .......................................................... ii

Chapter 1 Introduction ......................................................... 1

Chapter 2 "We Were Never Meant to Survive:" Audre Lorde and the Connections between Individual and Collective Trauma .......... 12

Chapter 3 Testify: Black Women’s Consciousness and the Power of Self-Definition ................................................................. 41

Chapter 4 'Becoming Afrekete: Audre Lorde and the Strategies of Mythmaking, Agency, and Healing ............................................. 66

Chapter 5 Conclusion ............................................................ 90

Appendix A ........................................................................... 93

Appendix B ........................................................................... 95

Bibliography ......................................................................... 96

Approval Page
Introduction—Chapter 1

What are the words that you do not have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you sicken and die of them, still in silence? Perhaps for some of you, I am the face of one of your fears. Because I am woman, because I am black, because I am lesbian, because I am myself, a black woman warrior poet doing my work, come to ask you, are you doing yours?

These words, spoken in 1977 by the late poet/writer Audre Lorde, bear witness to the artist’s personal survival and issue a call to black women everywhere to collectively speak out against the traumas and resulting silences that bind them. As she faced her own mortality that same year, Lorde came to a sense of urgent clarity about the need to break the cultural silences around her identity not only as a woman, but also as black and lesbian. Seven years later, she gives this account of her reasons for breaking her silence and publicly naming herself: "...first off I identified myself as a black feminist lesbian poet, although it felt unsafe...because if there was one other black feminist poet in isolation somewhere within the reach of my voice, I wanted her to know that she was not alone. I think a lot about Angela Weld Grimke, a black lesbian poet of the Harlem Renaissance, who is never identified as such, when she is mentioned at all...I often think of her dying alone in an apartment in New York City in 1958 while I was a young black lesbian struggling in isolation at Hunter College, and I think of what it could have meant in terms of sisterhood and survival for each of us to have known each other’s existence.”

In breaking her own silence and undoubtedly as one of the most widely read and anthologized black woman feminist lesbian poet, essayist, and theorist of all time, Audre

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2 Lorde was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy in 1977.
Lorde stands as an unrepentant revolutionary, a mythic prophetess at the threshold of an emerging black woman’s consciousness. Refusing confinement by any simple identity, Lorde writes as a black woman, a mother, a daughter, a lesbian, and a feminist. As a self-identified “poet of difference,” Lorde participates in a number of apparently separate worlds that refuse to be contained within any single group of location. Instead, she moves within, between, and among the specialized worlds of academia and publishing; the private spaces of family and friends; the politicized communities of African-Americans; and the overlapping yet distinctive worlds of feminists, lesbian and gay, and American women of color. Thus at the intersection of the multiple oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class, Audre Lorde affirms her own speaking voice and summons other black women’s voices from silence.

As a collective group, silence regarding black women’s sexuality has been enforced through a history of institutional violence and oppression. At the same time, silence of black women themselves has also been enforced, not merely from the outside, but from within the individual woman herself. This is because, for the survivor of a traumatic event, silence is not simply a command from the other but the very condition of the possibility of survival. In other words, the individual survives precisely because she does not consciously experience the event in a narrative way, but only through flashbacks and dreams, and therefore, she cannot speak of it, she cannot tell the story. How then, does Lorde move from this state of silence to speech?

4 Because Audre Lorde defined herself as a “black lesbian feminist” among many other identities, the term “feminist” will be used for the intellectual standpoint discussed here and throughout this study.
5 Lorde, Sister Outsider. 12.
Although I will further examine the historical and psychological implications of black female silences in the next chapter, I want to suggest that the answer to Lorde’s use of the agency of speech lies partly in the work of black feminist lesbians who, in the late 1970’s, provided the context in which these silences could begin to be broken. In April 1977, the Combahee River Collective wrote “A Black Feminist Statement” in which they state, “Our politics evolve from a healthy love of ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.” This can be seen as the background and the precursor to Lorde’s “erotic.” And in October 1977, Barbara Smith’s “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” was published, which was the first “writing about black women writers from any perspective at all.” While Smith writes of the “overwhelming” task of breaking “such a massive silence” in the field of literary criticism, she does note work being done in literature, including Audre Lorde’s first three volumes of poetry. The essay concludes with a call that Audre Lorde would soon answer:

I finally want to express how much easier both my waking and my sleeping hours would be if there were one book in existence that could tell me something specific about my life. One book based in black feminist and black lesbian experience, fiction or non-fiction. Just one work to reflect the reality that I and the black women whom I love are trying to create. When such a book exists then each of us will not only know better how to live, but how to dream (italics mine).

Lorde’s entire life work can be read as an attempt to learn and to teach how to dream. How do we learn to dream, how do we learn to envision, to imagine a better future? The answer lies in learning how to remember the pasts that we would rather forget, to

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9 Smith, 5.
remember the dreams that haunt us, and to speak of the dreams that scare us silent. Lorde teaches us that learning to dream the future is only possible by learning to speak through the silence of the past. Lorde’s concern with silences shows us that paradoxically it is only through the very act of speech that there is any hope for the survivor.

However, where does the dream begin for Audre Lorde? Lorde’s own experience is skillfully deconstructed in her groundbreaking biomythography entitled Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982). In Zami Lorde gives a narrative of her life, experienced as a series of joys and sorrows. Born Audrey Geraldine Lorde on February 18, 1934 in New York City to Grenadian immigrant parents, Lorde’s early experiences are key to her evolution as poet and thinker. As a child she had difficulty learning to talk; indeed, she did not speak until she was five, and then only in a limited way. Lorde went to Catholic schools in New York, where she learned early how it felt to be a “sister outsider” in a predominantly white society. More disheartening for Lorde was the emotional absence of her mother and why she, after a certain point in her life, went back to her childhood memories of her mother because of her strict methods of education. In Zami Lorde speaks frankly about the emotional inadequacy of her mother: “My mother bore me into life as if etching an angry message into sand...She never talked about color...And she disarmed me with her silences...”11 From her mother, who used silence to control, Lorde first learned the importance of speech. More precisely, her mother’s strategic silences demonstrated language’s double-edged power, in both its restrictive and liberating potential. Lorde broke through this barrier when she left home for Hunter College in 1951. She also went for a year in 1954 to the University of Mexico; there for the first

10 Smith, 20.
time she began to speak about the silences that surrounded her childhood. She did not graduate from Hunter until 1959, because in order to support herself she had to work as an x-ray technician and in a factory, among other occupations. In 1961, she earned an M.A in library science from Columbia University. She worked as a librarian in New York City, married, had two children—a daughter and a son—and divorced her husband in 1970.12

Having written poetry early in her life, a crucial experience for Lorde during the 1960's was her time as poet-in-residence at Tougaloo College in Mississippi. There, during the height of black cultural nationalism, she finished her first volume of poetry, The First Cities (1970). This book was innovative for the times because, as black nationalist critic Dudley Randall wrote, Lorde “does not wave a black flag, but her blackness is there, implicit to the bone.”13 Her second collection, Cables to Rage (1970), explored marital love and betrayal, child rearing, and included her first explicit reference to her own homosexuality.14

For Lorde, the 1970's were a period of racial, social, sexual, and poetical awakening. Like many other American outsiders, Lorde attempted to integrate into American society, but soon became aware of her situation of “otherness” as a black woman who wanted to write and publish poetry as a lesbian. During this period, Lorde published most of the poetry for which she is best known—in all, five volumes: From a Land Where Other People Live (1973), which was nominated for the National Book Award; The New York

13 Ibid, 2203.
14 Ibid, 2203.
Head Shop and Museum (1974), considered by critics as her most radical volume; Between Ourselves, a chapbook of her most quoted poem, “Coal” (1976); and The Black Unicorn (1978), in which she creates and uses African mythology, especially in relation to women. With various speeches and essays available in the 1970’s and throughout the 1980’s via small presses and alternative journals, Lorde, a “poet of difference” and activism, became one of the founders of the Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, a small feminist publishing house, in 1979. Although she struggled with breast cancer in the 1980’s, she continued to publish essays and prose, most notably The Cancer Journals (1980), the first exploration by a black lesbian feminist woman of her experience with the disease. A collection of essays and journal entries, A Burst of Light (1988) centers on Lorde’s struggle with cancer, as she faced the meaning of her probable death. Between these two volumes, Lorde published her biomythography, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), in which she combined the literary genres of autobiography, fiction, myth, and poetry. Zami is also the first account of a black lesbian growing up in homophobic America.15 As Lorde continued to struggle with breast cancer in the early 1990’s, she retired to St. Croix on the Virgin Islands, where she, together with her friend and partner, Gloria I. Joseph, initiated the Women’s Coalition and continued to support feminist causes overseas, such as SISA (Sisterhood in Support of Sisters in South Africa) and CAFRA (Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action).

Lorde’s life was artfully shaped by her relationship to mainstream society and she left her indelible imprint on those who knew her. Recognition of this came when she was named Poet Laureate of New York State from 1991 to 1993. Audre Lorde, later named

15 Ibid, 2203.
Gambia Adisa (or “warrior,” “she who makes her meaning known”) died of cancer on November 17, 1992. Numerous obituaries from all over the world, the memorial service held at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, five honorary doctoral degrees, and her fifteen volumes of poetry and prose testify that, in Gloria I. Joseph’s words she “cannot be silenced, for Audre Lorde has imprinted upon the lives of all who knew her work.”¹⁶ In her teaching and life as well as throughout her prose and poetry, she was a radical feminist, an outspoken lesbian, and a political activist. She was deeply connected to the present and past situation of black women and saw her own identity deeply rooted in this community. One of the underlying themes in her work is the representation or (re)creation of her self within a framework of multiple identities. To find or present her “self” was not only a purpose but also a means to overcome trauma and the more generalized feeling of being marginalized in a white, male, and heterosexual society. Audre Lorde used her writing as personal and political therapy in which she spoke about herself and others. Even though “Audre Lorde would often introduce herself as a black, feminist, lesbian, poet, mother, warrior,” she would add that “however accurate these words may be, we know that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and so being Audre Lorde cannot be defined by a list of words.”¹⁷

With Audre Lorde, the spectrum of identity is further fragmented with the additional ethnic dimension, which adds to but melts with the issues of class, gender, and sexuality. One of the present difficulties in writing criticism on Lorde’s work (and with this particular study as well) is the widespread marginalization of Lorde’s identities, as many

¹⁷ Ibid.
critics both black and white tend to forego the implications of her multiplicative identity
and place her within their own limited and often fragmentary frameworks. I was often
distressed in my own search of criticism on this topic, as source after source I
encountered dealt not with the multiple aspects of Lorde's identity, but instead engaged
Lorde as a woman who was lesbian, black, feminist, a child of immigrant parents, or a
cancer survivor. To date, there has not been enough sufficient critical attention to the
multiple aspects of Lorde's identity, and, when these aspects are engaged, critics often
fail to place these elements within a historical context. In this study, I will attempt to
connect the void left by empty historical references in Lorde's critical canon with their
proper contexts and integrate new analyses of her work therein to reveal how black
women such as Audre Lorde translated their position as a multiple outsider in American
society into speech and the affirmative creation of a new self.

In addition to presenting the ways that poetry allows us to further explore the multiple
identities of black women, this study will break new ground in other ways as well.
Clearly, it breaks the critical silence about the traumatic aspect of Lorde's work. While
Lorde's work has received much critical attention over the years, there has been complete
silence about her narratives of sexual abuse in her autobiography. My reading of
Lorde's work fills in three gaps by addressing Lorde's multiple identity, her work's
historical context, and her experiences of sexual abuse.

This first section of this study builds its structure around two major questions,
answered through readings of Lorde's work. These two questions are: What is the
trauma for black women in America? What long-lasting effects do the multiple and

18 Steele, 5.
intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender (and in Lorde's case, sexuality) have on black women? In the first question, I will not be searching for an event or a cause but rather exploring the gaps in the knowledge that provide clues to a traumatic event, a threat to bodily and psychic survival. In Chapter 2, "We Were Never Meant to Survive": Audre Lorde and the Connections Between Individual and Collective Trauma," I take insights about individual trauma and turn toward an examination of intergenerational trauma, the effects of which are passed down through generations. I will show how Audre Lorde's work follows in the tradition of other black woman writers, such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Angela Davis, Deborah Gray White, and Darlene Clark Hine among others, who address the links between stereotypical imagery (such as Mammy's and Jezebels), the history of silence about black women's sexuality, and the history of slavery in America.19 Lorde's work shows how these traumatic histories continue to affect black women both individually and collectively.

The following section of this study will set out to answer another set of questions that are necessary to explore after an individual or a communal body has survived a traumatic event—the possibility of healing. In the case of black women's collective and individual silences and trauma: How did black women endure? How was survival possible? As we witness to black women's shared past of trauma, we open the possibility of allowing oneself to be healed from the past through a healing relationship with the present. Thus, this section will move toward an examination of how traumatic reconstructions of the past are subsequently shared with another through speech—the process of testimony, or witnessing. Here I will discuss the formation of a black female double consciousness and

the roots of its self-definition, which was crucial in Lorde’s later interactive naming of the multiple aspects of her identity. Lorde’s witnessing took place within the context of the feminist and civil rights movements, which gave her the societal support necessary to make her entire life’s work a project of survival and healing. In “Testify: Black Women’s Consciousness and the Power of Self Definition,” I suggest an alternative, doubly-voiced reading of her widely anthologized poem “Coal” as a method of coming to voice and creating a radical new agenda for black women.

In the final section of this paper, I would like to further examine Lorde’s strategies for breaking and healing traumatic silences, with a focus on the historical implications of the split between black women’s sexuality and spirituality. Through Lorde’s treatment of the themes of sexuality and spirituality in her essay “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” and in her 1982 biomythography Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, in this section I set out to explore the questions: What is Lorde’s strategy for individual and collective healing? How was Lorde’s healing possible? In “Becoming Afrekete: Audre Lorde and the Strategies of Mythmaking, Agency, and Healing” I discuss the historical split between sexuality and spirituality in the collective psyche of black women through negative imagery and present how Lorde’s writing offers a vision for healing this split through a reclamation of history and myth in Zami. In this chapter I will examine the ways in which Lorde’s essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” can be read as a keynote to her vision of the connection between sexuality and spirituality, and how this essay resonates throughout her work and is given its full dramatization in the final scenes of Zami, through the figure of Afrekete.

