

Elizabeth Alexander

“Coming Out Blackened and Whole”

Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde’s *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals*

“As a Black woman,” said the late Audre Lorde, “I have to deal with identity or I don’t exist at all. I can’t depend on the world to name me kindly, because it never will. If the world defines you, it will define you to your disadvantage. So either I’m going to be defined by myself or not at all” (“Interview with Audre Lorde” with Karla Hammond 18). In essays from her *Sister Outsider* and *A Burst of Light*, as well as in the more narratively autobiographical *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and *The Cancer Journals*, Lorde names differences among women, African Americans, lesbians, and other groups as empowering rather than divisive forces and as aspects of identity. The political ideal, as she sees it, should not be a melting pot where all difference is subsumed, usually bending to the descriptive and ideological might of the previously dominant group. Instead, Lorde argues, difference within the self is a strength to be called upon rather than a liability to be altered. She exhorts her readers to recognize how each of them is multifarious and need never choose one aspect of identity at the expense of the others. “There’s always someone asking you to underline one piece of yourself,” she said in a 1981 interview,

whether it’s *Black, woman, mother, dyke, teacher*, etc.—because that’s the piece that they need to key in to. They want you to

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dismiss everything else. But once you do that, then you’ve lost because then you become acquired or bought by that particular essence of yourself, and you’ve denied yourself all of the energy that it takes to keep all those others in jail. Only by learning to live in harmony with your contradictions can you keep it all afloat. . . . That’s what our work comes down to. No matter where we key into it, it’s the same work, just different pieces of ourselves doing it. (“Audre” 15)

Each of us, says Lorde, needs each of those myriad pieces to make us who we are and whole. Lorde works the science and logic of her own hybridity. “I had never been too good at keeping within straight lines, no matter what their width” (25), she writes in *Zami*. She must make a physical space for herself in a hybrid language, a composite, a creation of new language to make space for the “new” of the self-invented body.

The implications of this thinking for questions of identity are broad. For the self to remain simultaneously multiple and integrated, embracing the definitive boundaries of each category—race, gender, class, et cetera—while disassembling their static limitations, assumes a depth and complexity of identity construction that refute a history of limitation. For the self to be fundamentally collaged—overlapping and discernibly dialogic—is to break free from diminishing concepts of identity. Lorde says, “When I say myself, I mean not only the Audre who inhabits my body but all those feisty, incorrigible black women who insist on standing up and saying ‘*I am* and you cannot wipe me out, no matter how irritating I am, how much you fear what I might represent’” (Interview, 104). The self is composed of multiple components within the self and evolved from multiple external sources, an African American women’s tradition or mythos.

The Cancer Journals is Lorde’s memoir of her battle with the disease, but the scope of the meditation, as well as Lorde’s formal freedom, makes it much more. For *Zami* she has invented a name for the book’s new, collaged genre: *biomythography*. Neither autobiography, biography, nor mythology, *biomythography* is all of those things and none of them, a collaged space in which useful properties of genres are borrowed and reconfigured according to how well they help tell the story of a particular African American woman’s life. *Biomythography* both refers to each of its eponymous genres and defines itself in its present moment.

I will consider how in this *biomythographic* mode Lorde’s vision of collaged self-construction is mirrored in her compositional choices. With *biomythography* Lorde names a new genre, creating a larger space for her

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myriad selves. "I feel that not to be open about any of the different 'people' within my identity," she said in an interview, "particularly the 'mes' who are challenged by a status quo, is to invite myself and other women, by my example, to live a lie. In other words, I would be giving in to a myth of sameness which I think can destroy us" (Interview 102).

Both *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals* favor nonlinear narration that plays with chronology as it needs to. Both are autobiographies of Lorde's body. Both books are also erotic autobiographies, with *Zami* in particular describing Lorde's sensual life in intricate detail. The African American woman's body in Lorde's work—specifically, her own body—becomes a map of lived experience and a way of printing suffering as well as joy upon the flesh. Because the history of the Black female sexual body is fraught with lies and distortion, the story of those bodies as told by their inhabitants must take place on new, self-charted terrain with the marks of a traumatic history like a palimpsest. Like Carriacou, the Caribbean home of Lorde's antecedents that she as a child could not find on any map at school, the body of flesh or land that does not accurately exist in white American eyes leaves the inhabitant open for self-invention and interpretation. The flesh, the text, remains scarred, marking the trail to self-creation.

