Family ties: re-defining families with Dorothy Allison's Trash and Audre Lorde's Zami: a new spelling of my name

Bobby Juan Vasquez

Iowa State University

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Family ties: Re-defining families with Dorothy Allison’s *Trash* and Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

by

Bobby Juan Vasquez

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This is to certify that the Master’s Thesis of

Bobby Juan Vasquez

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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ABSTRACT

Lesbian feminist writers Dorothy Allison and Audre Lorde re-define the concept of family. For Allison, her autobiographical fiction text Trash (1988) consciously and unconsciously re-defines the Southern family so she can show society the real family and not the stereotype we expect. She re-defines the concept because she feels that we have only looked at the negative aspects of Southern families. I contrast Allison with black lesbian Audre Lorde and her definition of family to further show that family is more than a narrow dictionary definition. Lorde dissolves boundaries of family by coming up with new ways for dismantling the oppression that is limiting the concept of family through narrow definitions.

In Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), Lorde invents a name for a new genre of autobiography: biomythography. Through this personal narrative Lorde re-defines the concept of families by insisting that our family members are also our lovers and friends, and our lovers and friends are also our family. In the end, both Allison and Lorde change our reality of what family means, so we can look at family in a different light. These women accomplish this by creating new definitions of family through their individual race, location, and heritage.
INTRODUCTION: FAMILIES IN BLACK AND WHITE

The topic of family is a staple in the traditional autobiography. The typical autobiography usually has a dedication or acknowledgement that makes reference to a mother and/or father who helped the writer to “become the person that he/she is,” or states that the book “would not have been possible without the love and support” from some family member. Typical autobiographies may also start out the same way: “I was born in 1976, to proud parents Mr. and Mrs. Juan and Shirley Vasquez.” Writers then will spend anywhere from a quarter to half the book on their childhood experiences with their families. Yet according to Susanna Egan, in Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography,

Gone are the days when the autobiographer was born on such and such a date to such and such parents and told a story that moved forward from clearly historical beginnings to comprehensible narrative conclusions. If other people figured in such writing, especially famous other people, the work faced outward and was known as a memoir. If introspection figured largely, then the autobiography was valued for its psychological, intellectual, or spiritual qualities. Either way, readers have tended to assume a certain transparency from the open text to the person of the subject and narrator (29).

Lesbian feminist writers Dorothy Allison and Audre Lorde prove that the typical/traditional autobiography is becoming obsolete because of what they are trying to achieve and how they go about achieving this. First, when Allison and Lorde write about their lives they mix fiction with reality. Allison uses autobiographical fiction and Lorde uses a creative autobiography (biomythography). By creatively putting a different spin on their lives, they are more easily able to tackle some traditional subjects in different ways.

Even though these women do not write the typical autobiography, the subject of family still plays an important role in their writing. This is so because families are those who
birth, nurture and love us. Yet those same people can neglect, hate and kill us. What these women do is that they change the definition of family. Allison considers herself “white trash.” And what is the first thing that comes to mind when you read “white trash”? Being from the South, Allison realizes that most people have stereotypes about Southerners. Stereotypes, however are based on oversimplifications of a people. The qualities that mark these generalizations may be part of the people, yet they are not their only quality. The South has this problem. Look at any literary or cinematic representation of the South and one will see the slow talking, uneducated white person. According to Allison her family are more than the stereotypes. They are responsible for who she is: a smart, powerful, funny individual. And as for Lorde, her family is not the typical one composed of mother, father, siblings, grandmothers, grandfathers, uncles, aunts, etc. Her blood family are part of her childhood, yet that is the only time they mattered. Her extended family did not play a big part in her adult life because they are in Grenada. As Lorde grows up, she relies on her “other” family, the family she creates outside her home, the family that includes her friends and lovers. In the end, both Allison and Lorde change society’s perceptions of the family by giving their readers new positive definitions of family.
CHAPTER 1. RE-DEFINING FAMILIES THROUGH CLARIFICATION

I. Re-defining White Trash Families

As mentioned in my introduction, the South definitely has a problem when it comes to its people being accurately represented in literature or movies. In 1728 William Byrd II wrote, in *The History of the Dividing Line*, of North Carolina backwoods white trash as being lazy, dirty, vulgar, ignorant, and promiscuous (Byrd). Today the likes of Roseanne Barr and Jeff Foxworthy fill the TV airwaves with reruns and TV specials on the negative aspects of white trash culture. And if you think these stereotypes are dead, think again. Former “white trash” comedian Brett Butler is coming out with a new TV series (“Knee Deep”), and David Spade’s new movie *Joe Dirt* looks at a character’s search for his “white trash” parents years after he was abandoned by them. Allison’s goal is to change these stereotypes. She consciously and unconsciously re-defines the Southern family so she can show us the real family. She re-defines the concept because she feels that we have only looked at the negative aspects of stereotypical Southern families. The re-definition is conscious in part because she writes short stories specifically to break the stereotypical view we have of white trash families. Yet it is also unconscious because as Allison writes of lovers and friends, her upbringing and family values come out.

Before we proceed, we first need to look at the definition of family. Merriam-Webster defines family in a couple of different ways. Looking at the etymology of the word, we can see that the word comes from the Middle English *famillie*, which derived from Latin *familia*, meaning a household (including servants as well as kin of the household). The definition of groups of people (family and servants) sounds close to what we know today as family. But looking further at the definition, we find the following:
The basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their own or adopted children; also: any of various social units differing from but regarded as equivalent to the traditional family: a single-parent family b: spouse and children <want to spend more time with my family> (“Family”).

This definition is the one that society typically knows. But this definition is bland. Without love. Without emotions. The word “family” is a very emotional term, and yet all we get is “the basic unit in society.” This definition is cold. It describes people without feelings, being part of a homogenous society that wakes up, gets ready for work, gets the children ready for school, goes to work, comes home, cooks dinner, eats, watches the news and then goes to bed. Repeat the next day.

Even taking the dictionary definition as a broad general definition of family, it still does not fit Allison’s Southern tradition. Looking at family in a stereotypical fashion, the South is peopled with inferiors and/or underprivileged whites. When you add family you get drunk and brutal husbands, barefooted and pregnant wives, and dirty children that have been raped by a family member. Yet this is not family, at least to Allison. She re-defines family through her fiction. Following the dictionary paradigm, I would say that Allison re-defines family this way:

Main Entry: family
Pronunciation: 'fam-i-ly
Function: Primary: lover, nurturer, and educator. Yet can also be: one that neglects, harms, etc.
Etymology: unknown (ask your family)

Archaic/modern 1 a: people who love and hate
2: a: people who share. b: either of two people living together
3: affectionate or benevolent friends
4: people that you can have animosity for, but in the end, they are there for you when you most need them (e.g. in-laws, ex-spouses/lovers, etc.)
5: one who can hate, neglect, and harm you
Since Allison comes from the South, she adds her own Southern spin to the definition. She believes that white trash are those people who keep their cars up on blocks and do not work for a living. They are “the caricatures of the society—the laundry workers and whores of America...” (Huston 71). In an interview Allison states that she feels like she came out of a world nobody knows about, that maybe does not exist anymore. And when the topic moves to her family, she states that leaving her family in the South was “an amazing knot of shame, pride and rage. Guilt too....” The reason for these mixed emotions is that she loves her family and yet she is also terrified of them. She describes her relationship with them as a “complicated love” (Huston 71). The reason for this complication is that her mother, aunts, and other family members made her who she is, and yet they almost killed her. Allison’s step-father rapes her and her mother does not protect her; the mother just stays with her husband. Allison’s family has the qualities of white trash and yet these qualities are only part of it. In the end, Allison helps to define white trash family as they really are: strong women and men that may have been different with their talk and life habits, and may be violent, yet were a big part of Allison’s growing up and surviving in a harsh world that shunned her for her sexual preference.