1985.
It is my hope that these readings may demonstrate that we are not victims of our oppressors, but that all of us inherit the legacies of a history of trauma and violence. In this study I would like to present this history as both a problem and a solution, as my reading of Audre Lorde illustrates. History is a problem that when it is not remembered and worked through the problems are repeated and inflict further violence on those who forget. History may offer solutions if we remember, testify, and mourn our traumatic collective past. The recognition of the problem of memory—that our seemingly most personal, individual memories are not only connected to our collective past but are also shaped by it—is the necessary first step toward our being able to say that, indeed, we heal from memory. The tremendous hope of Audre Lorde’s legacy and vision, then, comes from her courage in remembering the enormous horror of her past. To create from horror and to regain the power of hope: these are the promises that arise when we bear collective witness to the strength of our own survival.
Chapter 2: ‘We Were Never Meant to Survive’: Audre Lorde and the Connections between Individual and Collective Trauma

Audre Lorde, was, as she described herself, “a black woman warrior poet” who lived from 1934 until her death in 1992, after a 14-year struggle with breast and liver cancer. Lorde was, in many ways, a survivor who worked tirelessly to end the many silences in black women’s history. As we examine the connections between individual and collective experiences of trauma in Audre Lorde’s life and work, we will see that it is the context of a collective history that makes the critical difference in reading an individual’s life and work. At the individual level we know that “unless childhood trauma is resolved through reparative experiences, including psychotherapy, components of the trauma will be incorporated into the pattern of family life in the next generation.”\(^\text{20}\) At the collective level, it is evident that the links between the history of silence about black women’s sexuality and the history of slavery continue to mar the consciousness of succeeding generations of mothers and daughters. In this chapter, I will explore how both a collective silence about black women and an individual silence within black women themselves are the results of traumatic histories. I will trace the historical roots of these silences and show how Lorde’s work both follows from and reacts to this legacy in black women’s history. To date, criticism on Audre Lorde has not usually been done with sufficient attention to the multiple aspects of Lorde’s existence. In Lorde’s case, it is apparent that the trope of race adds to the enormous complexity of the ever-present

realities of gender, class, and sexuality. The matrix of intersecting oppressions further complicate the question of historical context, as well as assures the textual marginalization of one or more of these multiple identities. For the most part, certain aspects of Lorde’s writing are highlighted, and others left in shadows while the critic focuses on whatever aspect or aspects of Lorde’s identity he or she wishes: as a woman who is lesbian, feminist, black, the child of immigrant parents, or a cancer survivor. Even critics who engage with the multiple aspects of Lorde’s self, however, they do not explicitly connect these elements with their historical contexts. A minimal number of critics place Lorde’s work in a historical context. Taking its lead from the work of black women themselves, my reading of Lorde’s work is founded upon the importance of recognizing the multiple aspects of the black women’s work and placing the work in historical context, both within dominant tradition and within the tradition of black women’s thought itself. As Maria P.P. Root writes of the necessity for historical contextualization: “similarly to American historians’ neglect to record the atrocities suffered by ethnic minority groups of people, psychiatry’s and psychology’s theoretical foundations have limited contexts and tend to be ahistorical, in a sociopolitical sense, making invisible the experiences of large segments of the population who have been

historically oppressed." To acknowledge the multiplicity of black women's existence and to fit this existence into its history and tradition is to work against the historical silencing of black women.

As Bruno Bettelheim has written, "What cannot be talked about cannot be put to rest; and if it is not, the wounds continue to fester from generation to generation." This chapter will focus primarily upon the historical causes of "what cannot be talked about:" the silence imposed upon black women from the outside, the silence imposed from within, and the possibilities of ending silence. I will examine how a history of oppression engenders a collective silence, and how a history of trauma engenders an individual silence, a silence at the heart of the identity of the individual. Lorde's work shows how these silences are connected and how it is fundamental to one's survival to end the silences. As an example of how Lorde's poetry witnesses to the silence, let us examine the poem, "A Litany to Survival," from 1978.

We can read this poem as a call to witnessing to trauma, the experience of knowing "we were never meant to survive," which is repeated twice in the poem. Until the event is told, the silence is a fear that invades all aspects of the survivor's life, as in Lorde's poem. A silent survivor who has not told her story is one whose silence contaminates her life, distorts her memory, makes it—the memory, the life—evil. This can manifest itself in various ways, such as feeling a lack of relation to others, feeling a general sense of

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24 Steele. 29.
25 Refer to Appendix A, pg 93.
lack, feeling one has a heart of stone, or finally, feeling that one is responsible for the atrocities one survived.

In Lorde’s poem, we see the effects of trauma (which is here not only personal but also collective as in the history of African Americans): living both inward and outward, before and after, as the trauma shifts the inside and the outside, both spatially and temporally, so that the event becomes the ever-present now within the survivor. We also see the effects of silence: the fear that leads to lack: lack of love, lack of food, lack of nurturance. It is a fear that becomes generalized, projected onto the world as the speaker fears even the sun will not rise again. It is a fear that perpetuates the silence unless we “speak/remembering”: speak our remembering, and “speak/remembering/ we were never meant to survive”: speak the stories of what threatened, and continues to threaten, one’s survival.27

This silence, this aloneness, is ended by speaking to a listener, one who cares enough to, together with witness, participate in the reliving of the event. In her poems, then, Lorde invites readers to witness to the truth of the destruction that has been survived. For Audre Lorde, ending silence is the first and most important step in ending both the political as well as the psychological oppression of black women. Lorde provides a model for coming to speech—even in the face of fear, even in the face of fatigue, even in the absence of memory, even in the absence of feeling.

27 Lines 42-44.
Silence from without: the history of black women’s trauma

One might wonder about the significance of the silence of Lorde’s critics regarding black women’s history. Their silence is connected to a corresponding silence regarding black women’s sexuality. Both of these silences—the silence about black women’s history and the silence in black women’s history—point to the profound connection in history between black people’s sexuality and racism in America. During slavery, black women’s sexuality was owned and used by white slave owners in two main ways: for the reproduction of wealth and labor through enforced pregnancies, and for the depositing of white men’s desire in a system where white women were seen as chaste under the “cult of true womanhood.”

Thus, enforced mating, pregnancy, childbearing, and rape were routine experiences for black women under slavery. As scholar Deborah Gray White writes:

Female slave bondage was not better or worse, or more or less severe, than male bondage, but it was different. From the beginning of a woman’s enslavement she had to cope with sexual abuse, abuse made legitimate by the conventional wisdom that black women were promiscuous Jezebels. Work assignments also structured female slave life so that women were more confined to the boundaries of the plantation than were men. The most important reason for the difference between male and female bondage, however, was the slave women’s childbearing and childcare responsibilities. These affected the female slave’s pattern of resistance and figured prominently in her general health.

Historian Winthrop D. Jordan also writes on the everyday realities of rape and sexual abuse in the lives of black women under slavery:

White men commonly, almost customarily, took Negro women to bed with little pretense of concealing the fact…and Negro concubinage was an integral part of

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28 Steele, 29.
slave life, tightly interwoven into the social fabric...Sexually, as well as in every other way, Negroes were utterly subordinated. White men extended their dominance over their Negroes to the bed, where the sex act itself served as the ritualistic re-enactment of the daily pattern of social dominance.\textsuperscript{31}

Even after slavery ended, the Reconstruction prohibition of societal relations between whites and blacks and the systematic lynching of black men, women, and children contributed to the continuation of "the daily pattern of social dominance."

As the only black woman to address frankly the issue of sexuality in her time, Ida B. Wells-Barnett believed that "existence was a phenomenon in which belief and action could not be separated," and to this end, Wells-Barnett addresses lynching as a feminist issue in 1900 in her essay, "Lynch Law in America."\textsuperscript{32} Wells-Barnett addresses lynching as an institutional threat to the black community, a threat that covers over the reality of sexual violence of white men upon black women. As a way of upholding the cult of true womanhood, the law held that "no white woman shall be compelled to testify to the investigation of a court of law."\textsuperscript{33} Thus whenever white women claimed sexual assault, black men (and the women and children who refused to tell white mobs the location of their relatives) were lynched routinely in America. Underlying this practice, argues Wells-Barnett, is the truth of the matter: "the Negro has suffered far more from the commission of this crime against the women of his race by white men than the white race has ever suffered through his crimes."\textsuperscript{34} Here Wells-Barnett alludes to the history of

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid}, 72.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid}, 74.
sexual exploitation and rape of black women by white men both during and after slavery. This history resulted in the repression and silence surrounding black women’s sexuality.

In a pattern typical of such a history of oppression, the “true” story of this event is left behind and replaced by an “official” story that obscures the violence, the force of the history.\textsuperscript{35} Angela Davis’ essay from 1971, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” attempts to refute the “official” story by reading through the silence about black women’s lives under slavery.\textsuperscript{36} Davis refutes the Moynihan Report, which argues that black women “assented to slavery” by being “related to the slaveholding class as collaborator,” as one example of an “official” story of black women under slavery.\textsuperscript{37} By paying attention to this silence in the “official” story, Davis is able to reconstruct the “true” story, a story that documents the violence surrounding black women’s sexuality under slavery: “she had to surrender her child-bearing to alien and predatory economic interests;” she was subjected to “the slave master’s sexual domination;” and she was ultimately imperiled by the most elemental form of terrorism distinctly suited for the female: rape.\textsuperscript{38} As remarkable as this essay was—it was the first such attempt to read through the silences of black women’s history—because it was written while Davis was in prison, it did not gain a wide audience. The nation—in 1971—was quite simply resistant to giving up its belief in the “official” history of black women under slavery.

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid}, 201.
The silence surrounding the history of violence regarding black women’s sexuality was only recently given its proper theoretical context in Darlene Clark Hine’s 1989 essay, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance.” Hine argues that because of the historical threat of rape and sexual violence toward black women, a culture of dissemblance has developed in which black women keep matters of sexuality silent and private so as not to be abused by the larger society that would construct it in other, more harmful, ways. In order to protect themselves, black women “created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually suppressed the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors,” and often, I would add, from themselves. As a result, “stereotypes, negative images, and debilitating assumptions filled the space left empty due to inadequate and erroneous information about the true contributions, capabilities, and identities of black women.” It is for this reason that the stereotyped dichotomies of Mammy and Jezebel, representing the split between spirituality and sexuality, so persistently haunt the forms of subjectivity for black women in America.

The dual dichotomy of Mammy and Jezebel

Where does the Mammy and Jezebel paradigm originate? To understand the roots of the historical split between sexuality and spirituality in the collective black female psyche, one must first explore the uniqueness of the black female’s position within American

38 Ibid, 203.
40 White, Deborah G. Aren’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South. New
society. The black woman's extraordinary situation is that she stands at a crossroads of two of the most well-developed ideologics in America, that regarding women and that regarding the Negro. Although much of the race and sex ideology that exists in America has its roots in history that is older than the nation, it was during the slavery era that the ideas were molded into a peculiarly homegrown American mythology.41 White males have been the primary beneficiary of both sets of myths which contain common elements in that both blacks and women are characterized as infantile, irresponsible, and promiscuous. Both blacks and women generally have been dependent politically and economically upon white men. Both groups are consigned to roles that are subservient, both groups have shared a relationship of powerlessness in relation to white males, and both groups have been treated as outsiders and inferiors.

The black woman's position at the nexus of America's sex and race mythology has made it most difficult for her to escape it altogether. Black men can be rescued from the myth of the Negro, as this seems to have been one of the aims of the historical scholarship in the 1970's. They can be identified with things masculine, aggressive, and dominant. White women, as part of the dominant racial group, have to defy the myth of woman, a difficult, though not impossible task. The impossible task confronts the black woman. If she is rescued from the myth of the Negro, the myth of woman traps her. If she escapes the myth of woman, the myth of the Negro still ensnares her. Since the myth of woman and the myth of Negro are similar, to extract her from one gives the appearance of freeing her from both. Thus, she gains none of the deference that results from being perceived as weak, and she gains none of the advantages that come with being a white

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male. To be so “free” attracts the envy of black males and white females. Being thus exposed to their envy she has often become their victim.\textsuperscript{42}

In antebellum America, the general silences regarding black female sexuality as well as the female slave’s chattel status, sex, and race status combined to create a complicated set of myths about black womanhood. One of the most prevalent images was a person governed almost entirely by her libido, a Jezebel character. In every way Jezebel was the counter-image of the mid-nineteenth century ideal of the proper Victorian lady. She did not lead men and children to God; piety was foreign to her. She saw no advantage in prudence and domesticity ranked last in importance before matters of the flesh. How white Americans came to think of black women as sensual beings has to do with the impressions formed during their initial contact with Africans and with the ideas that white men had about women in general. Unaccustomed to the requirements of a tropical climate, Europeans mistook semi-nudity for lewdness. Similarly, they misinterpreted African cultural traditions, so that polygamy was attributed to the Africans uncontrolled lust, tribal dances were likened to public orgies, and African religions lost the sacredness that had sustained generations of ancestral worshippers.\textsuperscript{43}

As troubling as the Jezebel image was for black women, whites were hardly of one mind concerning their perceptions of her within antebellum slave society. When forced to rationalize the positioning of the Jezebel character many whites quickly retreated and revised their thinking. They did not necessarily abandon Jezebel nor their rationalizations of her. Rather many whites were able to embrace two images of black women

\textsuperscript{41} White, 27.
\textsuperscript{42} White, 28.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 30.
simultaneously and to switch from one to the other depending on the context of their thought. On one hand there was the woman obsessed with matters of the flesh, and on the other was the asexual woman. One was carnal, the other maternal. One was Jezebel, the other a Mammy.

Most of what we know about Mammy comes from memoirs written after the Civil War. The descriptions are written with a certainty and definitiveness that seem to defy question. According to these accounts, Mammy was the woman who could do anything, and do it better than anyone else. Because of her expertise in all domestic matters, she was the premier house servant and all others her subordinates. She was completely dedicated to the white family, especially to the children of that family. She also served as a friend and advisor. She was, in short, surrogate mistress and mother. As advisor and confidante, surrogate mistress and mother, as one who was tough, diplomatic, efficient, and resourceful, Mammy was not merely a female slave housekeeper who identified more with her master's family than her fellow slaves. The image of Mammy taking care of the children, performing and supervising household chores, lending an ear and offering advice to master, mistress, and white children, was in keeping with the maternal or Victorian ideal of womanhood prevalent in nineteenth century America.

In antebellum America, ideas about women went hand in hand with ideas on race. Women and blacks were the foundation on which Southern white males built their patriarchal regime. If blacks and women conspired to be other than what white males wanted them to be, the regime would topple. Mammy was, thus, the perfect image for Southerners. As the personification of the ideal slave and the ideal woman, Mammy was a consummate symbol of the patriarchal tradition. She was not just a product of the
“cultural uplift” theory, she was also a product of the forces that in the South raised motherhood to sainthood. As part of the slave tradition, and as part of the cult of domesticity, Mammy was the centerpiece of the white perception of a perfectly organized Southern society.

