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“Restorying” the Maternal Myth of Origin in *Zami* and *Makeba: My Story*

Benjamin M.O. Odhoji

Myths are particularly important sources of alternative history for groups denied a place in mainstream culture.¹

I have, throughout my private war, been a she, a you, a Donna, a me, and finally, an I.²

INTRODUCTION

Historically, autobiography has occupied a central place in black South African and African-American letters. More than any other literary form in African-American writing, autobiography has functioned since its inception as a powerful means of addressing and rewriting sociopolitical as well as cultural realities in the United States. Increased racial politics of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States and South Africa, respectively, in fact heightened black racial consciousness and identity. Collective racial identity politics therefore tended to overshadow other aspects of subordination and exclusion, including non-racially-based forms of individual self-definition. In the United States, anyone with African ancestry was *de facto* black.

However, identity is not static. It is gendered, racialized, and historically constructed. Identity formation is constructed and expressed through representation. Indeed, a number of contemporary black autobiographers from the two regions have increasingly interrogated and questioned the category of “race” as a monolithic measure of difference, pointing out that it tends to be exclusive and hence masks

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¹ Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*.

² See “Author’s Note” in Williams, *Nobody Nowhere*. This observation (from 1992) suggests the model of transformation and “journey motif” that I examine with respect to Audre Lorde’s and Miriam Makeba’s autobiographies. See Lorde, *Zami*.

other important identity markers of difference and exclusion. In this regard, William Andrews notes that “the search for a communal means of expressing contemporary African American identity and its roots in hitherto unrecorded history continues.”³ He adds further that autobiography also continues to bear profound witness to its cultural heritage and to its ongoing responsibility to represent the individual and communal voices of African Americans.

My working definition draws on Philippe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography as “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his own individual life, in particular the story of his personality.”⁴ Lejeune argues that identity is not resemblance, but is defined starting with three terms: author, narrator, and protagonist. According to Lejeune, the “narrator and protagonist are the figures to whom the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the utterance refer *within the text*; the author, represented at the edge of the text by his own name, is the referent to whom the subject of enunciation refers by reason of the autobiographical pact.”⁵ The autobiographical pact identifies the author, the narrator and the protagonist as identical. Lejeune’s autobiographical pact has arguably become the main conventional yardstick for evaluating the extent to which a given self-referential text qualifies as autobiography. However, the two texts I focus on in this paper tend to challenge, subvert, rupture, or transgress the tidy conventional parameters of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact.

One significant means by which contemporary black autobiographers have attempted to represent the individual and communal voices by African Americans and black South Africans is through the use of myth. The use of myth in narratives is a crucial mode of “restorying” (radically redefining personal and communal identities). As Humm suggests in the above epigraph, myths are important as sources of alternative history for marginalized groups. In this regard, myths function as revisionist modes of protest and resistance. In other words, they “often describe journeys *away* from powerful tyrants, away from social discourses into a world of beauty and freedom.”⁶ In this paper, I want to examine, compare, and contrast self-definition and representation in two autobiographical texts by recent black women artists: Audre Lorde and Miriam Makeba. I want to examine their forms of self-representation in terms of myth criticism and with respect to what Carole Boyce-Davies refers to as “migrations of the subject” or self-definition that encompasses multiple facets of identity. According to Boyce-Davies, “migrations of the subject” in the context of black women’s writing presupposes the subject’s agency as “constituted in terms of multiple identities that do not always make for harmony.”⁷

³ Andrews, “Secular Autobiography,” 37.

⁴ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶ Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 25.

⁷ Boyce-Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, 36.

I would like to propose these arguments: First, that the multiple identities in Lorde's and Makeba's autobiographies, in fact, are harmonious and constituted mainly in terms of "restorying" what I refer to as "the maternal principle" or the maternal myth of origin. In other words, self-definition is framed by reference to the mythical symbols of maternal forebears, heritage and values as a fundamental trope in the construction and representation of the autobiographical self. Secondly, the "maternal principle" emerges in both texts as a narrative strategy of "restorying" that is both a vision as well as a model for recreating a harmonious self in the present and for the future. In this respect, the maternal myth suggests a story about the collective past as part of the individual's story. The framework of "maternal myth of origin" not only provides cultural pathways in the journey to multiple selves, but also emerges as a unique narrative mode of restorying.

