

‘Difference is a reason for celebration and growth’: re-thinking feminism in Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

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Issues to be addressed:

1. Who can be a feminist? (Reflecting on the need to re-define the concept of *difference* as empowering: recognizing, reclaiming and defining our differences and discussing current issues of excluding those whose biological sex is not female, as well as separations based on race and class).
2. How can we re-think feminism, to paraphrase bell hooks, as a *collective* social action eliminating all forms of oppression which challenges ideologies of domination and reduces separation, to be all-inclusive?
3. When dealing with white privilege (especially in the context of feminist organizations and academia), how can white anti-racist feminists deal with the paradox of speaking from a position of privilege to advocate a transformation of a society that produces that privilege? How can white anti-racist feminists account for our locations without sliding into moralizing, careerism, appropriation and paternalism? (Particularly: which are the self-reflexive strategies that could be used to question and reduce these problems?)
4. Do we ever have situations (especially in the academia) where we faced injustice in any form and wanted to speak out but did not, because of fear of conflict or any other? What is the underlying cause of that fear? (Highlighting the importance of breaking silences and speaking out)
5. How can we, as feminist academics and teachers, move away from Eurocentric models and definitions, to validate different perspectives? How can different forms of feminist writing (poetry, biomythography, non-academic language) supplement such efforts?

EXCERPTS FROM AUDRE LORDE'S *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

The Mother-Daughter relationship and its inspiring influence:

‘My mother was a very powerful woman. This was so in a time where that word - combination of *woman* and *powerful* was almost inexpressible in the white american¹ common tongue, except or unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind, or hunchback, or crazy, or Black. Therefore, when I was growing up, *powerful woman* equaled something else quite different from ordinary woman, from simply ‘woman.’ (p.6)

‘There was so little that she really knew about the stranger’s country. How the electricity worked. The nearest church. Where the Free Milk Fund for Babies Handouts occurred, and at what time – even though we were not allowed to drink charity.

She knew about bundling up against the wicked cold. She knew about Paradise Plum – hard, oval candies, cherry-red on one side, pineapple-yellow on the other. She knew which West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue carried them in tilt-back glass jars on the countertops. She knew how desirable Paradise Plums were to sweet-starved little children, and how important in maintaining discipline on long shopping journeys. She knew exactly how many of the imported goodies could be sucked and rolled around in the mouth before the wicked gum Arabic with its acidic british teeth cut through the tongue’s pink and raised little red pimples.

She knew about mixing oils for bruises and rashes, and about disposing of all toenail clippings and hair from the comb. About burning candles before All Souls Day to keep the soucoyants away, lest they suck the blood of her babies. She knew about blessing the food and yourself before eating, and about saying prayers before going to sleep. (p.2)

‘As a very little girl, I remember shrinking from a particular sound, a hoarsely sharp, guttural rasp, because it often meant a nasty blob of grey spittle upon my coat or shoe an instant later. My mother wiped it off with the little pieces of newspaper she always carried in her purse. Sometimes she fussed about how low-class people who had no better sense nor manners than to spit into the wind no matter where they went, impressing upon me that this humiliation was totally random. It never occurred to me to doubt her.’ (p.9)

On the evolution of a feminist consciousness and the concept of difference:

‘Now you don’t grow up fat, Black, nearly blind, and ambidextrous in a West Indian household, particularly my parents’ household, and survive without being or becoming fairly rigid fairly fast.’ (p.14)

¹ In her writing, Audre Lorde did not capitalize certain words, like america, christian, british and so on, for poetic, political and / or personal reasons.

‘I have always wondered why the farthest-out position always feels so right to me; why extremes, although difficult and sometimes painful to maintain, are always more comfortable than one plan running straight down a line in the unruffled middle.

What I really understand is a particular kind of determination. It is stubborn, it is painful, it is infuriating, but it often works.’ (p.6)

‘I remember how being young and Black and gay and lonely felt. A lot of it was fine, feeling I had the truth and the light and the key, but a lot of it was purely hell.

There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sister Amazons, the riders on the loneliest outposts of the kingdom of Dahomey². We, young and black and fine and gay, sweated out our first heartbreaks with no school or office chums to share that confidence over lunch hour. Just as there were no rings to make tangible the reason for our happy secret smiles, there were no names or reason given or shared for the tears that messed up the lab reports or the library bills.’ (p.152)

‘In a paradoxical sense, once I accepted my position as different from the larger society as well as from any single sub-society – Black or gay – I felt I didn’t have to try so hard. To be accepted. To look femme. To be straight, to look straight. To be proper. To look ‘nice’. To be liked. To be loved. To be approved. What I didn’t realize was how much harder I had to try merely to stay alive, or rather, to stay human. How much stronger a person I became in trying.

But in this plastic, anti-human society in which we live, there have never been too many people buying fat Black girls born almost blind and ambidextrous, gay or straight. Unattractive, too, or so ads in Ebony and Jet seemed to tell me. Yet I read them anyway, in the bathroom, on the newsstand, at my sister’s house, whenever I got a chance. It was a furtive reading, but it was an affirmation of some part of me, however frustrating.’ (p.157)

‘Each of us had our own needs and pursuits, and many different alliances. Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self. At the Bag, at Hunter College, uptown in Harlem, at the library, there was a piece of the real me bound in each place, and growing.

