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## Becoming Ourselves: Black Women's Autobiographical Interrogation of Tropes of Identity

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Becoming Ourselves:

Black Women's Autobiographical Interrogation of Tropes of Identity

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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I thank the women in my life first and foremost for their love, unwavering support and homegirl interventions, which have sustained me throughout this journey.



## Abstract

A central premise of this project is that Black female identity has historically been seen as a fixed identity. Much of the imposed rigidity on Black female identity has been informed by conservative strategies for survival. Such conservative strategies include respectability politics, as racial leaders have found utility in upholding the principle that if they or others work hard, they can uphold the race. Only by maintaining these standards of respectability have Black women been deemed as worthy and able to uphold and reinforce positive images of Blackness. Many of the stories written by Black women generally fall into the limited tropes of respectability and struggle. Additionally, Black women's autobiographies often mirror each other given certain parallels in their experience. However, my thesis aims to illuminate a divergent consciousness among Black women writers through their autobiographies. With this divergent consciousness, these writers interrogate the politics of respectability and create new possibilities for Black female identity as I will explore throughout this thesis.

In Chapter I, I study Hurston's memoir, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, in order to affirm the work that she did as a Black woman and writer, especially while taking into account the waves of criticism that she endured throughout her professional life. In Chapter II, I explore Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* as her narrative of sexuality and a shared girlhood builds on the experiences that Hurston conveys in *Dust Tracks*. In Chapter III, I consider the concept of the "angry Black woman" as explored in Brittney Cooper's memoir, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*. Indeed, I will use various key personas for each of these writers as frameworks and lenses for examining their autobiographical writing. These personas include "cosmic Zora," "sister

outsider,” “the angry Black woman,” and the Black woman in process as advanced in Michelle Obama’s recent memoir, *Becoming*, which I will place in dialogue with Cooper’s work in the third chapter of the thesis.

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## Introduction

### Imagining Self and Community:

#### Lorde's and Hurston's Construction of Writing Personas

Stories centrally inform our understanding of the world. As the saying goes, stories do make the world go “round.” We have stories about ourselves and about our things. Everything around us is based in story, which helps us make meaning of things. Within the context of literature, it is writers who make stories. However, it is even more interesting to hear people’s stories written by themselves and from their own perspectives. To read an autobiography is humanizing, as writers become people beyond their focus on their craft while offering insight into what the writers have experienced or done.

In this project, I will focus primarily on the autobiographical writing of Zora Neale Hurston and Audre Lorde. I explore Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) and Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) in order to consider how their experiences as Black women shaped their relationship to literature.

In previous iterations of this research, I have sought to interrogate contemporary gender politics within the Black community. As I explored the conditions and parameters of Black womanhood, I found that Black women were discursively stuck in the limited binary framework of respectability politics and the concept of “ratchetness.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars and members of the Black community often disregard Black women since the imaginative scope of Black empowerment is often reduced to more privileged subject positions, namely cisgender Black males. Given this general context of disregard, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ratchet is a slang term variously insulting a person, usually a Black woman, as whorish, low-class, and trashy. [Dictionary.com/e/slang/ratchet]

stakes of the politics of respectability are higher for Black women as Black women must be deemed worthy to be seen and valued.

Within her book, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*, Brittney Cooper defines the “politics of respectability [as being] predicated on extremely conservative ideas about what a proper race man and a proper race woman are and should look like” (Cooper 55).<sup>2</sup> Cooper goes on to describe this set of beliefs as the expectation “that Black people can overcome many of the everyday, acute impacts of racism by dressing properly and having education and social comportment [which] is, first and foremost, performed as a kind of sartorial prerogative” (Cooper 147). Based on a limited perception of propriety and virtue, adherence to respectability politics leaves Black women’s value as human beings to be determined by their compliance with societal standards for women. Consequently, when Black women’s lives are threatened or worse, the first discourse that gets activated is one of respectability as people within the Black community critique women’s attitude, attire, and adherence to accepted standards of femininity.

This project aims to counter these limited frameworks for conveying Black women’s experiences as I focus on the autobiographical writing of Hurston and Lorde in order to interrogate and explore the ways in which these authors write their way to self through their autobiographical writings. To do so, I will first examine the genre of autobiography. Of course, the genre itself has been and continues to be shaped by

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<sup>2</sup> *Eloquent Rage* has been central to my thinking as I have developed this thesis; I will also examine it as a primary text in chapter 3.

cisgender<sup>3</sup> white men whose experiences don't reflect those of Black women like Lorde and Hurston. However, Black women's experiences are not only entangled in the generic constraints of autobiographical conventions, but ideas of Black female identity also box in Black women. Similar to the limited range of the genre itself, Black womanhood is generally viewed as a rigid identity category with highly prescribed ways of being.

Indeed, patriarchal forces ultimately shape both Black womanhood and autobiography. Yet I am interested in the ways in which Lorde and Hurston reinvent themselves as Black women therefore removing themselves from those prescribed narratives and expectations that they have encountered as Black women. As they remove themselves from those prescriptions, Lorde and Hurston come to occupy particular modes of being. For Lorde, that mode or self-determined identity is as "sister outsider"<sup>4</sup> while Hurston achieves transcendence as "cosmic Zora."

In her personal essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," originally published in 1928, Zora Neale Hurston offers readers sketches of scenes in her life growing up as a Black girl and woman. From greeting passersby driving through her town much to

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<sup>3</sup> "The recent renaissance in critical literature on autobiography has largely focused on traditions of the genre which have been excluded from earlier canonical studies. These studies, it is argued, have constructed their categories and definitions on the basis of white Western male exemplars, thereby marginalizing autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries by women and minorities." Judith Robey, "Generic Strategies in Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*," p. 667.

<sup>4</sup> Audre Lorde's first references to "sister outsider" appear in her memoir, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). She refers to herself and other Black gay women in her social group as "sister-outsiders": "During the fifties in the Village, I didn't know the few other Black women who were visibly gay at all well. Too often we found ourselves sleeping with the same white women. We recognized ourselves as exotic sister-outsiders who might gain little from banding together" (177). Lorde later publishes a book of essays entitled, *Sister Outsider*. Given the way that the persona appears repeatedly throughout Lorde's writing, it is clear that the figure is a vital framework for understanding Lorde's life and oeuvre.

everyone's dismay to being the solitary Black woman as a student at Barnard College, Hurston addresses the ways that she has often existed as a transgressive figure both as a child and later as an adult. Toward the end of the essay, Hurston describes the figure of "cosmic Zora." "At certain times I have no race, I am me. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance. [. . .] The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads." Although "cosmic Zora" is not explicitly named across Hurston's writings, this figure who stands above race and above her sociopolitical position within American society does maintain a presence elsewhere in the writer's oeuvre.

Audre Lorde's first references to "sister outsider" appear in her memoir, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). She refers to herself and other Black gay women in her social group as "sister-outsiders": "During the fifties in the Village, I didn't know the few other Black women who were visibly gay at all well. Too often we found ourselves sleeping with the same white women. We recognized ourselves as exotic sister-outsiders who might gain little from banding together" (177). Lorde later publishes a book of essays entitled, *Sister Outsider*. Given the way that the persona appears repeatedly throughout Lorde's writing, it is clear that the figure is a vital framework for understanding Lorde's life and oeuvre.

Throughout their autobiographical writings, Hurston and Lorde depict these experiences and expressions of self-definition which allow them to create spaces for themselves in which they can exist. Whether in the crawl-spaces of a family home or between the lines of a notebook, Hurston and Lorde use the personas of "cosmic Zora"

and “sister outsider” to advance themes of self-preservation as they pry open a space for Black women’s self-identification in literature and beyond.

### **Hurston and Lorde in Juxtaposition**

Both Lorde and Hurston are known throughout the literary world as figures who interrogate and deconstruct politics of respectability. However, while they both do this work, these two writers are not equally credited for their contributions to deconstructing these limited frameworks for Black women. While Lorde is viewed as politically astute and aesthetically avant-garde, Hurston was often seen as just another Black woman writer. Indeed, the way that Hurston has been read reflects the way that Black women are viewed broadly speaking, as simply transgressive without virtue or reason. By looking at both of these writers together, the genealogical traces between the two writers become apparent.

As a storyteller and anthropologist, Hurston exists both inside and outside of the Black community. With her college education, she stands apart from many other African Americans, but her familiarity with the communities of her birth gives her access to the narratives which she explores in her books. Given the ways that she stands apart from her community, the writer sees herself primarily as an individual eschewing the “box” of racial identification. Although she has an appreciation for her community’s stories, she does not seek the validation of her community nor does she appeal to her community. As a folklorist, she knows that the African American community of her birth is not her primary audience as it has never been able to fully support her intellectual pursuits from her book-reading as an adolescent to her anthropological studies later in adulthood. As

opposed to the validation of a community, Hurston envisions and activates “cosmic Zora” where she can be “cosmic” by herself and thus permit herself to engage in the kinds of intellectual and creative pursuits that have animated her throughout her life.

Considering Hurston’s position vis-à-vis the Black community, she does not seek the community’s acceptance nor does she focus her work on racial liberation. In that way, Hurston is distinct from many of her contemporaries who were directly involved in the work of racial uplift. In lieu of racial uplift, the writer’s stated goal for much of her work was to capture people’s stories. Her texts—her novels, collections of folklore as well as her autobiographical writing—reveal both Hurston’s stories as well as those of the people she encountered throughout her life, from her mother and grandmother to her sister and her white charges.<sup>5</sup> As she engages all of these characters in her writing, she always presents them in their complexity.

Like Hurston, Audre Lorde explicitly defines herself as “other” through the theoretical lens of “sister outsider” where she too stands within and apart from the communities with which she is associated. Yet in contrast to Hurston, much of Lorde’s appeal as a writer has been based on her explicit claims of belonging within particular marginalized communities, namely Black, feminist, and lesbian.<sup>6</sup> While the writer gives her book the subtitle, “a new spelling of my name,” she does not bestow that name on herself alone; rather, she places herself in a continuum: “Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty” (Lorde,

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<sup>5</sup> All of these figures are present in Hurston’s memoir, *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

<sup>6</sup> Lorde frequently introduced herself before her speaking audiences explicitly claiming the multiple aspects of her identity. “I am myself—a Black woman warrior poet doing my work.” Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” p. 41-42.