At first, it may seem outlandish to compare self-representation in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* to Miriam Makeba's *Makeba: My Story*. *Zami* is principally about how Audre Lorde became a lesbian, while *Makeba: My Story* is mainly about Makeba's life story as a political exile. Secondly, Lorde was an accomplished poet and writer, whereas Makeba was a celebrated, legendary South African musician.⁸ Thirdly, while Lorde is much more explicit in questioning the stifling excesses of racism, heterosexism, and sexism in America, Makeba mainly protests the racist institutions of the South African apartheid regime. Fourthly, the sociocultural and geopolitical spaces that shaped their childhood consciousnesses were quite different. Although Makeba was born and grew up within a traditional patriarchal rural community in South Africa, Lorde was born in an urban setting in New York City. The way they each discuss and interpret certain aspects of racism, for instance, is bound to be in some respects quite different. Their concepts of "self" and "motherhood" share certain commonalities, but also convey marked differences. Nevertheless, comparison becomes extremely fruitful if one remembers that differences may be at least as illuminating as similarities.

"RESTORYING"

In spite of certain specific differences, self-representation in both texts is structured by a maternal mythic frame that is not presented simply as a nostalgic recreation of a familiar world but as a viable narrative of self-identity. Both writers not only "restory" the interlocking features between ethnic/racial and individual identities, but also recognize the spiritual connections between self-identity and mothers. For both Makeba and Lorde, the remembered past has often been a nightmare revisited. Self-representation is characterized by recreations of oppressive historical experiences; hence the testimonies emerge and function as processes of redefining or

⁸ Makeba collaborated with one James Hall in writing her autobiography. Although (apart from his signature) there is no other reference to the role Hall played, Makeba alludes to collaborative effort by a fellow countryman based in Switzerland. See Mutloase, *Umlhlabu Wethu*, 95.

“restorying” personal and communal identities. The impulse to pattern chaotic, violent memories of a life lived on the margins in terms of main categories as race, gender, class, and sexuality into a narrative of possibility, informs the process that I refer to in this paper as “restorying.” Restorying therefore entails protest and resistance against forms of domination and exclusion. In terms of formal and narrative strategies, it entails rewriting, revision, and recomposition that figure and foreground eccentric, subversive, and radical modes of self-representation.

Restorying not only suggests retelling a story, it is also a “complex process, indeed an aesthetic process, for it concerns the shape we assign to our experience overall.”⁹ In the context of this study, restorying is significantly, viewed as a poetic or a literary process of recomposing the story of who one is or where one has come from and where one is headed. It is a process in which the autobiographical protagonist plays a powerful role as a “radical outsider,” or as an agent of revision of a given “master” narrative. According to Kenyon and Randall, our worldview—including our ethics, our experience or our relationships, our gender, even our emotions—all can be traced to the way we learned to tell ourselves in the rhetorical context of family life.¹⁰ “Restorying” can also entail actually challenging narrative environments or recontextualizing our lives. This could involve “leaving home and moving to a different community” or adjusting the dominant genre through which we make sense of events. “Restorying,” in short, implies restoration, revision, and rewriting some hitherto stifling circumstance or state of affairs.

Both Audre Lorde and Miriam Makeba recontextualize their lives through radical affirmation as being “differently-abled” rather than “crippled” as lesbian or conduit for some mystical ancestral alter-selves, respectively.

MATERNAL MYTH

As a “restorying” framework, the maternal principle functions in three significant related ways. First, it ties the threads of the multiple facets of self-definition. Secondly, it frames the emotional and political pathways to a composite sense of self. Thirdly, it suggests the multidimensionality and fluidity of difference, as well as linking the individual’s self-referential narrative to a mythical collective past history. As a source of “alternative history,” the maternal myth of origin thus emerges as a structural device of self-representation that is inclusive of, but goes beyond, the binary black/white category. In this regard, myth is deployed as a restorying technique of protest against racist and sexist (and homophobic, with regard to *Zami*) forms of marginality and exclusion.