Lorde is preoccupied with things bodily: that which is performed upon the body versus what the body performs and asserts. Cancer surgery and subsequent bodily struggles are the focus of *The Cancer Journals*, while the ingestion of X-ray crystals at a factory job and an illegal abortion are signal episodes in *Zami*. Sexual and spiritual woman-love are what the body performs and how it heals as well as the means by which Lorde finds voice and self-expression. She incorporates the intellectual and physical aspects of her life, reminding the reader that the metaphysical resides in a physical space, the body. Thus rage and oppression are metabolized to cancer, but she will also "write fire until it comes out my ears, my eyes, my noseholes—everywhere. Until it's every breath I breathe" ("Burst" 76–77). In Lorde's work, the body speaks its own history; she chooses corporeal language to articulate what she could not previously put into words.

In *The Cancer Journals*, for instance, Lorde dreams of a different vocabulary for considering this phenomenon. She recounts a dream in which "I had begun training to change my life" and follows a "shadowy teacher":

Another young woman who was there told me she was taking a course in "language crazure," the opposite of discrazure (the

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cracking and wearing away of rock). I thought it would be very exciting to study the formation and crack and composure of words, so I told my teacher I wanted to take that course. My teacher said okay, but it wasn't going to help me any because I had to learn something else, and I wouldn't get anything new from that class. I replied maybe not, but even though I knew all about rocks, for instance, I still liked studying their composition, and giving a name to the different ingredients of which they were made. It's very exciting to think of me being all the people in this dream. (14–15)

The “formation and crack and composure” of words mirror the process of reconstituting the scarred self. Lorde thinks of herself as all of the people in the dream. She is at once the self who wants to learn about language, the self who explores new selves and ideas, and the censorial teacher-self, as well as the self who gives permission for new exploration, albeit grudgingly. The dream allows for the simultaneous existence of different selves coexisting as a single self, and the contemplation of form, crack, and composure mirrors how the self is continually brought back together from disassembled fragments. Perhaps she is playing also, in the way that dreams play tricks with language, with the words *crazure* and *discrazure*, with first being considered “crazy,” as Lorde tells us she has been since elementary school, and then coming to see the roots of *craze* as, in fact, whole and sane. In *crazure* the lines and fissures are visible but the object—like Lorde herself—remains whole.

In *Zami* Lorde describes the process of constructing herself racially and sexually with race and gender both facts of biology and learned characteristics and social operatives. To be “blackened” reveals not only a process of becoming and being acted upon but also a state of being. Lorde restores the visual impact of “coming out” to suggest her assertion and arrival and also, of course, to play on lesbian “coming out.” Hers is a process of becoming Black and lesbian on her own terms as much as it is being named and seen as those things by a larger world. “Blackened” is a positive state to “come out” into, but it also implies being burnt and scarred. The statement's ending—“and whole”—suggests no contradiction between being scarred and being whole (*Zami* 5). In Lorde's work, life experience ever marks and takes shape as visible body memory, as a collage whose assembled scraps always allude to their past and beyond to a collective race memory of the violence of rupture in the Middle Passage, as encoded by the African American collage artist Romare Bearden. When Lorde refers to the “*journeywoman*

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pieces of myself" (*Zami* 5), she configures the self as simultaneously fragmented and reassembled.

Zami's first section is an unlabeled preprologue, a dedication of sorts in which Lorde asks questions in italics and then muses upon them in roman typeface. This introduces us to the dialogism of Lorde's work, in which process is always apparent and the self is presented as an unfinished work in transition and progress. Collage, too, is dialogic at its core, insofar as the cut and torn strips encode a dialogue between past and ever-evolving present. That referentiality of using a scrap that on closer scrutiny can be identified both with its former life and as part of the present fiction recalls Bearden's earlier work, in which pieces were readily associated with their origins. Interestingly, Bearden later worked continually with origami-like paper in ways less obviously allusive to a separate past than his earlier newspaper and magazine cutouts.¹ This gesture reflects the assurance of both self and voice in Bearden's mature work. By engaging visibly in the dialogic aspects of collage, *Zami* ruminates on how the self is put together and how the book is the body for Lorde's ideas about self-construction.

Images of Black people's bodies in American culture have been either hypersexualized or desexualized to serve the imaginings and purposes of white American men and women. African American men have been iconographically exploited as either Black buck (in the nineteenth century, renegade slave; in the twentieth, athlete or criminal) or docile, smiling eunuch (in the nineteenth century, men seen as "Uncles"—Remus, or Jim on the river raft, without children of their own and without discernible sexuality; in the twentieth, obsequious entertainers). Black women, similarly, have been iconographically exploited as the hypersexualized Jezebel who entices the supposedly unrapacious master into her pallet or as the desexualized Mammy who has no children or loves her white "babies" as her own. Her body is very much a part of her image: as Mammy she is a comforting void of *avoirduois*, while the Jezebel's curvaceous body is prominently displayed like an emblem of her social status or her essence. It is startling how, even today, there is so little iconographic gray space with these images. Historian Gerda Lerner writes that the postslavery mythology of Blacks was created to maintain social control. She specifically addresses the mythicizing of Black women's sexual freedom and abandon so that they were seen as women who,

therefore, deserved none of the consideration and respect granted to white women. Every black woman was, by defini-