II. Why the Need for a New Definition?

Back in 1983, Audre Lorde wrote the powerful and controversial essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in which she asserts that a serious change must occur if society wants to prosper. The reason we need change is because of those in charge, the “masters.” Lorde is not precise in the definition of masters, in order to let readers come to their own conclusions. What I came to understand for masters are those in charge of the oppressed. So masters can be any one or a combination of the three
categories: men, whites, and/or heterosexuals. Lorde also believes the masters have been able to dominate the oppressed through ignorance; once again she is vague as to what she means by “oppressed.” So I took for the oppressed any one or combination of the following categories: women, minorities, and/or homosexuals. Oppression is achieved through heterosexual white men’s ignorance of the independent existence of women, minorities, and homosexuals and their needs. Lorde believes that because of the times we live in, one’s personal vision can help lay the groundwork for political action. For this to happen, divide and conquer must become define and empower. According to Lorde, the way to definition and empowerment is through the creation of new ways/tools to end oppression and not using the master’s tools, because they are not by definition adequate (Lorde 112-113). Thus a new definition must be created to empower Southern white trash to destroy the oppression that is keeping them down with stereotypes. Allison’s personal vision of family helps lay the groundwork for this political action.

When it comes down to it, the stories in Trash directly and indirectly deal with father-daughter incest. Granted the bulk of this chapter focuses on Allison’s re-definition of white trash families, the father-daughter incest does contribute to Allison’s re-definition. In Authoring A Life: A Woman's Survival In and Through Literary Studies, Brenda Daly quotes from Judith Lewis Herman’s Trauma and Recovery about secrecy as a defining feature of father-daughter incest, and points out how this secrecy has, until recently, been maintained by the literary canon. Because the traditional canon focuses on the straight white males who are in charge of families, it forces daughters of incest to bear the burden of secrecy. Not Allison. Allison breaks the silence. She tells her story. The reason she survives is because of her family, minus the step-father. Thus she tries to portray this in her stories that re-define
white trash families. Only when the daughter tells her story, a critical step for recovery according to Herman, is she able to reconstruct a meaningful life (qtd. in Daly 155).

III. Why Autobiographical Fiction as Allison’s Vehicle?

First, the question of Trash being autobiographical fiction will cause some debate. In the preface of the text, we find the following, “I write stories. I write fiction. I put on the page a third look at what I’ve seen in life—the condensed and reinvented experience of a cross-eyed working-class lesbian, addicted to violence, language, and hope, who has made the decision to live, is determined to live, on the page and on the street, for me and mine” (12). For me, the first thing that comes to mind is: is this preface fiction too? Is it just part of the whole fictional text? The preface never really states whether this is Allison or the narrator talking. If it is the narrator, then the preface would show Allison taking a “third look” at what she experienced. Yet if we take the preface as being nonfiction and what is said as truth, would not Allison’s definition of fiction still fit the definition of nonfiction? Traditionally nonfiction is seen as the opposite of fiction, but can writers truly write nonfiction without altering it somehow? Without offering that “third look” at what they have seen in real life?

When it comes down to it, the stories in Trash are explicitly about Allison’s “experience of violence, the violence of poverty, and the violence of physical and sexual abuse,” and how these experiences shape her understanding of her own, and other women’s, lesbian identity. For Allison to get her experience fully across to us, I believe she needs to alter it. I am a firm believer in embellishment in trauma nonfiction. For the audience to understand and feel what someone has gone through, one needs to embellish to get the readers to feel what he/she originally felt. So if this means altering events, one should do it.
Allison herself states that people often confuse her fiction and real life. The reason this is so is because Allison’s stories employ the theme of “lies and storytelling.” “People assume that fiction’s real life—if you do it well. Good storytelling is convincing” (Huston 71). Lying and storytelling are powerful and convincing tactics for Allison. Noted Latina lesbian and feminist Gloria Anzaldúa backs up this point. Anzaldúa states that what kept her back in writing fiction was that she was trying to stay with the truth, with the experiences that actually happened. Not until she realized that her writing had to be free did she succeed: “imagine things, exaggerate—whatever you need to do in order to convey the kind of reality that you are trying to transmit” (Anzaldúa 244). Sometimes you have to “color” the truth to get your audience to feel what you felt during the actual experience, whether that is rape, war or death.

Another reason to consider Trash an autobiographical fiction is because the events in each story parallel Allison’s own life. In “Mama,” the story of the narrator being born corresponds with Allison’s life. Allison was born in a car accident. Her mother was unconscious for the first three days of her life, so her aunts named her and took care of her (Huston 72). Second, it is also true that Allison had/has a painful, difficult relationship with her step-father. Her step-father was physically violent, and raped her as a child. Allison also has an aunt, whom she was named after. Allison herself states that it has taken her entire life to figure out what happened to her as a child, “because the things that you have to do to survive with some kind of sense of yourself, the emotional maneuverings, really obstruct accurate memory” (Huston 71). Allison is not convinced about the distinction between fiction and reality, which shows her writing may have a little of both. Therefore, in the end, I’m not convinced that Trash is just fiction.
Finally, the last thing to prove *Trash* is autobiographical fiction is Allison’s harsh past. Allison states that she was the one who escaped. And yet her escaping was not helped out by anything she saw or read. White trash was/is portrayed in literature as stereotypes. She never saw herself in texts written by others. All of this is important because she believes that she needed to write the past out to help her live. Of course even though she wrote, she never imagined anyone reading her stories, but she needed to make her past “visible and real in a tangible way” for herself, in order to move on (9). One would think with all of this Allison could have been able to freely write fiction or autobiography to heal herself, to educate society on the hardships of Southern families, help those who are in the same situation, and change our view of white trash. Yet as mentioned before, Allison has a complicated love for her family, which involves being terrified of them. Sometimes writing about something you both love and hate is the hardest thing to do. First, you do not want to re-visit something that caused so much pain, but second and more importantly, you will not provide an accurate portrayal because you are essentially writing about yourself. You will want to try to put your family and yourself in a positive light even though they caused pain for you. Allison herself states, “it gets tricky about how explicit to be about your own experiences” (Huston 71). She says this because much of her story is about incest and poverty. But her writing is not literal autobiography. In the end it is about good story telling. It is telling her “emotional truth” (Huston 71). And this is Allison’s gift: when you cannot tell what is fake and what is real. This emotional truth is what makes Allison great at portraying the Southern family. Allison’s stories are not truly about her actual family, but they have the feel, the “shit-kicking anger and grief” of her life (12). In the end, it is not autobiography and it is not lies either. It is autobiographical fiction.
IV. White Trash in *Trash*

Although Allison knows that her family is not perfect and that it sometimes fits the mold of the typical white trash family, she believes we should not look down on people who have these qualities because white trash families are larger than that mold. In “Talking Trash, Talking Back: Resistance to Stereotypes in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina,*” Kathlene McDonald suggests that Allison helps those on the outside to understand the reality and diversity of white trash. McDonald looks at some of the ways in which Allison constructs her subjects in order to make the white trash world more believable. Yet in *Trash* Allison has a conflict because first she is trying to break the white trash mold and yet she also realizes that society would be expecting this stereotype: “I show you my aunts in their drunken rages, my uncles in their meanness. And that’s exactly who we’re supposed to be. That’s what white trash is all about...some of that stuff is true. But to write about it I had to find a way to...show you those people as larger than that contemptible myth” (McDonald 18). Allison basically constructs a white trash subject, which she is not denying, that defies stereotypes seen in the media and literature.

In the preface of *Trash* Allison states that the stories are about a girl who grew up in a white Southern setting of poverty and brutality and “became the one who got away” (7). The first story “River of Names” illustrates this. It is about a narrator haunted by childhood memories of sudden death, constant violence, and harsh rage. These qualities are things we associate with the white trash community. The stereotypical white trash qualities do not stop there. We find out the narrator comes from an enormous family, incest is an issue with the main character and her cousins, and drunkenness is common with wives, husbands and children. We must not forget the suicides committed by family for no other reason than the
white trash lifestyle. The narrator also tells of domestic violence and child abuse that happen behind closed doors. An interesting thing is that these white trash qualities are hidden from the narrator’s lover, and ultimately the rest of society. The white trash qualities come up in the form of lies, funny stories, an inability to love, wild sex, and alcohol/abuse as escapes. When it comes down to it, "River" is a personal look into the mind of a tormented survivor. Yet surviving the Southern lifestyle is what defines the character. The reason I say this is because if you fight back, you will die from it. And if you do not fight back, the lifestyle will take its grip on you and slowly kill you. Even if you escape, you still can harm yourself and your family. This will happen by not speaking. By not speaking you condemn the South. Therefore, Allison speaks.