In *Zami* and *Makeba*, the remembered self is constituted and represented in terms of a gradual transformation that draws on the structure of myth while at the same time re-envisioning collective and individual identities. The claims of self-identity,

⁹ Kenyon and Randall, *Restorying Our Lives*, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

therefore, derive from and return to the “pre-symbolic maternal power.”¹¹ For example, with regard to Lorde, this relates to how she came to integrate the multiple facets of her identity collectively as “Zami.” On the other hand, for Makeba, transformation relates to self-discovery as being the conduit for the *amadlozi* alter-selves she “inherits” from her mother.¹² In this regard, both texts read like “born again” or “coming out” narratives.

Both texts are also marked by “exilic self-fashioning,” or what I refer to as the “journey motif.” This pertains to self-definition that is constituted and represented in terms of transformation from a state of self-estrangement/alienation to self-awareness. It also relates to physical human mobility across geographic and political space. To be in exile, in a general sense, “means to be out of place, also needing to be rather elsewhere, also not having that ‘elsewhere’ where one would rather be.”¹³ As a metaphor, exile refers to “the pervasive feeling human beings often experience that they do not entirely belong to the sub-lunar world.”¹⁴ For example, by becoming a lesbian, Audre Lorde represents herself as a “stranger” within a patriarchal, heterosexual world. Likewise, being a political exile living abroad, Makeba represents herself as a “stranger” in a foreign land.¹⁵ Significantly, being a conduit for the *amadlozi* spirits Makeba’s “knowing self” is dispossessed by the alter-selves. In both texts, therefore, the maternal myth of origin structures self-definition in terms of a fictionalized quest of awakening in which the autobiographical self gains a new sense of self and the world through a mystical awareness of a past collective consciousness. In their own unique ways, both texts centre on “a quest for identity or a search for a parent figure, where the sweep of the narrative orders pieces of the world into an allegory of individual development.”¹⁶ The search for a psychological holism is constructed as a journey and individual transformation. Hence, the “restorying” process entails what Janice Haaken refers to as “transformative remembering.”¹⁷ Transformative remembering “refers to the creative use of the past in redefining the self, with emotion and bodily felt states of arousal serving as motivational impetus for the process of self-discovery.”¹⁸

¹¹ Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 173.

¹² According to Makeba, the *amadlozi* are ancestral spirits that manifest themselves when they possess their host. Whoever they possess has to undergo a transformative ritual initiation, *ukuthwasa*, in order to become an *isangoma* (healer/fortune-teller). One important study on spirit possession that elaborates on the notion of self as Makeba deploys it is by Karp. According to Karp, during spirit possession, “one body is host to competing personalities that exhibit different motivations and dispositions. In possession and multiple personalities, the knowing self is dispossessed by another, and self’s reports of the experience are not possible” (Karp, “Power and Capacity,” 82). This concept of “self” constitutes one fundamental difference between Makeba’s and Lorde’s self-definition. See Makeba, *Makeba*.

¹³ Bauman, “Assimilation into Exile,” 321.

¹⁴ Pavel, “Exile as Romance and as Tragedy,” 26.

¹⁵ Makeba’s self-consciousness at times is subverted and relegated to the margins when under spirit possession: see *Makeba*.

¹⁶ Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 26.

¹⁷ Haaken, *Pillar of Salt*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

In both texts, the quest for an integrated sense of self emerges as a symbolic quest for “home.” The quest for home is marked by “the rhetoric of nostalgia” or the “capacity to locate in memory an earlier version of self with which to measure to advantage some current condition of the self.”¹⁹ In this regard, the quest for home is linked to a nostalgic longing for a mythical collective maternal past. What occasions the nostalgic recall resides in the present circumstances of the narrator of the “here and now,” present, time of writing. In both texts, social protest is intertwined with self-definition and artistic expression. Lorde observes in this respect, “I see protest as a genuine means of encouraging someone to feel the inconsistencies, the horror of the lives we are living. Social protest is saying that we do not have to live this way . . . so the question of social protest and art is inseparable for me.”²⁰ Along similar lines, Makeba explains, “My life, my career, every song I sing and every appearance I make, are bound up with the plight of my people. I have been denied my home. We have been denied our land.”²¹

The “multiple identities” that Carole Boyce-Davies refers to are not only conjoined by the symbolic maternal principle, but are also coordinates of a coherent sense of self for both Lorde and Makeba. Rather than fragmenting and demobilizing the subject, the “exilic self-fashioning” emerges as a source of self-determination and expression of resistance. Hence, the price to pay for this self-determination appears to be “homelessness” within a stifling patriarchal environment. Rewriting the self in terms of the symbols of a mythic mother, therefore, is a sure way home that ensures a new sense of self. Towards this end, Lorde has stated,

As a Black, lesbian feminist comfortable with the many different ingredients of my identity, and a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression, I find that I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live. My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow . . . without restrictions of externally imposed definition.²²

Self-representation in *Zami* thus takes stock of multiple identity markers beyond the binary opposition of black/white.