*Zami* 14). She thus sees herself as existing within “the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the ‘I’ moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed” (7). Within this continuum of womanhood, Lorde undergirds her own validity by envisioning the communities in which she belongs. As an “outsider,” she declares that she does not have to stay within other’s expectations or perceptions of her, but as a “sister,” she maintains her affinities to the many communities that she names in her writing thus giving herself new parameters of identity and subjectivity.

Lorde’s claims of affinity to these marginalized groups take precedence over her individual subjectivity which sets her apart from Hurston, her literary predecessor. However, there are stakes to Hurston’s individualist framework for her writing and thought. Indeed, Hurston was an erased figure for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century despite all of her contributions to African American and African Diasporic writing and culture. Many of her contemporaries critiqued her work for the way that it treated race as peripheral to the writer’s development. Whereas the point of autobiography is to be able to tell one’s own story, Hurston has frequently been policed in her autobiographical writing. Within public reviews and debates, Hurston was frequently reminded that she was not entitled to tell her story as she deemed best. The result was her erasure from the African American cultural landscape.<sup>7</sup>

Lorde has experienced a different fate from Hurston, especially after her death. While Lorde’s life and politics regarding her feminism and her sexuality placed her in a

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<sup>7</sup> Ann Rayson describes Hurston’s relationship with the Black literary establishment, arguing, “while loved for her contradictions and eccentricities, politically, if not stylistically, she stands on the fringes of the Black world [. . .] not only denying any interest in her people political and social cause, but also working against it for her own idiosyncratic reasons.” “Dust Tracks on a Road: Zora Neale Hurston and the Form of Black Autobiography,” p. 40.



marginal position within the literary canon, her liberationist approach to self and community have allowed her to take up a more central position within the feminist, African Diasporic, and postcolonial canons. As Lorde attaches herself to community throughout her writing, her objective to liberate women and people of color becomes clear. Her writing is an attempt to save other “Black lesbian warriors” and other “Black women” who seek the tools for individual and collective liberation. While Lorde imagines communities of belonging which frame her identity, she uses her writing as a vehicle for achieving liberation.<sup>8</sup> Yet given this imagined community that Lorde creates out of her need for belonging, it suggests that the women in her writing exist within a unifying theme. Even though the women in Lorde’s texts are generally depicted as complex figures, the author’s framing of her communities remains fairly utopic thus impacting the characters’ complexity. However, the writer’s willingness to engage in ideas of liberation and uplift informs her continued relevance today.

Yet Hurston was penalized throughout her life for her failure to fulfill others’ expectations. Contemporaries critiqued her for choosing not to write about race while they simultaneously disregarded the political import of her writing.<sup>9</sup> While her critics searched for direct treatment of her experience as a Black person, Hurston wanted to explore people’s complexities. Indeed, she was off to be “cosmic Zora,” sacrificing material success to be able to fulfill her own intellectual intention. Ultimately, Hurston’s

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<sup>8</sup> Here, I am applying Benedict Anderson’s theories of nationalism and the nation-state to Lorde’s collectivist mindset in her life and in her writing. While Lorde’s project is in no way nationalist, the idea of imagining a community as related to the development of identity is a helpful frame for considering the writer’s oeuvre. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Darwin Turner described her as “a woman, loved by whites and feared by Blacks.” Langston Hughes depicted her as a “perfect ‘darkie’” to her “white friends [. . .] naive, childlike, sweet humorous.” Quoted in Ann Rayson, “Dust Tracks on a Road,” p. 40.

and Lorde's writing personas have shaped their legacies which I will explore further in the next two chapters.

Despite their differences, the type of work that Lorde and Hurston do in their writing has opened up space for contemporary Black women writers. The types of interventions that Lorde and Hurston made in their lives and in their writings are still very relevant and necessary within the contemporary period, and the same expectations continue to frame perceptions of Black women. A contemporary autobiographical text, *Eloquent Rage* by Brittney Cooper, continues to engage and interrogate these continuing perceptions and will be discussed more in the third chapter of the thesis.

## Chapter I

### “Cosmic Zora”: Hurston’s Transcendence of Context and Circumstance

As an anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston is an observer and student of African Diasporic culture. For the purposes of this project, I will focus on her engagement in Black Southern culture. However, as a Black woman, she holds a marginal position within that culture given its own patriarchal framework. She describes her work as a folklorist in her memoir, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (Hurston 143-173). However, she explores her research in more depth in her folkloric text, *Mules and Men*; there, she recounts her interactions with members of her community who have maintained the narratives that she seeks. In those encounters, Hurston stands strikingly on the margins of her hometown community. With her college degree and motor vehicle, she is a woman apart within the small town of Eatonville, Florida, and she is accordingly perceived as an outsider. In this chapter, I argue that Hurston makes an intervention through her writing to use the space of autobiographical narrative to establish herself as more central within the narrative frameworks of her home by constructing herself as a folk hero. Thus, having observed the folk cultural roots of her hometown community as an ethnographer, Hurston finds a way to frame her own existence within its discursive and imaginative patterns.

By creating a folk hero of herself, Hurston gives herself a “seat at the table”<sup>1</sup> by which she challenges the patriarchal and white supremacist bias that would otherwise marginalize her existence.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Hurston herself is a modernist thinker. Her

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<sup>1</sup> Solange Knowles 2016 album, *A Seat at the Table*, has also been central to my thinking in developing this thesis. I will be referencing the Solange’s album at various moments in the thesis.

<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Lorde’s voice, from the very beginning of *Zami* has a collective character to it. Unlike Hurston, the pursuit of a seat at the table is no longer a viable

framing of herself as a character in texts like *Dust Tracks on a Road* and “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” speaks to her depiction of herself as a self-referential subject. Through Hurston’s autobiographical writing and anthropological work, she shines a light on social dynamics within the Black community, and by depicting herself as a folk hero, Hurston places herself at the center of those interrelationships and thereby gives her voice a platform which many of her experiences growing up attempted to deny her. In this chapter, I will examine scenes in *Dust Tracks on a Road* in order to see how she intervenes in the patriarchal constraints of her day to reclaim the necessary social and discursive space in which she can exist and grow.

After exploring her family and her place of birth in the first two chapters in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston focuses her attention on the details of her birth in the third chapter, “I Get Born.” Within this portion of the text, the writer offers a unique portrayal of time. Indeed, here and elsewhere in the autobiography, time is presented through a frame of simultaneity where conventional boundaries between past, present, and future are suppressed.

In describing her mother’s labor in giving birth, the narrator states, “My mother’s time had come,” subtly hinting at death (19). Time is presented as finite in this sentence as the mother’s “time” of being *with child* is coming to an end *and* another phase of

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option for Lorde. In lieu of folk narratives, Lorde turns to mythological discourse to frame the development of herself as a character. Rather than the magical filter of “I Get Born,” Lorde places herself within a matrilineal frame by which women challenge the patriarchal limitations of most social and cultural discourse. Rather than a “seat at the table,” Lorde recognizes that setting up shop in “the master’s house” does little to support a broader project of liberation. Rather than using the master’s tools of individualism and heroic discourse, Lorde balances the autobiographical aspects of *Zami* with the collective voice of Black lesbian womanhood.

motherhood has arrived. As past, present, and future converge in this moment, time is presented as simultaneous, allowing multiple streams of reality across various tenses.

Yet in this portrayal of Zora's birth, the mother is centrally present. However, her centrality is quickly interrupted by the narrator's exploration of the father and his feelings and his absence as well as his presence in the family home. Since this is "hog-killing time," the movements of everyone in the community are fairly predictable.

Most people were either butchering for themselves, or off helping other folks do their butchering, which was almost as good. It is a gay time. A big pot of hasslits cooking with plenty seasoning, lean slabs of fresh-killed pork frying for the helpers to refresh themselves after the work is done.

Over and above being neighborly and giving aid, there is the food, the drinks and the fun of getting together. (20)

As for her father, he is known to be "a carpenter, successful enough to have other helpers on some jobs, he was away often on building business, as well as preaching" (19).

However, when the mother's "time" comes, the father's whereabouts go unknown. "It seems that my father was away from home for months this time. I have never been told why" (19). There's something interesting in the fact that she cannot tell why her father was absent at the time of her birth but can tell us about everyone else's hog-killing affairs at the time. Despite the fact that her father has all of these jobs, building and preaching all over Florida, Zora still doesn't know why he is gone at the time of her birth; thus, the writer adds suspense to her father's absence at the time of her birth. Rather than any intimate family preparations for the coming child, Zora's conception and birth come

across as “news”—“I did hear that he threatened to cut his throat when he got the news” (19).

As she plays with distance and knowledge through her interrogation of family, Hurston is also playing with irony. She gives us this detail of her father’s unknown whereabouts as juxtaposed against hog-killing time and contrasting with his usual employment in construction and preaching. And she offers these details without any rationale. When the narrator says, “I have never been told why,” that suggests that no one else knows why he’s away from home either thereby foreshadowing later portrayals of her father’s infidelity. Indeed, he wasn’t at home when he learned of his wife’s pregnancy. He still wasn’t there when he reacted to it saying that he wanted to commit suicide as he was about become a father once again. Hurston speculates that this has something to do with her being a girl, a “trick” on him. “Of course, by the time I got born, it was too late to make any suggestions” to terminate the pregnancy or otherwise (20).

This antagonism between father and child plays out thematically in the scene of Zora’s birth and beyond in the text. She creates distance in her relationship between her and her father at her birth. There, she refers to him as the “old man,” and given the physical and interpersonal distance between them at the time of birth, one could say that Zora is borne out of the father’s absence. He can’t really engage his daughter as he rejects the idea of having another girl “to wear out shoes and bring in nothing” (19). That antagonism between father and daughter has repercussions for Zora’s mother as she has been left to give birth alone. In fact, “my mother had to make it alone” (20). In this scene, the mother worries about herself as well as about the child that she is carrying. This

points to Hurston's depiction of what a woman's role is. According to the father, women can't work and must depend on a man. Therefore, the father's absence engenders the mother's worries and in her mind leads to her doom.

Still, the text builds on this sense of antagonism as the writer introduces themes of morbidity. Hurston draws a strong relationship between her birth and ideas of death. Around the time of her being born, Hurston depicts her mother as weakened nearly unto death "just [ . . . ] lying there," her father wanting to die having "threatened to cut his throat," and Zora herself as that her father did not choose to kill her. "He was nice about it in a way. He didn't tie me in a sack and drop me in the lake, as he probably felt like doing" (20). Because he is "nice [ . . . ] in a way," she recognizes his "choice" not to drown and asphyxiate her infant body. Rather than the solely joyous occasion that a birth is often purported to be, Zora's birth here is framed by fantasies and realities of morbidity.