In interview after interview Allison bluntly states that she comes from “bigoted, violent people; shotguns, beer, and pickup trucks…” (Huston 71). And this is exactly what she shows us in "River." The story explores the crossroads of Allison's white trash (Southern) and non-white trash (Northern) worlds. When you look at the story closer, you realize it is about violence in the lives of the narrator and her cousins. “My cousin, Tommy, eight years old as I was, swung in the sunlight with his face as black as his shoes—the rope around his neck pulled up into the sunlit heights of the barn…” “Lucille climbed out the front window of Aunt Raylene’s house and jumped. They said she jumped. No one said why.” “Almost always, we were raped, my cousins and I. That was some kind of joke, too. ‘What's a South Carolina virgin? A ten-year-old that can run fast.’” Death and incest. Not taking an interest in one’s children. Not caring why children do the things they do. All of these instances are stereotypical views of white trash, but form only a small part of their reality.
An interesting aspect of *Trash* is that "River" is pretty much the most extreme view we get of the stereotypical white trash family. Once Allison gives us a taste of the stereotypes, she gives us the real part of her family: her grandmother, grandfather, mother, aunts and uncles. Southerners are not perfect, just like anyone's family, and yet they are there for her and help her in times of need. "The Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee" proves this. The story is about a white trash woman who is not your typical white trash woman. Yes Great-Grandmother Shirley has a drunk for a husband and a harsh view of life, which are qualities we associate with white trash, but these qualities also work for Shirley's advantage. Shirley comes off as being mythical. The fact the piece opens with "[m]y Grandmother Mattie always said my Great-Grandmother Shirley lived too long" (23) sets up the mythical aspect. Shirley lives to be one hundred and fourteen. One gets a sense that she has an imaginary or unverifiable existence. Overall she is independent and has a good job at a mill with good pay. On the other hand, her husband works at a low paying and dangerous mining job. Shirley is also not submissive to her husband. In fact it is just the opposite. She once threatens to "cut off [his] thing" and to feed it to the kids to stop him from having sex with her. Shirley has the respect of her children, yet they also fear her. The children dream of their mother washing them with lye to "plane down their purplish genitals" (25). To further demonstrate the mythical figure of Shirley, she has a hatred of her own children; she says the children are devils. She has this tough love for her children to set them up for the tough life they are going to have as white trash.

In addition to this mythical white trash stereotype we also get the other side, the non-white-trash myth. First, even though Great-Grandmother Shirley has a tough love/hatred for her children, she never physically abuses them. She also did not marry at a young age;
she was nineteen when married her husband. One image we have of white trash is that they are dirty and do not care for their presentation. Shirley's children are not dirty. She believes herself to be one of the “quality” people, and she wants her family to reflect that. She makes her husband quit his lowly job and makes her children clean themselves. She tries to teach her children lessons about money and the work ethic. “Trash don’t know the meaning of use. Just like you kids” (26). She also does not want her daughter to be seen as loose. These are qualities we would not expect white trash to have, and yet they do. Allison wants society to see these qualities in addition to the white trash qualities. To get her point across, she does it in a mythical way. Great-Grandmother Shirley embodies a “grim legacy of drudgery that presages the seeds of [Allison’s] own love affairs” (Publisher’s Weekly 74). Whether Allison hates her family is not a factor. She loves them overall. What matters is, as she stated before, that her stories are emotionally true. Emotionally, these people are good Southern people.

In the story “River” the narrator is unable to admit her own pain to anyone but herself; but as the narrator grows she learns, finally, to talk about her pain. In “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know,” the narrator is confronted by her Aunt Alma, her mother’s oldest sister, who shows up to her Northern house. Since the narrator left the South the aunt is surprised at the narrator’s current situation. “My God, dirtier than we ever lived. Didn’t think you’d turn out like this” (97). Aunt Alma suggests that the narrator is still living the life she escaped, the dirty Southern lifestyle. From this the narrator is embarrassed and angered. She is embarrassed because she never realized it was like her old Southern lifestyle. She is angered because the narrator actually believes she has done well for herself: at least she is not in a violent relationship dealing with drunkenness and incest.
As a younger woman, Alma managed to support her sister and the narrator through difficult times, and it is the narrator’s belief in the power of this woman, and all her female family members for that matter, that has kept her alive all the succeeding years. But this belief is also what is keeping them apart. As Aunt Alma plays pool, she acts as stand-in for her sister and begins to bother her niece. Why hasn’t she had children? After exploding at her aunt as her aunt has exploded at her, the narrator explains at last:

Some people never do have babies, you know. Some people get raped at eleven by a step-father their mama half-hates, but can’t afford to leave. Some people then have to lie and hide it ‘cause it would make so much trouble. So nobody will know, not the law and not the rest of the family. Nobody but the women supposed to be the ones who take care of everything, who make children who believe in them and trust in them, and sometimes die for it. Some people never go to a doctor and don’t find out for ten years that the son of a bitch gave them some goddamned disease (Allison 107).

Through this confrontation the narrator comes to see that even the combined strength of her mother and her aunts was not enough to protect her. Then and only then is she able to reconnect with their powerful, sustaining love.

So how does this help Allison in her portrayal of her white trash family? Allison still loves her mother even after all her mother has put her through. She does not place the mother in a negative light. In “Hopeful Grief: The Prospect of a Postmodernist Feminist in Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina,” Vincent King states that Allison manages to “put her own distinctive stamp upon postmodernism by imbuing it with a feminist ethic which declares that story alone cannot make [a person’s] life” (124). In other words, people cannot transform their pain by replacing the stories that have hurt them with stories of hatred for others. According to King, Allison contends that our social relations define us and that we cannot rid ourselves of the hatred we have until we learn that we are also shaped by who we
pretend others to be. In the end, King believes Allison’s feminist politics are evident in that she focuses on women who have been “marginalized” by a total of forces and ideas. In Trash the daughter’s mother is strong and independent, but in the end she is a marginalized wife and mother. She could not survive in the patriarchal world by herself, which is what Allison tries to show in the story.

To further help show Allison’s re-definition of Southern white trash, all we have to do is look at “Gospel Song.” This is one of many short stories in Trash that evolves and becomes part of Bastard Out of Carolina. Stripped down, this chapter is Allison’s take on religion in the rural South. This chapter is primarily about how religion cannot save you. But more importantly here, it is about the narrator and her friend Shannon Pearl and the issue of white trash families. The first paragraph opens with the narrator wanting to be a gospel singer so she could “be loved by the whole wide world” (45). At this point the reader questions why the narrator would want to be loved by the whole wide world. We get the answer in the next paragraph: she has a working mother. The absent mother is nothing new in the South because working-class wives usually worked to support the family. Yet there is more to this than just working a lot. Yes the narrator lacks her mother’s presence, but more importantly she lacks her mother’s physical closeness. The narrator’s mother did love her child, but the child just needs more affection when they are together. I say this after examining how the narrator reacts in the presence of Shannon Pearl and her family.

Before we examine Shannon Pearl and her family, we first need to clarify the narrator’s relationship with her mother. The first sign that we get of the troubled relationship between mother and daughter is in the short story “River.” The narrator in this chapter is grown up and talking with her lover about childhood. Jesse, her lover, tells the narrator
about “her father going off each day to the university, her grandmother who made all her
dresses, her grandmother who always smelled of dill bread and vanilla” (13). The narrator
listens with her mouth open in awe because she wants to have Jesse’s “fairy tale life.” Later
Jesse asks the narrator what her grandmother smelled like, and she lies stating “like
lavender” (13). The reason the narrator lies is because she is ashamed of the truth. She
knows what her mother smells like, “sour sweat and snuff” (13), but does not tell because she
has not accepted her Southern working-class culture. She is not at that point where she
accepts her family, with both good and bad qualities. The narrator fears that because her
grandmother is not like Jesse’s that her grandmother is not normal; therefore she steals a lie
from a book. Looking at the smells that are given I would think the narrator would prefer the
“sour sweat” to the lavender smell, or even the dill bread and vanilla. The sour sweat and
snuff symbolize the South. The sour sweat stands for the working condition of the working-
class women in the South and the snuff is a quality usually associated to the white trash
culture. The lie the narrator tells is her way of trying to rise above the South. This is bad. In
a sense, Jesse is happy with the lie because the smell is like her lifestyle. It is something with
which Jesse can connect. Jesse responds to the narrator’s lie that it must be great to be part of
such a large family. The reason Jesse says this is because the stories the narrator tells about
her family are the funny ones and not the ones about incest and drunkenness. The narrator
lies to have the ideal family she thinks everyone has. Yet this is not to say the narrator did not
have a decent life with her family. She just has not accepted the Southern lifestyle of her
family.

