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Sexual Subject and Textual Braid: Autobiographical Politics of Emancipation in Audre Lorde's *Zami*

Sujeto sexual y trenza textual: políticas autobiográficas de emancipación en *Zami* de Audre Lorde

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Abstract: A critical study of Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* reveals that Lorde employs the embodied narrative as an emancipatory space, weaving together geography, history, myth, and biography to construct a revolutionary self—one that directly challenges heterosexist domination and the rigid, unitary concepts of identity and authorship. This paper examines how Lorde's naming of both the narrator as "Zami" and the text as a "biomythography" enacts a radical form of resistance, decentering the traditional autobiographical subject and instead positioning a Black lesbian consciousness at the core of the narrative. Through an intricate interplay of intertextual and intratextual storytelling, Lorde constructs an alternative autobiographical form that resists Western hegemonic discourses of the "I." Drawing on Sidonie Smith's concept of the "manifesto" and Françoise Lionnet's métissage as strategies of autobiographical emancipation, we argue that in *Zami*, Audre Lorde not only reclaims Black lesbian subjectivity but also deconstructs conventional narrative structures, employing a braided textuality that subverts dominant Western autobiographical traditions.
Keywords: Sexual "I;" poetics of difference; trickster; textual braid; genre blend.

Summary: Introducing Emancipatory Politics. Metissage and Manifesto. Revisiting Existing Scholarship and Framing Method. Autobiographical Subject in the Poetics of Differences. "I" as a Sexual Subject. Afrekete as the Sexual "I" and Textual Trope of Trickster. Sexual-Textual Braid. Narrative Braid in the Genre Blend. Conclusion.

Resumen: Un estudio crítico de *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* de Audre Lorde revela que Lorde emplea la narrativa corporizada como un espacio de sutura de emancipación, entrelazando geografía, historia, mito y biografía para construir un yo revolucionario que desafía directamente la dominación heterosexista y los conceptos rígidos y unitarios de identidad y autoría. Este artículo examina cómo la denominación que Lorde hace tanto de la narradora como de "Zami" y del texto como una "biomitografía" representa una forma radical de resistencia, descentrando el sujeto autobiográfico tradicional y, en cambio, posicionando una conciencia lésbica negra en el centro de la narrativa. A través de una intrincada interacción de narrativas intertextuales e intratextuales, Lorde construye una forma autobiográfica alternativa que resiste los discursos hegemónicos occidentales del "yo". Basándome en el concepto de "manifiesto" de Sidonie Smith y el métissage de Françoise Lionnet como estrategias de emancipación autobiográfica, sostengo que en *Zami*, Audre Lorde no solo recupera la subjetividad lésbica negra sino que también deconstruye las estructuras narrativas convencionales, empleando una textualidad trenzada que subvierte las tradiciones autobiográficas occidentales dominantes.
Palabras clave: "Yo" sexual; poética de la diferencia; embaucador; trenza textual; mezcla de géneros.
Sumario: Introducción a la política emancipadora. Mestizaje y manifiesto. Sujeto autobiográfico en la poética de las diferencias. El "yo" como sujeto sexual, Afrekete como el "yo" sexual y tropo textual del embaucador. Trenza sexual-textual. Trenza narrativa en la mezcla de géneros. Conclusión.

INTRODUCING EMANCIPATORY POLITICS

In *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body*, Sidonie Smith asserts that for women who are culturally marginalized and whose voices are often deemed "inauthentic" (62), autobiography serves as a powerful language of assertion. Through this genre, autobiographical subjects engage with and challenge the dominant discourses that shape subjectivity. As unauthorized subjects, they are often positioned within contradictory frameworks, yet by drawing meaning from their lived experiences, they disrupt traditional autobiographical constructs of a free, autonomous self and linear narrative structures. Rather than adhering to manyautobiography conventions, these writers embrace the genre's inherent instability, using it as a reflection of their fluid consciousness and dynamic engagement with "subjectivity, identity, and narratives" (Smith, *Subjectivity* 62). Smith identifies these acts of resistance and self-definition as "emancipatory politics" (*Subjectivity* 188). She further argues that writing an autobiography as a "manifesto" is one of the most effective

ways to enact this autobiographical politics of emancipation. Similarly, Françoise Lionnet, in *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, and Self-Portraiture*, describes autobiographical writing as an "unfailing commitment to a process of emancipation that can redefine the nature and boundaries of the political" (xii). She argues that contemporary female writers, in their efforts to articulate the female self, find it entangled in patriarchal myths of identity. In the process of rediscovery, they interrogate "the sociocultural construction of race and gender" and challenge "the essentializing tendencies that perpetuate exploitation and subjugation . . . on behalf of those fictive differences created by discourses of power" (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices* 5). Finding existing traditions insufficient and disempowering, these writers construct a new vision of female authorship, which Lionnet identifies as the "politics . . . of métissage" (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices* 1), a blending of multiple voices, cultures, and influences to resist imposed hegemonies.