Whereas Lorde evokes both mythical and historical images of the “mother” in “restoring” her identity as a black, lesbian, poet and “a woman committed to racial and sexual freedom from oppression,”²³ Makeba represents and attributes her complex multifaceted identity—not least, her musical talents—to her mother’s influence and power.

Zimmerman explains that “mothers in the narratives by lesbians of color and ethnic lesbians are sources of personal and collective identity, mothers connect the

¹⁹ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 45.

²⁰ Tate, *Black Women at Work*, 108.

²¹ Makeba, *Makeba*, 1.

²² Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 120–1.

²³ *Ibid.*

protagonist to her racial and sexual heritage. Since they bear their daughters in their own bodies, they provide the explicit link to the ethnic group, the origin, the root.”²⁴ This finds echo in Lynne Huffer, who explains (after Simone de Beauvoir) that “the mother as origin occupies a position in the ideological and political systems through which *gendered* meanings are constructed. Not only is a world of meaning structured in relation to a maternal origin, but those meanings are given value according to the oppositional relations of gender.”²⁵ Although Lorde mythologizes the maternal principle mainly in terms of her identity as a black lesbian poet, Makeba does so by emphasizing her identity as an exiled black woman singer. Both “re-story” the maternal origin as the foundation of their world-views beyond the oppositional relations of gender and race. According to Lorde, for instance, “the desire to lie with other women” is a “drive from the mother’s blood.”²⁶ On the other hand, Makeba attributes her talent as a singer to the *amadlozi* alter-selves she inherited from her mother.²⁷

Lorde’s creative energy as a poet and Makeba’s creative talent as a singer are linked to the “maternal principle.” Being a poet, as well as being a musician, is not a socially constructed identity but a creative mode of expression. In this regard, Lorde traces her identity as a poet to the mythical island women of Carriacou, her mother’s place of birth. On the other hand, Makeba recreates her identity as a singer in terms of her mother’s mystical *amadlozi* alter-selves. Being symbolically, motherless daughters, the “absent” mother seems to occupy a central place as the “event on which the whole narrative pivots,” and their self-definition “thus becomes inextricably interwoven with loss.”²⁸

NARRATIVE FORM

In terms of narrative form, both texts present crucial questions regarding the issues of testimony and witnessing. There are two distinct narrative points of view in Lorde’s text. There is the point of view of a relatively young protagonist who narrates her experiences as she encountered different circumstances and events up

²⁴ Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women*, 191.

²⁵ Huffer, *Maternal Pasts*, 9.

²⁶ Lorde, *Zami*, 256.

²⁷ She observes in this regard, “I, like my mother, am possessed by the *amadlozi*” (*Makeba*, 212).

²⁸ Edelman, *Motherless Daughters*, 214. Some coincidences regarding the life and experiences of Lorde and Makeba are quite striking. Both were born in the 1930s, Lorde on 18 February 1934 and Makeba on 4 March 1932. Both represent themselves, to a large extent, as exiles in the United States. While Lorde was born in New York City of West Indian parentage and “raised to know that America was not my home” (Moraga, *This Bridge Called my Back*, 248), Makeba was born in South Africa, but lived as a political exile in the United States, since “I have been denied my home” (*Makeba*, 1). Both suffered malignant breast tumors. Lorde was later diagnosed with liver cancer, while Makeba was diagnosed with cancer of the cervix. The complications led to the death of Audre Lorde on 17 November 1982. Makeba, on the other hand, had her uterus removed and survived the illness. However, while Makeba’s narrative covers her childhood experiences in South Africa, her experiences as an exiled musician in the United States and her final settlement in Guinea, *Zami* focuses on the “coming of age” experiences of Audre Lorde up to 1957 only, although the narrative is recounted from a 1980s perspective.

