

Analyzing zami: the
mother and the
motherland in the
formation of a black,
queer,...



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In *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* by Audre Lorde, Lorde invents a new genre that she calls “biomythography,” a genre in which she can explore her experiences, emotions, and life-journey in a way that emphasizes emotions, eroticism, and the mythological. Through the development of this genre, Lorde presents reality and myth woven together in harmony, as opposed to being presented in a traditional Western binary. This allows Lorde to explore various relationships in her life in a unique way that rejects binary opposition and Western/colonial modes of thinking. Lorde’s complex relationship with her mother and her motherland, Carriacou, is crucial to the formation of her queer, Black, female identity.

Lorde’s relationship with Linda is strongly connected to Linda’s ties to Carriacou, the motherland; Lorde’s seemingly physical and erotic desires surrounding her mother represent a longing beyond physicality. Through her often rocky relationship with her mother, Lorde longs for emotional intimacy, female community, and home. Lorde’s mother was an immigrant from Carriacou, a place that Lorde had never been and could not find on a map until she “was twenty-six years old” (Lorde 14). Linda’s stories of Carriacou made Lorde imagine Carriacou as “a sweet place, [...] my truly private paradise” (Lorde 14). Throughout the book, the images of Carriacou serve as a mental spot of respite for Lorde. However, without her mother, Lorde would have no concept of her paradise, as she notes when she writes that “home was [...] a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother’s mouth” (Lorde 256). Audre’s own ties to the motherland depend on her mother, thus creating a direct connection between Linda and a sense of home and belonging. In her essay “Becoming Her Mother’s Mother,” Stephanie Li

writes, “ The vexed relationship between Lorde and her mother is the foundation of the poet’s journey to voice and home in the text” (Li 141). Most often, the fights between Lorde and her mother surround her mother’s emotional unavailability. Scholar Bethany Jacob writes, “ Lorde’s lesbianism [serves] as an effort to fill the void of love left by Linda” due to Linda’s harshness and emotional unavailability. This prompts the eroticized image of Linda, which is not a reflection of physical desires, but of emotional desire instead. In one passage, Lorde describes a scene in which she has “ a fantasy of [her] mother, [...] looking down upon [her] lying on the couch, and then slowly, thoroughly, [...] touching and caressing each other’s most secret places” (Lorde 78). This early description of Audre’s same-sex desire stems from her mother and a lack of maternal love. While this description seems graphic, it reflects a desire to be intimate with her mother on an emotional level and to connect with her, which is represented by the physical connection that Lorde describes. The desire to connect with her mother, the woman who ties her to the motherland of Carriacou, directly relates to Lorde’s desires for a sense of home, belonging, and community.

Linda’s eroticism not only reflects Lorde’s own desire to connect emotionally with her mother and her motherland, but it also reflects Lorde’s belief that eroticism is a mode of female empowerment. Linda is portrayed as a force to be reckoned with from the beginning of the book. Lorde recognizes that her mother is “ a very powerful woman, [...] something else quite different from ordinary woman, from simply ‘ woman.’ It certainly did not, on the other hand, equal ‘ man.’ What then? What was the third designation?” (Lorde 15). She continues, pondering what the difference is, coming to the conclusion

that there is a certain queerness about powerful women. She refers to them as “ Black dykes,” using the term in a broader sense, “ in the sense of powerful and women-oriented women [...] And that includes my momma” (Lorde 15). Personally, Lorde observes a wider definition of lesbianism in which

“ lesbianism is a subject position derived most importantly from the presence of a powerful maternal figure. From this perspective, her claim to a lesbian legacy is not ‘ fictive’ [...] but rather operates through a definition of lesbianism that is not limited to sexual desire. Lorde suggests that lesbianism consists of more than physical intimacy between women; it involves a specific orientation rooted in the care provided by a strong black mother in opposition to the hostilities and injustices of a racist and sexist society” (Li 144).