In fact, in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* Lorde employs the embodied narrative as a space of emancipation, weaving together geography, history, myth, and biography to construct a revolutionary self—one that directly challenges heterosexist domination and the rigid, unitary concepts of identity and authorship. This paper examines how Lorde's naming of both the narrator as "Zami" and the text as a "biomythography" enacts a radical form of resistance, decentering the traditional autobiographical subject and instead positioning a Black lesbian consciousness at the core of the narrative. Through an intricate interplay of intertextual and intratextual storytelling, Lorde constructs an alternative autobiographical form that resists Western hegemonic discourses of the "I." Drawing on Sidonie Smith's concept of the "manifesto" and Françoise Lionnet's métissage as strategies of autobiographical emancipation, we argue that in *Zami*, Audre Lorde not only celebrates Black lesbian subjectivity but also deconstructs conventional narrative structures, employing a braided textuality that subverts dominant Western autobiographical traditions.

1. METISSAGE AND MANIFESTO

Before analyzing the construction of subjectivity and narrative in the paper, it is important to discuss, in brief, how Lionnet and Smith define métissage and "manifesto" respectively**.** Françoise Lionnet, in her *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*, identifying the

life writings of women of color as the reflection of their heterogenous differences, theorizes autobiography as métissage. Métissage, nearly untranslatable, roughly translated as "braiding," views autobiography as an author's engagement with history, myth, and cultures and proclaims it as a braid of multiple voices and disparate forms. In autobiographical writing, Lionnet identifies métissage as a language of novel vision. As Lionnet asserts, "métissage is a praxis and cannot be subsumed under a fully elaborated theoretical system. . . a form of bricolage, [that] brings together biology and history, anthropology and philosophy, linguistics and literature" (*Autobiographical Voices*8) in the spaces of métissage:

> multiplicity and diversity are affirmed . . . For it is only by imagining non hierarchical modes of relation among cultures that we can address the crucial issues of indeterminacy and solidarity. . . Métissage is such a concept and a practice: it is the site of undecidability and indeterminacy where solidarity becomes the fundamental principle of political action against hegemonic languages. (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices* 5–6)

The present study reads métissage as "a way of merging and blurring genres, texts and identities; an active literary stance, [a] political strategy" (qtd. in Bishop et al. 2) of blending history with myth, personal with communal in the crafting of the autobiographical narratives of emancipation.

Sidonie Smith explores the concept of the autobiographical manifesto in her influential essay, "The Autobiographical Manifesto: Identities, Temporalities, Politics." She describes this form as one of several autobiographical strategies that lead to political empowerment. By challenging conventional notions of subjectivity that ignore differences and fostering resistance, the manifesto proposes a redefined relationship with identity, subjectivity, and the body. According to Smith, the autobiographical manifesto questions the supremacy of the singular "I," affirms the validity of alternative knowledge systems, politicizes the private while personalizing the public—thereby unsettling traditional binaries of selfhood—and ultimately "speaks to the future" (Smith, "The Autobiographical Manifesto" 194). In her work, Audre Lorde exemplifies this resistant subjectivity by intertwining self and sexuality in a way that aligns with Smith's vision of the autobiographical manifesto. Lorde challenges established narratives and politics by constructing a new, explicitly political "I" that disrupts the dominance of the universal subject.

Furthermore, in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Lorde's autobiographical narrative is deliberately political and serves as an emancipatory practice aimed at revealing both the "true" self and the reality of that self's experiences. In this exploration of identity and experience, she weaves together diverse myths and traditions, employing métissage as a model of female textuality.

2. Revisiting Existing Scholarship and Framing Method

Since its publication, *Zami* has been widely analyzed through black lesbian and generalized lesbian perspectives. Barbara Dibernard interprets it as a *Künstlerroman*, while Georgia Scribellito contextualizes it within the *Bildungsroman* tradition by examining its feminist and intercultural dimensions. Lynda Hall, focusing on Lorde's representations of lesbian identity, explores the performative nature of sexuality and gender in *Zami*. Stephanie Li highlights Lorde's shifting concept of home—from her mother's Carriacou to the embrace of women—whereas Stella Bolaki views the lesbian community as a theoretical home and traces the process of "making home" throughout the text. Bethany Jacobs identifies the maternal as both social and sexual, while Malini Sheoran frames it as an "ecological praxis" (1) in constructing black lesbian identity. Charlene Ball and AnnLouise Keating examine Lorde's engagement with myth, categorizing her as a revisionist mythmaker. Keating argues that Lorde replaces Judeo-Christian myth with African female-centered myth, while Ball asserts that she reinterprets both African and Eurocentric archetypes. Ashley Coleman Taylor compellingly posits that Lorde "alters her sense of self and her being through religio-erotic experience" (680). However, despite these varied interpretations, *Zami* is consistently analyzed as either a novel or an autobiographical fiction. Some scholars, such as Katie King and Benjamin Odhoji, classify *Zami* as an autobiography. King explores the interconnectivity between narrative strategy and identity but limits her discussion to lesbianism, overlooking other intersecting identities. Odhoji applies myth criticism, focusing on the role of maternal myth in identity construction. It can be argued that *Zami* aligns with the American slave narrative tradition, challenging Lorde's project of reversing traditional narratives. Similarly, Sarita Cannon situates the text within the Afro-American "autobiographical literacy narrative," emphasizing how Lorde uses literacy as a tool for empowerment. Unlike previous critiques, this study highlights how Lorde employs feminist autobiographical

strategies—specifically métissage and manifesto—as tools for reconfiguring subjectivity and form in marginalized authors' narratives. It explores myth and geography as textual tropes of resistance and empowerment, advancing *Zami*'s (Lorde) revolutionary agenda of reclaiming tradition and carving out space for Black lesbians. This analysis broadens our understanding of *Zami* (Lorde) as an autobiographical act of defying Western cultural hegemony in a postcolonial, global context.