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tion, a slut according to this racist mythology; therefore, to assault her and exploit her sexually was not reprehensible and carried with it none of the normal communal sanctions against such behavior. A wide range of practices reinforced this myth: the laws against intermarriage; the denial of the title “Miss” or “Mrs.” to any black woman; the taboos against respectable social mixing of the races; the refusal to let black women customers try on clothing in stores before making a purchase; the assigning of single toilet facilities to both sexes of Blacks; the different legal sanctions against rape, abuse of minors and other sex crimes when committed against white or black women. Black women were very much aware of the interrelatedness of these practices and fought constantly—individually and through their organizations—both the practices and the underlying myth. (163–64)

This continual need to prove oneself sexually respectable—as if one ever could—against such a backdrop of accusation and assumption made the frank discussion of one’s own sexuality dangerous. The need to name oneself, rather than leave it to a hostile dominant culture, is shown in *Zami* in the way Lorde and her late-teenaged friends call themselves “The Branded”: “We became The Branded because we learned how to make a virtue out of it” (82).

Lorde’s mapping of her body is all the more powerful against this history, as is her reclaiming and redefining of the erotic in her groundbreaking essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”:

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling. (54)

Lorde carefully separates eroticism from abuse of sexuality, freeing herself and those who would write after her from the idea that Black women’s sexuality is to be whispered about and to be ashamed of. She reminds us that “the very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*,

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the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55). Eroticism as she defines it has nothing at all to do with how African American women are conventionally sexualized.

Lorde keeps readers aware of what the body feels, piece by piece, throughout the narratives. We are always aware of what her body is doing and feeling, from abortion cramps to sweat running between her breasts at 3 A.M. (*Zami* 117). This is in contrast to her mother’s “euphemisms of body”: “bamsy,” “lower region,” “between your [not ‘my’] legs,” all “whispered” (*Zami* 32). Further, Lorde talks about the body as a thing put together and taken apart. In both *The Cancer Journals* and *Zami* she isolates the breast and its symbolic meaning for motherhood and heterosexual beauty and then reconceives her own body by talking about what the breast means to her: yes, it gives her pleasure, but not apart from the rest of her body. The female breast can be prosthetically replaced, but Lorde needs to create and articulate her own grammar of physical significance.

Lorde continually refers to her physical self; phrases such as “when I was five years old and still legally blind” (*Zami* 21) give the reader a corporeal landmark in her life’s chronology, calling attention again to the conflict Black women frequently experience between public authority and self-authority. She is blind in the eyes of the law, yet she has already given us accounts of what she sees around her. We have before us, then, a legally blind narrative we have nonetheless come to trust. The emphasis on legality in “legally blind” calls up the ironies of legal and extralegal categories in African American life: “chattel personal” defined full human beings, and so on. Lorde points to a distrust of the American common legal system and asks readers instead to trust her authority as she recounts the details she remembers seeing. Young Audre enters a “sight conversation class” but shows us a “blue wooden booth,” “white women,” “milk,” “black mother,” and “red and white tops” (*Zami* 21). It turns out that the seven or eight Black children in her class all have “serious deficiencies of sight”; are all these children wrong and legally deficient? Lorde’s authority supersedes legal status and public logic.

Lorde yokes the physical and conceptual when she recalls a doctor who “clip[ped] the little membrane under my tongue so I was no longer tongue-tied” (*Zami* 23). To be tongue-tied is to have an encumbered, surgically correctable tongue as well as to be at a loss for words or with-

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out language, and Lorde literalizes this metaphorized tongue: she gives a physical home and tangible, corporeal image to the concept of self-expression. The tongue, the physical organ that enables speech, is clipped that she might speak, and Lorde mines that act of surgical violence, of bodily invasion, to talk about speaking, expression, recreation, and acting. Similarly, when struggling for money, Lorde sells her blood for plasma. Blood is a synecdoche for the surviving body and its sale a metaphor for the idea of “living off of her body,” and Lorde refigures “selling one’s body” as a tawdry sexual act (though most prostitutes do so to survive as well). That is, she sells a regenerative part so the whole can live.