to 1957. Then there is the perspective of an adult observer that often intervenes—scripted in italicized form—to present an explanatory exposition of the events. Makeba’s text is similarly constructed in terms of two narrative points of view, although, unlike Lorde’s, the young protagonist’s point of view matures as the story unfolds. In terms of time-frame, Makeba’s life-story covers the period from 1932 to the late 1980s. The protagonist’s point of view is presented in the present tense. However, there are explanatory interjections from the observer perspective in the past tense. For instance, the principal narrator/protagonist presenting the experiential point of view explains, “I never caught cold but ‘got co-hum, co-hum’ and then everything turned ‘cro-bo-so,’ topsy-turvy, or at least, a bit askew.”²⁹ The observer point of view intervenes to explain, “I am a reflection of my mother’s secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers.”³⁰ While the principal narrator attempts to capture the essence and style of her mother’s speech patterns, the observer perspective intervenes, presumably to explain to the reader the sources of the protagonist’s idiom and poetic style. The two perspectives suggest a kind of intertextual discourse. This style is also suggestive of the transgressive mode of restorying that informs the narrative.

Likewise, in Makeba’s narrative, the principal narrator explains rather naïvely how she received her birth certificate when still a youth, “Before long I am given an official document by the white people who control our lives. It is called a birth certificate. The paper states that I arrived on the Fourth of March, Nineteen Hundred and Thirty-two.”³¹ At this point in the story, the more reflective and mature observer perspective intervenes to expound on the larger implications of this incident, “There were no such papers in my mother’s time, and no one, not even she, knows her exact age.”³² As if imposing herself as an interpreter for the “narratee,” the observer voice explains, “I must tell you how things happened for us, the original South Africans, so you will know how evil of today came to be.”³³ And she continues to narrate the principal milestones in the political and social history of South Africa. This intertextual discourse is suggestive of the sense of estrangement that runs throughout this narrative.

In both Lorde’s and Makeba’s texts, therefore, there is a complex relationship between the narrator and the protagonist. The “I” narrator emerges as both the protagonist who witnessed the events and experiences recalled and also a detached but interested party to the testimony about the same events. Sometimes the narrator, as a witness to the testimony of the narrator-as-protagonist, acts as an interpreter, or as a more experienced older sister who assists the “narratee” in

²⁹ Makeba, *Makeba*, 32.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.* The “narratee,” as Todorov points out, is not the real reader. As soon as “we identify the narrator (in the broad sense of a book), we must also acknowledge the existence of his ‘partner,’ the one to whom the discourse uttered is addressed” (Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics*, 40).

understanding the complex issues that are beyond the comprehension of the relatively naïve and inexperienced protagonist. This mode of self-representation tends to rupture the conventional generic patterns of self-referential writing. The intertextual structure emphasizes the themes of multiple identities and exilic self-fashioning. It also points to the revisionist formal aspects of “restorying.”³⁴ In Lorde’s and Makeba’s texts, it appears as if one protagonist has split into two narrators to tell the life-story of one protagonist from different historical periods.

In some passages of *Zami*, elements of realism and myth-making are combined as strategies of self-representation. Observing that there is no particular unique narrative form or literary style that could be regarded as lesbian style, Zimmerman points out that often, “lesbian writers revise the ‘good’ (or neutral) myths of our common literary heritage in order to replace the ‘bad’ myths tainted by homophobia and misogyny . . . In the process of doing this, they also create new myths that are specific to the culture we are forming as lesbian feminists.”³⁵ From the beginning of her narrative, Lorde highlights aspects of myth-making that clearly privilege the maternal principle:

I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me . . . I have felt the age-old triangle of mother father and child with the “I” at its eternal core, elongate and flatten out into the elegantly strong triad of grandmother mother daughter with “I” moving back and forth in either or both directions as needed. Woman forever. My body, a living representation of other life older longer wiser.³⁶

Particularly striking in the above passage is the “age-old triangle” of mother, father and child that transform into “the elegantly strong triad” whereby the father and child are replaced by the grandmother and daughter. The common denominator is the “mother.” This suggests the centrality of the symbolic maternal myth that frames the multiple facets of Lorde’s identity.