The present study seeks to examine how Lorde employs Black lesbian subjectivity to subvert dominant discourses of race, gender, and sexuality and to what extent her narration embodies the unstable and hybridized form that both Smith and Lionnet associate with marginalized women's life writing. To explore these research questions the study adopts an interpretive, qualitative approach grounded in feminist autobiography theories of métissage and manifesto and explores the ways in which Lorde constructs a hybrid, politicized self within her biomythographical narrative. The methodology employed centers on textual analysis, thematic exploration, and genre examination, guided by the understanding that autobiography is not merely a record of personal history but a political site of resistance and emancipation. Employing a close textual analysis as the basis of this inquiry the study examines how the autobiographical "I" is constructed not as a unified, stable entity, but as a dynamic, fragmented, sexual subject. The employment of thematic coding that focuses on recurring motifs such as cultural memory, naming, heritage, and sexuality helps contextualize the narrative within broader socio-historical discourses, particularly those related to race, gender, and sexuality in mid-twentieth-century America. Reading Lorde's *Zami* within this methodological framework attests that Lorde deploys autobiography as a sexual-textual tool for constructing subjectivity and ensuring emancipation for the silent and marginalized others.

3. Autobiographical Subject in the Poetics of Differences

The closing line of *Zami*'s pre-prologue, "Becoming. Afrekete" (Lorde 5), signals the unfolding of an autobiographical enterprise in which the female subject assumes agency as both narrator and protagonist of her own story. However, for Lorde, this story resists categorization, as the narrator does not embody a singular, fixed identity but is instead immersed in what Neuman describes as the "poetics of differences" (*Zami* 223). As a self-affirming "black lesbian feminist mother lover poet" (Lorde, *The Cancer*

Journals 25), Lorde's autobiographical subjectivity exists at the shifting "intersections of race, nationality, religion, education, profession, class, language, gender, sexuality" (Neuman 224), historical context, and material conditions. In this framework, identity itself becomes a métissage—a weaving together of diverse strands. As Julia Watson argues, métissage challenges essentialist notions of womanhood by recognizing that women's identities are shaped by "ethnicity, class, time, and location rather than a singular feminist experience" (75). Lorde articulates this multiplicity when she writes:

> Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. (*Zami* 226)

Lorde's marginalization within white American masculine culture is a recurring theme throughout the text. As a child, Lorde endures gendered violence through molestation and rape. As a Black girl in a racist society, she regularly finds "a glob of grey spittle" on her coat or shoe during school. Lorde draws a direct correlation between her specific embodied experience—amputated, one-breasted, and surviving cancer—and her identity as a Black, lesbian, female, and working-class individual. She frames her body not as a passive site of affliction but as a palimpsest of survival and resistance. As in *The Cancer Journals* (Lorde) she poignantly asserts: "growing up Fat Black Female and almost blind in america requires so much surviving that you have to learn from it or die" (40). Her working-class struggle is further defined by occupational hazards—she accepts a job operating an X-ray machine because "there's not too much choice of jobs around here for Colored people, and especially not for Negro girls" (Lorde, *Zami* 125), unaware that "carbon tet destroys the liver and causes cancer of the kidneys" (Lorde, *Zami* 126). As a Black lesbian in the 1950s, Lorde's sense of alienation intensifies. She finds no place within the solidarity of either white women or Black men. Black women, conditioned by systemic racism, are taught to regard one another with "deep suspicion" (Lorde, *Zami* 224). At the same time, her sexual identity further isolates her: "Downtown in the gay bars [she] was a closet student and an invisible Black. Uptown at Hunter [she] was a closet dyke and a general intruder" (Lorde, *Zami* 179). Even as a gay subculture emerged in

resistance to heterosexual norms, Black lesbians remained on the margins, their visibility considered dangerous. Lorde reflects on this precarious existence: "To be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet in a white environment, even to the extent of dancing in the Bagatelle, was considered by many Black lesbians to be simply suicidal" (*Zami* 224).

Confronted with multiple layers of exclusion, Lorde found existing autobiographical models inadequate for representing her lived experience. She rejected both the self-representation traditions of male writers and the introspective personal narratives of white Western women. Instead, she fused history, myth, and biography with autobiography, creating a radical new form of self-narration that defied fixed categories. As an act of resistance, Lorde transforms writing into a political tool, crafting what Hartsock describes as "an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top and can transform the margins as well as the center" (qtd. in Smith, "The Autobiographical Manifesto" 191). By interweaving personal biography with history and myth, she reinvents the self as *Zami* (Lorde). This unconventional braiding of narrative forms is essential for articulating a new vision of both sexuality and textuality. In this analysis, *Zami* (Lorde) emerges as both a manifesto of self-invention and an assertion of the politics of identity. Its subtitle, "biomythography" becomes a textual métissage—a fusion of myth, reality, history, fantasy, and dream that resists imposed definitions and asserts the complexity of marginalized subjectivities.