As the stories progress, we see the mother-daughter relationship growing. In “I’m
Working on My Charm,” the narrator and mother work at a diner. The daughter is working
to save money for college. While working here the narrator states that her mother “taught” her the skills of being a waitress, and yet these “great skills” are less tangible than rules about being a waitress. The narrator learns practical life lessons and they start on her first day as a waitress:

I believed everything I read in books, and most of the stuff I heard on TV, and all of Mama’s carefully framed warnings never seemed to quite slow down my capacity to take people as who they wanted me to think they were. I tried hard to be like my mama but, as she kept complaining, I was just too quick to trust—badly in need of a little practical experience (75).

So it seems the narrator learns not to be so naïve and quick to believe stories. Yet we also get Allison’s commentary on the white trash stereotype. One should not believe everything one finds in novels or on television. These are at times just crafted lies. One should listen to the heart and go beyond these one-dimensional stereotypes. The mother tries to educate the narrator that people are three-dimensional. Yet the warning does not help because the narrator has to have "practical experience" working at the diner to fully understand the warning. As for us, we have to read all of Allison’s text to understand the mother’s warning.

As mentioned before, “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know” shows a great deal of support coming from the aunt. This chapter also gives us insight into what the narrator wants from her family. After the fight with her aunt that leaves both of them angry, the two state their love for each other. After an embrace, they cry and the narrator states that this moment felt like being five years old. The aunt herself was the narrator’s “mother” for a short time, and in one passage the two are combined: “the warmth in the room [was] purely a product of the love that breathed out from [her] aunt and ...mama...” (109). The scene depicts a love that comes from all of them, the daughter, aunt and mother, emotionally, mentally and physically. It is a positive love because it is warm and comes to life from the women. The
scene also ends with an erotic, but emotional bond that symbolizes how close the narrator wants to be with her family: “I opened my mouth, put my tongue out, and tasted my aunt’s cheek and my own. Butter and salt, dust and beer, sweat and stink, flesh of my flesh” (109). From this the narrator states she likes this closeness, stating it is “precious.” This scene is deeply symbolic because of its ties to “River.” In that story the narrator could not say what her grandmother smelled like, and yet now she knows and accepts what her aunt tastes like; the accepting comes from her response of “precious.” This acceptance is a stronger/deeper connection than what Jesse had with her grandmother (of knowing her smell). The narrator is now in the process of finally accepting the “real” part of her family. Before, the narrator was not able to do this and had to make up lies about her Southern white trash families.

In “Gospel Song,” we see that this deep connection is something that the narrator has not yet developed. To illustrate the closeness that is lacking, all we have to look at is the record player scene in this story. Whenever the narrator’s mother would listen to “The Sign On The Highway,” she would cry. Once as the mother is listening to it, the narrator happens to be there. The two of them cry quietly. I believe they cried quietly because of shame. They did not want anyone to see them having this “close” emotional moment together. They were pretty close, in a manner of speaking, crying in front of each other, yet there is not any touching or hugging. This is a deep and emotional moment, yet there is a distance to it. In addition to this, the narrator and her mother do have deep conversations on life, such as seeing beyond a person’s front she or he may put up (59). Yet even within these conversations there is no physical closeness between them. This is interesting because Shannon Pearl and her mother have physical closeness, yet they lack everything else.
Shannon and her mother have the touching and hugging, but they do not have much to say to each other.

Now to see the lack of emotions in the narrator’s life, we need to look at Shannon Pearl and her family. “Gospel Song” describes how Shannon’s mother would sit Shannon between her knees and "croon" to her and how Shannon would “purr” from this (46). These scenes of physical touching made the narrator’s stomach push “up against [her] heart” (46). Whenever Shannon would sit between her mother’s legs or eat candy from her father, the narrator truly hates Shannon: “Looking back at me from between her mother’s legs, Shannon was wholly monstrous, a lurching hunched creature shining with sweat and smug satisfaction. There had to be something wrong with me, I was sure, the way I went from awe to disgust where Shannon was concerned” (46). Yet when other people make fun of Shannon, we see a “fierce and protective love” from the narrator like the love that would come from a sister (46). The narrator almost becomes Mrs. Pearl’s daughter and Shannon’s sister, by hanging out with them so much, in spite of Shannon Pearl’s looks and their not having much in common. The narrator herself says that she did not befriend Shannon out of “Christian charity,” but in order to “sit at her kitchen table while her mama tried another trick on her wispy hair” (48). Here we see the narrator wanting Shannon’s mother’s physical closeness and love more than Shannon’s friendship.

As the narrator grows up, we finally see her trying her hardest to get closer to her mother. In “Mama,” Allison opens the story with the narrator describing a scar on her mother’s ankle. This is a strange way to open a story, but this shows how close the narrator is with her mother now. The narrator is actually examining and touching her mother’s body. The mother has given herself to her daughter to take care of her in old age. The narrator’s
love for her mother at times would actually choke her. This shows how much the narrator cherishes this closeness. To further illustrate the love for her mother's closeness, we see fear from the narrator. The fear is of losing her mother to old age, leaving the narrator alone. “I thought of my mama like a mountain or cave, a force of nature, a woman who had saved her own life and mine, and would surely save us both over and over again” (35). This is a throwback to “The Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee” because here we see the daughter describing the mother in mythical proportions, an exaggeration that is needed because Allison wants to show how much love was between them. Yet we also see the narrator’s mother as a force of nature that would save her own life and the narrator’s over and over again: “If she was fragile, if she was human, then so was I, and anything might happen” (35). Acknowledging the mother being human is the start of a significant connection with the mother. The relationship is going away from that pedestal the narrator places her mother on, being mythical, and makes her human. And the daughter describes how she is like the mother: a human. We get a strong mother. The mother is the one who tells her children life is hard, so have some morals, know when to pick your battles, have rage, a smile and words, do not roll over and play dead, and finally tells them how to survive.

In "Mama," we also see the narrator growing the most. The narrator wants to do what her mother does for her. She wants to be more than her mother’s lover, and to rescue her from the life that she is living with her husband. Through this chapter, we see the narrator wanting to be one with the mother:

But Mama grew into my body like an extra layer of warm protective fat, closing me around. My muscles hug my bones in just the way hers do, and when I turn my face, I have that same bulldog angry glare I was always ashamed to see on her. But my legs are strong, and I do not stoop the way she does; I do not work waitress for thirty
years, and my first love taught me the importance of buying good shoes...I tell myself they [her hands] are beautiful as they recreate my mama’s flesh in mine (42-43).

When it comes down to it, the narrator’s mother “didn’t raise no fool” (43). She is able to be one with her mother. The daughter finally positively “morphs” into the mother. An interesting thing to point out is this is not an entrapment, as one might expect from a mother-daughter relationship, but a protective bond. Here is where the narrator finally accepts her Southern family, in particular her mother. Allison describes this moment as if the mother’s soul has entered the narrator. The daughter finally accepts her mother’s good Southern qualities, ones the narrator once rejected: strength, determination, etc.