Thus, while the image of Jezebel excused miscegenation, the sexual exploitation of black women, and the mulatto population, the opposing dichotomy of the Mammy image helped to endorse the service of black women in white households. As with the exigencies of any myth, together Jezebel and Mammy did a lot of explaining and soothed many a trouble conscience. Coupled with the silence surrounding black female sexuality, both of these images have prevailed in the psychic imagination of both blacks and whites well into the 21st century.\(^4^4\)

The sexual politics of black womanhood

Scholarly critiques have approached Black women’s sexuality through its own set of assumptions. Within black intellectual communities generally and black studies scholarship in particular, black women’s sexuality is either ignored or included primarily in relation to African-American men’s issues. In black critical contexts where black women struggle to get gender oppression recognized as important, theoretical analyses of black sexuality remain sparse.\(^4^5\) Women’s studies scholarship demonstrates an inclination for placing black women in comparative frameworks. Interested in building coalitions among women across the boundaries of race, theorists typically add black

\(^{44}\) White, 47.

women into preexisting frameworks, often to illustrate how black women “have it worse.” Everyone has spoken for black women, making it difficult for us to speak for ourselves.⁴⁶

As Evelyn Hammonds points out, “Black women’s sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as a ‘void’ or empty space that is simultaneously ever-visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women’s bodies are already colonized.”⁴⁷ In response to this portrayal, Black women have been silent. One important factor that contributes to these long-standing silences both among African-American women and within Black feminist thought lies in Black women’s lack of access to positions of power in American social institutions. Those who control the schools, news media, churches, and government suppress Black women’s collective voice. Dominant groups are the ones who construct Black women as “the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of black women as the unvoiced, unseen—everything that is not white.”⁴⁸

However, suppression does not fully explain African-American women’s persistent silences about sexuality. Black American women have been discouraged from analyzing and speaking out about a host of topics. In response, Paula Giddings identifies another important factor, namely, the “last taboo” of disclosing “not only a gender but a sexual discourse, unmediated by the question of racism.”⁴⁹ Within this taboo, to talk of white

⁴⁶ Collins, 124.
⁴⁸ Hammonds, 171.
racist constructions of black women's sexuality is acceptable. But developing analyses of sexuality that implicate black men is not—it violates norms of racial solidarity that counsel black women to always put their own needs second. Even within these racial boundaries, some topics are more acceptable than others—white men’s rape of black women during slavery can be discussed while black men’s rape of black women today cannot. In “Remembering Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas: What Really Happened When One Black Woman Spoke Out,” Nellie McKay explains why black women have remained silent concerning issues of sexuality:

In all of their lives in America...black women have felt torn between the loyalties that bind them to race on one hand, and sex on the other. Choosing one or the other, of course, means taking sides against the self, yet they have almost always chosen race over the other: a sacrifice of their self-hood as women and of full humanity, in favor of the race.\(^5^0\)

“Taking sides against the self” requires that certain elements of Black women’s sexuality can be examined, namely, those that do not challenge a race discourse that historically has privileged the experiences of black men. The cost is that the other elements remain completely off-limits. Rape, incest, misogyny in black cultural practices, and other painful topics that might implicate black men thus remain taboo.\(^5^1\)

Yet another factor influencing black women’s silences concerns the potential benefits of remaining silent. Another clarifying statement for example, was during the early twentieth century club movement, white women were much more successful in advancing analyses of intraracial gender relations and sexuality than were black women. In a


\(^{51}\) Collins, 124.
context of virulent racism, public disclosure could leave black men and women
vulnerable to increased sexual violence at the hands of white men. White women who
forwarded a gendered analysis faced no such fears. In situations such as these, where
regulating black women’s bodies benefited systems of race, class, and gender alike,
protecting the safe spaces for black women’s self definitions often required public
silences about seemingly taboo topics. This secrecy was especially important within an
American culture that routinely accused black women of being sexually immoral,
promiscuous jezabels. In a climate where one’s sexuality is on public display, holding
fast to privacy and trying to shut the closet door seems preeminent. Darlene Clark Hine
refers to this strategy as a culture of dissemblance, one where black women appeared
outgoing and public, while using this facade to hide a secret world within. As Hine
suggests, “only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary
black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own
in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle.”

52 In contexts of violence
where internal self-censorship was seen as protection, silence made sense.

The convergence of all of these factors—the suppression of black women’s voice by
dominant groups, black women’s struggles to work within the confines of norms of racial
solidarity, and the seeming protections offered by a culture of dissemblance—influences
yet another factor for shaping patterns of silence. In general, black women have been
reluctant to acknowledge the valuable contributions of black lesbian feminist theory in
reconceptualizing black women’s sexuality. Since the early 1980’s, black lesbian
theorists and activists have identified homophobia and the toll it takes on black women as

52 Hine, 382.
an important topic for black feminist thought. “The oppression that affects black gay people, female and male, is pervasive, constant, and not abstract. Some of us die from it,” argues Barbara Smith. 

Despite the increasing visibility of black lesbians as parents, as academics, and as activists, African-Americans have tried to ignore homosexuality in general and have avoided serious analysis of homophobia within African-American communities.

Within the context of homophobia, black lesbian theories about sexuality have also been marginalized, albeit in different ways, in both black intellectual communities and women’s studies scholarship. As a result, black feminist thought has not yet taken full advantage of this important source of black feminist theory. As a group, heterosexual black women have been strangely silent on the issue of black lesbianism. Barbara Smith suggests one compelling reason: “Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining ‘straightness’ is our last resort.”

In the same way that white feminists identify with their victimization as women yet ignore the privilege that racism grants them, and that black men decry racism yet see sexism as being less objectionable, heterosexual black women may perceive their own race and gender oppression yet victimize lesbians, gays, and bisexuals. Barbara Smith raises a critical point that can be best seen through the outsider-within standpoint available to black lesbians—namely, that

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intersecting oppressions of sexuality, race, gender, and class produce neither absolute oppressors nor pure victims.\(^{55}\)

**In love and trouble: the conspiracy of silence**

Until recently, many heterosexual black men have remained either unable to challenge controlling images of black masculinity or have been unwilling to try. Sadly, believing in dominant notions of black masculinity and black femininity, they engage in controlling behaviors that often go unrecognized as such. Black men encounter contradictory expectations concerning black manhood. On one hand, black men have been constructed as sexually violent rapists, as brutes, and as irresponsible boys who fail to marry the mothers of their children. Whereas black men under slavery knew that they were not these things, their powerlessness denied them the trappings of manhood as defined by white propertied men.\(^{56}\) Emancipation brought with it black male outrage at the treatment of black women under slavery. A good deal of black male energy went into protecting black women from both economic and sexual exploitation. Given this history, efforts by black men to protect black women became valued. Many black women want protection. Sonsyrea Tate, who was raised within the Nation of Islam, describes how protected she felt within the Nation: “While I was growing up, the Fruit of Islam, the security unit of the Nation of Islam, had made me, a small black child, feel safer than I felt at any other time in America.”\(^{57}\)

\(^{55}\) Collins, 126.

\(^{56}\) Collins, 156.

Barbara Omolade argues that “protecting black women was the most significant measure of black manhood and the central aspect of black male patriarchy.”58 If Omolade is correct, then this important choice to protect black women, for many men, became connected to ideologies of black masculinity in such a way that black manhood became dependent on black women’s willingness to accept protection.59 Within this version of masculinity, a slippery slope emerges between protecting black women and controlling them. This control is often masked, all in defense of widespread beliefs that black men must be in charge in order to regain their lost manhood. As Paula Giddings points out, “It is men, not women, who control the sociosexual and professional relationships in the black community. Among other notions that must be dispensed with is the weak female/strong male patriarchal paradigm that clouds so much of our thinking about ourselves.”60

This general climate fosters a situation where some black women feel that they must subordinate their needs to those of black men in order to help black men regain and retain their manhood. Yet at the same time, black women’s daily struggles for survival encourage patterns of self-reliance and self-valuation that benefit not just black women, but men and children as well. As Barbara Omolade points out, “A black woman could not be completely controlled and defined by her own men, for she had already learned to manage and resist the advances of white men.”61 Tensions characterizing black women’s necessary self-reliance joined with their bona fide need for protection, as well as those

59 It is important to note that the post-Reconstruction improvements in the economic status of black men often made this “protection” highly selectable. See Omolade’s The Rising Song of African American Women. New York: Routledge, 13-19.
60 Giddings, Paula. 463.
characterizing black men’s desire to protect black women juxtaposed to their admiration and resentment of black women’s assertiveness and independence, result in a complicated love and trouble tradition.

Failure to challenge an overall climate that not only defines black masculinity in terms of black men’s ability to “own” and “control” their women, and black femininity in terms of black women’s ability to help black men feel like men, can foster black women’s abuse. Black men who feel that they cannot be men unless they are in charge can be highly threatened by assertive black women, especially those in their own households. In her 1982 novel *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker takes a fundamental role in exposing this reality with her portrayal of Mister, a black man who abuses his wife, Celie, explores the coexistence of love and trouble in black communities generally, and in black men specifically:

> At the root of the denial of easily observable and heavily documented sexist brutality in the black community—the assertion that black men don’t act like Mister, and if they do, they’re justified by the pressure they’re under as black men in a white society—is our deep, painful refusal to accept the fact that we are not only the descendants of slaves, but we are also the descendants of slave owners. And that just as we have had to struggle to rid ourselves of slavish behaviors we must as ruthlessly eradicate any desire to be mistress or “master.”

Those black men who wish to become “master” by fulfilling traditional definitions of masculinity—white, prosperous, and in charge—and who are blocked from doing so can become dangerous to those closest to them.  

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Rethinking relationships such as these has garnered increasing attention in black feminist thought. Refusing to reduce black men's abuse to individualistic, psychic flaws, black feminist analyses are characterized by careful attention to how intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality provide the backdrop for black heterosexual love relationships. Angela Davis contends, "We cannot grasp the true nature of sexual assault without situating it within its larger sociopolitical context."64 Author Gayl Jones concurs: "It is important for me to clarify...relationships in situation, rather than to have some theory of the way men are with women."65 In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pecola Breedlove is a study in emotional abuse. Morrison portrays the internalized oppression that can affect a child who experiences daily assaults on her sense of self. Pecola's family is the immediate source of her pain, but Morrison also exposes the role of the larger community in condoning Pecola's victimization. In her choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*, Ntozake Shange (1975) creates the character Beau Willie Brown, a man who abuses his lover, Crystal, and who kills their two young children. Rather than blaming Beau Willie Brown as the source of Crystal's oppression, Shange considers how the situation of "no air"—in this case, the lack of opportunities for both individuals—stifles the humanity of both Crystal and Beau Willie Brown.

Investigating the problems caused by abusive black men often exposes black women intellectuals to criticism. Alice Walker's treatment of black male violence in works such as *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *The Color Purple* (1982) attracted

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censure from both blacks and whites alike. Even though Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem is about black women, one criticism leveled at her work is its purportedly negative portrayal of black men. Particularly troubling to some critics is the depiction of Beau Willie Brown. In an interview, Claudia Tate asked Ntozake Shange, “Why did you have to tell about Beau Willie Brown?” In this question Tate invokes the bond of family secrecy that often pervades dysfunctional families because she wants to know why Shange violated the black community’s collective family “secret.” Shange’s answer is revealing: “I refuse to be a part of this conspiracy of silence. I will not do it. So that’s why I wrote about Beau Willie Brown. I’m tired of living lies.”

This “conspiracy of silence” about black men’s physical and emotional abuse of black women parallels black women’s silences about the politics of sexuality in general. Both silences stem from a larger system of legitimated, routinized violence targeted toward black women and, through silence, both work to reinscribe social hierarchies. Because hegemonic ideologies make everyday violence against black women seem so routine, some women perceive neither themselves nor those around them as victims. The brutal realities of this “secret” and often routine violence appear throughout black female autobiography, though most compellingly in the narrative of black domestic worker Sara Brooks. Brooks’ husband first assaulted her when she was pregnant, once threw her out of a window, and often called her his “goddamn knock box.” Despite his excessive

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violence, she considered his behavior routine: "If I tried to talk to him he’d hit me so hard with his hands till I’d see stars. Slap me, and what he’d slap me for, I don’t know...My husband would slap me and then go off to his woman’s house. That’s the way life was." Outwardly positive images of black women make some women more likely to accept domestic violence as routine. Many black women have had to exhibit independence and self-reliance to ensure their own survival and that of their loved ones, but this image of the self-reliant black female can be troublesome for women in violent relationships.

When an abused woman like Sara Brooks believes that "strength and independence are expected of her, she may be more reluctant to call attention to her situation, feeling that she should be able to handle it on her own; she may deny the seriousness of the situation." Abused women, particularly those bearing invisible scars of emotional abuse, are often silenced by the image of the "superstrong" black woman. According to Audre Lorde, however, sexual violence against black women is a "disease striking the heart of black nationhood, and silence will not make it disappear." To Lorde, such violence is exacerbated by racism and powerlessness such that "violence against black women and children often becomes a standard in our communities, one by which manliness can be measured. But these woman-hating acts are rarely discussed as crimes against black women." By making visible the pain the survivors feel, black feminist intellectuals like

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69 Simonsen, 143.
70 Collins, 159.
72 Sister Outsider, 120.
Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, and Ntozake Shange challenge the alleged “rationality” of this particular system of control and institutionalized silence.

**Trauma and silence from within**

Thus far we have seen that the history of violence and oppression of black women in the United States is accompanied by silence. This silence is imposed upon black women from the outside—through the force of institutional power, educational authority, and cultural norms. Yet these external forces are not the only reasons for silence. There is another silence, a silence from within, that further enforces the perpetuation of black women’s silence. This silence is, as we will see, a traumatic silence, a silence resulting from trauma. While black women indeed have endured multiple oppressions in American history, the trauma at the core of their oppression is sexual. The enforced use of black women’s sexuality under slavery, compounded by generations of sexual violence, together mean that black women must not only struggle against multiple oppressions from outside, but that they must also contend with a legacy of silence at the interior of their being.

Beverly Guy-Sheftall, in her essay, “The Women of Bronzeville,” remarks that the images of black women as “matriarch, whore, bitch” persist in the literary works by both white and black writers, which might lead to the question of whether there is something deeper at work in these images than simply negative stereotypes. In their research on incest, Herman and Hirschmann write that survivors have “a sense of being different. and

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73 Collins, 176.
distant, from ordinary people,” and they also note that “almost every one...described herself as ‘witch,’ ‘bitch,’ or ‘whore.’” Similarly, researchers find that among survivors of sexual abuse there is a legacy of silence caused by “passive resistance and dissociation of feeling.” We might wonder if these images of black women in our society and the corresponding silence regarding the origins of these images are so persistent precisely because they originate in deep, historical ways from the psyches of survivors of rape and sexual abuse themselves. It is precisely this connection between the silence imposed from without and the silence imposed from within that Lorde’s work examines. As we will see, Lorde shows us that the collective, institutionally enforced silence for black women is accompanied by an individual, psychically enforced silence within black women themselves.

Audre Lorde’s autobiographical narrative, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, tells the story of a black lesbian woman coming to consciousness of herself through her history: a history of traumatic violence toward black women. The main character, Audre, becomes conscious of her race in the second grade, which illustrates that identity-formation is a process that develops over the course of a lifetime. Later, Audre learns to connect her identity with history when, as a young adult working in Stamford, Connecticut, her friend, Ginger, tells her about Crispus Attucks, “the first cat to die in the Revolutionary War, in Concord, Massachusetts—a black man.” This causes her to ask, “What did that mean

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76 Ibid., 32.
about the history I had learned?" As Janet Brice-Baker writes, "maintaining the slavery system depended upon creating a distorted image of Africans, concealing their true history, and presenting the distorted version to both Black and White Americans." With her question, Lorde begins her quest to end this concealment of black history.