4. "I" AS A SEXUAL SUBJECT

Audre Lorde opens *Zami* by exploring the histories of Grenadians and Barbadians, a move that, as Smith observes, allows her to transform experiences of oppression into a call for new awareness. By reclaiming an alternative cultural narrative, Lorde both critiques dominant political structures and "counter valorize an alternative nationalism" (Smith, "The Autobiographical Manifesto" 202). This cultural reclamation is especially evident in her depiction of Carriacou, her mother's homeland, which she presents as a site of intergenerational memory and identity. Reflecting on her visit to Grenada, Lorde writes:

> When I visited Grenada I saw the root of my mother's powers walking through the streets. I thought, this is the country of my foremothers, my forebearing mothers, those Black island women who defined themselves by what they did . . . There is a softer edge of African sharpness upon these women, and they swing through the rain-warm streets with an arrogant gentleness that I remember in strength and vulnerability. (*Zami* 9)

The vision of androgyny that Lorde seeks in the prologue is embodied in the women of Carriacou, who combine both masculine strength and feminine beauty. These women engage in daily labor, tending to animals, farming, and building homes, while also performing rituals to ensure prosperity. They sustain their families and communities, and in the absence of their men—who are often away at sea—they form deep bonds with one another, both as companions and lovers. Lorde affirms this unique sense of connection by highlighting the meaning of *Zami*, which she defines as "a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (*Zami* 255). She further emphasizes their legendary strength and beauty: "How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty" (Lorde, *Zami* 14). Through Carriacou, Lorde constructs a geography of women-identified women, where lesbianism is not merely a personal identity but a historical and social phenomenon. By reclaiming this cultural myth, she challenges dominant narratives of nationalism and belonging, centering Black women's resilience, labor, and love as acts of resistance.

In the text, Lorde realizes her sexuality as Zami: "*patois* for 'lesbian,' based on the French expression, *les amies*" (*Zami* 385), as Chinosole remarks, in the very moment of her first menstruation. In her mother's kitchen, when she was pounding spice with the mortar and pestle to make "souse," a traditional West Indian dish, to celebrate her first cycle, a love-making rhythm aroused in her. However, she didn't imagine the pestle as a phallus in a traditional way. On the contrary, the whole imagery of grinding spice with the mortar and pestle evoked a lesbian erotic in her mind and aroused a sexual awaking in her body and psyche, as she says, "I smelled the delicate breadfruit smell rising from my print blouse that was my own womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious" (Lorde, *Zami* 77). In Stella Bolaki's words, "Lorde sexualizes the Carriacou ritual of pounding spice" in order to embrace "a woman-identified sexuality" (201). Making this awakening as natural and autonomous as menstruation blood and as spicy as "souse," Lorde talks

back to the discourses of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 11) that women are by nature heterosexual. Against the repressive mechanisms of desire and myth of the body, Lorde reinvents the myth and reconnects it to her sexual identity to her matrilineal heritage as the sources of subjectivity, power, and emancipation. Naming her Zami, Lorde affirms her Black female sexuality and deploys the "arrogant gentleness," "strength," and "love" of her Carriacou mothers and grandmothers in her "I." Moreover, in her development of the self as a performing subject, she will be applying the place as an intertextual chronotopic space. Therefore, Lorde's ancestry is a trope to corroborate her difference not only as a Black female but also as a woman whose sense of survival comes from other women and who owes to many other women in her becoming process, reaching a new consciousness in the text.

A declaration of the subject as Zami or lesbian is an instance of witnessing the dislodgement of the "Eurocentric, phallogocentric 'I'" (Smith, "The Autobiographical Manifesto" 189) mostly white, able-bodied, heterosexual male human. This new subject treats sexuality as a vital point of belongingness, a source of power, and a form of subjectivity and resistance. According to Zimmerman, "As the protagonist assumes her lesbian identity through her first realization of love or sexuality, she also changes from an outsider into one who belongs; she has 'come home'" (249). Lorde politicizes lesbianism to answer the sexual hegemony of heteronormativity and those black feminists too "who once insisted that lesbianism was a white woman's problem now insist that Black lesbians are a threat to Black nationhood, are consorting with the enemy, are basically un-black" (*Sister Outsider* 121). Lorde foregrounds the body and creates the homosexual sublime by depicting Lorde's relationships with women as friends and lovers, who gave meaning to her living and provided fuel to her burning survival.

Through her experiences with various "journeywomen" in lesbian relationships, Audre Lorde explores her Black female sexuality in a revisionist manner. Lorde's intimacy with Eudora—an exiled white Texan woman who turned lesbian in Mexico—is depicted as an exchange of strength, creativity, and intellectual passion. Through her relationship with Eudora, Lorde portrays lesbian sexuality as a powerful antidote to invisibility. Eudora, as her gay lover, becomes a catalyst for Lorde's reclamation of freedom, beauty, and visibility. This transformation is metaphorically aligned with her experience in Mexico, which offered the tranquility and self-affirmation that New York and her childhood home

had denied her. In Mexico, Lorde learns that the word "negro" is used to mean "something beautiful" (*Zami* 173), mirroring Eudora's affirmation that she is "more beautiful than [she] know[s]" (*Zami* 165). Through both the space of Mexico and the gaze of Eudora, Lorde begins to see herself a new, stating: "It was in Mexico that I stopped feeling invisible. In the streets, in the buses, in the markets, in the Plaza, in the particular attention with in Eudora's eyes" (*Zami* 175). In this sense, Eudora and Mexico become symbolically interchangeable—both serve as sites of recognition, love, and self-discovery.