Moreover, blood “belongs” inside of the body, but Lorde externalizes it, as she constantly turns her body inside out, showing us the hidden insides that amplify how the outside has been maligned and distorted; the metaphysical inside is never known unless she chooses to reveal it. Conversely, the X-ray crystals that Lorde counts in the factory are brought inside the body in another inversion of nature. She buries them deeper and deeper in her body, first secreting them in her thick socks, then taking them into her mouth, chewing them up and imbibing some part of them even as they are spit out in the bathroom.

Lorde’s photograph makes up the full front cover of the first edition of *The Cancer Journals*. Here she makes herself, her body, empirical, the best evidence of her arguments and self-definitions. She illustrates that she is all she proclaims herself to be—fat and Black and beautiful—but that cover is also a strange testament to her very physical existence: she is a survivor and alive. She shows us the inside of her body to gain a kind of documentary, empirical, self-referencing authority as an expert on her own life and as the maker of a life on paper. For neither that life, her own, nor that of any Black woman, has ever existed in representation as its possessor experienced it. Consider the case of the Hottentot Venus, a southern African woman named Saartjie Baartman (tribal name unknown) brought to Europe in the early nineteenth century under the impression that she was to earn money performing that she could take back to her family (see Gilman 232–35). Instead, she was exhibited nude in circuses and private balls in London and Paris: eager Europeans paid to see her steatopygia. A French scientist, Georges Cuvier, made a name for himself by performing experiments of an unspecified nature upon her body and by dissecting her buttocks and genitalia after her death at the age of twenty-five. Baartman came to signify sexual and racial difference represented in extremis, as well as the attitude that Black women’s bodies were easily commodified and utterly dispensable. Baartman’s case

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represents as well another side of the exploitation of Black women: the burning desire to see further and further inside, to have access to every crack and crevice of a Black woman's body and to that which she has tried to keep sacred. This underlines the power of Lorde showing us her insides, that sanctified, veiled territory that looks so different because she is showing it herself.

Zami's subtitle, "a new spelling of my name," hints that the alphabet—shapes that when put together make discernible meanings—will be rearranged. The "me" or "my" that name represents remains constant: Audre Lorde, as we her readers know her. But the moniker is what is new and what will unfold in the book: what the self is called and what it calls itself are not necessarily identical things. The theme of naming and renaming oneself is familiar within African American culture, of course. Instead of the example of Malcolm X, whose X stands as a sign of empty space, negation, and refutation of the white patriarch's legacy, Lorde respells her name altogether. She empties language, even letters, of previous signifiers as she plays with these received symbols. Lorde makes use of all that is available to her, just as African American experience incorporates the joy of transported and reassembled culture as it remembers the ugly rupture of the Middle Passage. Lorde works with that same alphabet to make a newly named and new self altogether. *Spelling* works both as a noun (how the word is spelled) as well as an active verb form (the process of spelling). So Lorde engages in spelling and reinventing, a work in progress who has not necessarily settled at a fixed meaning or identity. "A" new spelling (as opposed to "the") means there are probably more to come.

The way Lorde sees before she gets glasses and the validity of that vision challenge conventional ways of seeing and knowing. The first story she writes as a child, Lorde tells us, is a collage as well as a rebus: "I like White Rose Salada tea" (*Zami* 29), with the rose represented by a picture clipped from the *New York Times Magazine* and by letters spelling her story. "How I Became a Poet" (*Zami* 31–34) challenges the concept of chapters. Unattributed quotations challenge the notion of authorship and attribution.

"Growing up Fat Black Female and almost blind in america requires so much surviving that you have to learn from it or die," Lorde writes in *The Cancer Journals* (40). She spells America with a lowercase *a*, again exercising her prerogative as maker of the body of the book and letting her spelled language bear her perspective on the world. She chooses not to capitalize the name of a country that she sees as "cold

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and raucous” (*Zami* 11). Carriacou is her ancestral home, but the body of the country, the physical spot, while not locatable in any official text (the map), is utterly integral to her sense of self and ancestry. “Once *home* was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother’s mouth” (*Zami* 13), she continues. If a body of land does not even appear on a paper map but incontrovertibly exists, emitting from her mother’s actual body, she must trust her own authority and be utterly free to experience and know it according to an internal family barometer. Invisibility, rather than distorted visibility, ironically provides a higher degree of self-inventive freedom.