Therefore, Lorde reads her mother as a lesbian. Linda’s power is emphasized by the eroticism that surrounds her. Especially in the first eleven chapters of the book, Linda is portrayed in a particularly erotic way, but also as an emotionally unavailable, harsh woman. While some readers consider the eroticism of Linda by Lorde to be taboo/incestuous, Audre Lorde has a broader perspective of eroticism and the powers it holds. In her 1984 essay “ Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power,” Lorde distinguishes between eroticism and pornography by describing the erotic “ as an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (Lorde 55). Taking into consideration that eroticism is not necessarily sexual and that Lorde understands eroticism <https://assignbuster.com/analyzing-zami-the-mother-and-the-motherland-in-the-formation-of-a-black-queer-female-identity/>

as a form of female empowerment, one can assume that the eroticism of Lorde's mother adds to her power as a woman. Not only does it add to her power as a woman, but it adds to her power as a woman of color.

Traditionally, Black females are either over-sexualized/fetishized or made into asexual figures like the Mammy trope. Often times, Black women are seen as either one trope or the other, and both tropes remove the woman's agency and individual sexual identity; however, Lorde's use of eroticism is sensual and powerful in a poetic way that defies both stereotypes of Black women's sexuality. For instance, Lorde describes Linda while she is brushing Audre's hair in an extremely sensual way: " I remember the warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of our physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain" (Lorde 33). Here, Lorde describes the intimacy between mother and daughter in a sensual way, with Linda particularly eroticized with her " warm mother smell [...] between her legs." The eroticism adds to Linda's power, while it also sparks " Audre's process of associating the strength and authority of the maternal figure with the pleasure and power of the erotic" (Jacobs). Taking into account Lorde's broader perspectives on both lesbianism and the erotic, Linda reads as an empowered Black, queer, female, who helps Audre form her own empowered Black, queer, female identity.

The connection to the motherland naturalizes and depathologizes Lorde's homosexuality. On Carriacou, a legend says that lesbianism is prevalent among the women on the island " who survived the absence of their seafaring men" (Lorde 14). This legend makes space for homosexuality within the culture, hereby naturalizing it. In stark contrast, homosexuality in

America was pathologized; homosexuality was not removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders until 1973, and other similar diagnostic categories such as “ ego-dystonic homosexuality” were not fully removed from the DSM until 1986 (Herek). Through Carriacou, Lorde feels a sense of home, belonging, comfort, and community that she cannot find in America due to the pathologization of homosexuality. It is important to note that Lorde can only find this belonging and community through her mother’s connection to Carriacou. In the epilogue of the book, Lorde writes, “ There [Carriacou] it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother’s blood,” which strengthens her mother’s role in Audre’s construction of her queer, Black, female identity because same-sex desire stems directly “ from the mother’s blood” (Lorde 256). Unlike Western culture, which traditionally silences queer voices and renders queer people invisible, Carriacou has language for queerness, which is crucial in developing Audre’s self-concept. The title of the book, “ Zami” is “ a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers” (Lorde 255). Lorde repeats this word and definition on several occasions throughout the book. Naming and language is extremely important in the development of identity and self-concept, which Lorde recognizes when she goes to Mexico: “ For the first time in my life, I had an insight into what poetry could be. I could use words to recreate that feeling, rather than to create a dream, which was so much of my writing had been before” (Lorde 160). Queerness exists in America as a diagnosis instead of a word. In Carriacou, queerness exists as a word, as “ poetry,” transforming homosexuality into “ feeling, rather than [...] a dream,” or something intangible, invisible, unheard,

unseen. By naming queerness in a non-pathologized way, Carriacou continues to make a space for queerness within the culture.

Without the connection to her mother and the motherland, Lorde would have been stuck within a culture that does not name homosexuality, but rather diagnoses it. Linda and Lorde's relationship is a main element in the formation of her female, Black, queer identity. If Lorde had not been connected to Carriacou through her mother, queerness and female empowerment would have been even more difficult to come to terms with.

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