Beyond visibility, Lorde's relationship with Eudora celebrates lesbian sexuality as a vital source of emotional and physical strength, rooted in a network of women's love. Eudora's counsel—"waste nothing Chica, not even pain. Particularly not pain" (*Zami* 236)—resonates deeply with Lorde's writing in *The Cancer Journals*, where pain is reclaimed as a source of power and truth. Lorde writes not only of emotional suffering but also of embodied experience, giving voice to the body through her literature. The memory of Eudora—marked by "the pale keloids of radiation" (Lorde, *Zami* 167)—is evoked as a shared language of survival and resistance. It is as though Eudora, twenty-four years her senior and once her lover at nineteen, reappears symbolically before Lorde's mastectomy, offering a legacy of endurance and empowering her to face loss with courage and clarity in *The Cancer Journals*.

In her intimacy with Ginger, she challenges conventional beauty standards by celebrating Ginger's "snapping little dark eyes, skin the color of well-buttered caramel, and a body like the Venus of Willendorf" (Lorde, *Zami* 136). This description subverts the traditional ideal of white, slim, and rosy beauty, instead centering a "dark," "fat," and "caramel"-skinned Black body as desirable and powerful. With Muriel, her weird white lesbian partner, the erotic transforms into an all-encompassing force capable of healing and liberation. Lorde describes this power as "all-powerful," one that could "give word to . . . pain and rages . . . free . . . writings, cure racism, end homophobia" (*Zami* 210). Her activism in establishing a lesbian identity moves beyond physical relationships, embracing a broader vision of resistance and transformation. As Ruth Ginzberg argues, Lorde moves beyond a fixed lesbian identity, instead portraying it as a dynamic interplay of "acts, moments, relationships, encounters, attractions, perspectives, insights, outlooks, connections, and feelings" (82). Thus, Lorde's work introduces a revolutionary rhetoric of lesbianism, positioning herself as an active subject rather than the passive

object to which she has historically been confined. As Smith notes in "The Autobiographical Manifesto," "she purposefully identifies herself as subject, situating herself against the object-status to which she has been confined" (190). Through this reframing, Lorde not only reclaims her identity but also expands the possibilities of lesbian existence as a political and creative force.

5. Afrekete as the Sexual "I" and the Textual Trope of Trickster

Lorde intertwines the erotic body with linguistic expression through the trickster figure Afrekete, embedding her within what Smith terms "the representational politics of language" ("The Autobiographical Manifesto" 203) in the manifesto. Central to Lorde's representational politics is her identification of métissage as a means of reclaiming and reimagining the past. As Lionnet asserts, "renewed connections to the past can emancipate us, provided they are used to elaborate empowering myths for living in the present and for affirming our belief in the future" ("Métissage" 7). Lorde implements this process by weaving history, mythology, and language into a transformative narrative, embodied in the trickster figure of Afrekete. An African goddess and the youngest daughter of the mythical mother Mawu-Lisa, Afrekete originates within the African trickster tradition. Judy Grahn in *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay World* (1990) identifies Afrekete with Esu, the supreme trickster god, describing him as: "Eshu-Afrikete is the rhyme god, the seventh and youngest son in the old Mawulisa pantheon . . . As the trickster, he . . . makes connections, and is communicator, linguist, and poet. Only Afrikete knows all the language of the gods" (125).

By invoking Afrekete as a trickster figure, Lorde subverts dominant linguistic and mythological structures. As Gates notes, Esu, a key figure in African diasporic cultures, functions as "a trickster and . . . messenger of the gods [who] figures prominently in the mythologies of Yoruba cultures" (xxi). In *Zami*, Lorde reimagines Afrekete as the "youngest daughter," an embodiment of "linguistic skill and Black female strength, intelligence, and sexuality" (Provost 46). By situating Afrekete as a predecessor of Esu, Lorde not only revises the trickster myth but also reclaims divinity through a Black, female-centered perspective. Lorde's reimagining of mythology subverts the conventional depiction of a white male deity, thereby disrupting the binary framework of Western thought,

which prioritizes whiteness over Blackness, masculinity over femininity, and logic over emotion. This strategic reconfiguration aligns with Lorde's broader rejection of "the master's tools," allowing her to "spiritually remember and reconstruct [her] cultural past" (Keating 91). Through Afrekete, Lorde disrupts hegemonic narratives, reclaiming language and mythology as tools of empowerment and resistance for Black women.