Harlem is capitalized while *america* is not; Lorde gives herself that authority of capitalization. For upper- and lowercase letters imply caste or class, both suggested and contained within *case*. Lorde plays with the spelling of her name from the beginning of the biomythography, describing her decision to drop the *y* on her birth name, Audrey, for love of the solidity and visual symmetry of Audre Lorde:

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. (*Zami* 24)

Lorde echoes this theme in *The Cancer Journals*. Discussing the politics of prostheses, she talks about carving one’s physical self to someone else’s idea of correctness rather than to one’s own sense of symmetry. That dangling Y is in a way like a prosthetic limb or breast: once the new and natural shape of the body is to have one breast, just as the new and natural shape of the name is the indeed wonderfully even AUDRELORDE, addenda are prosthetic, unnecessary, and in their way de-forming.

Later, young Audre writes her name at school in what she thinks is her most glorious penmanship, moving slantwise down the page in another kind of symmetry. She works hard at this display, “half-showing off, half-eager to please” (*Zami* 25). She wants to write with pencil, which is how she has learned and the way she thinks is proper, but is given a crayon instead. Crayon, we are to think, is much coarser and less exact than the sharp pencil, for children and not for adults. Lorde makes do, but her teacher says, “I see we have a young lady who does

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not want to do as she is told" (26). This moment in which the narrator's "right" is presented in opposition to a public "right" is an important trope in Black women's autobiography: without resistance, survival and growth are impossible in an unjust world. Since we have been set up to identify with the narrator, as readers we align ourselves against the tyrannical dominant culture and with the contested genius of the Black girl-child. This is how we learn the lesson that to follow instructions, to play by what you think are the rules, does not always garner the expected perquisites.

In that instance of childhood we see Lorde asserting her own way of *writing*—not yet "spelling" explicitly, as the title would indicate, but spelling in the fundamental way that a child spells when every act of writing is a conscious act of putting together the pieces that make words that then hold meaning. To spell one's name is to create oneself in language, in Lorde's words, to put together "all the journeywoman pieces of myself" into one's most public signifier: the name.

Also present in *Zami* is the signal scene in African American autobiography in which the slave learns to read and to transcend a received legal status, thus entering the domain in which literacy is experienced as freedom. Lorde learns to read and speak simultaneously "because of [her] nearsightedness," distilling from apparent deficiency a new way of learning. Describing this, Lorde establishes a firm link between literacy and self-expression:

I took the books from Mrs. Baker's hands after she was finished reading, and traced the large black letters with my fingers, while I peered again at the beautiful bright colors of the pictures. Right then I decided I was going to find out how to do that myself. I pointed to the black marks which I could now distinguish as separate letters, different from my sisters' more grown-up books, whose smaller print made the pages only one grey blur for me. I said, quite loudly, for whoever was listening to hear, "I want to read." (23)

This scene demonstrates Lorde's understanding that letters and words have physicality, that language has a body, and that the physical place in which communicated language resides is important. This leads the reader, him- or herself engaged in an act of literacy while reading the book, to reexperience that lost sense of the word's physicality. After this scene, Lorde's mother teaches her "to say the alphabet forwards and backwards as it was done in Grenada" (23). Lorde's logic, bodily

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and intellectual, finds sense in the so-called backwards as well as in the forwards.

Lorde describes her mother as follows: “My mother was a very powerful woman. This was so in a time when that word-combination of *woman* and *powerful* was almost unexpressable in the white american common tongue, except or unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind, or hunchback, or crazy, or Black” (*Zami* 15). For her mother to exist in language as she knows her, Lorde must trust her own knowledge and her own developing linguistic cosmos. She must also become attuned to what she knows outside of spoken language. She says that “my mother must have been *other* than woman” (16) because of her authority, because of the way she did not fit what “the white american common tongue” would represent as “Black and foreign and female in New York City in the twenties” (17). Lorde writes of her mother: “It was so often her approach to the world: to change reality. If you can’t change reality, change your perceptions of it” (18). Lorde’s mother in some regards provided a blueprint for Lorde’s ability to change form to suit her needs, to change an outside perception of her body by inserting her own sense of form, both literary and physical. In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde said she learned from her mother “the important value of nonverbal communication, beneath language. My life depended on it . . . [and] eventually I learned how to acquire vital and protective information without words. My mother used to say to me, ‘Don’t just listen like a ninny to what people say in their mouth’” (“Interview with Audre Lorde” 715). Language makes space for self-articulation and allows the self-invented body to name itself and to exist. Like so many other African American women writers, Lorde must make a physical space for herself in a hybrid and composite language wherein what she knows is frequently at odds with what the world tells her she should see.