Yet, Lorde has to contend with the silence not only of black history, but also of women's history and lesbian history: "It was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female, to be Black female and gay." Lorde's project is to write the myths and histories that were invisible to her as a "Black female and gay" woman coming of age in the 1950's: "There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sister Amazons, the riders on the loneliest outposts of the kingdom of Dahomcy." The invisibility of these myths and histories, as we will see, is a result of individual and collective trauma.

While we will see in Chapter 3 how Lorde finds positive spiritual and sexual roots through her mother and the history and myth of Carricou, her own personal history contains much pain. In curiously non-introspective ways throughout the narrative of Zami, Lorde relates incidents of sexual molestation and impropriety. While Lorde's lack of self-reflection about the incidents has led critics to ignore their importance, we can see this lack of self-reflection as itself one of the results of the legacy of a sexually traumatic history. Lorde narrates seven such incidents in which black women are sexually

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78 Ibid, 131.
80 Zami, 134.
81 Zami, 176.
82 Steele, 33.
violated or threatened by men—four white men, one black man, and two men of unspecified race. In so doing, Lorde shows how the silence about sexual trauma can and must come to an end—simply by those who are affected beginning to speak.

The earliest scene occurs between an eight-year-old Audre and a man in a comic book store, a “fat white man with watery eyes”: “his nasty fingers moved furtively up and down my body, now trapped between his pressing bulges and the rim of the bin. By the time he loosened his grip and allowed me to slide down to the blessed floor, I felt dirtied and afraid, as if I had just taken part in some filthy rite.”83 In describing the incident as being lifted up and back down again into a blessing, as a baby being baptized, Lorde connects the incident with religion. However, the blessing comes not from above as in traditional Christian thought, but from below, from the earth. Later Lorde will describe sexuality as a blessing from below, from the earth, as well.

Lorde again connects abusive sexuality with religion around the same time of the previous incident as she tells of witnessing the practice of the principal of her Catholic elementary school. Monsignor John J. Brady, a racist priest who tells Audre’s mother that “he had never expected to have to take Colored kids into his school:”84 Lorde writes that “his favorite pastime was holding Ann Archdeacon or Irene Crimmons on his lap, while he played with their blonde and red curls with one hand, and slid the other hand up the back of their blue gabardine uniforms. I did not care about his lechery, but I did care that he kept me in every Wednesday afternoon after school to memorize Latin nouns.”85 The fact that she says, “I did not care,” shows her inability to deal with the feelings.

83 Zami, 48-49, italics mine.
84 Zami, 60.
surrounding these incidents. Nevertheless, despite her lack of feeling, Lorde shows that speaking is the necessary first step. The numbness and silence surrounding the abuse will have to end, as we will see, in order for Audre to heal from these events.

Subsequently Lorde foregrounds the scene of her first menstruation during her fifteenth year by telling of her knowledge of sexuality: "but five years before, I had to find out if I was going to become pregnant, because a boy from school much bigger than me had invited me up to the roof on the way home from the library and then threatened to break my glasses if I didn’t let him stick his ‘thing’ between my legs."86 This threat to break her glasses is significant for two reasons. First, it shows the relationship between class and the threat of sexual violence, as we are led to conclude that Audre’s mother may not be able to afford another pair of glasses and certainly would be angry if they were broken. Audre, subsequently, would be unable to explain the unfortunate situation to her mother. Second, it shows the importance of reading for Audre, even at the age of ten: she is returning from the library in this scene and she eventually goes on to become a librarian.

What happens after the threat is not narrated; instead, Lorde connects her fear of her mother with her own loneliness as a way of explaining what happened: "I was afraid my mother would find out and what she would do to me then" is followed by "I was always so lonely in the summer, particularly that summer I was ten."87 After the incident she gets home late, “washed myself up” and “got a whipping for being late.”88 She spends the rest

85 Ibid, 60.
86 Ibid, 75.
87 Ibid, 75.
88 Ibid, 75.
of the summer trying to find books in the library that might tell her if she is going to be pregnant. Therefore, when her period comes four years later, at the age of 15, she is relieved that she is not pregnant.

The most emotionally charged incident of sexual abuse that she knows of as a child occurs when she is in high school. Then, Audre’s best friend, Gennie, shows up at Audre’s house late at night with a scratched face after fighting with her father who had been drinking. As Gennie tells Audre, “and when [my father] drinks he doesn’t know what…” 89 Audre refuses to ask her strict parents if Gennie can stay with them, and so Gennie leaves alone to deal with her “good for nothing call himself father” who is “using that girl for I don’t know what,” as Audre’s mother phrases it. 90 One of the intergenerational effects of traumatic violence is silence, which is here marked by Audre’s mother’s silence, by her inability to say the words for what Gennie is experiencing—especially to help her daughter get the awareness she needs. These silences inflict themselves on subsequent generations from within, and such internalized silence leads to devastating consequences: Audre hears of Gennie’s suicide the next day.

The incidents continue into Audre’s young adulthood. After she moves out of her parent’s home, her landlady’s brother “closed the door to my room and said I was a nice girl and I wouldn’t have to pay him for moving me if I’d just be quiet and stand still for a minute.” Here there is a paragraph break, and then Lorde writes, “I thought it was all pretty stupid, and he got cum all over the back of my dungarees.” 91 In the paragraph break is the silence that stands in for the emotions surrounding the incident. Also after

89 Ibid, 94-95.
Audre becomes pregnant by Peter, a white boy she’s met at a Youth Labor League party with whom she had slept “since it was expected,” she has an abortion, which leaves her “with an additional sadness about which she cannot speak.”92 And later, she writes, as an adult, that she “got out of being raped although not mauled by leaving behind a ring and a hatch of lies” to a “Black brother,” a “bastard…stronger than I was.”93

The results of these incidents manifest themselves in Lorde’s inability to acknowledge her feelings and to speak about them. These results affect her in other ways as well, such as the numbness she feels at her father’s death instead of grief. And in Mexico, she tells her older woman lover, Eudora, that she doesn’t like being made love to, another sign of blocked feeling caused by sexual trauma.94 Audre starts therapy in the fall of 1955, when she is 21, because “there were things I did not understand, and things I felt I did not want to feel, particularly the blinding headaches that came in waves sometimes. And I seldom spoke.”95 The pain, whether physical or emotional, and the silence go together, along with the lack of understanding and the feelings. Thus while Zami is the story of an individual, this story is also connected to a larger, intergenerational, collective context. In telling her story, Lorde is also telling the collective history of African women under colonization and slavery, as well as the collective history of all women and girls, like Gennie, who live through or die from sexual abuse. In speaking out about her silence, she is providing a tentative model for collective and individual healing.

91 Ibid, 105.
92 Ibid, 119.
93 Zami, 182.
94 Steele, 35.
Chapter 3—Testify: Black Women’s Consciousness and the Power of Self Definition

"In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers," asserts Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider* in 1984.95 This "watching" generates a dual consciousness in black women, one in which black women become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection while hiding a self-defined standpoint from the prying eyes of dominant groups.97 Ella Surrey, an elderly black domestic, eloquently summarizes the energy needed to maintain independent self-definitions: "We have always been the best actors in the world...I think that we are much more clever than they are because we know that we have to play the game. We've always had to live two lives—one for them and one for ourselves."98

Behind the mask of behavioral conformity imposed on black women, acts of resistance, both organized and anonymous, have long existed. Despite the strains connected with domestic work, Judith Rollins asserts that the domestic workers she interviewed appeared to have maintained "a remarkable sense of self worth." They skillfully deflect these psychological attacks on their personhood, their adulthood, their dignity, these attempts to lure them into accepting employers' definition of them as inferior."99 Bonnie Thornton Dill found that domestic workers in her study refused to let their employers push them around. As one respondent declared: "When I went out to

95 Zami, 214.
97 Ibid, 114.
work...my mother told me, 'Don't let nobody take advantage of you. Speak up for your rights.' In these and many other oppressive situations facing black women, these women crafted identities to empower them.

Resisting by doing something that is "not expected" could not have occurred without black women's long standing rejection of stereotypes of themselves as mammys, jezebels, matriarchs, and other controlling and denigrating images. Combined, these individual acts of resistance suggest that a distinctive, collective black women's consciousness exists. Such a consciousness was present in black intellectual Maria Stewart's 1831 speech advising the "daughters of Africa" to "Awake! Arise! No longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties." Such a consciousness is present also in the worldview of Johnny Mae Fields, a mill worker from North Carolina with few opportunities to resist. Ms. Fields wryly announces, "If they tell me something and I know I ain't gonna do it, I don't tell them. I just go on and don't do it."

Silence is not to be interpreted as submission in this collective, self-defined black women's consciousness. In 1925 author Marita Bonner described how consciousness remained one sphere of freedom available to her in the stifling confines of both a black middle-class world and a racist white society:

So—being a woman—you can wait. You must sit quietly without a chip. Not sodden—and weighted as if your feet were cast in the iron of your soul. Not wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and chains and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty. But quiet: quiet. Like Buddha—who brown like I am—sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself;

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100 Rollins, 41.
motionless and knowing...Motionless on the outside. But inside? \(^{103}\)

Black women intellectuals have long explored this private, hidden space of black women’s consciousness, the “inside” ideas that allow black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. \(^{104}\) How have many black women as a group found the strength to oppose our objectification as “de mule uh de world?” After witnessing to the horrors of institutionalized psychic and sexual violence perpetrated upon black women and the silences that result, how do we account for the black female voices of resistance that seemingly stretch across the boundaries of class and distinction—as the words of Johnny Mae Fields, Maria Stewart, and Marita Bonner demonstrate? What foundation sustained Sojourner Truth so that she could ask “Ain’t I a woman?” The voices of these black women are not those of victims but of survivors. Their ideas and actions suggest that not only does a self-defined, group derived black women’s standpoint exist, but that its presence has been essential to black women’s survival. The later writings of Audre Lorde would prove to be yet another link in this long-established tradition of self-defined, black female consciousness. Throughout her work and the work of other black women writers, it is apparent that, in the words of Lorde, “survival is not only mutual, it is our destiny.” \(^{105}\) Claiming the right to a destiny demands that black women relive the traumas of the past and bear collective witness to their occurrence by speaking it into existence. Further

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exploration into this shared ethic of ‘testifying’, or bearing witness, reveals that this course of action functioned in myriad ways—through the intimacy of mother-daughter relationships, within black social institutions, in black women’s relationships to one another, and in the work of black women writers committed to social change and the textual recreation of a new black self. In this chapter I will seek to explore the implications of this consciousness and the subsequent roots of black women’s self-definition. I will also discuss Audre Lorde’s interactive process of self-naming and suggest an alternative reading of Lorde’s heavily anthologized 1976 poem “Coal” not as a black nationalist call to arms but as the poet’s own double-voiced negotiation for a new agenda for black women—and a radical new rethinking of their own existence through the breaking silences.

Resisting Jezebel and Mammy

“A system of oppression,” writes black feminist activist Pauli Murray, “draws much of its strength from the acquiescence of its victims, who have accepted the dominant image of themselves and are paralyzed by a sense of helplessness.”106 Black women’s ideas and actions force a rethinking of the concept of hegemony, the notion that black women’s objectification as the Other is so complete that we become willing participants in our own oppression. Most black women simply do not define themselves as mammies, jezebels, matriarchs, welfare mothers, mules, or sexually denigrated women. The matrix of domination in which these controlling images are embedded is much less cohesive or uniform than imagined. Black women encounter these controlling images, not as

disembodied symbolic messages but as ideas designed to provide meaning in our daily lives. Black women's work and family experiences create the conditions whereby the contradictions between everyday experiences and the controlling images of black womanhood become visible. Seeing the contradictions in the ideologies opens them up for demystification. Just as Sojourner Truth deconstructed the term *woman* by using her own lived experiences to challenge it so, in a variety of ways, everyday African-American women do the same thing. That fewer Maria Stewarts, Sojourner Truths, or Ella Surrays are heard may be less a statement about the existence of black women's ideas than it is a reflection of the suppression of their ideas. As Nancy White, an inner city resident points out, "I like to say what I think. But I don't do that much because most people don't care what I think."107 Like Marita Bonner, far too many black women remain motionless on the outside...but the inside?

**Speaking from silence: finding the dark voice**

"To be able to use the range of one's voice, to attempt to express the totality of self, is a recurring struggle in the tradition of black women writers," maintains black feminist literary critic Barbara Christian.108 Black women have certainly expressed our individual voices. Black women have been described as generally outspoken and self-assertive speakers, a consequence of expectations that men and women both participate in black civil society. But despite this tradition, the overarching theme of finding a voice to express a collective, self defined black women's standpoint remains a core theme in black

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feminist thought.

That this theme of self-definition should preoccupy black women is not surprising. Black women’s lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African American women with our objectification as the Other. The struggle of living two lives, one for “them and one for ourselves,” creates a peculiar tension to construct independent self-definations within a context where black womanhood remains routinely derogated. As Karla Holloway points out, “the reality of racism and sexism means that we must configure our private realities to include awareness of what our public image might mean to others. This is not paranoia. It is preparedness.”

Much of the best black feminist thought reflects this effort to find a collective, self-defined voice and express a fully articulated feminist standpoint. Audre Lorde observes that “within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, black women have on the one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism.” Lorde also points out that the “visibility which makes us most vulnerable”—that which accompanies being black—“is the source of our greatest strength.” The category of “black woman” makes all of black women especially visible and open to the objectification of black women as a category. This group treatment potentially renders each individual black woman invisible as fully human. But paradoxically, being treated

109 Gwaltney, 240.
Lorde, Sister Outsider. 42.
as an invisible Other places black American women in an outsider-within position that has stimulated creativity in many.\textsuperscript{113}

For individual women, resolving contradictions of this magnitude takes considerable strength. To learn to speak in a “unique and authentic voice, women must ‘jump outside’ the frames and systems authoritics provide and create their own frame.”\textsuperscript{114} Unlike the controlling images developed for middle-class white women, the controlling and stereotypical images applied to black women are so uniformly negative that they necessitate resistance. For black American women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace negative images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to black women’s survival.

Another world: safe spaces and coming to voice

While domination may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within social spaces where black women speak freely. This realm of relatively safe discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for black women’s resistance. Extended families, churches, and black community organizations are important locations where safe discourse potentially can occur. Sondra O’Neale describes the workings of these black women’s spaces: “Beyond the mask, in the ghetto of the black women’s community, in her family, and, more important, in her psyche, is and has always been another world, a world in which she functions—sometimes in sorrow but more often in genuine joy...by doing things that ‘normal’ black women

\textsuperscript{112} Lorde, 42.
\textsuperscript{113} Collins, 100.
do. These spaces are not only safe—they form prime locations for resisting objectification as the Other. In these spaces black women “observe the feminine images of the ‘larger’ culture, realize that these models are at best unsuitable and at worst destructive to them, and go about the business of fashioning themselves after the prevalent, historical black female role models in their own community.” By advancing black women’s empowerment through self-definition, these safe spaces help black women resist the dominant ideology promulgated not only by black civil society but also within black institutions.