With the reconstructed past in the trickster figure, Lorde writes freely of the "changing boundaries of our racial and sexual bodies" which Lionnet considers "an important step in the complex process of female emancipation" (Lionnet, "Métissage" 66). Lorde's handling of language, in *Zami*, becomes increasingly trickster-like when Afrekete emerges in the text not as Esu— an abstraction—but as a real-life woman, a friend, a partner in the bed through whom Lorde "links the revolutionary agenda of her emancipatory psychosexual politics" (Smith, "The Autobiographical Manifesto" 197) in print. Afrekete emerges when Lorde is physically frozen and psychologically lost from the broken relationship with her white, weird friend Muriel. As a complete package, she combines all earlier loves and proves more of what they lacked. With her "full" mouth, "chocolate color skin," "broad-lipped beautiful face," and "great lidded luminescent eyes" (Lorde, *Zami* 243), Afrekete was not only sexually appealing but also could seduce like Ginger, illuminate like Eudora, her lesbian lovers. Afrekete's transcending love not only breaks the "carapace" of Lorde's bodily inaction but also answers many of Lorde's questions that have been inflicting her for years. Lorde learns to accept many things that lived with her as suppressed agony: the loss of friends to alcoholism, her friend Gennie's suicide, the break-up with Muriel, and "internalized racism and sexism" (Ball 72). Afrekete, thus, heals many of the imperishable scars from Lorde's psyche and helps Lorde emerge as a dominant voice in black lesbian activism. Although the affair between Lorde and Afrekete was of a short time the power of it was immense as Lorde claims "her print remains upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo" (*Zami* 253).

6. Sexual-Textual Braid

Lorde weaves a sexual-textual braid treating sexuality as a form of matrilineal heritage and her mother's motherland, Carriacou, a geographical intertext. In Lorde's lovemaking with Afrekete, Lorde evokes home, Caribbean, and Africa. Her apartment seems to be a tropical

paradise of Carriacou, decorated with "pot after clay pot of green and tousled large and small-leaved plants of all shapes and conditions" and a tank full of "translucent rainbowed fish dart[ing] back and forth through the lit water" (Lorde, *Zami* 248). Describing their lovemaking Lorde says, "[w]e bought delicious pippins, the size of french cashew apples." There were ripe red finger bananas, stubby and sweet, with which I parted your lips gently, to insert the peeled fruit into your grape-purple flower" (Lorde, *Zami* 249). The "breadfruit," "avocado," "banana," and "coconut" (which bear both her mother's and Afrekete's smell) are traditional Caribbean fruits, which both the mother and Afrekete buy from the market "under the bridge" (Lorde, *Zami* 249). Thus, the homeland memory in terms of visual and gustatory imagery of fruits is dancing with her female-oriented bodily desire in the textual construction of sexual subjectivity.

About the performance of the new identity, Smith says, "The manifesto revels in the energetic display of a new collocation of identity" ("The Autobiographical Manifesto"193). With Afrekete, Lorde's identity is expressly a "conscious display" of a revisionary act of the embodied erotic. In the last scene of the lesbian erotic, "in the shadow of the roof chimney," at Afrekete's rooftop, Afrekete's and Lorde's bodies move against each other "making moon, honor, love" (Lorde, *Zami* 252). The lesbian union of their black bodies becomes an honorable act of love, and "making moon," transcends the limitation of time and space. Moreover, by affecting the tide, the moon represents hope and opportunity for change. Thus, it promises to celebrate differences and "speaks to the future" that will fight off homophobia, sexism, class consciousness, and racial supremacy. The reflection of the moon in their sweat-slippery bodies, demands Lorde as "sacred." Such a compelling choice of the word "sacred" transgresses the binaries of physical and spiritual. The lovemaking becomes a ritual act that fuses the body with the soul. This can be viewed as an example of the "flamboyant performance of the revolutionary woman" ("The Autobiographical Manifesto"199) in Smith's language.

Moreover, this revolutionary subject exuberantly employs stylistic strategies, as Audre Lorde immerses herself in incantatory italics:

> Afrekete, Afreketeride 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. (*Zami* 252)

Here, Lorde invokes Afrekete, pleading with the goddess to carry her to the crossroads, a sacred space where they can unite in women's power. Mythically, Esu—the Yoruba deity of communication and transition—is known to meet people at the crossroads, inspiring the construction of shrines in these liminal spaces. Similarly, Lorde envisions Afrekete as "the officiating priestess of the crossroads" (Anzaldúa 102), where their lovemaking transcends the personal and becomes a collective prayer for "strangers and sisters." In this sacred union, the oppressive forces of stereotyping, subjugation, and deprivation are cast away. Through this enactment of sexual subjectivity, woven into the textual fabric of *Zami*, Lorde sets forth a radical reimagining of identity and authorship. Her work resonates with Evelynn M. Hammonds' assertion that Black lesbian sexualities are not merely fixed identities but dynamic spaces of discourse and material existence. By focusing on Black lesbian experiences, she argues, a new mode of expression emerges—one that breaks the historical silence imposed on these identities. Rather than being confined to rigid categories, Black lesbian sexualities become active sites for the creation of "speech, desire, and agency"(Hammonds 181), challenging dominant narratives and fostering new possibilities for self-definition and resistance. By positioning the erotic as a space of resistance and transformation, Lorde not only reclaims Black lesbian subjectivity but also challenges the silence historically imposed on it, opening the way for new forms of expression, desire, and empowerment.