On a family trip to Washington, D.C., Lorde describes the agony of what her eyes actually see. The trip marks the hardest smack with direct racism and segregation that the family had experienced and takes place “on the edge of the summer when I was supposed to stop being a child” (*Zami* 68). Great preparation is made in the family for the trip; food is cooked and packed for the train along with suitcases. Lorde sees everything there “through an agonizing corolla of dazzling whiteness” (69) that at the same time dazzles and blinds. The color of Washington’s buildings represents who runs them; it is beautiful, what the family members have come to see, but it is also what they are up against and

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what they are not, for when they stop on the hot summer day for vanilla ice cream (more blinding whiteness) they are not allowed to eat at the counter. Washington is “real” and “official” as a site of power, and Lorde, on the brink of a new maturity, sees what is painful in the white dazzle: “The waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice cream I never ate in Washington, D.C. that summer I left childhood was white, and the white heat and the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington summer made me sick to my stomach for the whole rest of that trip” (71). Here we see a direct example, as well, of how her body absorbs and metabolizes her life’s experiences, including painful ones. Her body holds and manifests that which has happened to her psyche. She develops a long-lasting stomachache from the moment she is acted upon via the seeing power of her eyes, as though the white is a tincture of evil.

Lorde writes of the “secret fears which allow cancer to flourish” (*Cancer* 10). In both books taken together, cancer is inescapably a metaphor for the dangers of growing up poor, female, and Black. She metabolizes the fears that others have of her, from teachers to exploitative employers. The episode where she describes her abortion and the episode when she works in Keystone Electronics most vividly illustrate this.

The abortion segment is graphic, necessarily, “Now all I had to do was hurt” (*Zami* 110), she writes, after she has had the catheter inserted into her uterus. This both isolates and delays bodily experience. The rubber eventually works its way out, as does the fetus. She keeps the reader ever aware of exactly how she is feeling: “This action which was tearing my guts apart and from which I could die except I wasn’t going to—this action was a kind of shift from safety towards self-preservation. It was a choice of pains. That’s what living was all about” (*Zami* 111). The fetus is, of course, a part of her body as it grows inside of her, but it is a part that she wants to be rid of. To get rid of the life burden of an unwanted child she must have this physical symbol of that invasion removed. Like a tumor, a fetus grows unwittingly.

Lorde has worked in two doctor’s offices but cannot type and is young, poor, female, and Black, so she ends up working in a factory that processes X-ray crystals used in radio and radar machinery. The place was “offensive to every sense, too cold and too hot, gritty, noisy, ugly, sticky, stinking, and dangerous” (*Zami* 126). She counts X-ray crystals with Black and Puerto Rican women whose fingers are permanently darkened from exposure to the radiation: “Nobody mentioned that carbon tet destroys the liver and causes cancer of the kidneys. Nobody mentioned that the X-ray machines, when used unshielded, delivered

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doses of constant low radiation far in excess of what was considered safe even in those days” (*Zami* 126).

Workers could earn bonuses for “reading” crystals past a certain amount, but the factory bosses scrutinized them, making sure they did not discard crystals and claim credit for them. Lorde, in need of money, figures out a way to beat the system. She slips crystals into her socks every time she goes to the bathroom, and once inside the stall, “I chewed them up with my strong teeth and flushed the little shards of rock down the commode. I could take care of between fifty and a hundred crystals a day in that manner, taking a handful from each box I signed out” (*Zami* 146). She chews the crystals and spits them out; they are nonfood but nonetheless “metabolized,” as she tells us hatred, too, can be metabolized. The body, then, makes visible also what has been metaphorically imbibed. Lorde’s cancer turns the body inside out, alluding to the internal lacerations of chewed X-ray crystals, which are themselves a manifestation of what a poor Black female has to do to survive. Lorde earns unprecedented amounts of money—for the factory, of course—and is laid off shortly thereafter. The X-ray crystals have stained her fingertips, leaving her marked with the work of her class status and for the illness she will eventually develop. She says she has a sense of the fingers burning off (*Zami* 146). A reader of *The Cancer Journals* cannot escape the conclusion that this episode contributed largely to her subsequent illness.

By insistently reminding the reader of her bodily reality, Lorde works toward the body’s integration through struggle, a synecdoche for the struggle of the self to remain whole. The women she admires are whole in their variegated bodies. One of the first images she presents of a woman outside of her family is of a woman named DeLois who walks on the street, her “big proud stomach” (*Zami* 4) attracting sunlight. She tells of one of her early, significant love affairs, in Mexico, with a woman, Eudora (*Zami* 161–76), who has had breast cancer—eerily presaging the future of Lorde’s own healing, whole-ing process, just as it is “the love of women,” though not explicitly erotic love, that heals her in *The Cancer Journals*. Making love, how the body acts, is a counterpart or antidote to what has been done to it. Making love (the erotic) as a creative act (as power) is a self-making and self-defining act. Even autoerotic love, masturbation, is written about as a part of the process of healing the body and making it and the resident psyche whole again (*Cancer* 40).