Interwoven in all of these ideas of literal morbidity is a rewriting of genealogical lines within the family. In the first paragraph of "I Get Born," Hurston begins by saying, "This is all hear-say" (19). She ends that paragraph with the assertion, "I really did get born." Absent from these two sentences are any notions of family and biological parentage. Certainly, the text does point to a correspondence between Zora's life and her father's unpredictability and his existence as a jack-of-all-trades. A close reading of the text reveals how his presence as a trickster and an enigma is something that he passes down to his daughter. Yet rather than any biological conception, this paragraph points to how Zora is borne out of the oral tradition, the "hear-say" which "told" her into existence. This discursive birth is necessary for Hurston as she crafts her own folk hero

origins. This continues in the second paragraph where she ostensibly introduces her biological parentage, but before she does so, she continues to give precedence to the oral tradition as the folk roots of African American culture. Prior to any mention of mother or father, she prioritizes the procreative possibilities of storytelling—"The saying goes like this." Once "the saying goes," then the text can bring forth a biological mother and then a biological father, but it cannot do so before "the saying goes."

These storytelling elements and themes of morbidity function in tandem as the text offers an alternative genealogy for the child. In the moments after birth, Zora's mother is presented as weak while the baby is "crying strong." Her birth figuratively "kills" both of her parents. Hurston plays up her mother's weakness so that she appears lifeless while her father remains absent, nonexistent within the home. The infant Zora lies in the house while the text suggests that she is stronger than her mother as her cries are impactful much more than any action of her mother's. Her disproportionate strength queries the genealogical line. The infant's cries compel her neighbor to enter the house and provide assistance to the mother and child: "he claimed later that he heard me spreading my lungs all over Orange County, so he shoved the door open and bolted on into the house. He followed the noise and then he saw how things were" (21). How could this strong baby come from this nearly lifeless woman except that her birth transcends the seemingly nuclear framework of biology and human reproduction? Her crying and thereby her life are her mother's saving grace in this scene, and the writer thus begins to shed light on the "cosmic" and mythological nature of her portrayal of selfhood.

Later in Zora's childhood, the mother continues to create space for the girl's voice. While issues of discipline and parenting form a site of tension between the mother



and father, that tension also exists between women within the family as the mother and grandmother often disagree about the child's speech and behavior. The grandmother's response to Zora's self-expression was often urgent articulating the need for immediate discipline and punishment. "Wring her coat tails over her head and wear out a handful of peach hickories on her back-side! Stomp her guts out! Ruin her!" (53). Indeed, the grandmother saw the child as God's "punishment." Counter to the grandmother's threats, Zora's mother functions as a protective aura around her child. "Mama never tried to break me. She'd listen sometimes, and sometimes she wouldn't. But she never seemed displeased. But her mother used to foam at the mouth" (54).

Hurston's portrayal of the tension between mother and grandmother offers a frame for other areas of the text. It is important to note that the child is threatened with death from her father and her maternal grandmother as well as the world. In their predictions for her life, there is no real space where she can be the person that she is. Her father wanted to kill her and then himself because she had been born not only a girl but a girl who would not submit. The grandmother too wants to kill the child for her refusal to adhere to the politics of the plantation and respectability to which the elder feels subject. Still, beyond all of that, the grandmother wants to kill the child for her resemblance to her father, whom her grandmother despised.

Yet rather than repressing her, the mother has a vested interest in Zora's voice and her ability to express herself. From the time that the child is born and through the mother's illness and demise, Zora provides this voice, and the mother uses her own voice to create space for her daughter to be a child. However, we never get direct quotations

from Zora's mother. Her words are reported to readers of the text, but she cannot directly speak:

she had called me and given me certain instructions. I was not to let them take the pillow from under her head until she was dead. The clock was not to be covered, nor the looking-glass. She trusted me to see to it that these things were not done. I promised her as solemnly as nine years could do, that I would see to it [ . . . ] she looked at me, or so I felt, to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice. (64-65)

Hurston presents the mother as being lifeless while she herself grows in her vitality. One could juxtapose these two moments—Zora's birth and her mother's death. In the first instance, her mother was nearly silent while the newborn cried loudly. In the later instance, Zora herself was silent while the mother breathed loudly "still rasping out the last morsel of her life" (66). With Zora's attempts to speak for her mother, the text points to the ways that the girl and her mother mirror each other at these critical junctures.

However, this intense relationship between the mother and father is disrupted by the father's presence. Rather than being empowered to help navigate the loss of the mother, "Papa held me tight and the others frowned me down" (66). Yet even in her dying moments, the mother continues to empower the child: "I think she was trying to say something, and I think she was trying to speak to me. What was she trying to tell me?" (66).

The ambiguity of this scene sheds light on this life-changing moment in Zora's life. Not only does she lose her mother, but she also loses any fantasy she may have had

about her agency as she struggles against her father's arms and finds herself unable to understand her mother. "I was to agonize over that moment for years to come. In the midst of play, in wakeful moments after midnight, on the way home from parties, and even in the classroom during lectures. My thoughts would escape occasionally from their confines and stare me down. [. . .] I hope that Mama knows that I did my best. She must know how I have suffered for my failure" (66). Within this patriarchal framework, the father is ultimately able to silence the mother's voice and wishes as he restrains Zora. Throughout their time together, Zora's mother was the one who would tell her father to leave the child alone, so as soon as the mother dies, the father silences the child and physically restrains her. Before she thought that her father wanted to kill her for having been born and for being a girl, but he didn't do that especially given the presence of her mother. In her reflection on a man's perspective, Hurston argues, "I know now that that is a gripping thing to a man—not to be able to whip his woman mentally. Some women know how to give their man that conquering feeling" (69). But now that the mother is dead, he can more effectively silence the child without any maternal or feminine restraints.

To consider how Hurston writes herself into being out of a folkloric tradition, it is notable that in the mother's death, the narrator clings to her literal biological genealogy—"I was Mama's child." In this moment of loss, Zora's humanity is forefronted. Rather than the child born of her own will and a story told, here in this moment, Zora comes from people, people to whom she is intimately connected. As she processes this loss, her portrayal of herself as cosmic, divine, and superhuman recedes. She is the girl who lost

her Mama, her maternal teacher and protector. When the mother dies, readers see her step into her bereavement.

Given his unpredictability, his characterization as a trickster, and the family's perceptions of him as invincible, Zora's father is portrayed as exceeding or transgressing the boundaries for being a human; indeed, the children were "certain of Papa's invincibility" (68). Neither Zora nor the reader can access him. Yet this moment of the mother's death almost creates the possibility of empathy between them. "I have often wished I had been old enough at the time to look into Papa's heart that night. If I could know what that moment meant to him, I could have set my compass towards him and been sure" (67-68).

Hurston expresses her capacity to recognize multiple perspectives in text where she asserts, "Nothing that God ever made is the same thing to more than one person" (45). This statement is interesting in light of the mother's death. When her mother dies, Hurston wonders about her father's love, if it was the same as her mother's love for her father. That moment temporarily reconciles her estrangement from her father. But then, as in her birth, the father quickly absents himself from the house, inaccessible as always, leaving her there, left behind to "wander." "But life picked me up from the foot of Mama's bed, grief, self-despisement and all, and set my feet in strange ways. That moment was the end of a phase in my life. I was old before my time with grief of loss, of failure, of remorse of failure" (66). These "strange ways" that her feet took connect Zora back to the cosmic context of her birth and life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lynn Domina describes Hurston's use of a mythological framework in her autobiographical writing, "in *Dust Tracks on a Road* Hurston constructs her life such that many events and characters acquire mythic significance" (197). Recognizing the way that

Still, Hurston looks more broadly at the Hurston family dynamics in her interrogation of the patriarchal politics that constrain the lives of women. Distinct from her sister Sarah, Zora functions as the “Black sheep” while Sarah is the favored child.

Papa had honored his first-born daughter from the day of her birth. If she was not fore-told, she was certainly fore-wished. Three sons had come, and he was glad of their robust health, but after the first one, he wanted a little girl child around the house. For several years then, it had been a wish deferred. So that when she did arrive, small, under-sized, but a girl, his joy was boundless. (74)

The father expresses his joy about Sarah by dressing her in the finest apparel that he could purchase for her, “putting the finest and the softest shoes on her dainty feet; the fluffiest white organdy dresses with the stiffest ribbon sashes” (74). He further amplifies her daughter’s assets by investing in her learning.

She had music lessons on the piano. It did not matter that she was not interested in music, it was part of his pride. The parlor organ was bought in Jacksonville and shipped down as a surprise for Sarah on her tenth birthday. She had a gold ring for her finger, and gold earrings. When I begged for music lessons, I was told to dry up before he bust the hide on my back. (74-75)

Sarah was the object of her father’s patriarchal desire as having a desirable daughter validated his status as a father. Sarah didn’t want for anything while Zora hungered for

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Hurston interweaves the nonfictional with the mythological offers a needed lens for the writer’s mythologizing of key moments in the character’s life.

attention. Sarah thus functions as an extension of the father's identity which others in the community can admire him for. To ensure and sustain other's desire, he always shielded her from others' and even his own rage.

Although Sarah was his favorite child, when the mother dies, the tie between the father and daughter is broken. Having returned home from school, Sarah writes her siblings to inform them that "Papa had married again. That hurt us all, somehow" (73). However, this new marriage fosters an atmosphere of competition between the Sarah and the stepmother, at least from the perspective of the latter as "[i]t was not long before the news came back that she had insisted that Papa put Sarah out of the house" (73). However, that was not enough to satisfy the stepmother; Sarah needed to be beaten and "driven out of town." Hurston creates great intensity of feeling in conveying this moment in their lives. "He had never struck her in his life. She never got but one from him, and that was this cruel thing at the instigation of our stepmother. Neither Papa nor Sarah ever looked at each other in the same way again, nor at the world" (75).