Zami (Lorde) has been proved to be the manifestation of these activities as "with the language of the body the narrator inaugurates the utopian regime of the (Black women), the newly coined sovereign" (Smith, "The Autobiographical Manifesto" 199). As we know, Lorde embarks on "becoming Afrekete" in *Zami*. By "recreating (her) in words" (*Zami* 255), Lorde becomes the trickster goddess who becomes the speaking subject and talks in different languages. Afrekete becomes the trope of Lorde's ability to write what as a way of emancipation she has been seeking desperately as a black woman. With the power of writing, Lorde engenders a lesbian utopia. In their brief last meeting, Lorde and Afrekete become "an electric storm, exchanging energy, sharing charge" (*Zami* 253). Together they reformed and reshaped their concept of "self," identity and the community. After their last lovemaking scene in the Tar Beach, when they strolled down "into the sweltering midnight of a west Harlem summer," they found "mothers and fathers smiled at [them] in

greeting as [they] strolled down to Eighth Avenue, hand in hand" (Lorde, *Zami* 252–53). In these smiling greetings, Lorde heralds a new age, one in which sexuality erupts strength, injects vitality, and builds a community of "we" the way the subject of the manifesto stands "to speak as one of a group to speak for a group" (Smith, "The Autobiographical Manifesto" 193).

Thus, Audre Lorde disrupts the traditional Western autobiographical "I," which primarily centers on male narratives, by redefining autobiography through a Black lesbian perspective. Rather than adhering strictly to factual details, she reinterprets Africa while transforming her own lived experiences—growing up in 1940s Harlem, navigating the McCarthy era, and embracing her identity as a Black lesbian in the 1950s—into myth. By invoking the goddess Afrekete, Lorde weaves together personal, social, political, and historical elements with mythology, creating a Black feminist critical consciousness shaped by geography, sexuality, class, race, and language. Thus, Lorde integrates the subversive trickster figure into her identity, reinventing herself as both the collective "Zami" and Afrekete—a writer who taps into the suppressed power of female sexuality to energize her literary voice.

In such a formulation, Lorde "resists the totalizing definitional politics of traditional autobiographical practice" (Smith, "The Autobiographical Manifesto" 186) since traditional autobiography is a male Western genre of the egoist "I," in which "the author, the narrator, and the protagonist" (Lejeune 5) are identical, who is always confident, uninfluenced by external affairs, separate from others as a discrete and finite unit of society. Lorde has replaced the "I" reflecting on Lionnet's view that the female model of self is a métissage or braiding of multiple voices within the self. Critiquing Augustine's concept of self Lionnet states that "Augustine's search for plenitude and coherence leads him to emphasize wholeness and completeness, whereas for the women writers, it will become clear that the human individual is a fundamentally relational subject whose 'autonomy' can only be a myth" (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, 27). According to Lionnet, "from autobiographical writings" of women we can learn "a new way of listening for the relational voice of the self" (*Autobiographical Voices*, 248) in which the self instead of becoming other or "los[ing] itself in other's essence" opts for "assimilation, incorporation, and identification with a mirror image" (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, 67). Lorde's Zami has constructed the self in the similar vein with Lionnet's vision. Instead of defining herself "through individuation and separation from

others" (Schweickart 54), Lorde has created a flexible ego boundary that defines herself in incorporating the characteristics of Eudora, Ginger, Muriel, and many other women.

Lorde's autobiographical self is shaped by multiple voices allowing her to adopt the role of a trickster linguist, Afrekete, who dismantles rigid binaries of identity and language. This transformation challenges the traditional idea of individual autonomy, replacing it with what she describes as "a new vision" in her conversation with Tate. In this vision, the Western concept of a singular, sovereign self-fades, as Lorde surrenders her individual "I" to the collective presence of ancestral and personal figures. By embodying these real and mythical women, she becomes Afrekete and, ultimately, Zami. Rather than embracing a fixed identity, Zami fosters a shared consciousness, and is shaped by multiple voices, historically and culturally grounded, and open to fluidity. Through this narrative approach, Lorde illustrates that both subjectivity and writing are inherently interwoven with the voices and influences of others. Lorde's narrative practice challenges the idea of individual autonomy, replacing it with a vision of selfhood that is relational and contextually rooted in a broader social and historical framework. This reimagining of identity, as fluid and collective, provides a powerful critique of traditional autobiographical forms and offers a more inclusive and interconnected approach to understanding the self.

In fact, Lorde's *Zami* is an evocative and intimate depiction of her life through personal and interpersonal growth. However, it encodes heterogeneity through the intertextual references to Charlotte Bronte, Dante, Sara Vaughan, Frankie Lymon, and many other writers and singers on the one hand, while with her mother's, Ella's, and Gennie's stories of intersectional oppression of race and gender, constantly produce intratextual diversity on the other. Lorde gives voice to her subjectivity that is built in an intersubjective fashion identified with other women. Writing the text, she takes the "reality of *mētis* as a form of *techne* projects itself on a plurality of practical levels but can never be subsumed under a single, identifiable system of diametric dichotomies" (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, 14). Lionnet argues that the Greek *mētis* "is the allegorical 'figure of a function or a power,' a cunning intelligence like that of Odysseus, which opposes transparency and the metaphysics of identity" (Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*, 14). This power is exercised in Lorde's neologism, biomythography, where leaving the customary