The institutional sites where black women construct independent self-definitions reflect the dialectical nature of oppression and activism. Schools, print and broadcast media, government agencies, and other institutions in the information business reproduce negative images of black womanhood. In response, black women have traditionally used family networks and black community institutions as sites for countering these images. On the one hand, these black community institutions have been vitally important in developing strategies of resistance. In the context of deep-seated American racial segregation that persisted throughout the 1960’s, the vast majority of black women lacked access to other forms of political organization.

On the other hand, many of these same institutions of black civil society (churches, schools, etc.) have also perpetuated racist, sexist, elitist, and homophobic ideologies. This same period of desegregation of American society overall spurred a parallel

116 Ibid. 139.
desegregation within black civil society where women, working-class folks, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and other formerly subjugated subpopulations within black civil society began to speak out. As a result of the politically changing context, black reality became much more complex. No uniform, homogenous culture of intraracial resistance ever existed among black Americans, and does not exist now. One can say, however, that blacks in America have shared a common political agenda and culture, differently experienced and expressed as a heterogeneous collectivity. Historically, survival depended on sticking together and in many ways aiming to minimize differences among African-Americans. More recently, in a changing political economy where survival for many blacks seems less of an issue, space to express these differences now exists. Black feminism itself has been central in creating that space, in large part, via black women’s claims for self-definition. Overall, black women find ourselves in a web of cross-cutting relationships, each presenting varying combinations of controlling images and black women’s self-definitions.

Thus, the historical complexity of these institutional arrangements of racial segregation and heterogeneous black community politics profoundly affected black women’s consciousness and its articulation in a self-defined standpoint. Given this context, what have been some important safe spaces where black women’s consciousness has been nurtured? Where have individual black women spoken freely in contributing to a collective, self-defined standpoint?
Black women’s relationships with one another

Traditionally, black women’s efforts to construct individual and collective voices have occurred in at least two safe spaces. One location involves black women’s relationships with one another. In some cases, such as friendships and family interactions, these relationships are informal, private dealings among individuals. In others, as was the case during slavery, in black churches, more formal organizational ties have nurtured powerful black women’s communities. As mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends to one another, many black women affirm one another.¹¹⁸

The mother-daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among black women. Countless black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to black women’s survival. Black daughters identify the profound influence that their mothers have had upon their lives. It is the mother-daughter relationship that Audre Lorde recognized that led her, after a certain point in her life, back to her childhood memories of her mother in her later writings. Although I examine this relationship further in Chapter 4, it is important to note that mothers and mother figures emerge as central figures in black women’s autobiographies, such as Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969), Elaine Brown’s A Taste of Power (1992), and Audre Lorde’s Zami (1982). Novelist Alice Walker attributes the trust she has in herself to her mother. In describing this relationship, Mary Helen. Washington points out that Walker “never doubted her powers of judgment because her mother assumed they were sound; she never questioned her right to follow her intellectual bent, because her mother

¹¹⁸ Collins, 102.
implicitly entitled her to it.” By giving her daughter a library card, Walker’s mother showed she knew the value of a free mind.

In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious discussion and humor, black women as sisters and friends affirm one another’s humanity, specialness, and right to exist. Black women’s fiction, such as Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula* (1974), *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and *Beloved* (1987), as well as Terry McMillan’s blockbuster novel *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), is one important location where black women’s friendships are taken seriously. In a dialogue with four other black women, Evelynn Hammonds describes this special relationship that black women have with one another: “I think most of the time you have to be there to experience it. When I am with other black women I always laugh. I think our humor comes from a shared recognition of who we all are in the world.”

This issue of black women being the ones who really listen to one another is significant, particularly given the importance of voice in black women’s lives. Audre Lorde describes the importance that the expression of individual voice within the collective context of black women’s communities can have for self-affirmation: “Of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.” One can write for a nameless, faceless audience, but the act of using one’s voice requires a listener and the one most able to pierce the invisibility created by black women’s objectification is another black woman. The process of trusting one another can seem dangerous because

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only black women know what it means to be black women. If we will not listen to one another, then who will?

Black women writers have led the way in recognizing the importance of black women's relationships with one another. Mary Helen Washington points out that one distinguishing feature of black women's literature is that it is about black women. Women talk to one another, and "their friendships with other women—mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, and lovers—are vital to their growth and well-being." The significance placed on relationships among black women transcends black American women's writings. For example, Ghanian author Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Changes* (1991) uses the friendship between two African professional women to explore the challenges facing professional women in contemporary African societies. With black American women's fiction, this emphasis on black women's relationships has been so striking that novelist Gayl Jones suggests that women writers select different themes from those of their male counterparts. In the work of many black male writers, the significant relationships are those that involve confrontation with individuals outside the family and community. But among black women writers, relationships within family and community, between men and women, and among women are treated as complex and significant.

Black women writers have explored many themes affecting black women's relationships. One concerns the difficulties that black women can have in affirming one another in a society that derogates black women as a group. Albeit for different reasons,

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the abilities of mothers to help their daughters come to understandings of black
womanhood characterize mother-daughter relationships in Toni Morrison’s novel *The
Bluest Eye*. Another theme concerns how black women’s relationships can support and
renew. Relationships such as those between Celie and Shug in Alice Walker’s novel *The
Color Purple*, among four women in *Waiting to Exhale*, and among women in the
movie/film *Daughters of the Dust* all provide cases where black women helped one
another to grow. Another theme involves how relationships among black women can
control and repress. Audre Lorde’s relationship with her mother in her autobiography
*Zami* illustrate ways in which black women with some sort of power, in this example that
of the authority of motherhood, can suppress other women. Perhaps Ntozake Shange best
summarizes the importance that black women can have for one another in resisting
oppressive conditions. Shange gives the following reason for why she writes: “When I
die, I will not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind thinking that anyone can
tend to their emotional health other than themselves.”

**Consciousness as a realm of freedom**

Traditionally, when taken together, black women’s relationships with one another and
the work of black women writers provided the context for crafting alternatives to
prevailing negative images of black womanhood. These sites offered safe spaces that
nurtured the everyday and specialized thought of black women. In them black women
intellectuals could construct ideas and experiences that infused daily life with new
meaning. These new meanings offered black women potentially powerful tools to resist

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123 Collins, 104.
negative images of black womanhood. Far from being a secondary concern in bringing about social change, challenging dubious images and replacing them with a black women's point of view constituted an essential component in resisting intersecting oppressions.

The issue of the journey from internalized oppression to the "free mind" of a self-defined, womanist consciousness has been a prominent theme in the works of black women writers. Author Alexis DeVeaux notes that there is a "great exploration of the self in women's work. It's the self in the relationship with an intimate other, with the community, the nation and the world."¹²⁵ Far from being narcissistic or of trivial concern, this placement of self at the center of analysis is critical for understanding a host of other relationships. DeVeaux continues, "you have to understand what your place as an individual is and the place of the person who is close to you. You have to understand the space between you before you can understand more complex or larger groups."¹²⁶

Black women have also stressed the importance of self-definition as part of the journey from victimization to a free mind in their lives. Given the physical limitations on black women's mobility, the conceptualization of self that has been part of black women's self-definitions is distinctive. Self is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead, self is found in the context of community and family—as Paule Marshall describes it, "the ability to recognize one's continuity with the larger community."¹²⁷ By being accountable to others, black women

¹²⁵ Tate, 54.
¹²⁶ Tate, 54.
¹²⁷ Washington, 159.
develop more fully human, less objectified selves.¹²⁸ Sonia Sanchez points to this version of self by stating, "We must move past always focusing on the 'personal self' because there's a larger self. There's a 'self' of black people."¹²⁹ Rather than defining self in opposition to others, the connectedness among individuals provides black women deeper, more meaningful self-definitions.

This journey toward self-definition has political significance. As Mary Helen Washington observes, black women who struggle to "forge an identity larger than the one society would force upon them...are aware and conscious, and that very consciousness is potent."¹³⁰ Identity is not goal but rather the point of departure in the process of self-definition. In this process black women journey toward an understanding of how our personal lives have been fundamentally shaped by oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

This particular expression of the journey toward self-definition, as we will see in the work of Audre Lorde, offers a powerful challenge to the externally defined, negative images of black women. Replacing negative images with positive ones can be equally problematic if the function of stereotypes as controlling images remains unrecognized. The insistence of black women's self-definitions thus reframes the entire dialogue from one of protesting the technical accuracy of an image—namely, refusing the black matriarchy thesis—to one stressing the power dynamics underlying the very process of self-definition itself. By insisting on self-definition, black women question not only what has been said about black women but the credibility and the intentions of those

¹²⁸ Collins, 113.
¹²⁹ Tate, 134.
¹³⁰ Washington, xv.
possessing the power to define. When black women define ourselves, we clearly reject
the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality
are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of black women’s self-definitions,
the act of insisting on black female self-definition validates black women’s power as
human subjects.

A woman speaks: Audre Lorde and the power of self-naming

At the intersection of the multiple oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality,
Audre Lorde defines her own identity and affirms her own voice through her poetry and
calls other black lesbian women’s voices from silence. Refusing to be circumscribed by
any simple identity, Audre Lorde defines herself as she writes as a black woman, a
mother, a daughter, a lesbian, a feminist, and a visionary. Audre Lorde, a poet, is thus
situated as a poet of difference, one whose often marginalized identities articulate a
poetics for political agency. As prospective readers of Lorde, to value her poetry
precisely for the competing discourses of race, gender, and sexual persuasion among
others constructs the poems subjective positions. Lorde’s name as a poet signs itself not
only through her texts but also through her varied sociopolitical commitments—in terms
of the recent theoretical thought, Lorde’s “name” foregrounds itself as author function
constructed by the contradictory discourses that make it available, thus subverting the
control of the person who writes.\textsuperscript{131} Indeed, readers encounter Lorde’s name most
frequently in the context of feminist activism; her prose, speeches, and essays are widely
known and cited by feminists, critics, and others. Major feminist anthologies include her

\textsuperscript{131} Dhairyam, Sagri. “Artifacts for Survival: Remapping the Contours of Poetry Audre Lorde.” \textit{Feminist}
essays, and interviews with Lorde appear in a variety of contexts. Specifically enough, references to her poetry are relatively uncommon, indicating that Lorde’s name as a poet is heavily over written by her name as black, lesbian, and feminist activist.

If Lorde is to be admitted to the American reading public, she is, ironically enough, admitted as a representative of Otherness. The elusiveness of this rhetoric point to the allure of literary discourse and the values it imparts to the poetic as a species of sacral discourse, which claims space for a visionary subjectivity; even in recent theorizing, the fascination lingers, granting the poetic the status of transgressive force. Where Audre Lorde’s particular value resides is in her self-conscious negotiation with poetry not only as a literary genre but also as a polemic for change. Her opposing identities thwart any one overriding agenda, maneuvering variously between the racisms and heterosexisms without and within communities, feminist and other. Tracing Lorde’s strategies through her poems compels us to remark on our vested interests in homogeneity even as we thematize her work.

Although her lived identities as black, women, and lesbian demand that her poems not be co-opted into totalizing “literariness,” they equally frustrate the move to unselfconscious biography to gloss her texts. Lorde’s own attempt at autobiography, Zami, calls itself “biomythography,” a description that explicitly recognizes that any interpretive act, whether of the writer or the reader, reconstitute reality. “Biomythography” recognizes the tactical uses of fictional identity but refuses to grant the author primacy over the textuality of her life. Such a strategy is evident throughout her poems as well; denying themselves the certainty of any simple reality outside the text, they engage in

*Studies.* 18:2 (Summer 1992): 229-256.
dialogue across an array of texts and discourses. This refusal of authorial/referential authority reapporions the responsibility of interpretation between writer and reader. Communities of readers who read Lorde's work—black aestheticians, feminist critics, and lesbian activists—are implicated in Lorde's agenda for change, etching their communal agendas for reading into her texts. And insofar as the communities reading Lorde's work for particular political ends, they redefine the value of literary discourse in relation to Lorde's name. Even as these readings situate Lorde's value as poet, they ponder the changing values of the literary as a system that is shaped by an institutional and professional demands. The literary critic, in such communal histories of reading, is an agent for political reformation who emphasizes social and historical agendas for change rather than literary or aesthetic merit.

Sister Outsider: “the double-voiced agenda” of Audre Lorde within the black aesthetic

“Coal,” Lorde's perhaps most frequently anthologized poem, constructed as it is by its political history of interpretation, epitomizes the value of such rethinking of literary discourse. Included in part of Stephen Henderson's Understanding the New Black Poetry (1973), an anthology of poems reflecting the tenets of the black aesthetic movement, the poem was, and is, widely read to be affirming an unself-conscious black essence. Its inclusion in Henderson's anthology is justified because the volume was one

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132 Dhairyam, 231.
133 Here, I play off of Stanley Fish's notion of interpretive communities as "made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading...but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions." See Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum," in Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism, ed. Jane P. Tompkins Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). 182.
134 Dhairyam, 232.
of the literary manifestos of the Black Power movement, calling for blacks to recognize and celebrate their singularity as a people. No small part of “Coal’s” success is due to its apparent valorization of the movement’s ideology. The controlling metaphor of coal, staple fuel, celebrates “the total black, being spoken/From the earth’s inside,” which becomes in its idealized form, the jewel, the diamond (lines 1-3). In this reading, the poem’s final visionary lines, “I am Black because I come from the earth’s inside now take my word/for jewel in the open light,” claim their political identity through an empowering biologism. The Black Power movement (named after Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton’s Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America) gained impetus in the late sixties and early seventies. For black American poets it meant a call to a poetics of blackness which emphasized the role of poet as activist and leader and the role of poetry as expression of an essential black vision.

The histories suppressed by this reading, however, are crucial not only because they unsettle the homogeneity of the black aesthetics’ agenda for change but also because they dispute the primacy granted an essentialist reading of “Coal.” Important as the movement was in calling for a poetics of blackness and in emphasizing the role of the black poet as activist and leader, it was largely male and often homophobic in its tenets. The only woman poets included with any frequency in anthologies of poetry were Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez, poets whose work reflected the ideologies of Black Power and who were appropriately heterosexual in inclination. Lorde’s membership in this community has to be necessarily suspect as a poet who is both lesbian

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and black feminist. Although Henderson, in a biographical note, registers concern that a poet so “meticulous [and] skillful” is not better known, the Black Aesthetic movement, of which he is so much a part, can, significantly enough, afford to “know” Audre Lorde’s work no better. Much of the power in an affirmative reading of the poem depends on its position within black aesthetic ideology which reclaims the role of black visionary. The contexts structuring Lorde’s poems is her troubled position as a lesbian within a sexist and homophobic movement. The contingent nature of the poem’s celebratory black essence becomes a political strategy in the interests of the movement that repudiates its primacy. To read through the histories suppressed by an essentialist reading is to find the tropes in the poem battling each other inasmuch as they share a strategic sameness of vision; coal and diamond. One is the staple black fuel and the other is the privileged white jewel, both affirming each other’s positions as controlling/speaking symbols.¹³⁷

The opening celebration of the speaker’s identity with coal, “the total black” staple fuel dug from the earth and the controlling metaphor of the poem, is no sooner spoken than sabotaged.