Despite the relationships that he had developed with his children, once he remarries, it is almost as if the father doesn't have children anymore. By losing their mother, they no longer have a protector nor are they worthy of protection. As de facto adults, they suddenly occupy positions of competition with their stepmother. Yet in addition to the seemingly inevitable opposition with which the stepmother approaches her stepchildren, she furthermore requires a patriarchal intervention forces the father to choose his allegiance—in this case, to his wife or to his daughter. One of them, and only one of them, can be chosen. After the fight happens, the father chooses his new wife over

his daughter, and he subsequently sends his child away to be married as she can no longer function in a daughterly role.

This scene speaks to the disposability of women. The mother died, and the father immediately married a new wife. This speaks to this idea of women's disposability and women as property. All of the women in the text exist in these roles of domesticity as wives and mothers or as domestic servants. In the way that he sends Sarah to be with some man, the text demonstrates how she must stay within a caregiver role whether taking care of her younger sibling in the place of her father or in a relationship with a man outside of her family of birth. Zora and her sister may not have been considered adults within this context, but without the presence of their mother, they no longer had anyone to protect and defend their youth. They were "grown" and had to embark on women's work and women's lives within the domestic sphere.

Relatedly, when the school year ends, the father informs the school staff that he doesn't want Zora to come home. This is how she learns of her disposability. Throughout her life, Zora had observed how her father had worked hard to put Sarah through school, getting her music lessons and keeping her presentable. Indeed, the youngest daughter sensed that being more like Sarah would have allowed her to get along better within her family. She felt like she needed to possess such archetypal femininity as her sister had possessed. In *Beyond Respectability*, Cooper advances that in order to be good, a woman had to be conquerable.

Yet *Dust Tracks* offers a scene in which the idea of conquerability is subverted as the stepmother and the stepdaughter have a physical altercation. Indeed, the stepmother believes that she has the advantage—that the child would not engage her physically or if

she did, that her husband would discipline the child by any means necessary “in order to stay in her good graces” (76). The overconfident stepmother thus provoked the child and “called [her] a sassy, impudent heifer, announced that she was going to take [her] down a buttonhole lower, and threw a bottle at [her] head. The bottle came sailing slowly through the air and missed [her] easily. She never should have missed” (76). That last sentence is ominous as it foreshadows how Zora was not conquerable in the ways that her sister had been conquered. Capturing her mindset during this fight, Hurston writes, “The primeval in me leaped to life. Ha! [. . .] Fight! [. . .] I didn’t have any thoughts to speak of. Just the fierce instinct of flesh on flesh. [. . .] Consequences be damned! If I died, let me die with my hands soaked in her blood. I wanted her blood, and plenty of it. That is the way I went into the fight, and that is the way I fought it” (76)

While this scene is portrayed quite dramatically, this fight also has much substance. While Sarah’s willingness to be subservient leaves her conquerable, Zora is not conquerable and therefore resists others’ efforts to dispose of her in the ways that her sister and mother were boxed in and disposed of. Of course, in the wake of this fight, Zora becomes an adult as she is literally motherless and de facto fatherless. Given Zora’s unconquerability, the girl loses her place in the world. In many ways, she is exiled from the world around her, unmoored in many ways from her familial context. Estranged from her father, the possibility of her being desired by men recedes further away on the horizon.

The text further suggests that Zora didn’t have the capacity to explain or describe her experiences in her home until she got to recall Sarah’s experiences of disposability. Observing her sister’s victimization offers her a gateway and a framework



to understand and articulate her own. The text offers a frame here that readers or perhaps Hurston herself didn't have access to in earlier chapters. One may wonder why Sarah was not previously disdained as a mere girl who would "wear out shoes and bring in nothing." Of course, she was the girl child who was sought out and prayed for.

Yet this moment of abandonment for both Sarah and Zora gains additional illumination if we consider it in light of the death of Zora's biological mother. In reflecting on the loss of her mother, Hurston proclaims, "I'm my mother's child." This statement comes full circle when the father abandons her, once at school and now back at home. Abandoned, Zora must work in order to survive. Yet the mother lives on through Zora's experience and continues to protect her even after her father abandons her. It is because she is her mother's child that the mother's friends take her in. It is because she is her mother's child that people cheer her on when she fights her stepmother. Zora has additionally inherited her mother's slick mouth. When she has to enter other people's home in pursuit of employment, it remains vitally important that she carry her inheritances from her mother with her.

When she is hired to work in a white family's home, Zora is there to clean, but she ends up mothering their children. In this way, she's transgressive at every level. She's not doing what she was hired to do. She is taking the place of the mother figure. On top of all that, her presence is threatening to the head Black service worker in the home. However, also fundamentally transgressive is the fact that she is a child and must enter the world of work as a child. With her mothering these children as a child herself, it becomes clear that she cannot be a child because she must also be all of these other things. However, while she is acting in this maternal capacity, she is finally able to be a

child as she gets to embody her youth while playing with these children who are in her care. These children become like the siblings that she never had. In the process, Zora turns the family structure on its head. Her being in this home displaces the mother from her traditional role, and as such, the mother was able to pursue her own life of friends and social gatherings beyond her domestic duties. However, that threatened the father of the house. Indeed, everything was subverted. The mother got to be a socialite, and Zora's presence challenged the father's assumption of the role of head of household. In a way, he loses his patriarchal power, but that happened as his children were able to (re)claim their childhood through play with Zora. Children being able to be children is something that Zora never had.

Yet even in this household, she has her subversive tongue and her father's invincibility where neither the father, the mother, nor the head worker can say anything to her. Contrary to his intention, Zora's father disowning her forces her to become an adult, but in her first adult adventure, she is finally able to become a child. Zora's presence in this scene points to how she rewrites the narrative of her abandonment to access a world of youth and play.

It is during these years absent of family that Zora transitions to her life as an adult. Yet these years are as precarious as her life as a child, perhaps even more so. She describes this time in her life as liminal, situated at the boundaries of society and community. "The five years following my leaving the school at Jacksonville were haunted. I was shifted from house to house of relatives and friends and found comfort nowhere" (87). This moment is indicative of the end of childhood for Zora. With her mother's death, the girl physically loses her mother as well as her family and her standing

within her family as a child. Although she is still child-aged, she no longer gets to enjoy the benefits of childhood such as going to school. This is unlike her siblings' experiences growing up as they mostly attended school while some attended college. However, both stability and the opportunity to go to school come to an end with the mother's death leaving Zora as a nomad of sorts. The way that Hurston describes this nomadic life after the mother's death reinforces the fact that she is forced to go from house to house as a way to survive.

In many of these homes, Zora works as a domestic servant helping to keep up the home. Whatever other interests she had are irrelevant and denied. "I was without books to read most of the time, except where I could get hold of them by mere chance. That left no room for selection. I was miserable, and no doubt made others miserable around me, because they could not see what was the matter with me, and I had no part in what interested them" (87). The text presents the idea of school as a luxury and its binary opposite as being a domestic servant. Although both of these realities are relevant for Zora, she cannot inhabit both experiences given their oppositional nature. From others' perspectives, literacy is both a luxury and useless, particularly for her as a domestic servant, and the Black people around her assert the uselessness of books. When she is in school, even those moments feel precarious. "I was in school off and on, which gave me vagrant peeps into the light, but these intervals lacked peace because I had no guarantee that they would last. I was growing and the general thought was that I could bring in something" (87-88). If she worked, then she would be able to bring in her earnings. With these jobs, Zora is performing a particular type of gendered labor, and the fact of Zora being a laborer reinforces the ways in which her ability to merely exist is something that

she must earn with minimal distractions, particularly from the books she loved. “This book-reading business was a hold-back and an unrelieved evil” (88). This passage points to how Zora was discouraged from reading and from formal learning.

Yet the end of childhood does not only signify the end of youth, it also signified the end of ease. In many ways, the people around Zora associate school with such ease. They make her to understand that “People who had no parents could not afford to sit around on school benches wearing out what clothes they had” (88). This passage marks the loss of ease in Zora’s life. Her willingness to simply sit is predicated upon the active presence of her parents in her life, and after the mother’s death and her father’s rejection, Zora is no longer able to sit around and read as that is not in alignment with her indigent status.

To connect this to the essay, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde highlights the normalcy of discouraging Black girls from reading, thinking, and learning. Both Lorde and Hurston assert that there is a widely accepted cultural belief that the Black girl does not have time for any of that. In terms of reading being out of alignment with Zora’s status at this point in the book, the text points to the conflict between her enjoyment of reading and the broader denial of that enjoyment. In other words, her access to spaces of reading, thinking, and learning are denied. That denial subsequently teaches her to repress her intellect as well as her desires. This cultural belief also suggests to the character that her place in her society is fixed and that she doesn’t have the agency to alter how she is placed within her society. Even when Zora was seen as a child, she could not read because her family lacked the means to obtain books for her, leaving her to find books in the trash. Her fundamental characteristic of being a student and learner was not

something that anyone facilitated in her life. This is in contrast to her sister, Sarah, who had piano lessons and dolls. Zora, on the other hand, had minimal access to learning, and that which she did, she had to gather for herself.

Hurston's efforts to access spaces and opportunities for learning point to how she always embodied an outside stance. Even from her birth as a baby girl, she came into the world via her father's rejection. So not only was she denied access as a learner, but her access to existence was compromised as a girl. Given her "brazenness" and expressiveness throughout her childhood, being "cosmic Zora" was her only way to exist and survive as herself in the world. In so many of the settings where readers encounter her as an adult, we don't see her engaging in the kind of deliberately subversive work that many scholars ascribe to her; rather, these are the terms by which she can exist at all. Indeed, all of these experiences have as part of their basis, her marginalization within the Black community beginning with her abandonment by her family. So when readers see her interacting with white people within her autobiographical writing, her behavior is based less in a desire to be anyone "favorite darkie," but it is more based in her recognition that these are spaces which may allow for her survival as a parentless child. These spaces give her access to money and income but also books and reading and most fundamentally childhood. Her working for white families allows her a moment in which she can finally be—a child, a girl, a young person at play. In those spaces, she gets to enjoy these things and these aspects of her identity. As she experiences these spaces, she creates an aura of freedom that others in these houses also benefit from.