"auto" it turns to be a "complexly-integrated and relational" (Davies 56) theoretical narrative braid and the subject becoming Zami exercised that cunning intelligence of trickster god Odysseus. With her linguistic trick, she resists the Western hegemonic orthographic dominance which Cannon identifies as "the manipulation of language to create a space for herself in a world that often refuses to see her" (345) and any marginalized like her. She deliberately capitalizes words like "Black" "Colored" and "Indian" while writing "america," "white," "german," "catholic," "united states," "white house" and "french" in lowercase. As Elizabeth Alexander notes, "these choices are ideologically driven: She spells America with a lower-case a, again exercising her prerogative as marker of the body of the book and letting her spelled language bear her perspective on the world" (704). Moreover, the choice of the words and phrases like "thundering space," "light" (Lorde, *Zami* 249) "electric storm," "energy," "charge" (Lorde, *Zami* 249) for describing lesbian love is injected with revolutionary zeal reflecting Smith's notion that the manifesto's "language must become the revolutionary palace" of the new subject ("The Autobiographical Manifesto"196).

6.1. Narrative Braid in the Genre Blend

In our argument of the genre blend as a strategy for the emancipation of marginalized women authors, the concepts of manifesto and métissage happen to be much more relatable once more. Smith argues that since the subjects of the manifesto are "resisting" voices, in practice, they "require and develop resisting forms" (Smith and Watson 433) of autobiography. Smith exemplifies Cherrie Moraga's Loving in the War Years as a manifesto that makes a "textual montage" (Smith and Watson 433) of journal entries, sketches, prose analysis, and poetry. This textual montage resonates with Lionnet's métissage "that is the weaving of different strands of raw material and threads of various colors into one piece of fabric" ("Métissage" 213) as a strategy of emancipation of the textual construction of "I." Weaving different genres into a piece of life writing Lorde executes métissage as the resisting form of a manifesto.

Expressing the crucial moments of her life, in her expression of gratitude: "To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?" (Lorde, *Zami* 3), in her dearest wishes: "If my mother were like everybody else's" (Lorde, *Zami* 16), in emphasizing: "the most vicious kind"(Lorde, *Zami* 12), in expressing sensuality, in expressing urge for transcendence,

Lorde's prose turns into italicized poetry. In her acknowledgments, Lorde pays her gratitude to those "writers of songs whose melodies stitch up [her] years" (*Zami* "Acknowledgements"). Throughout *Zami*, for various purposes, Lorde uses songs. She adopts songs as a tool to reconnect herself with her mother mythically, since her mother's people "had a song for everything" (Lorde, *Zami* 11). Moreover, "the endless casual song-making" that constructed her mother's "self" has become a part of Lorde's unconscious. Consequently, Lorde connects events with songs and in the climax of the plot, Lorde feels the spiritual as a "surge of strength" (*Zami* 239) to come back to life from her sense of being lost after her breakup with Muriel, as Lorde said,

> The bus door opened and I placed my foot on the step. Quite suddenly, there was music swelling up into my head . . . 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 . . . ! (*Zami* 238)

In this "music swelling" in her head, Lorde "felt rich with hope and a promise of life—more importantly, a new way through or beyond pain" (*Zami* 239). In this newfound way to a promising life, Lorde stood beyond the physical realities. It turned into the moment of revelation when Lorde heard "the sky fill with a new spelling of my own name" (*Zami* 239). Therefore, its blend of prose with poetry, drama, and songs substantiates, textual montage/métissage/braiding of literary forms, to combat the leanness of generic autobiography and counter its claim of universality.

CONCLUSION

Focusing on its construction of the new "I" as the sexual subjectivity, and deployment of linguistic politics through mythical, geographical, and orthographic tropes the present analysis has claimed that *Zami* "offers an arena in which the revolutionary can insist on identity in service to an emancipatory politics" (Smith,"The Autobiographical Manifesto" 196). Although we have seen that Lorde's life is braided in her intersectionally marginalized identities, as a racial, gendered, poor, and sexual subject

position, she recovered herself from marginality and erasure with self-consciousness about her black mothers and community myths and stories. Lorde's trajectory has emancipated by harboring the new subject Zami, a revolutionary black lesbian who is capable of performing the identity publicly, asserting it as a possibility for a promising future during a time when lesbianism was a taboo and black lesbianism was completely imbued with silence and invisibility. Her work has become a form of speech/action/performance that withstands symbolization within a homogeneous framework of life writing. Exercising the power to transform the logic and the clarity of concepts of autobiographical "I" and narrative, she writes the self without "auto," and makes the graph a braid of traditions, which makes her biomythography the "locus of her dialogue with a tradition she tacitly aims at subverting" (Lionnet, "Métissage" 262). Thus, not only has she given voice to marginalized identities but also envisioned a communitarian social vision and created a space for upcoming generations of writers. As one of the contemporary radical lesbian authors, Jamaika Ajalon declares, "With *Zami*, Lorde both named and gave a blueprint for a way of writing our existence, our truth. The idea of mythologizing one's life, one's lived experience, burst all kinds of doors wide open for me artistically" (1).

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