Lorde survives despite “grow[ing] up fat, Black, nearly blind, and ambidextrous in a West Indian household” (*Zami* 24). “Ambidextrous”

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plays on the fact that she tells us about sleeping with both men and women, but it also deals more seriously with the notion of self-creation and incorporating power. To be ambidextrous, then, is another instance of bodily states, facts of nature, existing as metaphors for aspects of identity. She talks about her mother as being both, other, and says that she, too, wishes for ambidextrous self-culled sexual identity: "*I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me. . . . I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child, with the "I" at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter, with the "I" moving back and forth flowing in either or both directions as needed*" (7). Identity is fluid, as is demonstrated by the elision of punctuation in "*mother father and child*" and "*grandmother mother daughter*."

The essay "A Burst of Light" serves as a postscript to *The Cancer Journals*, synthesizing and further distilling many of its ideas. Lorde makes explicit connections between becoming an authority on one's own body and cancer and politics, dying and struggling to live and work. Much of the essay is an exhausting chronicle of the work she keeps up with around the globe as she is fighting the disease; a refrain is "I" (or "we," with her lover, Frances) "did good work." She fights experts and decides she does not want the borders of her body to be invaded. She rejects medical advice when it is her life at stake. When she says she wants to have "enough moxie to chew the whole world up and spit it out in bite-sized pieces, useful and warm and wet and delectable because they came out of my mouth" ("Burst" 62), the image recalls and inverts the chewed and spit out X-ray crystals. *To metabolize* means to take in good and bad and then determine what is useful in the shaping of the self. The act that probably poisoned her can be reenacted to her advantage.

Lorde travels to a holistic healing center and finds a philosophy wherein "the treatment of any disease, and cancer in particular, must be all of a piece, body and mind, and I am ready to try anything so long as they don't come at me with a knife" ("Burst" 83). Divisibility and invasion are worse even than cancer.

She rejects a prosthesis in part because the breast does not "perform," as a leg or an arm does. She realizes it is not its own erotic world, not erotic unto itself, but rather part of a schema of eros she controls and that is integral within her body. She explores what the body performs versus what is done to the body: abortion, cancer surgery. Body language is a necessary part of naming herself in her own tongue.

“Coming Out Blackened and Whole”

Lorde’s work, as it focuses on her physical existence, emphasizes the literal meaning of incorporation, of putting one’s self into a body, or in this case, of speaking of one’s self in one’s own body. The intellect lives and operates in the body. The heart and soul express themselves through the body. The body manifests the ills of an oppressive world that is especially punishing to women and poor people and people of color. The body is a very specific site in Lorde’s work, the location where all this takes place. She is constantly reminding us that she is an inhabitant of a body that has given birth to children, has been nearly blind, and has battled cancer and lost pieces of itself but remains whole, incorporated, integrated. It is “*my body, a living representation of other life older longer wiser*” (*Zami* 7). Bodies express what verbal language cannot.

I am a scar, a report from the frontlines, a talisman, a resurrection.

—Audre Lorde, “A Burst of Light:
Living with Cancer”

In James Alan McPherson’s “The Story of a Scar,” the African American male protagonist sits in a plastic surgeon’s waiting room and from the first page is compelled to ask the African American woman next to him, “As a concerned person, and as your brother, I ask you, without meaning to offend, how did you get that scar on the side of your face?” (97) She rebuffs his bold inquiry and his presumption that she will “read” her own body for him: “‘I ask you,’ she said, ‘as a nosy person with no connections in your family, how come your nose is all bandaged up?’” (97) His bandaged nose makes his nosiness legible. As the story proceeds from the man’s narrative perspective, the woman tells her story, only to be continually interrupted by the man’s presumptions about her narrative. He presumes to know her and to know what the mark on her face signifies. He presumes he has access to that signification because, after all, the mark is visible, and if a Black woman’s body is visible, it is therefore accessible, not only to white men, historically, but in this instance to Black men as well.