However, because Zora doesn't really have any family upon whom she can rely and because of her loss of status, she is supposed to be seen as little as possible and is

expected to stay in her place. “One of the most serious objections to me was that having nothing, I still did not know how to be humble. A child in my place ought to realize I was lucky to have a roof over my head and anything to eat at all. And from their point of view, they were right. From mine, my stomach pains were the least of my sufferings. I wanted what they could not conceive of” (88). Her not having parents meant that she should occupy a position of inferiority by default, staying silent and inconspicuous. The broader society appears to assert that she should not be asking for more and should simply take what she is given. Zora sees this status as a form of death. “I was forever shifting. I walked by my corpse. I smelt it and felt it. I smelt the corpses of those among whom I must live, though they did not. They were as much at home with theirs as death in a tomb” (88). Walking by her “corpse,” the text shows how she is embedded in that sense of survival, and she sees that the others around her lack the vision to know that there is more to life. Hurston is both observer and participant in this moment of recognition.

Without the aura of worth and protection that her mother had once provided her, Zora’s basic necessities are now viewed as luxuries, and this societal perception reflects a caste system in which her parentlessness leaves her akin to an untouchable. This perception exists even now as we often deny poor people agency and choice. For those whom we situate at the bottom of society, we don’t see them as capable or worthy of mobility or agency or choice. If Zora weren’t poor or parentless, she wouldn’t be expected to be humble in this way. She knows that what she wants exists but not within the limited scope of other people’s perspectives.

Thus, here is where “cosmic Zora” is reactivated. To the degree that her ambitions are seen as transgressive to her status in that lowest social class, she must transcend the limitations of the societal constraints of others’ limited visions of what her life could or should be. Indeed, Zora has been socialized her whole life to merely survive as a Black woman. In being taught survival, she was also taught to expect only the minimum that life has to offer, but she knows that there is more out there. She has to detach from the people in her life and their limited perspectives in order to subsequently activate “cosmic Zora.”

## Chapter II:

### Interrogating Marginality in the Audre Lorde's *Zami*

Throughout *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Zora Neale Hurston interrogates her marginalized status within her family and community. The previous chapter in this thesis explored how Hurston does the discursive work to centralize herself as a folk hero within her autobiographical narrative from her folkloric birth to her endless ability to overcome her vulnerability as an African American young woman in the South in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In many ways, Hurston's shaping of a heroic narrative of herself depends on the character's and the author's ability to articulate a new space for Black female existence both on a sociopolitical level as well as within the frameworks of language and narrative. While young Zora finds space for innocence and play within the crawlspace of her family home, that pursuit of space is something that we also see in Audre Lorde's writing as she repeatedly confronts the reality of her outsider status throughout her life.

Early in her memoir, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Lorde<sup>1</sup> describes her discursive position vis-à-vis the world around her.

I have often wondered why the farthest-out position always feels so right to me; why extremes, although difficult and sometimes painful to maintain, are always more comfortable than one plan running straight down a line in the unruffled middle. What I really understand is a particular kind of determination. It is stubborn, it is painful, it is infuriating, but it often works. (15)

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the chapter, I will refer to the writer as Lorde to consider her work as the author of *Zami*; however, I will refer to her as Audre when I am speaking of the character within the book *Zami*.



A reading of the text demonstrates how Audre's default is to occupy an outsider stance. Certainly, positioning herself as a folk hero allows Hurston the writer to navigate her marginalization; Lorde relatedly transcends the bounds of realism to construct a discursive space that can support her Black lesbian experience. As opposed to folklore, Lorde turns to myth and centralizes herself and her community through the biomythography form.

While *Dust Tracks* and *Zami* are both written in nonlinear fashion, Lorde's text consists primarily of her construction of and journey to self. While Lorde is cognizant of her positionality as an outsider, that outsider status yet poses significant challenges for her as she navigates her life as suggested in the above quote. In the writer's and the character's search for self, the ways in which she exists in exile are revealed in her relationships with her family, her schoolmates, and her community at large. As she searches for who she is, she must also preserve the notion of who she is expected to be.

As Audre actively works to construct an identity of her own, she encounters rigid expectations for Black women. In this chapter, I argue that as Audre is cycling through these ever-present revolving doors of identity, Lorde is actively working to escape those expectations. The writer conveys her awareness that her escape will not happen by forging a self that can fit into rigid identity categories, so instead she fashions an identity that resists these rigid cultural and social frameworks. To do so, Lorde must establish a realm in which she can uncontestably exist, and she constructs the book as precisely the realm where she an articulate selfhood in its fullest possible sense.

### **Dropping the “Y”: Lorde’s reflections on her youngest self**

When Audre is introduced within the book as a small child, she does not encounter a realm for developing and engaging the self; rather, the character, even as a child, is tasked with forging such a space. In reflecting on her name, the adult narrator tries to capture her child self’s autonomous mindset.

I did not like the tail of the Y hanging down below the line in Audrey, and would always forget to put it on, which used to disturb my mother greatly. I used to love the evenness of AUDRELORDE at four years of age, but I remembered to put on the Y because it pleased my mother, and because, as she always insisted to me, that was the way it had to be because that was the way it was. No deviation was allowed from her interpretations of correct. (24)

On one hand, Audre likes “AUDRELORDE” on an aesthetic level as she enjoys the evenness of the characters since the “y” does not hang over the line, but throughout the book, she suggests that she has never cared for lines nor for fitting within them. It is ironic that even in her resistance to her prescribed identity, she also subconsciously subscribes to the rigidity of lines and boundaries in the sense that her name is a central part of her identity. But even in her acknowledgement of the centrality of her name to her identity, she is ascribing the orthography of her name to the aesthetics of her own forged identity. She does not change her name; she changes the appearance of her name. The optical presentation of that deviation directly rails against her mother’s deep investment in the ways in which she herself and her children are perceived.

At the same time, this scene illuminates similarities between Audre's and her mother's experiences. The models of comportment that Linda Lorde was taught as an adolescent has colored her existence, and thus, she places those same models of learned behavior on Audre. Yet whereas these practices were basic cultural practices in Grenada, Linda perceives them as a requisite for survival in Harlem. At home in Grenada, the stakes of singing in the street are not presented as a matter of life and death, but in New York, which is not home, these teachings are integral to how Linda safeguards her daughter. She teaches this way of being and these principles of correctness to Audre as a means of survival. In doing so, Linda Lorde teaches her daughter that her identity and how she must present herself to the world has already been established and cannot be altered. One must not question "Y."

In its portrayal of this scene, the text presents the child's name as the contested borderland upon which Audre must begin to claim the space she needs for herd envisioning and articulation of selfhood. Yet even the liminal space of a borderland erodes as the child approaches the constructs and exclusions of school. From the time that Audre was four years old, she already occupied a marginal position. She is young; she is *blind*, and she has never spoken before. It is time for her to go to school, "But the catholic school had no kindergarten, and certainly not one for blind children" (21). Even at this young age, Audre is aware of her differences vis-à-vis her unaccommodating community. The messaging that she receives is that she cannot go to the private Catholic school like her two older sisters, but beyond that, there is no space for a blind child in the realm of the classroom seen as if she is an impediment to the collective project of learning. Such a perception is based in a false dichotomy where the presence of a disability was equated

with a lack of intelligence and physical ability on the other hand was assumed to undergird cognitive intelligence. Thus, Audre was not welcome in this place of learning for “good” and “worthy” children. What the text demonstrates is that the child protagonist is placeless in this moment in her ongoing pursuit of selfhood; silent at home and rejected at school, there is no place or space for self.

Technically speaking, Audre’s “blindness” was actually an acute nearsightedness. Defined as “a condition in which close objects appear clearly but far ones don’t,” near-sightedness has a dual meaning in the context of the book.<sup>2</sup> The narrator poses a relationship between seeing, speaking, learning, and reading. “Despite my nearsightedness, or maybe because of it, I learned to read at the same time I learned to talk” (21). The near-sightedness has a layered meaning. She can only see up close to her. Certainly, she is barred from the classroom because of her impaired sight, but also due to her nearsightedness, she cannot visually access the barriers of his ableist ideology.

Counter to the exclusions of the classroom, the public library is a space that Audre can structurally access since she is not barred from it. Yet it is also a space that she can visually and neurologically engage. It does not have any invisible or ideological walls that would also bar her entry. As she sits listening to the picture book being read to her, she is able to see the words in large font as they appear on the page. Being able to see language up close and in front of her, not distorted by any invisible walls, Audre bursts through this moment exclaiming, “I want to read” to which Linda responds, “‘Will wonders never cease to perform!’ Her excitement startled me back into cautious silence” (23). This is a breakthrough moment within the text as many have assumed that the child

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<sup>2</sup> Information on near-sightedness can be found on the Mayo Clinic website, [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org).

would not speak nor would she learn. Silent at home and rejected at school, she has largely been viewed through a lens of limitation and lack. Yet in this moment, Audre counters the assertion that equals ability with intelligence. She juxtaposes the heightened diagnoses that marginalize her with language that better fits her experience. Through her exclamation, the child refuses the language of being blind and dumb while asserting herself as an intellectual given her explicit desire to read.

Still, the narrator's reflective analysis of this moment introduces additional stakes surrounding the child's seemingly belated first words. The narrator describes how the mother's exclamation "startled [her] back into cautious silence." In reflections on her coming to voice, the narrator introduces both ambivalence and ambiguity. "Perhaps learn isn't the right word to use for my beginning to talk, because to this day I don't know if I didn't talk earlier because I didn't know how, or if I didn't talk because I had nothing to say that I would be allowed to say without punishment. Self-preservation starts very early in West Indian families" (21-22). Similar to the conflicts surrounding the mother and child in regards to the latter's name, the adult narrator knows that some speech is viewed as transgressive. Given her fear of punishment, she chooses the protection that silence gives her even before she knew that she had a choice to be silent. She "chooses" to preserve herself as silence as akin to protection.

Considerations of Linda Lorde are key to understanding the child's subconscious desire to protect herself. Whether it's around the child's name or her ability to navigate school normally like her sisters, she conveys awareness that the mother has notions of correctness that the young Audre suspects will point to her transgressiveness. For Chinsole, Linda teaches her daughter to love the culture and tradition of the West Indies,

which will form part of Lorde's collective identity. The transmission from mother to daughter of this legacy is a way of keeping links with her homeland and of affirming cultural differences in the country where they live (Chinosole 137). Yet with the Caribbean as an ideological foundation, the text illustrates how the Caribbean is a colonized space in which women aspire to notions of Britishness as a form of correctness. If one thinks about the way that Linda was taught by Sister Lou and other matriarchs, one sees that she was not taught but was *told* how to navigate the world. There is a difference between teaching and instruction, and Linda was given a set of instructions with which she was expected to comply. That structure of authority was the same for Audre. The protagonist was similarly given a set of instructions based on things just being the way they are. In these instances, the instruction that the girls receive is not about teaching but about a kind of discipline that they would need to comply with to navigate their worlds. Through that discipline portrayed in the text, the author suggests that the stakes are high for maintaining the cloak of respectability that women gain in the upholding of bourgeois politics and standards.