All is not well with the narrator and her mother, because there are times when the narrator hates her mother and herself. This is so because sometimes the narrator also has the bad qualities of her mother (the white trash): not leaving a violent relationship, drunkenness, etc. But these are the bad things you have to take with the good. The other problem is that the narrator finally achieves this closeness as her mother is dying and while living away from the South. Therefore this may be the only physical closeness the narrator will ever have with her mother. In the end, the narrator’s realization of how great her mother is, though Southern and white trash, comes at a price: there are good and bad qualities of white trash. Some white trash are violent. Some are caring. Others are a combination. Not until we accept this, will white trash be accepted as equal and not cast out from society.
CHAPTER 2. RE-DEFINING FAMILIES THROUGH EXPANSION

I. Audre Lorde Expands the Autobiography

In the previous chapter, I looked at white trash families and the autobiographical fiction of a white lesbian feminist. Let us now contrast that by looking at a black lesbian, her definition of family, and her take on the autobiography, the biomythography. Before I go into any more detail with Audre Lorde and her personal narrative, we must look at what came before in autobiography writing. Before the arrival of feminist and cultural studies, the autobiography was an ideologically “limited form” for literary critics. The typical subject of a canonical literary autobiography was a “mixture of introspective self-consciousness, middle-class familial and gender formation, and liberal autonomy” (Gagnier 135). The subject—typically white, middle-class, and male—assumed individual creativity, autonomy, and freedom to pursue “his individual projects; attributed what was specifically human and valuable in him to his mental capacity; and developed in a progressive narrative of self within the context of gendered family relations and increasing material well-being” (136). Many earlier feminists were comfortable within the tradition of the introspective “bourgeois” autobiography in which the self’s protest against others was the very evidence of its individuation and autonomy (136).

But as we move on with autobiographies, in particular those by lesbians, we see a change. According to Biddy Martin, author of “Lesbian Identity and Autobiography Difference(s),” lesbian writers “take up, even as they work against, already conventional lesbian-feminist narratives of lesbians’ experiences” (82). Martin argues against totalizing concepts of lesbianism, which put forward lesbianism as a “profoundly life-saving, self-loving, political resistance to patriarchal definitions and limitations” (88). And returning to
Audre Lorde, one can see that *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* is no conventional lesbian autobiography. For Lorde the possibility of enacting lesbian desire sets the stage. She ultimately dissolves limitations around identity and relocates meanings elsewhere—in family, friends, and lovers—in resistance to the hegemony of heterosexuality.

One way Lorde dissolves boundaries is through coming up with new ways for dismantling the oppression that is limiting the concept of family through narrow definitions. Lorde invents a name for the new genre of autobiography: biomythography. Neither autobiography, biography, nor mythology, biomythography is all of those things and none of them. Biomythography is a makeshift space in which useful properties of different genres are “borrowed and reconfigured according to how well they help tell the story of a particular African-American woman’s life” (Alexander 696). Biomythography both refers to each of its “eponymous genres and defines itself in its present moment” (696). The way Lorde reconfigures is she favors nonlinear narration that plays with chronology, as it needs to.

When it comes down to it, *Zami* is a biomythography of Lorde’s body. It is erotic, while describing Lorde’s sensual life in complicated details. 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” (Alexander 697).

**II. Lorde Expands the Family**

Through this “map of lived experience,” Lorde re-defines the concept of families by insisting that our family members are also our lovers and friends, and our lovers and friends are also our family. *Zami* is a biomythical history of the women in Lorde’s life—which ultimately starts with her Grenadan mother in Harlem. When the text moves along, we see the mother repressing and protecting Lorde from what she could not change. Lorde was born
and raised in New York City's Harlem, but her parents both retained links with their Caribbean island home. Her father was from Barbados and her mother from Grenada. Before she was born, her parents left the poverty of Grenada to move to New York City. Lorde once said: “My mother had sisters working in New York. The dream in those days was to make some money in New York and return to the islands to open a little store or business. My parents came to New York, and then came the Depression and babies—I was born in 1934” (DISCovering Multicultural America 1). The parents' retaining of their homeland links is significant when Lorde is trying to find herself and her "family." Yet now, it is important because it is the start of a reconciliation with Lorde's blood family.

As Lorde tells her biomythical history, we see reconciliation. In revising the traditional autobiographical family and female gender outline, Lorde's Zami summons a "reconciliation" with her mother through a poetic re-telling of her life, which is then offered to the rest of the community. Lorde herself states in the prologue: "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). With her biomythography, individual history is changed into myth. Discontinuities are present, as the analysis moves to the poetics of the body in pain and pleasure. The way Lorde reconciles with her mother is through her mother’s history. For example, Lorde introduces us to Carriacou. Carriacou is the mother's West Indian island as well as a utopia of Lorde's imagination. Zami is a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers (255). Women who work together as friends and lovers are the personal history of the book.
Since Lorde is knowledgeable about and nurtured by her mother’s stories of Carriacou, her “geography” traces the outlines of a longed-for world—a home deferred, elsewhere. The longed-for world is built up in Lorde’s head by both her mother and herself, which becomes a problem. The island of Carriacou becomes a utopia and has the status of being unattainable. It obtains this status because it is not on any map. In addition to Carriacou, the production of home constitutes the text itself as “space of multiplicity and heterogeneity,” and Lorde as an “exile, moving between various configurations of power and meaning: ‘This now, here, was a space, some temporary abode, never to be considered forever nor totally binding nor defining’” (Kader 187). Through this space, Lorde is able to show why the definition of family is more than just mother, father and siblings. She does not have a permanent home, and with this no “permanent” family, permanent in the sense of the traditional mother and father being authoritarian figures. The traditional family members become her equals as Lorde pushes them away from their authority roles. Lorde escapes being an exile when it comes to defining her family. However before she can do this, she must define her home for herself.

The significance of place within Zamí provides a foundation for the book’s overall construction. Its narrative map runs through the real and metaphysical spaces of Carriacou, Harlem, Mexico, and Greenwich Village in the 1950s. Reinforcing Lorde’s representation of these locations is an “idea of home that gradually comes to encompass physical places and personal, communal, and sexual identities” (Wallace 62). The concept of identity is important because what helps Lorde define herself are her family, friends, and lovers and her different homes. The different locations she lives in are the “physical places,” and the family, friends, and lovers are the “personal, communal, and sexual identities.” The way
these people help Lorde is through the construction of home. Your home is where your heart is, and your family, lovers, and friends help you in part to construct this home.

And when solely looking at Lorde’s blood family’s heritage, we see an interesting twist. *Zami* can be seen as the stories of immigrants. It can also be seen as a second-generation immigrant autobiography written to make sense of having parents from the Caribbean and growing up in New York (Wallace 62-63). If we read *Zami* this way, the text can be seen as a crossroads of changing social groups, or “homes,” that allows one to explore the connections between home and identity. The thing to keep in mind is that even though Lorde is a lesbian, lesbianism is never an essential identity. It is always “intersected and transversed by shifting and often contradictory matrices of ‘differences’” (Kader 187). Add to that, Lorde locates and relocates herself within these differences by overlapping histories of the people and communities among whom she lives, showing that we are all the products of multiple and various homes.

One way Lorde accomplishes her journey of finding herself is by re-defining family, in part through naming the differences in the people she loves. Lorde names differences among women, African Americans, lesbians, and other groups as “empowering rather than divisive forces and as aspects of identity” (Wallace 695). The 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” (695). Instead, Lorde argues that difference within the self is a strength to be called upon rather than a responsibility to be altered. Therefore friends and lovers, who are not technically family, should not be put down because they are not blood relations. Lorde urges us to recognize how everyone is diverse and to realize that we must 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 an interview (Wallace 695). Questions such as, “Are your parents responsible for who you are?”; “How significant was your first boyfriend to your sexual orientation?”; etc. are what this chapter and Lorde argue against. Family as being blood kin would be that one “piece” society asks you to underline. Family are not necessary those who birth you. Family are those who help you to grow, love, learn and see. Family are those diverse and unique people we encounter that change our lives. From the start of Zami, Lorde works the logic of her own “crossbreeding” that shows family is more than blood: “I had never been too good at keeping within straight lines, no matter what their width” (25). Family goes beyond what we know.