A similar triadic positioning is evident in the “prologue” of Makeba’s text although the images in this case, are drawn from nature. The “call and response” musical style, is quite unmistakable and suggestive of her career,

I look at an ant and I see myself: a native South African, endowed by nature with a strength much greater than my size so that I might cope with the weight of racism that crushes my spirit. I look at a bird and I see myself: a native South African, soaring above the injustices of apartheid on wings of pride, the pride of a beautiful people. I look at a stream and I see myself: a native South African, flowing irresistibly over hard obstacles until they become smooth . . . My life, my career, every song I sing and every appearance I make, are bound up with the plight of my people.³⁷

³⁴“Restorying” entails radical formal strategies of revision. It can also entail actually challenging narrative environments or re-contextualizing our lives. This could involve “leaving home and moving to a different community” or adjusting the dominant genre through which we make sense of events. See Kenyon and Randall, *Restorying Our Lives*.

³⁵ Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women*, 26.

³⁶ In terms of style, this sparkling poetic gaiety characterizes Lorde’s narrative style (*Zami*, 7).

³⁷ Makeba, *Makeba*, 1.

The musicality of these lines is effected in part by the parallelism of the trailing constituents. The symbols and images in Makeba's narrative tend to emphasize the sense of "sight" while in Lorde's text symbols and images relating to the sense of "feeling" are more emphasized. This is suggestive of the preponderant forms of marginality they address. Makeba's "marginality" takes on a "visible" form in terms of physical exile from her home country and in terms of the visible effects of the *amadlozi* spirit possession. By contrast, Lorde's "marginality," being a budding lesbian within a predominantly white, heterosexual world tends to be emotionally felt in the form of self-estrangement and alienation.

Although Miriam Makeba is not quite as an accomplished literary practitioner as Audre Lorde (her autobiography is "collaborative") and in spite of the fact that the social/cultural spaces they inhabit and "restory" are quite different in many respects, comparing their self-referential portraits highlights some insightful commonalities. This is particularly recognizable with regard to their narrative forms of self-representation that figure the "mother" as a significant trope for self-definition.³⁸ Campbell argues that since "the black artist invariably writes from an intensely political perspective, he or she searches for rhetorical devices that will move the audience on the deepest possible level." Consequently, she explains further, "black artists who rely on myth have the potential to provoke whatever response they wish; to move the audience to consciousness, to attitude, even perhaps to action."³⁹

Zami and *Makeba* are unique contemporary autobiographies by black women that resist stifling patterns of subordination beyond a monolithic racial category by "forging a mythical and alternative fictional account of a return to origins."⁴⁰ In their own different ways, they celebrate the communal features of a mythical maternal past. In other words, they dramatize the process of self-definition by drawing upon or fashioning mythic elements of the maternal world in constructing and representing the autobiographical self.

Comparing the two texts highlights for us two crucial issues. First, the extent to which identities are "constructed and lived out on the historical terrain between necessity and choice, the place where oppression and resistance are simultaneously located."⁴¹ Secondly, the extent to which "restorying" the textual self in terms of the myth of origins of the "mother" constitutes a radical political act. Being black women of the contemporary period, both Lorde and Makeba, as Humm observes, make use of mythical language and themes "to define a womanist culture in a racist, masculine literary tradition."⁴² Indeed, Lorde suggests that such racist and homophobic terms of abuse and exclusion as black, gay, dykes if collectively

³⁸ Huffer observes that "the mother as origin occupies a position in the ideological and political systems through which gendered meanings are constructed. Not only is a world of meaning structured in relation to a maternal origin, but those meanings are given value according to the oppositional relations of gender" (Huffer, *Maternal Pasts, Feminist Futures*, 9).

³⁹ Campbell, *Mythic Black Fiction*, ix.

⁴⁰ Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 24.

⁴¹ Bammer, "Introduction," xviii.

⁴² Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 25.

combined can be turned into an affirmation. The mythical framework thus ties the threads of identity together.