I
is the total black, being spoken
From the earth’s inside.
There are many kinds of open.
How a diamond comes into a knot of flame
How sound comes into a word, colored
By who pays what for speaking. (lines 1-7)

“There are many kinds of open,” the comment immediately following the opening lines, remarks the ambivalence of their agenda. The line is itself “open,” linking its functions to both form and theme, providing ambiguous linkage between initial image of “the total

¹³⁷ Dhairym, 235.
black, being spoken/From the earth’s inside” and later reflections on diamond and sound. These reflections reiterate their ambivalence in the negative oppositions they set up between coal and diamond, so likely to be passed over as different forms of the same mineral essence. A diamond signifies luxury and privilege, but coal remains fuel, trope of need and material comfort. That the “diamond comes into a knot of flame” is significant—only the jewel is allowed glorification. The lines following this image remark on coal’s exclusion from the “knot of flame” in its speculations on the ways “sound comes into a word, colored/By who pays what for speaking.” The lines’ very intimacy indicts diamonds as well as words for their complicity in business transactions of “who pays what for speaking.” Words, and by extension the tropes in the poem, are contaminated by their openness, necessary through the openness for the words to function in language. Such as awareness acknowledges that the initial image of the “total black...from the earth’s inside,” although celebratory, is also open to connotations of rape and the associated violence of forcible extraction. Earth’s “total black...inside” is thus also a feminized trope for the womb, both receptive and violated, that is at the center of the poetic act of extracting meaning. As Margaret Homan’s deconstructions of the tropes of passive, feminized nature playing muse to male poet so urgently demonstrate, literary history has more often than not coded the act of poetic creation as male. In the poem, the violation done to earth to get at coal (lines 12-23) is a masculinized violence, invoking resonances of violence done to the figure of woman in poetic tradition. The “total black” is a force to which blackness speaks, double-voicedly in different languages of its social and political histories.

The recognition of this many-languages openness motivates the images of the second
stanza as the poem arrives at an unwilling acceptance of the suspect conditions for negotiating black identity.

Some words are open
Like a diamond on glass windows
Singing out within the passing crash of sun
Then there are words like stapled wagers
In a perforated book—buy and sign and tear apart—
And come whatever wills all chances
The stub remains
An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.
Some words live in my throat
Breeding like adders. Others know sun
Seeking like gypsies over my tongue
To explode through my lips
Like young sparrows bursting from shell.
Some words
Bedevil me. (lines 8-22)

Words, here, are variously open to the violences of the tropologies they trace, as, by extension, is the act of writing itself. Inasmuch as words sing “out within the passing crash of sun,” their music is a music of violation that “the passing crash of sun” exacerbates. Images that follow resonate with similar double-voicedness: “words like stapled wagers” survive, despite the acts of buying and signing and tearing, in the “stub that remains,” but are also testimonials to the cost of such survival which admit to their complicity in such business activity. “An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge” does not deprive one completely of speech but is a continual reminder to the price paid in pain for forming speech, like and unlike the violence of the deadly adders which breed in the poet’s throat threatening the unwary gypsies who “know sun.” Finally, although “young sparrows” burst “from shell” in ebullient life, they explode through the poet’s lips.
Indeed the intimacy of the next lines imply that the fledgling sparrows, as well as words,
may return at the end to “bedevil” her. In this ambivalent birth, mother and poet are
destroyed, at least partially, in the violence of their creations’ explosive entrance into life.

But hard upon this concentration of images follows the last stanza, repeating the initial
image in apparently recuperative fervor, willing black identity in the performative force
of poetic creation.

Love is a word, another kind of open.
As the diamond comes into a knot of flame
I am Black because I come from the earth’s inside
Take my word for jewel in the open light. (lines 23-26)

However, if love is another word, it must partake of the violations sung earlier. The
repetition of images of diamond and flame from the first stanza (the only difference is
that a diamond becomes universalized into a diamond) colludes in the brutality wreaked
by “a diamond/on glass widows.” Diamonds and flame, indeed, stress their alliance with
the forcible extraction of coal from the earth’s “inside” in the repetition of the same
image (“I am black because I come from the earth’s inside”) and are rendered more
suspect after the tortured ambiguity of the middle stanza. Insofar as the final imperative
commands a celebration of blackness, “now take my word for jewel in the open light,” it
issues a mandate in the contexts that it restructures for itself through the poem.

The poem’s final line adjoins enigmatic openness, knowing its duplicitous value. In
unselfconsciously taking Lorde’s “word for jewel in the open light,” we contribute in the
violations perpetrated upon the poet as both black and woman. But the paradox here is
that if we do not perform these necessary violations, we leave her unspeaking in the silent
recesses of earth. And such silence leaves Lorde again, as black, woman, and poet,
outside a literary tradition that continues unchallenged. For Lorde to name herself as poet
is not only to rewrite tropes of race and sex within literary tradition (those absences that continue untheorized precisely because they are framed as areas of systematic doubt) but, more importantly, it is to “open” literary discourse to the arbitrariness of its markers and to use that high cultural discourse to initiate material change in the lives of black women. “Coal” uses the rhetoric of black aesthetic to speak Audre Lorde, black lesbian; within that movement’s impetus to carve a niche for blackness in white tradition, the woman poet defines and negotiates her particular agenda of difference. Read in terms of these double-voiced agendas for change, the poem becomes a deeply striated comment on a black woman poet’s relation to language and literary tradition.¹³⁸

Hazel Carby, black British feminist, emphasizes this double agenda of black women. “They have not only had to deal with their absence from cultural discourse at large, but they also have to refigure the images that make them present even within a mainstream feminism that claims to give them voice.” She adds also that

The black women’s critique of history has not only involved us in coming to terms with “absences,” we have also been outraged by the ways in which it has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us. History has constructed our sexuality and our femininity as deviating from those qualities with which white women, as the prize objects of the Western world, have been endowed. We have also been defined in less than human terms. Our continued struggle with history began with its “discovery” of us.¹³⁹

Although Carby is specifically concerned with tracing the struggle of black women in the 1970’s Britain, her outcry against the formulations of history apply to the overlapping narratives of black women’s struggles in the United States and their oppression by common cultural ideologies of racism and sexism. White feminist practice and theory

¹³⁸ Dhairyam, 240.
¹³⁹ Carby, Hazel. Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist. New
exist in an asymmetrical power relationship to black women, often unaware of the blind spots of their own colonizing drives. While even feminism’s “alternative” agenda cannot safeguard it against the exigencies of its hierarchies, this anguish of attempted but always failed efforts at nonexclusionary political organization is laid bare in Lorde’s 1978 volume of poetry, *The Black Unicorn*. For the politicized poet, the task of making the black female self visible is one contaminated by the guilt of silencing others. For mythmaking, alternative or not, to succeed as political strategy, it must recognize its provisional status, must speak for the demands of the moment, admitting its complicity in the myths already existing about it. Thus, the Black Unicorn pursues its task of reclaiming an alternative mythos for black women, particularly women-identified women, with duplicitous resolution.
Chapter 4—‘Becoming’ Afrekete: Audre Lorde and the Strategies of Mythmaking, Agency, and Healing

In an essay in 1984, Lorde asks Afro-German women to ask themselves, “How can I draw strength from my roots when these roots are entwined in such a terrible history?” Lorde’s own writings can be read as an answer to this very question. In this chapter, I will continue to analyze the historical and conceptual splits between spirituality and sexuality in Western culture that is addressed in Lorde’s poetry. I will show how Lorde’s writing responds to and attempts to heal this split through the “erotic as power,” which she treats in theory and narrative form, as well as throughout her poetry. By exploring Lorde’s treatment of the themes spirituality and sexuality in her essay, “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in her narrative, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), we will see how Lorde both arises from and reacts to the tradition of black women’s thought. Further, by healing this split between sexuality and spirituality, Lorde shows how history may be turned from a problem into a solution. In this chapter I intend to explore Lorde’s strategies of revisionary mythmaking within Zami: her textual recreation of the figurative and literal mother, subsequent methods of mythologizing her personal history, and more specifically, Lorde’s arrival at her version of self-definition through the mythical inscription of Afrekete, the youngest daughter of MawuLisa, whom Lorde describes as the “mischievous linguist, the trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become.”

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Lorde's use of Afrocentric mythmaking

Audre Lorde draws on nonwestern mythic traditions within these works to develop a performative aesthetics and holistic worldview. As she explains in an interview with Claudia Tate, European based philosophical systems prove problematic for African-Americans in that they depict life as a series of conflicts:

African tradition deals with life as an experience to be lived. In many respects, it is much like the Eastern philosophies in that we see ourselves as a part of a life force; we are joined, for instance, to the air, to the earth... We live in accordance with, in a kind of correspondence with the rest of the world as a whole. And therefore living becomes an experience, rather than a problem, no matter how bad or painful it may be. Change will rise *endemically* from the experience fully lived and responded to.\(^{143}\)

This statement illustrates the interactional model of identity formation and social change in Lorde's revisionist mythmaking. She posits an organic world in which all things are connected and change seems inevitable. Yet she believes that transformation entails active participation; alterations only occur when the subject fully lives and responds to events. In Lorde's Africanized self/worldview, agency belongs partially to the individual social actor and partially to the external context.\(^{144}\)

As discussed in Chapter 3, the interactional model of personal and communal change plays an important role in the lives of black women and Lorde's theory of writing. She posits an interconnection between her private experiences and an over-arching "life force" that establishes an interpretive context for her life: she can "read" each event that

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\(^{142}\) Lorde also used several elements of Native American myths in many of her works as well. With respect to relevance and for the purposes of this study, only her distinctive use of African mythologies in *Zami* will be critically discussed here.


occurs as a lesson to be learned from rather than an obstacle to be overcome. Moreover, by maintaining that each person is similarly connected to this life force, Lorde finds the courage and the voice to explore her emotions as she writes and the confidence that this self-exploration leads inevitably to individual and collective change. In *The Cancer Journals*, for example, she uses writing to comprehend more fully the changes that occurred during her first experience with breast cancer. She explains that by exploring the anger, sorrow, and loss she felt after her mastectomy, she hopes to learn “who [she] was and was becoming throughout that time.”145 Because she sees her desire to comprehend her battle with cancer as “part of a continuum of women’s work,” she is confident that her words can be useful to others.146 This belief in a continuum of female experience motivates her writing. Thus she extends her own experience with breast cancer and a mastectomy outward to explore their implications for other women.

Lorde’s approach to life is not uniquely African, as she herself points out in the interview with Tate. Yet by attributing her organic worldview to her African ancestry, she underscores the political implications of her work. Her references to African cultural traditions enable her to resist dominant society’s attempts to deny the existence of nurturing black communities. Patricia Hill-Collins makes a similar point in her discussion of black women activists’ strategies for survival: “By conserving and recreating an Afrocentric worldview, women...undermine oppressive institutions by rejecting the anti-black and anti-female ideologies they promulgate. Thus, Lorde’s transformational epistemology and her revisionist mythmaking serve as important dimensions of her own political activism. She incorporates her African cultural

perspective in both her theory of the erotic and her revisionist myths, reconstructing a tradition that Judeo-Christian belief systems have almost entirely erased.\footnote{Lorde, *The Cancer Journals*. 17.}

**Mythic ways of knowing: Lorde's use of the erotic and revisionary mythmaking**

Historically, images of American black women have been presented as stereotypes that allow the dominant culture to perceive black women in ways that reinforce their socially and economically lower status. In particular, the stereotypes of Mammy and Jezebel work to split black women’s subjectivity into two parts: the spiritual and the sexual.\footnote{Keating, 48.}

As Patricia Hill-Collins writes, the mammy is “asexual, a surrogate mother in black face;” further, “mammy represents the clearest example of the split between sexuality and motherhood present in Eurocentric masculine thought.”\footnote{White, Deborah G. *Aren’t I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: W. W Norton, 1985.}

While Mammy represents the mothering, caring, nurturing, spiritual side of the self, Jezebel represents the sexual side, with her “excessive sexual appetites” and “animal nature.”\footnote{Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 1990. 77.} As Collins notes, although these doubly oppressive images make each woman “invisible as a fully human individual,” many black women have transformed their status as “invisible Other” into a source of tremendous inner strength.\footnote{Christian, Barbara. *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition 1892-1976*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1980. 15.} By developing a “private, hidden space of...consciousness,” they have successfully defied externally imposed labels and maintained their authority to define themselves. As discussed in Chapter 3, black women’s ability to create unique self-expressed standpoints, or ways of knowing based\footnote{Collins, 94.}
on their own experiences as black American women, have been essential to their survival. However, because they often use a doubled consciousness and mask their inward resistance with outward conformity (as evidenced in the double-voiced agenda of Lorde's "Coal"), this inner dimension of their lives has received little recognition.

Lorde uses revisionary mythmaking to externalize the "inside ideas" of black women's resistance to dominant groups. In her work, West African mythic images serve as vehicles for establishing new definitions of womanhood, definitions that affirm the culturally specific components of black female identity yet go beyond this affirmation to provide all women with new models of subject formation. By expressing her own self-defined standpoints through the figures of Aido Hwedo, Seboulisa, and other Yoruba/Fon orisha, Lorde simultaneously critiques previous conceptions of womanhood modeled on European beauty standards and social roles and offers her readers new ways to perceive themselves and new ways to act. She refers to this trajectory from "inside ideas" to outer forms in the interview with Tate. She describes her attempt to develop a voice "for as many people...who need to hear what I have to say—who need to use what I know."

This desire to share her knowledge shapes her writing, and she "speak[s] from the center of consciousness, from the I am out to the we are and then out to the we can."152

Lorde's "we" is performative; it enables her to establish a personal/collective voice that she invites her readers to share. Lorde bases this shared sense of identity on an alternate mode of perception, or what she calls the erotic, "the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest within each of us."153

Here, Lorde's "erotic" indicates a nondual transformational epistemology that combines

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152 Tate, 105.
visionary language with cultural critique. Lorde’s theory of the erotic also enables her to unite alternate ways of thinking with material change: the erotic makes it possible to develop “new ways of understanding our experiences. This is how new visions begin, how we begin to posit a future nourished by the past. This is what I mean by matter following energy, and energy following feeling. Our visions begin with our desires.”

As this transition from feeling to energy to matter implies, Lorde’s invention of the erotic integrates her African-centered spirituality with social protest and cultural change. Furthermore, Lorde brings the past, spirituality, and sexuality together through her theory of the erotic to achieve this cultural change and suggests the possibility of a collective healing experience.