III. Your Family Are Also Your Friends and Lovers

The way Lorde establishes that her family are her friends and lovers is through her portrayal of desire. Desire is one of the most abundant places in Zami for an examination of how identity is defined in the text and the role that sexuality has in stabilizing these identities. To start, when I write “family” I mean those who are female. Although Zami’s prologue suggests, “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—to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks”(7), Lorde literally writes off the father as “distant lightning” (3). The father is portrayed in a few scenes, but they are minor. He is nothing more than a background figure and foil to highlight Lorde and her mother. Lorde appears to have included him to show that she did not grow up fatherless. Clearly her mother and sister were the main ones to raise her during childhood.
Before Lorde’s mother moves into the role of a lover, we must see how Lorde achieves this. Lorde must balance the power between herself and her mother to establish an equal relationship. Therefore, the mother will be able to lose the power position and ease into the position of a lover. The way Lorde balances out power is through naming herself. Lorde takes control out of the mother’s hands and gains it for herself. The need to name oneself rather than leave it to a “hostile dominant culture” is an important aspect in the text. It is important because it shows the start of the birth process for Lorde. Granted Lorde’s mother physically births her, but Lorde wants to show that her mother did not mentally and emotionally birth her. This birth happens with friends and lovers.

The way Lorde names herself is by playing with the spelling of her name. Her decision of wanting to drop the “y” on her birth name (Audrey) is for love of the sturdiness and visual balance of “Audre Lorde.” Yet I believe it was also for the power:

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 AUDRELORED 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).

We see here Lorde wanting to re-name herself. Yet Lorde also has a love for her mother and wants to please her, thus she puts the “y” on her name. Lorde ultimately starts the journey of finding her identity, when she drops the “y” and goes against her mother.

Another instance in which Lorde plays with names is in high school. In high school we also see Lorde naming herself with her teenage friends. Lorde and her friends call themselves “The Branded”: “We became The Branded because we learned how to make a virtue out of it” (82). The theme of naming and re-naming oneself is familiar within African-
American culture. Lorde knows this and she re-spells her name. The re-spelling is interesting because to name someone is control; if you name yourself you take the power back from the one who originally named you. It is like during slavery, when the masters named the slaves even though they already had names. The masters had the power. After slavery, African Americans ended up re-naming themselves, which took the power back from the masters. When you name a child, you pick a name you like, maybe after you or a relative. In the end it is power because that name will stay with that child forever and often shape his or her life. It is like Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Caroline*. The main character Bone is certified by the state as a “bastard” and yet she did not like that name because she knew she was not a bastard. The state had the power over Bone, and the entire first chapter of that book is about Bone’s mother trying to change that name of “bastard” on her birth certificate. Eventually the mother is able to change the name and Bone is able to go on with her life.

To go with this name-changing scenario, Lorde also gives us a “signal scene.” A signal scene in African-American autobiography is when one (usually a slave) learns to read and goes beyond a received legal status, thus entering the area in which literacy is experienced as freedom (Alexander 705-706). Lorde has this experience and this sets her journey toward a “birth” that happens outside her parents’ home. Lorde learns to read and speak simultaneously because of her nearsightedness and always breaking her glasses, which ultimately extracts 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...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” (Alexander 706). This leads Lorde to re-examining that lost sense of the word’s physicality. After this, Lorde’s mother teaches her “to say the alphabet forwards and backwards as it was done in Grenada” (23). Lorde’s logic, bodily and intellectual, finds sense in the so-called backwards as well as in the forwards. This sets up a new relationship between the two. Yes, Lorde has a mother who teaches her the alphabet, but she also has an equal because the mother loses her power when Lorde learns to write, which eventually leads her to re-name herself.

Lorde’s relationship with her mother is intriguing because the moments she seems to yearn for the most are those moments of privacy not allowed by her stern mother who, considering “solitude a social perversion,” insists that Lorde’s bedroom door remain open except when she is studying (Daniell 12). Yet we also get Lorde describing her mother as a “very powerful woman” (15). 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” (15). For her mother to exist, as she knows her, Lorde must trust her own knowledge and her own developing linguistic space. She says “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” (16-17). Lorde writes, “It was so often her [mother’s]
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 provides a blueprint for Lorde’s ability to change shape to match her needs, to change an outside perception of her body by inserting her own sense of form, both literary and physical.

The mother is a mother, but in a sense a go-between. The mother becomes someone that helps Lorde on her journey to find herself. The mother is not the one that will change and form her; that is a job for her “other mothers.” In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde states she learned from her mother “[t]he important value of nonverbal communication, beneath language. My life depended on it...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”’ (Rich 15). Lorde’s mother teaches her the basics to get her going on her journey. Lorde’s mother teaches her the unstated language. She teaches Lorde not to be naïve. Language makes space for “self-articulations” 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 cross and complex language where what she knows is frequently at odds with what the world tells her she should see (Alexander 707). With this, Lorde is able to go beyond the mother-daughter relationship that she has with her mother.

Lorde eventually goes beyond the mother-daughter relationship when the mother takes the lover role. In the text, Lorde presents her sexuality as defining, as central to experience and identity. Language is linked inextricably to memories of the mother, to the bodies of women—most specifically to memories of the mother’s body—and to the primacy of sexual desire and pleasure:
The click of her wedding ring against the wooden headboard. She is awake. I get up and go over and crawl into my mother’s bed. Her smile. Her glycerine-flannel smell. The warmth. She reclines upon her back and side, one arm extended, the other flung across her forehead...her large soft breast beneath the button flannel of her nightgown. Below, the rounded swell of her stomach, silent and inviting touch (23).

In this passage we see the mother in a very sexual way. The description is one that would be given by a lover. This scene is where Lorde makes the transition from her mother being a mother to a lover. The wedding ring clicking symbolizes a beacon call for Lorde to come and partake in a sexual romp that will set her on her journey of finding her identity and the rest of her family. The reason I say it appears to be a sexual encounter is because the mother is described as being in the middle of being pleasured. Another interesting thing is that the mother is awake and does not stop Lorde. The mother appears to be enjoying it, which shows that this encounter was a mutual one. With this the mother is different from other mothers—and while Lorde’s relationship with her mother is “volatile and full of misunderstandings,” it is from her that Lorde acquires the skills to survive in an "alien" environment (Kader 186). The mother has finally prepared and set Lorde free to go forth in the world to find herself, her home and her other family.

Something that is important now, but will have a bigger impact later, is relationships with women. In Zami, writing of same-sex desire among women is “tendentially linked to the deferred desire to engage sexually with the mother and the actual physical experience of having sensual experiences with the mother as a girl (combing of the hair, cooking together, etc.)” (Negrón-Mutaner 270). The maternal is also the first model for desire as young Lorde tries to seduce a new-found friend, Toni, treating her as her own “child,” “…this delectable creature in front of me was most certainly a girl, and I wanted her for my very own...” (38), but with the consciousness of her transgression (the taboo to desire and be sexual with her
mother) (Negrón-Mutaner 270). We get Lorde, the mother figure, wanting to mother Toni, but more importantly wanting to “play” with her. Play in the sexual sense. “I stuck both of my hands into the holes of her furry muff…” (39). Granted Lorde is talking about Toni’s hand warmer, but the reader is to take this as a sexual innuendo. Sexual innuendo occurs frequently in this section with Toni. This is a very heated sexual section when reading between the lines. In this sexual encounter, Toni is the daughter being a lover. Later on, it will play as Toni the lover being the daughter. I included it in the family section because it is a nice transition to the next section. In this sense, sexuality among women in the text is adorned always as a memory of the “primal” connection between mother and daughters:

Years afterwards, when I was grown, whenever I thought about the way I smelled that day, I would have a fantasy of my mother, her hands wiped dry from the washing...looking down upon me lying on the couch, and then slowly, thoroughly, our touching and caressing each other’s most secret places (78).

and:

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).

This primal connection is important because it sets the mother up as being a lover, and it will set her friends and lovers up as being family.

IV. Your Friends and Lovers Are Also Your Family

The thing that makes Lorde’s friends and lovers family, is the connections she has with them. Connections with women signal moments of safety and security (Kader 190). These connections in Zami become a homecoming: “Loving Ginger that night was like coming home to a joy I was meant for…” (139). Yet despite the construction of “home” as affirming desire between Black lesbians, in the context of Zami’s ambiguities as a narrative, it is clear that Lorde never finds a permanent “home.” Lorde does find a home in writing and
in the potential encounters with women’s bodies, but these are always short-lived. Lorde’s friends and lovers become family because they provide this temporary home for her when her family couldn’t. Kader, in “The Very House of Difference,” suggests: “Within this context, ‘home’ is recast as a frame of reference—a location with respect to knowledge and meaning” (191). As we can see, ‘real homes’ in Zami are temporary, impoverished and uncertain. There is no privileged space, no privileged discourse—only “the very house of difference.”