It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference. (And often, we were cowards in our learning. It was years before we learned fear does not have to incapacitate, and that we could appreciate each other on terms not necessarily our own.’ (p.197)

On racism:

‘Two weeks later after we moved into our new apartment, our landlord hanged himself in the basement. The Daily News reported that the suicide was caused by his

² Dahomey was a former country in West Africa, in the area of today’s Republic of Benin. The Kingdom of Dahomey was founded in the seventeenth century and it was known as a center of culture and power.

despondency over the fact that he finally had to rent to Negroes. I was the first Black student in St. Catherine's School, and all the white kids in my sixth grade class knew about the landlord who hanged himself in the basement because of me and my family.' (p.46)

'All the little girls wore blue gabardine uniforms that by springtime were a little musty, despite frequent drycleanings. I would come in from recess to find notes in my desk saying 'You Stink'. I showed them to Sister Blanche. She told me that it was her christian duty to tell me that Colored people *did* smell different from the white people, but it was cruel of the children to write nasty notes because I couldn't help it, and if I would remain in the yard the next day after the rest of the class came in after lunchtime, she would talk to them about being nicer to me!' (p.46)

'American racism was a new and crushing reality that my parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to the country. They handled it as a private woe. My mother and father believed that they could best protect their children from the realities of race in america and the fact of american racism by never giving them name, much less discussing their nature. We were told we must never trust white people, but *why* was never explained, nor the nature of their ill will. (p.54-55)

On the use of the erotic, alternative sexuality and re-claiming the female body:

'My mother's mortar was an elaborate affair, quite at variance with most of her other possessions, and certainly with her projected public view of herself. It stood, solid and elegant, on a shelf in the kitchen cabinet for as long as I can remember, and I loved it dearly.

The mortar was of a foreign fragrant wood, too dark for cherry and too red for walnut. To my child eyes, the outside was carved in an intricate and most enticing manner. There were rounded plums and oval indeterminate fruit, some long and fluted like a banana, others ovular and end-swollen like a ripe alligator pear. In between these were smaller rounded shapes like cherries, lying in batches against and around each other.

I loved to finger the hard roundness of the carved fruit, and the always surprising termination of the shapes as the carvings stopped at the rim and the bowl sloped abruptly downward, smoothly oval, but suddenly businesslike. The heavy sturdiness of this useful wooden object always made me feel secure and somehow full: as if it conjured up, from all the many different flavors pounded into the inside wall, visions of delicious feasts both once enjoyed and still to come.' (p.57)

'When I came back into the kitchen, my mother had left. I moved toward the kitchen cabinet to fetch down the mortar and pestle. My body felt new and special and unfamiliar and suspect all at the same time.

I could feel bands of tension sweeping across my body back and forth, like lunar winds across the moon's face. I felt the slight rubbing bulge of the cotton pad between my legs, and I smelled the delicate breadfruit smell rising up from the front of my print

blouse that was my own womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious.’ (p.63)

‘As I continued to pound the spice, a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new, ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach. That invisible thread, taut and sensitive as a clitoris exposed, stretched through my curled fingers up my round brown arm into the moist reality of my armpits, whose warm sharp odor with a strange new overlay mixed with the ripe garlic smells from the mortar and the general sweat-heavy aromas of the summer.

The thread ran over my ribs and along my spine, tingling and singing, into a basin that was poised between my hips, now pressed against the low kitchen counter before which I stood, pounding spice. And within that basin was a tiding ocean of blood beginning to be made real and available to me for strength and information.’ (p.63)

‘She rose slowly. I unbuttoned her shirt and she shrugged it off her shoulders till it lay heaped at our feet. In the circle of lamplight I looked from her round firm breast with its rosy nipple erect to her scarred chest. The pale keloids of radiation burn lay in the hollow under her shoulder and arm down across her ribs. I raised my eyes and found hers again, speaking a tenderness my mouth had no words yet for. She took my hand and placed it there, squarely, lightly, upon her chest. Our hands fell. I bent and kissed her softly upon the scar where our hands had rested. I felt her heart strong and fast against my lips. We fell back together upon her bed. My lungs expanded and my breath deepened with the touch of her warm dry skin. My mouth finally against hers, quick-breathed, fragrant, searching, her hand entwined in my hair. My body took charge from her flesh. Shifting slightly, Eudora reached past my head toward the lamp above us. I caught her wrist. Her bones felt like velvet and quicksilver between my tingling fingers.

‘No’, I whispered against the hollow of her ear. ‘In the light’. (p.144)

‘Every woman I have ever loved has left her print on me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me – so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her. And in that growing, we came to separation, that place where work begins. Another meeting.’ (p.223)

WORKS CITED:

1. Lorde, Audre, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (London: Pandora, 1982)
2. hooks, bell, *Ain't I a woman: black women and feminism* (London: Pluto Press, 1982)