These standards are ones that the child has come to know intimately. Prior to her coming to voice, her only way to express herself verbally was through the expression of pain. While the library is a space that she can enter, she is not allowed to freely express herself, so when the toddler finds herself in the middle of a tantrum, her mother responds to snap her back into “correct” ways of being. “I can still feel the stinging soreness in the flesh of my upper arm. There, where my mother’s sharp fingers had already tried to pinch me into silence. To escape those inexorable fingers I had hurled myself to the floor, roaring with pain as I could see them advancing toward my ears again” (22). As the

narrator recalls the memory of her crying on the floor of the library, the bodily memory of the physical trauma that she endured stays in focus.

Keith Byerman talks about the centrality of the maternal role within the Caribbean. For the critic, girls are raised just to be mothers and otherwise fill domestic roles. The mother is the socializing agent through which social conditioning happens. The mother passes on this culture of domesticity based in a set of instructions to the daughter by which she can be fully assimilated and integrated into the culture. This set of instructions is necessary for a girl to be seen as a true Caribbean woman. In this moment, Audre is precluded from expressing discomfort and prohibited from expressing herself. She is to be silent, not disturbing others' work in the library. The domestic realm is based in the support of others external to oneself; it does not acknowledge a woman's need to express herself.

Still, it is striking to note that Audre's being pinched on the floor of the library happens immediately before she speaks her first words. When her words confirm her intellectual and expressive ability, the mother shifts in her tone, attitude, and expression. As opposed to the embarrassment and shame with which she approached her crying child, her mother gains a sudden pride in her daughter—the reader. This juxtaposition of cruelty and love runs through her experience and actions as a mother. Here and elsewhere in the text, the figure of mother is more than a tool of patriarchy as the character is deeply embedded within its structures.

**“My best Audre”: The character as writer, growing into self**

In the scene that follows Audre’s coming to voice at the library, the character enters school just like her sisters, no longer an impediment to learning. Now, the text portrays her learning and writing alongside her peers.

I printed my best AUDRE. I had never been too good at keeping between straight lines no matter what their width, so it slanted down across the page something like this:

A  
U  
D  
R  
E

The notebooks were short and there was no more room for anything else on that page. So I turned the page over, and wrote again, earnestly and laboriously, biting my lip,

L  
O  
R  
D  
E

half-showing off, half-eager to please.” (25)

As she slants “it” down the page, she severs her self from her identity. She is doing this not for fun, but for approval and to be validated. However, that is not what she received. Yet part of this writing of her name is her self-expression which is different from the expectations held by her mother and her teacher. So even as she is trying to win their



approval, it further alienates her. But to think about “AUDRE LORDE” as a foreshadowing of this moment in the classroom, it builds up to this moment where the text subtly shows the reader how Audre’s name is a center of gravity and how everyone has a different stake in who she is. Her identity and her name are sites of tension which the protagonist is trying to mediate as she goes outside of the lines, trying to free herself from the constrictions of both the lined paper and of the authority of the adults around. She is expressing a kind of freedom as she goes outside of the lines. The lines that her writing crosses are tangible, but the boundaries that her teacher expresses return Audre to those invisible walls of expectation and prohibitions as she tells the child, “You don’t even want to try and do as you are told” (26). In this space where Audre is there to learn, she is not actually being taught. Rather she is being policed to perform in a certain way. To think about Lorde’s crying on the floor of the library, the narrator expresses consciousness of embarrassing her mother. The teacher also brings up the specter of the mother’s embarrassment when Audre transgresses the lines on the page.

From the time that Black girls are born, they are raised to be “good.” By the time they are able to walk and talk they are expected to be fully assimilated into the respectability politics that are meant to govern their bodies. The teacher conveys that requisite external governance when she chides Audre, “I see we have a young lady who does not want to do as she is told. We will have to tell her mother about that” (26). These respectability politics around compliance were created as a means of survival within structures of white supremacy to shield Black bodies from the white public desire to control them. Yet while respectability politics serve as a sort of subversion of a white supremacist order, one can also see that because of these survival tactics that Black girls

are taught, they never have a chance to experience girlhood. They don't get to be childlike. They don't get to explore or slant or find their way across the page. They are shamed for their innate desires to discover themselves and their worlds. "Imagine that, a big girl like you. Such a shame, I'll have to tell your mother that you won't even try. And such a big girl like you!" Yet the teacher does not frame this situation as something that can be isolated and addressed individually. "Now you copy that letter exactly the way it is, and the rest of the class will have to wait for you" (26). In this moment, not only is the young Audre being forced into fitting into this rigid category of "correctness," she is also being burdened with the responsibility of her peers' learning. Their education relies on her ability to perform in this public arena.

Thus, even within the space of a pre-K classroom, Lorde is subject. First as a Black body, then as a Black gendered body, that is viewed as needing to be controlled. Because she is viewed through lenses that do not allow for her to be a child, she is also deemed unworthy of being taught. Instead, she must be shamed into compliance. There is no range for her to be expressive verbally, physically, intellectually or artistically. The teacher must take hold of Audre through the projections that she can cast on her. She must make it clear to Audre that her body and her being resists feminine conventions by using the word "big" in front of "girl." In this moment, Audre becomes aware of her status as a Black female subject. However, she is unable to see the ways in which her subjectivity comes by way of another woman's subjectivity and must be enforced by other women and upheld by men.

Still, Audre experiences shame in this moment and is relegated to the category of bad children. Even though this is moment of becoming, because shame couldn't inhibit

this growing into self, the only mechanism by which that could be controlled is to frame it and name it as bad—Audre as a “Brownie.”

[The teacher] had divided up the class into two groups, the Fairies and the Brownies. In this day of heightened sensitivity to racism and color usage, I don't have to tell you which were the good students and which were the baddies. I always wound up in the Brownies, because either I talked too much, or I broke my glasses, or I perpetrated some other awful infraction of the endless rules of good behavior. (27-28)

Within her volume, Robin Bernstein argues about the “innocence” associated with children and how that was framed and differentiated by race. “By the mid-nineteenth century, sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence together wholly. Childhood was then understood not as innocent but as innocence itself; not as a symbol of innocence but as its embodiment. The doctrine of original sin receded, replaced by a doctrine of original innocence. This innocence was raced white” (4). In this way, Audre’s categorization as a “Brownie” is unsurprising even while it is simultaneously disappointing. As a child of African descent, she never could have been innocent.

Through her admonitions, the teacher stands in for the mother and reporting back to the mother as a socializing agent returning to Byerman’s terminology. Audre is struggling to grasp language, but as we see, Audre is struggling to come into this identity that she is trying to create. Ultimately, Lorde as writer is trying to do something else. Although Audre’s writing in this moment points to the moment of action, but that moment is already tempered by the adult narrator’s framing of this moment. The latter does not let the reader just dive into the child’s perspective. Lorde frames this moment

through the narrator's adult perspective. It may be that that chronological remove from the site of the classroom is another refusal of the mother's assertion that Audre's identity is fixed. The adult narrator comes in to contest the other adults in the scene and give space for the coming to self that the child is attempting to enact in order to seek validation for expressing herself. These layered chronologies and temporalities thus complicate this scene and suggest that this style of narration is another act of resistance. Even as the narrator is telling the story, she is resisting the trope of the victimized girl.

In this way, the adult narrator performs a vital function in this scene and within the book. The way that the adult narrative voice enters and thereby frames this classroom moment allows her to contest the other voices of authority. She rejects the teacher's attempts to admonish and shame the child for her self-expression. The narrator similarly refuses the mother's expectations of conformity. Ultimately, the adult narrative voice functions as a surrogate mother through which Audre as an expressive being is born. Through the formal possibilities of the biomythography, Lorde is able to reroute lines of genealogy such that she can give birth to herself and provide the discursive space that the young Audre needs to grow and be.

### **Audre's Adolescence: Interrogations of Patriarchy and Protection**

While family, authority, and validation are central to Audre's perspective as a small child, those are replaced with peer relationships in her adolescence. Central to these peer relationships is her friendship with Gennie. The narrator describes the girl as "the first person in my life that I was ever conscious of loving" (87). While Gennie is Audre's friend, she is symbolic of their social circle as well as their contemporaries. The girl

functions as a vehicle through which familial and social expectation act as controlling mechanism to instruct girls in the “correct” ways to comport themselves. Given what happens to Gennie later in the text, it would appear that the stakes of these controlling mechanisms are life and death for girls. Through her character, the text demonstrates how patriarchy is intermingled with a ferocious love that often doesn’t have the space to express itself.

Although the text beautifully portrays Audre and Gennie’s season of friendship, for my purposes in this chapter, I will focus on Gennie’s death and all that happens in the wake of her death. When Audre and her mother encounter each other at home after they both learn of Gennie’s death by suicide, Audre’s mother expresses coldness despite any prior affections she had shown her daughter’s friend. “‘I’ll fix you some tea. You mustn’t be too upset about this. Be careful who you go around with. You think we stupid. There was something there totally wrong there from the start’” (101). In this moment, Audre’s mother is interpreting Gennie through a patriarchal lens, within this “fast girl” narrative. She was someone around whom Audre should have been “careful,” and Gennie thus becomes a scapegoat in the mother’s narrative. There was not necessarily something wrong with Gennie, but she is being used by the mother as a vehicle to stigmatize the girl’s entire family. This is logical; since girls are policed, the quality of the family would be conveyed in the ethical character and quality of the girl.

Yet the mother’s questioning of the deceased girl are not simply hurtful to Audre, but rather, it exemplifies the way that women try to “protect” their daughters from the brunt of patriarchy. Audre’s parents are experiencing the realities of having a 16-year-old daughter and not knowing how to navigate adolescence. Linda jumps into this speech

because she says that her daughter lied to her. Even when the speech is over, her father comes home to reiterate, “Don’t lie to us.” Gennie’s death awakens Audre’s parents’ terror about whether Audre herself lives or dies. The mother fits in this patriarchal structure as she knows her role as nurturer, but she also has a deep investment in patriarchal values. So even though she is trying to play her role as a nurturer, she is also functioning as an agent of patriarchy such that her nurturing also indirectly conveys a violence which further harms the young Audre “as if her harshness could convey an invulnerability on me” (101).