A pivotal time when we see Lorde’s friends and lovers evolving to take the position as family is in Mexico. Lorde’s travel down south is symbolic of a new birth. In Mexico Lorde is on a quest for visibility and speech. Lorde achieves visibility by “looking” like everyone else—dark skinned—and speech when she learns the basics of the Spanish language. We even get a sense of a mother figure down in Mexico:

> It was in Mexico that I stopped feeling invisible. In the streets, in the buses, in the markets, in the Plaza, in the particular attention within Eudora’s eyes. Sometimes, half-smiling, she would scan my face without speaking. It made me feel like she was the first person who had ever seen who I was. And not only did she see me, she loved me, thought I was beautiful. This was not accidental collision (173).

In general, Zami offers a multiplicity of tensions in its construction of the journey to community. Yet in Mexico we get a sense of a completed birth that started when Lorde dropped the “y” in her name. Lorde becomes whole. And her relationship with Eudora did it. Eudora is an interesting character because she gives Lorde a love that is associated with a mother. Lorde describes Eudora as the first person ever to see Lorde for who she was. Traditionally your mother is the one that usually sees you as being “real” and tells you are a “beautiful” person. Eudora is also an older person who fits the older “motherly” figure that is absent in Lorde’s life. There is a deep connection between the two. Of course Lorde does
not immediately see this, but both of them are connected to cancer. Eudora had it and Lorde will eventually have it.

Part of Zami's effectiveness is the subject's "precarious sense of belonging as the daughter of emigrant parents" (Negrón-Mutaner 259). Home plays an important part in everyone's life. Home is where one's family is. Being an immigrant adds an interesting twist to this, because your true home is in another country. Therefore, New York is not home for Lorde's parents. Yet New York plays out differently with Lorde, as she leaves her family to find her "other" family:

Once home was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother's mouth....When I moved out of my mother's house, shaky and determined, I began to fashion some different relationship to this country....I began to seek some more fruitful return than simple bitterness from this place of my mother's exile, whose streets I came to learn better than my mother had ever learned them....And there I found other women who sustained me and from whom I learned other loving (104).

Thus, as this passage suggests, "home" embodies multiple and often contradictory locations, meanings, and levels of mythmaking. This becomes a problem because there is not a solid place called home. At its most organized, "home" in Zami is a never-ending and vague practice to include many supportive communities with varied possibilities for the subject's empowerment. Lorde's mother's home will not suit her because all she knows of it was from her mother. And yet New York is not truly her home because it was her mother's "exile" and she has not accepted it. New York is on its way to being Lorde's home because she is learning the ins and outs of it and is finding a new family that sustains and loves her.

One aspect that can be categorized as a somewhat solid place for Lorde that connects to home is her relationships. The foundational moment of Zami has many centers, but it is narratively anchored in a sexual encounter between two African American women
characters, Audre and Kitty/Afrekete. Kitty/Afrekete is a mythical figure in “the sense that through her a ‘revelation’ is crystallized: the discovery of roots. She is also a medium, a phantom who does not stay to construct but instead disappears” (Negrón-Mutaner 251). Lorde’s relationship with Kitty/Afrekete brings Lorde back to the sensuality of the body, nature, and urban life following the breakup of a long-term relationship. Through Kitty/Afrekete, Lorde learns that “roots are not necessarily in geography, but are also in the body” (66). It is a physical state of both body and mind, according to Lorde: “Afrekete taught me roots, new definitions of our women’s bodies—definitions for which I had only been in training to learn before” (66). This is reminiscent of what Lorde’s mother did. Lorde’s mother was the one who taught her a “new definition” of her body when Lorde had her first period. “[Y]ou are a woman, not a child anymore....this means from now on you better watch your step and not be so friendly with every Tom, Dick and Harry” (76-77). Yet as Lorde mentions, her mother only started her on the “training” to learn this new definition; Afrekete finishes the job. Kitty/Afrekete takes Lorde back to the territory of Lorde’s childhood, a journey that she had been reluctant to make.

Lorde’s affair with Kitty/Afrekete is an interesting one because it is with a Black Southern woman whose “sensuality and independence equals Lorde’s own” (Daniell 12). The relationship is also a metaphor for Lorde’s conciliation with her own reality, and with the world. She is crossing into a hostile environment in her life because she is going back to family. She is going back to family because the “primordial” event regressively shifts locations. Kitty’s final appearance not only marks her disappearance but also leads back to the mother as an “origin” of lesbian desire. That this Black mother is positioned at the origin and that “one can experience black female sexuality as the most perfect re-telling of the
myth, does not cancel, expel, or denounce the possibilities of black women loving other women nor does it imply that this maternal origin is stable, as it can be partially substituted by other signs of community (African myth, food, Cariacou, Harlem)” (Negrón-Mutaner 251).

V. Family Is Where the Heart Is

In an essay on ethnic literature in New York, Mario Maffi observes, “the act of marking out a territory is a crucial step in the process of defining an identity” (qtd. in Wallace 63). Maffi’s comment is important because Zami marks out territories that can be seen as having “multiple levels, just as Lorde’s identity is multifaceted” (63). The territories range from Carriacou all the way to Mexico and her identities interchange among daughter, mother, friend and lover. However, the first sections of Zami show the struggle of a dislocated sense of place. This is the state in which Lorde existed with her family, before she found her friends and lovers. Even though Lorde lived in a “stable” place in Harlem with her parents, Lorde still dealt with her parents’ culture and not her own; stories about Grenada and the small island of Carriacou provide a “legacy, a specifically matrilineal one, with which Lorde must grapple” (Wallace 63). This normally would not be a problem, but her mother cannot prove this culture to Lorde. The mother also eventually moves away from being your typical mother to lover. It became hard for Lorde to adopt her mother’s culture because she needed a valid source for Carriacou and yet she never got it. Lorde needed to come up with her own culture that incorporated both the old and new. Carriacou functions as a geographic location for both cultural and individual memory. However, it is through Lorde’s experiences of New York that she comes to understand Carriacou. Lorde’s mother’s memories and stories make Carriacou a place despite not finding it on a map. The mother’s
stories in fact actually construct narrative maps that provide models for the ways Lorde uses writing to render New York, the place she knows intimately. Lorde listens to her mother’s stories about Carriacou and “gradually incorporates that women-centered and created, tropically lush, and ‘natural’ place with her women-centered and created environments in New York” (Wallace 63). It is not until she is twenty-six and working on a research project that she finally finds Carriacou on a map. Without having this proof, Carriacou evoked both distrust and longing for a utopian land. Yet until this happens, Lorde distrusts her mother’s stories and memories. She cannot accept the mother and her position as mother because part of her culture (where she comes from) cannot be validated. It is as if the mother does not have a home. She comes off as not telling the truth. Yet Lorde cannot disregard her mother’s power. Carriacou exists for Lorde in childhood primarily as a fantasy home and New York as a violent place. The fact that Carriacou comes off as being fantasy illustrates that the mother too may be fantasy. Finally Carriacou takes on increasing symbolic importance as Lorde explores how home and place, even the most Edenic of places, are “inextricably linked with human, and specifically female, presences” (Wallace 64). Home is where your (female) family is. Family does not necessary mean blood relations but “human presences.” To Lorde, her human presences include friends and lovers.

Ultimately *Zami* tells the journey of a woman unwilling “to relinquish any of the complicated parts of herself” (Kader 189). Neither Lorde’s mother’s home nor the home she makes with her friends and lovers does more than put alienation temporarily aside. Lorde is painfully aware of her “differences,” of an identity constituted in response to the various spaces she inhabits but always exceeding and thus dislocating their boundaries (189). At times, “home” may provide its residents with support and security, even intimacy; at other
times, however, it functions as a barrier to self-expression and desire. “In place of any permanent ‘home’—home as fixed referent—Lorde exploits the partiality of home” (Kader 190). Looking at Adrienne Rich’s “Notes Toward a Politics of Location,” we can see Rich’s “politics of location.” By doing this we can see Lorde continuously staging and re-staging the construction of identity within different and changing social and discursive areas (190).