**Healing the split through the erotic**

On August 25, 1978, one year after Barbara Smith’s call for black women to break the silences surrounding their sexuality, Lorde delivered a paper at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women at Mount Holyoke College, entitled, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” In this piece, Lorde brings together the powers of sexuality and spirituality through the erotic: “The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane.” In connecting the spiritual with the sexual, Lorde works against the dominant culture’s dichotomy of mind and body: “it has become fashionable to separate the (physical and emotional) from the political...In the

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154 Tate, 107.
same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual from the erotic.”\textsuperscript{157}

In her essay, Lorde defines the erotic as the production of joy in work and in love: “an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered.”\textsuperscript{158} It is the desire for excellence, the “internal requirement…[that we] demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work.”\textsuperscript{159} It asserts itself in work that we love, in love that we work at. “How often do we truly love our work even at its most difficult?” she asks. “We need to see love as out work: love of ourselves, love of others, love between us: the erotic forms a bridge…which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared…and lessens the threat of difference.”\textsuperscript{160}

Lorde’s erotic is not only an implicit critique of this conceptual split between sexuality and spirituality in Western thought, but it also shows how what is commonly accepted as a conceptual split is produced through a history of violence. Thus, the coming together of sexuality and spirituality in the light of black women’s history is a necessary attempt to begin the healing process of the sexual trauma of generations. As Lorde writes of the erotic: “Women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of existence.”\textsuperscript{161} Theorizing the erotic arises out of Lorde’s own experience as a multiple subject: “As black, lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding.”\textsuperscript{162} She brings this particular experience to bear in her critique of the “European American tradition” that often numbs our feelings even as we experience the erotic, thereby reducing the use of the erotic to abuse: “To refuse to be conscious of what

\textsuperscript{157} Lorde, \textit{Sister Outsider}. 56.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid, 55.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid, 54.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid, 56.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid, 53.
we are feeling...is to deny a large part of the experience.”163

Feeling deep pain is also part of Lorde’s experience, which is demonstrated by Lorde’s writings on cancer, sexual abuse, violence, and hate. Feeling such pain is necessary for healing, as we have seen, and until such feeling takes place, one’s life is not one’s own. In order to allow the erotic to empower us, Lorde attests, in order to love ourselves, love each other, and accept difference, women must first overcome their deeply rooted fear of feeling: “We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings.”164 And particularly for black women, given a collective history of sexual trauma, this fear of feeling is compounded by threats and events of further violence.

These threats of violence and death cannot be destroyed by either silence or fear, however. As Lorde writes in The Cancer Journals, “your silence will not protect you; so we must learn to speak even when we are afraid...in the same way that we have learned to work and speak when we are tired.”165 And as she said in an interview with Adrienne Rich one year after the publication of The Cancer Journals, “I’m not going to be made more vulnerable by putting weapons of silence in my enemies hands.”166

For black women, given this historical silence surrounding sexuality, and given the historical split between sexuality and spirituality, to speak means to work against history. For as we illuminate our differences in history, we come to see that we are not who we thought we were—as black women, as black Americans, as women, as Americans. Lives lived in fear and silence and repression are lives that are not fully lived. Lorde’s call to

162 Ibid, 59.
163 Ibid, 59.
164 Ibid, 57.
the erotic is a call for the coming together of sexuality and spirituality in black women’s history, but it is also a call to all of us to recognize our shared histories, to “share the feelings of those who participate in the experience with us.” Thus the erotic is a change in history and provides the possibility for further change. Lorde teaches us that overcoming the fear of feeling, ending silence, and recognizing the power of the erotic are not only the goals of black women’s history but are the goals for all of us who wish “to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible.”

**Turning to the mother for healing**

In her biomythography, *Zami*, Lorde turns to the mother as both a literal and a figural image that will provide her with roots from which she demonstrates how “to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible.” By turning to the figural image of the mother, she fits her narrative into the traditions of American women’s writing, black women’s autobiography, and lesbian narratives. Lorde’s *Zami* ends with a final scene of reunion with the mythological, sexual/spiritual mother, Afrekete, through which Lorde regains her connections to her sexual and spiritual motherland, Africa, and in whom Lorde finds the sexual and spiritual ritual that will enable her to heal from trauma.

Before turning to the mythological mother, Afrekete, later on in this chapter, I will first discuss the personal and historical mothers Lorde embraces. For while other critics have emphasized the significance of this figural black goddess in Lorde’s work, I will

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168 Ibid, 59.
show how Lorde not only is left to imagine the figure of the mother in her writing, but is also able to take from her own real mother both the literal and figurative roots that she needs. Her mother provides her with a way of turning to history and writing her story into history. Lorde’s specific history places her in a line of descent that can be traced through her mother, an immigrant in Harlem, to her mother’s birthplace, the West Indian island of Carriacou, and back to Africa, from where her mother’s ancestors were sold as slaves. Further, her mother also provides the seeds for the “metaphor” of the sexual and spiritual mother figure, Afrekete, through whom Audre creates a ritual of healing.

Grounding her narrative in matrilineal history and myth allows Lorde to find and take root: to form her identity. In this section, I will examine the ways in which Lorde digs this root through, first, her portrayal of her mother and the particular knowledges about spirituality and sexuality that her mother gives to the young Audre. In the next section, I will look at how Lorde incorporates her research into the culture and myths of the Carricou, her mother’s place of birth, into her narrative in ways that give Lorde’s own life meaning and context. Ultimately, Lorde’s matrilineage will take her back to Africa to the myth of Afrekete, the great mother. As we will see in the last sections of this study, these scenes of healing union between sexuality and spirituality, and between Lorde and the mother, are all the more powerful given Lorde’s own history of sexual abuse, numbness, and silence. As Lorde comes to union, feeling, and writing, she connects her own healing journey with the historical journeys of women of the global diaspora, women whose histories are laden with personal and collective sexual trauma.

Lorde’s narrative in Zami begins by focusing on her mother, Linda, and the wisdom that she passes on to Audre from her birthplace of Carriacou. Linda Lorde had emigrated
to America with Audre’s father, a Barbadian, in 1924, when she was 27 and he was 26.\textsuperscript{169}

Their new home in America never really felt like home to them. To counteract her feelings of loss, Lorde’s mother tells her daughters “stories about Carriacou, where she had been born” amid “the hills of Carriacou between L’Esterre and Harvey Vale.”\textsuperscript{170}

By these stories, Lorde’s mother teaches her a form of spirituality that was different from the Catholicism she was learning in school:

She knew about mixing oils for bruises and rashes, and about disposing of all toenail clippings and hair from the comb. About burning candles before All Souls Day to keep the soucayants away, lest they suck the blood of her babies. She knew about blessing the food and yourself before eating, and about saying prayers before going to sleep.\textsuperscript{171}

Although Audre did not know it at the time, her mother was passing on the particular mix of Catholic and African spirituality of the people of Carriacou, which includes beliefs in witches who suck the blood of babies and the celebration of All Souls Day on November 2. Similarly, Lorde writes that her mother “taught us one [prayer] to the mother that I never learned in school,” a prayer to the Virgin, “my sweet mother.”\textsuperscript{172} In these ways Lorde’s earliest spiritual teachings included mixes of Catholicism and African spirituality, held together by the female imagery of a mother who would care for and protect her.

At the same time that she was learning about spirituality from her mother, Lorde also learned an appreciation for the female physical body from her mother, demonstrated through the scene of her mother combing her hair as she sat between her legs and the intimacy of physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain like a nutmeg nestled

\textsuperscript{169} Lorde, \textit{Zami: A New Spelling of My Name}. 9.

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid. 14.

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid, 10.
inside its covering of mace.” Claudine Raynaud writes that this scene “expresses her rapport with her mother, her sense of belonging to the island of Carriacou, and discloses the source of her lesbianism...The rich red color of the mace netting before the nutmeg is dried...is the secret sign of home, the island of Carriacou, of Grenada, one of the main producers of nutmeg.” And directly following this scene in the narrative is a tender scene of Saturday morning in bed with her mother where “Warm milky smells of morning surround us,” a scene that likewise shows the importance of the physical, maternal presence in Lorde’s development.

Closely connected to the spiritual and the physical are the sensuous descriptions of her mother’s West Indian mortar: “I loved to finger the hard roundness of the carved fruit, and the always surprising termination of the shapes as the carvings stopped at the rim and the bowl sloped abruptly downward, smoothly oval but abruptly businesslike.” In her mother’s kitchen, Lorde feels the stirrings of sexual desire:

with one hand firmly pressed around the carved side of the mortar caressing the wooden fruit with my aromatic fingers. I thrust sharply downward, feeling the shifting salt and the hard little pellets of garlic right up through the shaft of the wooden pestle. Up again, down, around, and up...All of these transported me into a world of scent and rhythm and movement and sound that grew more and more exciting as the ingredients liquefied.

Raynaud connects this with African culture and myth since the “stone for oil crushing is a symbol for female genitalia” in a village of Sudan. And on the day of her first menstruation, Audre’s mother agrees to cook her favorite dish for supper and leaves to

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172 Ibid, 10.
173 Ibid, 33.
175 Ibid, 71.
176 Ibid, 74.
get tea. While she is away, Lorde prepares the spices: "I smelled the delicate breadfruit smell rising up from the front of my print blouse that was my own womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious."\textsuperscript{178} Then the narrator, as a grown woman, relates her fantasy of her mother and herself, "slowly, thoroughly, our touching and caressing each other's most secret places."\textsuperscript{179} As she grinds the spices, "There was a heavy fullness at the root of me that was exciting and dangerous."\textsuperscript{180} In the narrative to follow, Lorde will trace this root through her matrilineage to arrive at an understanding of the connection between the spiritual and the sexual. At this point, however, this root is "shameful" and "dangerous" because of the pain associated with it, coupled with the prohibitions against speaking of the pain. In breaking these prohibitions, Lorde rewrites history, both personal and collective.

\textbf{Turning to history for healing}

While as a child Audre was learning these sexual and spiritual lessons from her mother, it was not until she was an adult that she was able to connect the teachings of her mother with a larger, historical narrative. Lorde writes that as an immigrant from an island that could not be found on any map, "my mother was different from the other women I knew."\textsuperscript{181} Her parents speak in patois, using words the meanings of which Lorde can only guess, words that she calls "my mother's secret poetry."\textsuperscript{182} Growing up, her mother would tell her of "the Sunday-long boat trips that took her to Aunt Anni's in
Carriacou. Carriacou first enters Lorde’s consciousness as a legend that provides her with a vision of women together:

Here Aunt Anni lived among the other women who saw their men off on the sailing vessels, then tended goats and groundnuts, planted grain and poured rum on the earth to strengthen the corn’s growing, built their women’s houses and the rainwater catchments, harvested the limes, wove their lives and the lives of their sea-faring men easily, because they came to love each other, past the men’s returning. Madivine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty.  

As she grows older, Lorde begins to think that her mother is crazy or mistaken, that there really is no place called Carriacou, yet she harbors hopes for its existence: “But underneath it all as I was growing up, home was still a sweet place somewhere else which they had not managed to capture yet on paper.”

When she is 26 years old, Lorde finally locates Carriacou on a map in the Encyclopedia Britannica, which underlines the island’s history as a colony. Anna Wilson writes that “the reality of Carriacou as a mapped space indicates the inexorable colonization of the world; but it also reinforces the need for Lorde to redescribe it, to give it a voice and a significance that is not the strangled one of the former colony.” As an adult, Lorde visits Grenada, the island where her mother lived after her family left Carriacou. There, she writes, “I saw the root of my mother’s powers walking through the streets.” Although Lorde’s visit to Grenada is not ostensibly part of the story, she incorporates this visit and her newfound knowledge of Carriacou into the narrative.

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182 Ibid, 32.
183 Lorde, Zami, 11.
185 Ibid, 14.
187 Lorde, Zami, 9.
What Lorde discovers is that the love between women in Carriacou is not only legend; it is also history. Since in Carriacou men go away for long periods of time on fishing and trade expeditions, the women have a practice of *zami*, or lesbianism, while the men are away.\(^{188}\) In Carriacou the men say “women are hotter than men” and only women can satisfy other women.\(^{189}\) Donald Hill writes, “One informant claimed that virtually every wife whose husband had gone away several years or more is a *zami*.\(^{190}\) Further, the women very rarely stop their lesbianism when their husbands return. When the man does return, however, it is often difficult for him to regain sexual favors from his wife, so he permits her to remain *zami*, “hoping she will become bisexual.”\(^{191}\) Thus, through the history of Carriacou, Lorde is able to connect her lesbianism to a drive from her mother’s blood and find the context that gives her own life meaning—the milieu of lesbian desire and practice.

However, this sexual matrilineage is not entirely separate from the spiritual roots that Lorde finds in Carriacou. From Hill, Lorde would have learned that Carriacou had been a French colony in the West Indies that imported slaves from Africa. The island became a British colony briefly during the American war of Independence in 1763 and then again in 1784. By then, French cultural forms (including Catholicism) had been established. After 1808, when Britain prohibited the importation of slaves to West Indian colonies, the elite left the island, leaving it an island of people of African descent whose inhabitants speak French patois and English dialect and in whom Catholicism is deeply rooted. Thus,

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\(^{188}\) Lorde writes that “*zami*” is *patois* for ‘lesbian’, based on the French expression, les amies. 385, 393.


\(^{191}\) Hill, 281.
the Catholic/African mix of religion that Lorde learned from her mother has its roots in the history of colonization and slavery in Carriacou. Further, the prayer to the "mother" that Lorde learned would be explained by the link between the Virgin and great goddess religions in Africa. Three basic elements of African spirituality that often survive colonization and are integrated into new forms of syncretic religion—mothering, the connection to the earth, and the connection of spirituality and sexuality—are dramatized in the narrative.192

In describing her first sexual encounter in high school with her friend Marie, Lorde writes, "We lay awake far into the night, snuggling under the covers by the light of the votive candle on Our Lady's altar in the corner, kissing and hugging and giggling in low tunes so her mother wouldn't hear us."193 Thus, Audre's first positive sexual experience happens in the presence of mothers—both the physical mother of Marie and the spiritual mother, Mary. This scene also sets up the connection between sexuality and spirituality that Lorde will draw in her subsequent sexual encounters.

In the description of Audre making love with a woman for the first time, Lorde writes, "I surfaced dizzy and blessed with her rich myrrh-taste in my mouth, in my throat, smeared over my face."194 We might compare this encounter with the incident with the man in the comic store that we explored earlier in Chapter 2. In this encounter, however, Audre goes down into blessing rather than up into danger, emphasizing the source of blessing from below, from the earth, rather than from the heaven above. Also, the use of myrrh connotes a holy gift in Christianity, which shows Lorde's connection to elements

192 Steele, 124.
193 Lorde, Zami, 120.
194 Ibid, 139.
of Christianity. We should note, as well, that Audre’s love-making with this woman, Ginger, happens with Ginger’s mother’s knowledge and in the mother’s house.