. When Audre goes to Gennie’s mother’s house to return the girl’s notebooks, the latter is not aggressive like Mrs. Lorde, but the goal of creating some semblance of truth for herself seems the same. When the girl’s mother circumscribes the girls’ relationship as friends and as sisters, she is looking at Audre as a mirror into her daughter’s life that can reflect back to her everything that she needs to know about her late daughter’s life. ““You and Jean were such good friends. Matter of fact, she saw you more than she anybody else”” (102). Even though Audre is grieving, she is not given the space to grieve. Given the domestic expectations, her role is to support others in achieving their desires. In this way, Gennie’s death is not really about Gennie, nor is Audre’s grief about Audre, but rather, both Gennie and Audre come to encompass other people’s individual desires to find a narrative that will satisfy their unique needs. For Linda Lorde, Gennie was fast, and Audre was not to be anything like that. For Louise, Audre and Gennie were alike enough to be sisters. Thus, Audre can serve as a first-hand source, “Tell me why she did this.” In both cases, these families expect Audre to fulfill their needs in correspondence with the expectations placed on girls and women. Even as Audre is invited to express her

thoughts in conversation with Gennie's mother, it is to express what the mother needs to hear.

Indeed, Gennie's death is symbolic of the fact that there was no space in which the girl can exist within the world. There was no literal space for her in either of her parent's homes. Having recently met and reconciled with her father shortly before her death, Gennie had imagined how this relationship could help her overcome her challenges and conflicts with her mother. But when he entered her life, Gennie lost whatever space in which she had previously existed. Having been raised by both of her parents her whole life, Audre had over time figured them out and learned how to navigate their expectations and boundaries, and in doing so, the protagonist was able to craft essential survival tools. In contrast, having just met her father, Gennie lacked the tools by which Audre is able to survive. Neither Gennie nor her mother is able to stand up to the patriarchal violence that surround them. Louisa cannot take a stand against the abuse that the daughter is facing; she can only try, unsuccessfully, to keep the girl out of harm's way.

Lorde portrays how Gennie's death looms large in Linda's interactions with Audre. The mother obsesses over Gennie because the girl's death represents something that she cannot protect her daughter from. The mother's willful denial of danger and vulnerability in the wake of Gennie's death echoes Audre's reflections on her mother's response to racism. When Audre was 5 and the white man in the street spat on her, Audre's mother became upset about the vulgar ways of people spitting carelessly into the street. Since she couldn't truly exercise any agency in this racist situation, she denied the oppressive reality of being Black in America. In the Lorde family, they don't talk about race or racism, but Lorde reveals how that silence is simply a denial and evasion of the

circumstances in which they are living. In parallel fashion, the mother is quite anxious about Gennie's death and all of the ways that girls are vulnerable, but she cannot admit the fact of danger and vulnerability. Thus, she instead projects her anxieties on to her daughter as she reminds her how to be "correct" at all times. From her cautions, it would appear that policing girls kept them safe, but Gennie's death revealed the falsity of that idea of safety.

### **Daring to Transgress and Journeying to Self**

In these and other moments throughout the text, self-expression is grounded in the conflict between Audre's journey to self and the social and familial detours which attempt to impede her capacity for self-actualization. Indeed, her conflicts with her family soon peak in the wake of Gennie's death. When Audre graduates from high school the next year, the writer portrays her ultimate break from her parents. "Two weeks after I graduated from high school, I moved out of my parents' home [. . . .] The precipitating factors in my leaving home were some disparaging remarks my father made about Gennie, now dead almost two years, and a fight with my sister Helen. My mother threatened to call the police and I left" (103-104). In this struggle for social and psychic autonomy, Lorde places herself outside of the family home. The protagonist's decision to leave echoes the parents' expectations when she had previously graduated from 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Then, they explicitly told her that she was now an adult and that she needed to conduct herself and her affairs like a grown person. In this case, Audre makes an adult decision to support herself and live autonomously. However, the young woman doesn't leave home simply because she's an adult now but because she's not welcome in



her parents' house. When her mother threatens to call the police on her daughter, it demonstrates the reality that Audre no longer belongs there.

During that final period of family conflict, Audre enters into a relationship with a white young man named Peter. Having met him at a party, they

made a date. He arrived to take me to the movies the next afternoon. It was Washington's Birthday, and both of my parents were home. My father answered the door, and would not let Peter into the house because he was white. That immediately catapulted what would have been a passing teenage fancy into a revolutionary cause celebre. (103)

Given her white boyfriend serving as her “revolutionary cause,” Audre’s parents push her further away from them. This particular conflict also illuminated some of the contradictions that Audre was navigating in her parents’ home. Peter could not enter their home because he was white. But at various moments within the text, Lorde describes how her mother was pale enough to be seen as white. If Peter could not be trusted according to the parents due to his whiteness, how then was Audre to trust her mother. Indeed, Linda Lorde comes to embody the types of people Audre learned and/or was taught not to trust.

However, Lorde ultimately finds it necessary to leave New York City “whose streets I came to learn better than my mother had ever learned them” (104). Once she leaves the city, she truly comes home to her lesbian identity. In detailing her first explicitly sexual experience with her factory co-worker, Ginger, Lorde describes it as “coming home”: “Loving Ginger that night was like coming home to a joy I was meant for, and I only wondered, silently, how I had not always known that it would be so”

(139). Throughout these readings of Lorde's and Hurston's narratives of selfhood, a central argument focuses on the transience of home. Audre's experience with Ginger is both familiar and inviting, like "coming home." In this way, Audre finds a home in Ginger's body, and in doing so, Audre grows more comfortable in her sexuality. Yet this process can only be possible once the young woman leaves her parents' home. And even though Audre had previously played "house" with Gennie, that space could not be home, not while they were both actively running *away* from the constraints of their families and other circumstances.

However, Audre's and Ginger's relationship almost appears within the text. Before Audre and Ginger have sex, Audre planned to have an affair with a woman, but having sex with her does not completely relieve Audre's uncertainty about who she is or how she is connected to a community in any broader sense. "Ginger was my friend, the only friend I had made in this strange town, and I loved her, but with caution. We had slept together. Did that mean we were lovers?" (140). Even though Audre is confused, she realizes that her first intimate relationship with a woman is indicative of more than just an affair.

However, in envisioning the necessary discursive terrain in which Black lesbian womanhood can thrive, Lorde interrogates the boundaries between intimacy and sisterhood. From Ginger to Muriel and finally to Afrekete, Lorde's definition of friendship takes many forms.

We all cared for and about each other, sometimes with more or less understanding, regardless of who was entangled with whom at any given time, and there was always a place to sleep and something to eat and a

listening ear for anyone who wandered into the crew. And there was always somebody calling you on the telephone, to interrupt the fantasies of suicide. That is as good a working definition of friend as most. (179)

To reflect on Audre's relationship with Gennie, the latter was all of those things, but at the time, Audre didn't have the language for articulating that. Gennie was her friend and her sister; Audre didn't have the language for anything beyond that. However, as a young Black lesbian, all of these women are there in Audre's life so that she doesn't kill herself as she describes in this passage. This quote leaves readers to wonder if Audre's evolving definition of friendship was borne out of her experience of mourning having lost that first friend she had in Gennie.

However, the intimacy and sisterhood of a lesbian community does not eliminate her experience of conflict and marginalization that she had known so well growing up. When she later breaks up with her long-term girlfriend, Muriel, she realizes the inevitability of conflict. Reflecting on her former partner asleep on the couch, Lorde asserts, "She was not my creation. She had never been my creation. Muriel was herself, and I had only aided that process, as she had mine" (239). In a way, Audre had almost echoed her mother. To the degree that the young Audre had had expectations for Muriel, the protagonist echoes her mother's expectations and visions for the people in their family, including Audre herself. In this way, both the mother and the daughter attempt to force those they love into their fantasies of who they project them to be. In order to come into herself, Audre has to shed her mother's identity and ideas about others and create spaces where she and other can be fully themselves.

### **Connecting to the Present:**

#### **Brittney Cooper's Interrogation of Respectability Politics**

#### **Through the Angry Black Woman**

The Black woman intellectual has always existed and continues to exist within a curious place. She articulates her resistance to the various constraints placed on her including those of respectability politics while yet remaining subject to those constraints. Much of Hurston's and Lorde's experiences depicted in their memoirs are based in the tension produced by their interrogation of respectability politics while still being subject to its expectations. This site of tension informs the roles that Hurston and Lorde take up as "cosmic Zora" and "sister outsider." This tension continues to be present in Brittney Cooper's memoir, *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*. There she traces her evolution from growing up in the South to navigating academia and American society as a Black woman.

A key rhetorical trope in *Eloquent Rage* is Cooper's concept of "homegirl interventions." The writer defines "homegirl interventions" as "those Black girl call-outs" from women like her "grandmama, mama, and my girls. And they have saved my life" (Cooper 4). In many ways, Lorde and Hurston function as Cooper's literary "homegirls." Taken together, the work of Hurston, Lorde, and Cooper illuminates the genealogical traces that shape and inform their understanding of Black women's experiences across the decades. Such intergenerational connections are necessary as they offer a desired counterpoint to the constancy of "rage" as the emotional foundation of Black women's experiences in American society. Speaking of this "rage," Cooper states,

“What I have is anger. Rage, actually. And that’s the place where more women should begin—with the things that make us angry” (1). In this chapter, I shall examine Cooper’s memoir in order to trace the discursive genealogy based in identity and affect which connects all three writers. In this chapter, I shall briefly examine Cooper’s memoir in order to trace the discursive genealogy based in identity and affect which connects all three writers.

Cooper becomes aware of how she was perceived in relation to anger fairly early in her life. She recounts her former perspective,

By then, I was wary of the Angry Black Woman stereotype. Even though I was only in my mid-twenties at the time, I had already experienced many years of white people doing that thing they do to articulate Black Women—always asking us “Why are you so angry?” I hated the accusation from others, usually white people, because it was unfair, a way to discredit the legitimacy of the things Black women say by calling them emotional and irrational. (3)

As she recalls conversations with friends, Cooper conveys the degree to which she was hyperaware of the “problem” of Black women’s anger and the ways that people typically dismissed that anger. Even while she was actively experiencing hardship here and elsewhere in the book, she could not express her emotions because the stakes are too high for Black girls to be emotional. Feeling is not something that they can afford.