Within the invention of oneself/one’s genre, home is recast as a frame of reference—a location with respect to knowledge and meaning. In Zami, “real homes” are temporary, impoverished, and uncertain. There is no privileged space, no privileged discussion. When, as an adult, Lorde discovers her mother’s home on a map, she writes, “Once home was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother’s mouth. I only discovered its latitudes when Carriacou was no longer my home” (256).

Zami is framed by these acts of coming home, but it is only in the final scene that Lorde seems finally at home—with another woman who gives as much as she takes, with the past and present, and with Carriacou and New York. Lorde suggests a merger between the actual and the mythic, between New York and Carriacou:

*And I remember Afrekete, who came out of a dream to me always being hard and real as the fine hairs along the underedge of my navel. She brought me live things from the bush, and from her farm set out in cocoyams and cassava—those magical fruit which Kitty bought in the West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue in the 140s or in the Puerto Rican bodegas within the bustling market over on Park Avenue and 116th Street under the Central Railroad structures (67).*

This passage suggests the simultaneous existence of the mythic and the real. Lorde introduces Afrekete as the provider of fruits from the bush and tropics (Africa and the West Indies) and Kitty, who knows where to buy them. In this passage, Afrekete alters Kitty; the mythic, ancestral, utopia merges with the real, present, and urban place. This merged place
provides a deep sense of home, which is perhaps the most inclusive concept in Zami (68). And juxtaposing this final sense with Lorde’s other works shows that home is not at the mother’s home. In her poem “Home,” from Our Dead Behind Us, Lorde describes her realization that home and affirmation do not lie in Carriacou. The search for origins no longer matters:

We arrived at my mother’s island
To find your mother’s name in the stone
We did not need to go to the graveyard
For affirmation
Our own genealogies
The language of childhood wars (49).

Zami reflects Lorde’s search for depth and belonging. And in “Home” we see that this search cannot be backward. Lorde renders survival as a forward movement. In this sense, she has moved beyond the immigrant’s inclination to look back to the homeland (Wallace 69). Her new home is New York with new family (mother, father, sisters, friends and lovers). Her home equals her family.

Unlike so many early literary personal narratives, Zami does not obsess about the isolated artist as individual seeker. Rather Lorde describes the lives of many other women to highlight and underline her own experience. Zami is more than one woman’s story. It is a “eulogy and benediction for the women who helped her to see and to grow visible; her taciturn mother; her two sisters; her first playmate, Toni; her teenage friend Gennie who commits suicide; her first woman lover Ginger; the pickled and pungent expatriate Eudora; her Communist roommate Rhea; her tender-mad partner Muriel and, finally, Afrekete, who shines her light on what it means to be a loving, proud, black lesbian” (Contemporary Literary Criticism 237). In the end, Lorde brings closure to her journey of family by
forcefully drawing together the women who have enlightened her and formed her: “Their names, selves, faces feed me like corn before labor. I live each of them as a piece of me, and I choose these words with the same grave concern with which I choose to push speech into poetry, the mattering core, the forward vision of all of our lives” (256). Lorde believes each person she encountered was vital for her survival. These people are all part of her. They all birthed her to who she is. With this Lorde completes the journey of re-defining what a real family is all about: blood relatives, friends, and lovers.
CONCLUSION: COMING HOME

Looking back on Allison and Lorde, one cannot help comparing and contrasting the two writers. Each writer deals with the issue of family, but they have different approaches. Allison uses autobiographical fiction and Lorde uses biomythography. Yet when it comes down to it, both women try to change the definitions on issues that revolve around their lives. Allison wants to change the definition of white trash; and Lorde wants to change the definition of autobiographies and families. One question that comes to mind is how important are the differences of race, location, and heritage to both Allison and Lorde?

Race is an issue that needs to be looked at because society is usually unsure about it and/or afraid to address the issue. Race is typically known as people unified by community of interests, habits, or characteristics. The thing that unifies both Allison and Lorde is their minority status in society. Seeing Lorde as a minority is not a problem because of her color. Society usually oppresses those not white. Yet Allison’s minority status is a little harder to see. How could Allison be a minority when she is white? Allison is special white. She is white trash. White trash is typically seen as a step below being white and white trash people are therefore treated like a lower class. With this, how does race connect to the women’s re-definition of family? For Lorde, being a person of color, one expects her extended family to be part of her re-definition of family. Yet for Lorde, her friends and lovers are what re-define family. She wanted to show how her friends and lovers helped her to form her identity. Her blood family starts this process, yet it was completed outside the home. An important thing for Lorde is that her family crossed races. She has black, brown, and white friends and lovers that became her family. As for Allison, the family she focuses on are white yet race is still important because of the stereotypes that are out there on white trash
Americans. The stereotypes are negative. Society sees white trash families as doing more harm to their children than good. To change this perception, Allison literally has to re-write her whole white trash history.

And when we look at location, we also see it matters greatly to both Allison and Lorde. For Allison, her family members (the white trash blood relatives) are in the South and rarely diverge from there. Allison on the other hand left the South. As she lives in the North, she does make friends and lovers that help her grow, yet to Allison her blood family remains the most important to her. They are the ones who shaped her to who she is today: a powerful, smart, white lesbian. The problem is that her family does not have this positive description that she believes she has. They have a negative one. Allison wants to change this. For Lorde, location plays a bit differently. Lorde’s family is everywhere. Her mother, father and sisters are in New York. Her extended family are back in the Caribbean. Her friends and lovers are in Harlem, Mexico, and Greenwich Village. For Lorde, the family she wanted to focus on was not tied down to any one location. Just because people are not blood relatives does not mean they are not family. Family crossed boundaries, as well as borders.

Finally there is the question of heritage. Even though Allison and Lorde are both writing about their families, one can see that their heritages are a bit different. Yet these two women are both fighting and embracing their heritages. Lorde loves the Caribbean culture that her mother and father came from, but she is also fighting it because it is not one hundred percent her culture. It is her parents’. The problem is that at an earlier age, she assumed it to be her culture. This caused many problems because her parents’ culture was hard to find in New York. Lorde could not have her parents’ culture validated to her, since it was never validated to anyone outside that culture, e.g. not finding it on a map. So the culture that
defined her mother and father was only part of her culture. And as for Allison, she embraced
who she was, which is white trash, but at the same time she was fighting it; she was
embarrassed by being the butt of jokes and the main character of rape stories. Therefore she
had to re-define what society knew, with what she already knew. She literally had to re-
construct the white trash culture for society.

In the end, Allison and Lorde had to change our reality of what family meant, so we
could look at their idea of family in a different light. Once they have done this, the
stereotypes society has will be brought down and the process of ending oppression will
begin. These women started this process by creating new definitions of family from within
their race, location and heritage.
APPENDIX

1)

Main Entry: fam·i·ly

Pronunciation: 'fam-IL, 'fa-m&-

Function: noun

Inflected Form(s): plural -lies

Etymology: Middle English familie, from Latin familia household (including servants as well as kin of the householder), from famulus servant

Date: 15th century

1: a group of individuals living under one roof and usually under one head: HOUSEHOLD
2 a: a group of persons of common ancestry: CLAN b: a people or group of peoples regarded as deriving from a common stock: RACE
3 a: a group of people united by certain convictions or a common affiliation: FELLOWSHIP b: the staff of a high official (as the President)
4: a group of things related by common characteristics: as a: a closely related series of elements or chemical compounds b: a group of soils that have similar profiles and include one or more series c: a group of related languages descended from a single ancestral language
5 a: the basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their own or adopted children; also: any of various social units differing from but regarded as equivalent to the traditional family <a single-parent family> b: spouse and children <want to spend more time with my family>
6 a: a group of related plants or animals forming a category ranking above a genus and below an order and usually comprising several to many genera b in livestock breeding (1): the descendants or line of a particular individual especially of some outstanding female (2): an identifiable strain within a breed
7: a set of curves or surfaces whose equations differ only in parameters
8: a unit of a crime syndicate (as the Mafia) operating within a geographical area

2)

The other stories that are included in Bastard in one form or other are the following: "River of Names," "The Meanest Woman Ever Left Tennessee," "Mama," and "Don't Tell Me You Don't Know."
WORKS CONSULTED


“Knee Deep…the Unofficial Brett Butler Webpage”  