Lorde again connects the syncretic nature of religion with the mother when in Mexico, her lover, Eudora, whom Lorde describes as having the mark of an Amazon from her mastectomy, teaches her how “the women in San Christobal de las Casas give the names of Catholic saints to their goddesses.”195 Eudora also teaches her about the connections “between Mexico and Africa and Asia” and about the destruction of Aztec culture by the Europeans, a “genocide [that] rivals the Holocaust.”196 In addition to these lessons about history and mythology, Audre learns another lesson from Eudora, who “knew many things about loving women that I had not learned”; it is with Eudora that Audre allows herself to be made love to for the first time.197

Finally, the Amazon from Africa and the myrrh from Jerusalem mix with the corn of America when Lorde writes of all of her friends and lovers, fellow zamis, “Their names, selves, faces feed me like corn before labor.”198 This corn image again underscores Lorde’s connection to goddess mythologies; the corn mother is a common image in many indigenous cultures of the Americas, and holds within it the power of fertility, the nourishment between generations, and the promise of democracy. In all these ways, Lorde receives spiritual sustenance from her historical and cultural mothers in Africa, the Caribbean, and America.199

195 Ibid, 170.
196 Ibid, 170.
197 Ibid, 170.
198 Ibid, 256.
199 Steele, 125.
A ‘new’ spelling of her name: turning history into myth for healing

The ultimate connection between spirituality and sexuality can be found in the final scenes of the narrative, which show Lorde’s connection to her deepest mother root in Africa through the character of Afrekete. Significantly, just before the narrative turns toward Afrekete, there is a scene in which Audre boards a bus at a “corner,” or crossroads:

The bus door opened and I placed my foot upon the step. Quite suddenly, there was music swelling up in my head, as if a choir of angels had boarded the Second Avenue bus directly in front of me. They were singing the last chorus of an old spiritual of hope:

Gonna die this death
on Cal—va—ryyyyy
BUT AIN’T GONNA
die
no more....!
...I suddenly stood upon a hill in the center of an unknown country, hearing the sky fill with a new spelling of my own name.  

But what can it mean to discover “a new spelling” of one’s name? Like the description of her life in the Epilogue as “new living the old in a new way,” Lorde’s phrase suggests both continuity and change. She is not transformed into a new person; rather, she sees herself differently. In *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, Carol P. Christ defines such transitions in consciousness as “awakenings.” She contrasts the epiphanies described by women with those depicted by their male counterparts and explains that unlike traditional religious conversions that entail the seeker’s self-abandonment, the spiritual awakenings in woman-authored texts imply the reverse. Rather than lose herself, the protagonist finds herself as she strips away the false labels and acquires a new sense of agency. Christ emphasizes that an important part of this process is the

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protagonist’s “new naming,” her ability to translate this experience into words she can share with others, thus making possible collective transformations. She associates this linguistic power with social change: “As women begin to name the world for themselves not only will they create new life possibilities for women, they will also upset the world order that has been taken for granted for centuries.”

This naming process has additional, historically specific implications for women in the African diaspora. As Hortense Spillers asserts in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” naming has functioned as “one of the key sources of a bitter Americanizing for African persons.” Indeed, the “dehumanized naming” that occurred during the enslavement of African peoples could be more accurately described as a violent disnaming because it entailed an incredible cultural severance encompassing “the destruction of the African name, of kin, of linguistic, and ritual connections.” This “Americanization” stripped away gender roles, severed body from flesh, and converted human offspring into property. Given this violent disjuncture, it is extremely significant that Audre’s “new naming” directly precedes her encounter with Afrekete, Lorde’s personalized version of West African linguist and trickster figure. By rewriting her Yoruba/Fon myth, she invents a discovered connection between the irrevocably lost indigenous African past and her life in twentieth century American culture. Put differently, Afrekete serves as a conversion principle enabling Lorde to develop an Africanized “blackness” that collapses

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202 Christ, 24.
204 Spillers, 73.
conventional distinctions between invention and discovery. Her body becomes text as she emerges, "blackened and whole...becoming Afrekete."\(^{205}\)

**Searching for Afrekete**

But who is Afrekete? From a pantheon of almost six hundred orisha,\(^{206}\) Audre Lorde has selected a figure never mentioned in scholarly works on the subject. Background to the role of Afrekete in African myth will provide us with greater understanding of her significance in Lorde’s “biomythography.” Indeed, in *The Black Unicorn* Lorde herself does not refer to Afrekete by name. And although in *Zami* she describes Afrekete as MawuLisa’s “youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we all must become,”\(^{207}\) in Dahomean and Fon mythic narratives MawuLisa’s youngest child is generally portrayed as a highly masculinized figure named Eshu/Legba.\(^{208}\) Like Afrekete, this orisha is the divine linguist and trickster. Lorde explains in *The Black Unicorn* that Eshu/Legba is:

> the youngest and most clever son of Yemanja (or of MawuLisa). The mischievous messenger between all the other Orisha-Vodu and humans, he knows their different languages and is an accomplished linguist who both transmits and interprets. This function is of paramount importance because the orisha do not understand each other’s language, nor the language of humans. Eshu is a prankster, also, a personification of all unpredictable elements in life. He is often identified with the masculine principle, and his primary symbol is frequently a huge erect phallus. But Eshu-Elegba has no priests, and in many Dahomean religious rituals, his part is danced by a woman with an attached phallus.\(^{209}\)

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\(^{205}\) Lorde, *Zami*, 5. Her italics.

\(^{206}\) ‘Orisha’ is the singular form for the Yoruba pantheon of gods and goddesses.

\(^{207}\) Ibid, 255. Her italics.

\(^{208}\) Actually, this Yoruban/Fon trickster has many names—Eshu, Esu, Exu, Elegba, Elegbara, Ech-u-Elegua, Legba, Papa Legba, and Papa La Bas. I refer to this complex figure as Eshu/Legba, primarily because these are the names that I was taught.

Eshu/Legba is a perpetually liminal figure, a mediator symbolizing the disruption of boundaries that bring about personal, social, and cosmic change. According to Lorde, Afrekete is the female precursor to the Yoruban god, Eshu, the trickster, god of the crossroads. In Fon metaphysics Legba's mediation role is highly disruptive yet viewed in a positive light, for Legba's ability to generate conflict is closely associated with magic and transformations of all kinds. Henry Louis Gates characterizes Eshu as masculine: “the divine linguist...guardian of the crossroads, master of style and the stylus, phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of the mystical barrier that separates the divine from the profane world.”

Similarly, Ana Louis Keating remarks that, through Afrekete, Lorde “appropriates for herself the linguistic and authority generally associated with masculinity.” Although Eshu/Legba’s hypermasculinity is far more complex than Gates here implies, this trickster figure is not “really” masculine. Or, rather, s/he is no more masculine than feminine. As Gates himself points out, although he consistently refers to this orisha “in the masculine, Esu is also genderless, or of dual gender, as recorded Yoruba and Fon myths suggest, despite his remarkable penis feats...Each time I have used the masculine pronoun for the referent Esu, then, I could have properly used the feminine.” However, in defining Afrekete as the precursor to Eshu, Lorde stresses the figure’s mixture of both masculine and feminine characteristics. As precursor, Afrekete is, we might say, the mother of Eshu/Legba.

In Yoruban mythology, the mother of Eshu is the god/dess of the crossroads, MawuLisa. Some critics do identify Afrekete as MawuLisa. Claudine Raynaud writes

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211 Keating, 166.
that Afrekete is a bisexual personification of Mawu (the moon, female) and Lisa (the sun, male): “Whenever there is an eclipse of the sun or moon it is said that Mawu and Lisa are making love.” Mary K. DeShazer also identifies Afrekete as MawuLisa, “a mother of both sorrow and magic...[who] created the world.” Likewise, Ana Louis Keating connects Afrekete to MawuLisa by recalling that Lorde calls Eshu a son of MawuLisa in The Black Unicorn.

Rather than identifying Afrekete as either Eshu/Legba or MawuLisa, however, I want to stress the figure’s syncretic function, as s/he brings together all the mothers—personal, historical, and mythological—in Lorde’s narrative. Afrekete, thus, is part recuperation of the cultural myth and part invention. Both cross-gendered and bisexual, Afrekete is both mother and master, nurturing and philosophical; s/he shows that the values of “female” mothering and “male” competence with language and meaning are equally necessary in order to survive on these borders between cultures.

Home at last: ‘becoming’ Afrekete

The final scenes of Zami show the ultimate connection between sexuality and spirituality as they depict lovemaking as a rite, which includes references to mass, ritual, prayer, and transubstantiation, and union. Lorde writes that her lovemaking with Afrekete is an act of “making moon honor love...sacred as the ocean at high tide.” The site of the lovemaking occurs amid a “mass of green plants that Afrekete tended

212 Gates, 29.
213 Raynaud, 237.
215 Keating, 164-165.
religiously,” and their motions imitate those of religious ritual: “squeezed the pale yellow-green fruit juice in thin ritual lines back and forth over and around your coconut-brown belly...massaged it over your thighs and between your breasts until your brownness shone like a light through a veil.” Their coming together is a prayer: “Afrekete Afrekete ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman’s power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters, that the discarded evils, abandoned at all crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys.” It is a prayer to leave behind her own sufferings, like many prayers, but this prayer goes out not to an external deity but to a meeting of bodies, a connection that is both sexual and spiritual.

Most importantly, the lovemaking as religious rite concludes in transubstantiation. Transubstantiation implies change and becoming, mystery and magic, which, as in Christianity, is performed through the body; in this case it occurs through the body of Afrekete. Here Afrekete is identified as the youngest daughter of MawuLisa, who Lorde herself becomes as she incorporates the inheritance of her mothers: “Mawu-lisa, thunder, sky, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we all must become.” As biological daughter of her own mother and spiritual daughter of her cultural mothers, Lorde, through her spiritual-sexual union with Afrekete, loves her mother and becomes

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216 Steele, 127.
217 Lorde, Zami, 252.
218 Ibid, 251. Her italics.
220 Steele, 127.
221 Ibid, 255. Her italics.
her. In loving and becoming Afrekete, Lorde bodily inherits the mothers’ histories and myths that give her the sustenance, nurturance, and stability to grow strong and tall.

Lorde writes, "Afrekete taught me roots." Indeed, all her mothers—personal, historical, and mythological—provide her with the roots she needs to work through a traumatic history. Digging up these roots, entwined with violence, pain and silence, enables Lorde not only to envision healing but to make it possible. This healing comes through a sexual-spiritual reclamation of her personal, historical, and mythological mother roots. In weaving these mothers into her narrative, Lorde links history and myth by showing how myths can change history. Lorde teaches that the histories of slavery, rape, and sexual abuse, and their consequences of silence, numbness, and pain, may be transformed not when we leave these histories behind but when we return to them, when together, black women bear collective witness to and are touched by the pain of the past. Only after such a process may traumatic history be accompanied by a history of matrilineage, which leads us toward speaking, loving, and healing. Lorde’s biomythography is, finally, the complex history of all these mother roots.

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222 Ibid. 250.
Chapter 5—Conclusion

While indeed this study has demonstrated how the work of Audre Lorde teaches us to witness and heal from America's traumatic histories, it also shows that we, as a nation, are often not as we think we are. As Cassie Steele Premo so wisely observed, it is often the next generation who has the courage—or the audacity—to cry out that the emperor has no clothes. I have found this to be true—for myself, young enough to have Audre Lorde as my mother.

What Audre Lorde's writing opens up is the possibility that we might see through the mirages of our society: war as triumph, women as victims, family as sanctuary, the present as disconnected from the past, the mind as disconnected from the body, and spirituality as disconnected from sexuality. To conclude, then, I would like to share some of my insights to suggest ways that we, as writers, readers, teachers, scholars, and a community—might serve the next generation of children, as Lorde says, "wherever we may find them."

Before beginning this study I found it extremely difficult to write about the histories and realities of black female traumatic silence, especially coming from a middle class and Southern Baptist background where such issues are rarely spoken of in public. Although I was keen enough as a child to witness to the plague of racism by the dominant culture, there seemed to be an additional component to the equation; mainly, the absence of a constructive, healing dialogue within the black community. The dearth of insight into our cultural past mystified me. As I took on this project I was hoping to come to a personal catharsis and gain new perception into the traumatic histories that bind us and the
possibilities of healing that can set us free.

As I struggled with the disarming realities of silence, I found a kinship with the writings of Audre Lorde. I first came into the knowledge of her work in 1997, as a college student grappling with the desire to write fiction and poetry about the experiences of black women. I was undergoing a great deal of personal pain during this time as well, mainly, a burdensome sense of personal dissatisfaction with the quality of my work and a longing to escape from my present circumstances. In haste, at the local library on a summer afternoon, I picked up a then-unfamiliar volume of poetry, Lorde’s 1978 *The Black Unicorn*. It shook me to the core of my being. I followed this reading with several of Lorde’s other writings, specifically, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and *Sister Outsider* (1984). In these readings Lorde appeared to me in a way that no other writer had ever done: mythic, revolutionary, radical. I began to share my silences. In this burst of renewed creativity I wrote and completed a full-length novel in the summer of 1999. As a graduate student I decided to return my literary scholarship to Audre Lorde to complete this cycle of nurturance, for it is largely Lorde’s inspiration that is responsible for this stage in my academic and personal development.

Although my reasons for taking on this study and my encounter with Lorde is a personal one, her work demonstrates to us how the possibility for healing comes about through an understanding that the “I” arises as a result of the “we.” Through her writing, she teaches that both individual actions and collective traits stem from specific histories. Discerning the individual’s place in this collective history leads to the necessity of taking personal responsibility for the pain of the past and the possibility of the future. Lorde’s work thus not only shows how the “I” is connected to the “we” through history, but
moreover shows how each of us has the responsibility to witness to this history.

In witnessing, we participate in the reconstruction and recognition of the violence of the past and of the present that it creates. In turn, we come to see that each, individually, has the responsibility to witness to our own failure to recognize this history. Through this participation, we come to see our individual selves as a “we” who together make the choice to respect each other’s differences—sexual, social, racial, or otherwise.

Although this study suffers from its own limitations (the multiplicity of Lorde’s identities may leave the possibility that they never be given their full critical scope), it is my hope that one comes away from this study with the understanding that healing for black women cannot be conceived as either simple or certain. For Lorde, healing is not a product but a process. It is the endless effort to come to speech, to wade through the histories of silence, and to overcome fear so that one might be able to testify to a violent history. Through recognizing the resiliency in our doubly conscious black female culture and witnessing the strength of our mothers we are encouraged to turn to them for healing, to the “roots” from which we can derive power and hope for this future. Lorde teaches that, especially for a culture of people so violently torn from its roots, it is vital to see the still-surviving connections to that source of nurturance, to see our lives as following in the footsteps of others who continue to sustain us. She warns that if we refuse this recognition of our shared journeys we only contribute to our continued annihilation at the hands of the dominant culture. This work is never ending, and yet, it is the only way that we have to survive.
Appendix A

A Litany for Survival

For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who live in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children’s mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours;

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
learning to be afraid with our mother’s milk
for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be found
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
For all of us
this instant and this triumph
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid
it might not remain
when the sun sets we are afraid
it might not rise in the morning
when our stomachs are full we are afraid
of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid.

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.

-Audre Lorde, 1978
Appendix B

Coal

I
Is the total black, being spoken
From the earth's inside.
There are many kinds of open.
How a diamond comes into a knot of flame
How a sound comes into a word, coloured
By who pays what for speaking.

Some words are open
Like a diamond on glass windows
Singing out within the crash of passing sun
Then there are words like stapled wagers
In a perforated book—buy and sign and tear apart—
And come whatever wills all chances
The stub remains
An ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.
Some words live in my throat
Breeding like adders. Others know sun
Seeking like gypsies over my tongue
To explode through my lips
Like young sparrows bursting from a shell.
Some words
Bedevil me.

Love is a word another kind of open—
As a diamond comes into a knot of flame
I am black because I come from the earth's inside
Take my word for jewel in your open light.

-Audre Lorde, 1973
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