Throughout the book, Cooper stakes a claim to rage, which functions as the primary vehicle through which Cooper is able to articulate her agency. Cooper exerts a willingness to experience rage and to exert herself through that which angers her. The

author thus interrogates societal constructions of Black womanhood and explores the ways in which these narrow perceptions and expectations of Black female identity are detrimental. However, through her use of rage as a “superpower,” Cooper is able to subvert the “Angry Black Woman” trope. In doing so, she destabilizes societal notions of Black women’s anger. She claims ownership of her anger and points to the things that make her angry as that anger often develops into rage that then functions as fuel for action. In doing so, she transforms the “angry Black woman” trope from a fixed identity to being the force that mobilizes her.

Indeed, Cooper diminishes the power of the Angry Black Woman stereotype by reclaiming anger as an emotion and opening discursive space in which Black women can feel angry. “Black women have the right to be mad as hell. We have been dreaming of freedom and carving out spaces for liberation since we arrived on these shores” (4). In reclaiming agency over our emotions, we also gain access into our autonomy and can therefore use it to imagine other possibilities. So even as the world is restrictive, Cooper’s text points to the ways that Black women demonstrate a level of resourcefulness as they dream of their liberation and create spaces where freedom can exist.

Still, the book considers the issues of anger, rage, and Black women’s emotion in a different light. In the section entitled, “The Problem With Sass,” Cooper states, “[w]hen it comes to Black women, sometimes Americans don’t recognize that sass is simply a more palatable form of rage. Americans adore sassy Black women” (Cooper 1). From Tyler Perry characters to most female characters on predominantly Black sitcoms, the figure of the “sassy Black woman” is central in American cultural discourse. More

broadly speaking, Cooper illuminates the realities of being a Black woman in America acknowledging that Americans have an obsession with Black female identities especially within the mainstream consciousness where these limited fantasies of Black female identities exist.

In this section, Cooper also goes on to discuss the many tropes of Black womanhood, all of which are entangled in sexuality. The figures of the mammy and Jezebel are closely defined and interrelated based on their divergent sexualities. Within that entanglement around Black women's sexuality comes a forced submission to patriarchy. Not only do Black women have to be desirable, but they must also be as desirable as they are nurturing. They are expected to be the objects of male desire, and Black women are expected to fulfill that work. Thus, Black womanhood becomes an identity category based in and around the patriarchal norms that were meant to govern their lives, and even when Black women are respectable, they are yet bound by perceptions and beliefs regarding their sexuality. Since patriarchy operates as a system of oppression, it totally relies heavily on strict reinforcement. This reinforcement makes the space of Black womanhood a public affair. However, this framework is detrimental to Black women as it excludes Black women from their own public narratives.

This clearly resonates with the work of Lorde and Hurston. Certainly, this thesis has pointed to the ways that those writers have continually endeavored to make space for themselves and for others through their lives and writing. Yet in doing so, these writers are making a clear intervention in the social dynamics between women and particularly Black women. Cooper herself describes the world in which she grew up where women were taught to be suspicious of other women. "I came up in an era when Black girls

loudly proclaimed that *they didn't have friends. They had associates*. [. . .] It's hard for Black girls to be friends with each other" (14). Indeed, these girls reinforced ideas that other women and girls could not be trusted.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, Cooper expands her analysis of these barriers as patriarchy and respectability politics work in tandem to separate women from each other as the respectability politics "breed[] distrust between middle-class striving women and poor women of color. We (middle-class women) are taught that those women [. . .] make us all look bad" (119).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Cooper illuminates the fallacies within this thinking and points to how relationships with other women and girls have sustained her throughout her life.

Lorde similarly speaks to these barriers between Black women and the difficulties she experienced in building strong relationships with other Black women in *Zami*. "For four hundred years in this country, Black women have been taught to view each other with deep suspicion" (224). Within this atmosphere of suspicion, Lorde finds herself "longing" for the companionship of other Black women sensing that that might offer her the kind of sustenance that Cooper speaks to in *Eloquent Rage*. However, she recognizes the psychological and historical barriers that keep them separate from each other.

Those psychological barriers that Lorde describes are also comprised of all of the ways that these women are distinct from one another. In the "house of difference"

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<sup>1</sup> It is both ironic and inevitable that these girls would testify to their inability to trust other girls. Certainly, patriarchal principles inform their low regard for other women.

<sup>2</sup> Cooper cites Black feminist historian, Darlene Clark Hine's theories on the "culture of dissemblance" that also intersect with respectability politics and Black women's ability to authentically connect with one another—"this enigmatic way that Black women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries moved through the world, often doing race work of the type I was doing that day, giving the appearance of being open while fully obscuring the operations of their inner lives from public view" (101). Unable to integrate the multiple aspects of their lives, Black women would be compelled to avoid connection with others via the more troubling aspects of their lives.



passage in *Zami*, Lorde describes how she could never simplify her identity as one single “individuation of self” (226). “Each of us had our own needs and pursuits, and many different alliances. Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self.” Those real differences—their social circles at the Bagatelle, their enrollment or non-enrollment in college, their being from Uptown or elsewhere—also informed the challenges they experienced in connecting with each other.

One could even trace this feeling back to Hurston’s experience in the early twentieth century. She describes herself as a child, “always I stood apart within. Often I was in some lonesome wilderness, suffering strange things and agonies while other children in the same yard played without a care” (43-44). The writer goes on to describe the “cosmic loneliness” that served as Zora’s “shadow.” It is important that “cosmic loneliness” is a precursor to “cosmic Zora.” While the latter moniker appears to celebrate Hurston’s power and seeming divinity, her “cosmic” self is cast in the same solitary aura that the cosmically lonely little Zora lamented. Taken together, Lorde, Hurston, and Cooper serve as models of Black womanhood in the way that they envision sisterhood, but they situate themselves within an atmosphere of loneliness. Although they envision community and possibilities of such community, they themselves don’t often have that community at their disposal.

Thus, these writers are compelled to construct the personas and related perspectives that are present within their writings. A closer look at Hurston’s adult perspective is particularly illuminating for thinking about the personas that I’ve explored in this thesis. In describing her overarching worldview as an adult, Hurston asks the

question, “Why fear? The stuff of my being is matter, ever changing, ever moving, but never lost; so what need of denominations and creeds to deny myself the comfort of all my fellow men? [. . .] I am one with the infinite and need no other assurance” (226).

Hurston does not fear the challenges of life or whatever might happen to her in the future. Given the “cosmic loneliness” that shadowed her childhood, she comes to terms with the idea that nothing truly goes away or is finite. “I know that nothing is destructible; things merely change forms. When the consciousness we know as life ceases, I know that I shall still be part and parcel of the world. I was a part before the sun rolled into shape and burst forth in the glory of change” (226). Instead of being consumed or destroyed by the loneliness that defines her experience as a Black woman in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hurston knows that things often show up in a different way.

For each of these writers, autobiographical writing becomes a framework that they shape so that they can show up in a different way, different from the limited boxes of societal expectation and different from the conventions of the genre of autobiography. As they show up in different ways, whether as cosmic or angry outsiders—they expand the discursive terrain in which Black women can exist.

## Conclusion

Previous generations of scholars have not been open to Black women's writing, critiquing it for all of the ways that it was unique, differing from that of more privileged models, particular those of and those based on hegemonic white males. Even contemporary scholars repeat some of these same errors as they at times fail to read these texts closely, preferring instead to make great claims about Black women or the Black community.

These writers attempt to make space for themselves and imagine new paradigms in which they can exist. However, scholarly discourse often put them back in the same boxes that they were trying to escape. While I recognize that Hurston, Lorde, and Cooper have a reach beyond themselves, I'm invested in considering the personas that they wrote from in order to engage the fact that Black girls have always been creating spaces for themselves, and given the multiplicity of those spaces, there is no one size fits all for Black womanhood. The point of this project is get away from monolithic views of Black women. I have chosen instead to explore the range of Black women's experience.

As considered in previous chapters, Black womanhood is entangled in Black women's sexuality. Audre Lorde is an example of a Black woman who does not adhere to heteronormative constraints. Zora Neale Hurston, contrary to many race-based politics, disregards the tenets of racial uplift. She does not deny the existence of race, but she is not interested in reliving the past or in lamenting racialized subjection in America. While Cooper describes Black women as having to be caregivers and nurturers, these are roles that Hurston refuses to take on, choosing instead to maintain her integrity and her brazenness throughout her life, regardless of what's at stake. She

chooses to remain indefinable and comes to terms with her identity and herself, and she accepts the fact that the positions that she takes may leave her alone, not only from a literary community but also from peers and companions.

Cooper gives us a new way to engage rage as well as respectability. Her interrogation of patriarchal norms and her reclaiming the “angry Black woman,” she illustrates the fact that emotion possesses range. Anger has range as it possesses intellectual as well as emotional depth. She claims her entitlement to rage in contrast to all of the ways that Black girls are denied expression of their anger, rage, and their emotions in general.

Scholars have questioned the idea of autobiography based on the theory that there is no “true self.” However, in all of the texts that I have explored in this thesis, the authors’ have portrayed journeys to self that have illustrated how Black women see their self-actualization as a goal and how they desire to utilize language to capture that process of self-actualization in autobiographical writing. The analysis of Lorde ‘s writing points to how she defines herself based on her new spelling of her name. Cooper’s reclamation of her emotional self is also indicative of her journey to self, explicitly including her self that is borne out of anger and resistance to societal expectations. On the other hand, Hurston portrays herself as transcending time. Through her mythological self, “cosmic Zora,” she sees her unfolding as a Black woman as preceding her physical birth and following her death. Her belief systems lend themselves to being “cosmic Zora,” surpassing all of the meager constraints in the world. She also transcends the expectations and constraints of the social realm. Ultimately, Hurston sees through the

widely accepted mythologies of her time in terms of religion or in terms of race-based responsibility, focusing only on her own transcendence as “cosmic Zora.”

Although it may seem that Black women’s transcendence stands far outside of our reality as we stand mired in history and the social and political dynamics of contemporary society, by examining these three authors’ journeys to self, we open the needed discursive space in which Black women can exist and manifest the fullness of who we are.

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