But she will not let him get away with that and will not let her story be usurped. She “reads” him as well: “‘You don’t have to tell me a thing,’ she said. ‘I know mens goin’ and comin’. There ain’t a-one of you I’d trust to take my grandmama to Sunday school’” (98). The male protagonist persists:

The scar still fascinated me. . . . The scar was thick and black and crisscrossed with a network of old stitch patterns, as if

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some meticulous madman had first attempted to carve a perfect half-circle in her flesh, and then decided to embellish his handiwork. It was so grotesque a mark that one had the feeling it was the art of no human hand and could be peeled off like so much soiled putty. But this was a surgeon's office and the scar was real. It was as real as the honey-blond wig she wore, as real as her purple pantsuit. I studied her approvingly. Such women have a natural leaning toward the abstract expression of themselves. Their styles have private meanings, advertise secret distillations of their souls. Their figures, and their disfigurements, make meaningful statements. (98–99)

As it turns out, the woman has been marked by public violence by a man. Her scar is a history of sorts, a mark she is trying to change. The more she tells of her story the more she gives away of herself, leaving both of them on uncertain ground, but she will not simply cut to the chase and tell the *mere* “story of a scar”; she is telling a piece of her life, telling the story her way regardless of how the listener wants to receive it. The man characterizes her story as “tiresome ramblings,” and she becomes angry: “This here’s *my* story! . . . You dudes cain’t stand to hear the whole of anything. You want everything broke down in little pieces. . . . That’s how come you got your nose all busted up. There’s some things you have to take your time about” (100).

When she finishes her story, her talk is not interrupted narratively for several pages; she takes over the narrative space of the story with her bodily truth. The male narrator then interrupts and gives a condescending and erroneous conclusion to her story (105). She then takes the space of a long pause and a dramatic drag on her cigarette: “‘You know everything,’ she said in a soft tone, much unlike her own. ‘A black mama birthed you, let you suck her titty, cleaned your dirty drawers, and you still look at us through paper and movie plots’” (105–6).

After the story is finished, after he has had to listen to her truth, “a terrifying fog of silence and sickness crept into the small room, and there was no longer the smell of medicine” (111). There are no longer antidotes, only dis-ease, the fact of the scar and the story of a scar hanging in the air in the doctor’s waiting room. That is when we learn of other doctors who have been unsuccessful in their attempts to modify her scar. In the very last line the man asks the woman’s name, something that he thinks will provide information, when in fact it is beside the point next to the story he has just been given. It is merely something for him to possess. When Audre Lorde says she gives us “a new spelling of

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my name,” she insists that the names mean less than presumed, that you have to listen to a person tell his or her own story before assuming what the story holds. Lorde tells her own “story of a scar” in *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals* because she understands the imperative to both gather her multiple selves into one body and to name that body, rather than leave the (mis)naming to another.

Lorde continually states that she claims the different parts of herself—“I am lesbian, mother, warrior”—speaking through difference. It is her credo, a way of living, that all people, but particularly those said to be marginalized, must refuse to be divisible and schizophrenic. It is in the way that she takes us through the history of her body, in both *Zami* and *The Cancer Journals*, that Lorde maps the new terrain of what over 100 years ago Linda Brent had to whisper and withhold from her readers: all that a corporeal history embodies. The link between Lorde and Brent is crucial: for both, the issue is control over one’s own body and the power to see the voice as a literal functioning *member* of the corpus, an organ that works and must be self-tended.

Sexuality is broad and frequently forbidden discursive terrain for many Black women in both writing and other sorts of public lives. When we do write, we write our sexualities into existence against a vast backdrop, a history, of misrepresentation and essentializing and perversion, appropriations of our bodies and stories about our bodies. This precedes our entry into the Euro-American written universe. Lorde claims that terrain for herself, defining what she thinks of as the erotic, inscribing in her books an actual, fleshly Black woman’s body. The effect is like that seen in African American visual artist Howardena Pindell’s 1988 painting “Autobiography: AIR/CS560.” After a near-fatal car crash in 1979 and lengthy rehabilitation, Pindell suffered memory lapses and manifested her process of recovery and remembering in her work. She “used postcards from friends and collected them in her travels to help jar recollections or explain flashes of images. . . . Her automobile accident produced a need for memory” (Rouse 8). She also began lying on her canvases to leave an imprint of her body with which to work (Pindell). In the painting, then, Pindell left an impression of her fragmented and reassembled body as physical evidence both that the body exists and that she can imagistically create it. The narrative history of the body is a way of interpellating difference and claiming wholeness.

In Lorde’s work, as in Pindell’s, it takes literal invasion for the self to be reconstituted. Why is the self not conceived as an a priori whole? These images literalize what is historically and metaphorically true in African American women’s writing: it is the fissure, the slash of the

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Middle Passage, the separation from the originary, that which the physical scar shows and alludes to—all that is an intractable part of African American women's history—that makes possible the integrity of the scar, the integrity of the body's history, and a record of what the scar performs.

NOTE

1. For example, Bearden cuts paper in identifiable iconographic shapes such as the arc of a watermelon slice, the ruffle of a rooster comb, curls of steam engine smoke, or the shape of a guitar. Each of these has specific meaning in Bearden's African American cosmology.

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