AUDRE LORDE'S "BIOMYTHOGRAPHY": *ZAMI: A NEW SPELLING OF MY NAME*

Lynne Huffer observes that "the nostalgic structure underlying the desire to retrieve a lost canon of literary foremothers to counter the male-dominated tradition" is a significant element of lesbian writing.⁴³ According to Huffer, the nostalgic structure draws upon "the myth of Sappho, which highlights the lesbian nostalgia for a Greek source of woman-loving art and culture that would challenge traditional heterosexist models."⁴⁴ However, Lorde rewrites and revises Sappho by replacing it with Carriacou, her mother's mythical Caribbean Island home. Instead of the symbols of Sappho's mythical women, she recreates and identifies with "Zami"—a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers. She "develops a configuration of selves based on matrilineal Diaspora. Her mother, her Caribbean foremothers, and African *orishas* are all cultural pathways in the journey to her selves . . . matrilineal Diaspora is a theme that pivots on Lorde's relationship to her mother, her mother's ancestry, home and survival training."⁴⁵ By invoking the symbols of her maternal ancestry, Lorde suggests a link between her personal story and the mythic matrilineal Diaspora of her ancestry. By rewriting the symbols of Sappho in terms of her maternal myth of origin, Lorde resists both racial and sexist forms of exclusion. In this regard, *Zami* reads like one of the Black feminists' favored "narratives which are cultural histories of Black women's struggles and resistance."⁴⁶

My analysis of *Zami* also relates it to Zimmerman's supposition that, "alienation from patriarchy exiles women, love for women propels us home."⁴⁷ Lesbianism transgresses the patriarchal injunction against same-sex relationships. This female refusal of male authority "casts a woman out of the garden and onto her journey into exile."⁴⁸ Being an outlaw, "a stranger in the strange land of heterosexuality," sets the lesbian hero out "on a difficult adventure that eventually brings her home to her lesbian self and the lesbian community."⁴⁹ In this respect, exile is portrayed in terms of the classic myth narrative in which the protagonist, in order to be "reborn" or gain knowledge, has to descend into hell or into the wilderness. Hence, in terms of narrative trajectory, *Zami* draws on this structure of myth, though it re-envisioned its content. The narrative plot builds in terms of a symbolic journey into exile.⁵⁰ There is a gradual sense of alienation and estrangement that culminates in the attainment of a

⁴³ Huffer, *Maternal Pasts, Feminist Futures*, 16.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

⁴⁵ Chinosole, "Black Autobiographical Writing," 144.

⁴⁶ Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 161.

⁴⁷ Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women*, 154.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁰ In terms of narrative points of view and chronology, the "journey" is made by the young Audre and ends in 1957. The observer perspective of Audre in the 1980s shows that she has already arrived "home."

new self-awareness or rebirth. As Humm observes, classic myth stories “centre on a quest for identity or a search for a parent figure, where the sweep of the narrative orders pieces of the world into an allegory of individual development.”⁵¹ Using this model as an analytical framework, I want to closely explore this symbolic “journey” in terms of four related themes: self-naming, black identity, lesbian identity, and identity as poet. I will also indicate the intersections of these aspects in order to show how the journey motif figures as a process of “restoring” the maternal principle.

Although she published her autobiography in 1982, in terms of narrative plot and chronology, the text focuses on Lorde’s childhood experiences up to 1957. The question that comes to mind is why Lorde chose to narrate her life-story up to that period only. I propose that Lorde wanted to explain the events and experiences that shaped and transformed her sense of self and, consequently, how she became who she had become in adulthood. In other words, *Zami* tries to explain how the young Lorde became a poet, a lesbian, and a black political activist. She wanted to explain how her new sense of self became the appropriate representation of the facets of her composite identity. She wanted not only to show how she acquired a new sense of self, but also to point out the symbolic mythological sources of that new identity. In this regard, Lorde’s self-referential narrative reads like a *Bildungsroman*—the growing into consciousness story that is one of the key features of lesbian writing. By naming herself “Zami,” in recognition of Carriacou, Lorde’s narrative project was conceived in terms of revision of the mainstream (Western) lesbian identification with the mythological “maternal island” of “Lesbos.” The revision was based on “restoring” a satisfactory self-definition that reflected her peculiar racial identity, sexual orientation and mythical maternal heritage. Lorde wanted to demonstrate how her meeting with Afrekete (a black lesbian whom Lorde soon raises to the level of a symbolic figure), in 1957, turned out to be symbolic and pivotal in terms of her coming of age and the attainment of a new sense of self. This process of naming herself is one of the text’s major projects. Rather than being assigned a name by a hegemonic power structure, self-naming emerges as an act of protest and resistance that points to the restoring process informing Lorde’s narrative project.

Jeanne Perreault, in her study, *Writing Selves*, observes that Lorde “predicates being upon naming: those who are named by others have no way to exist in and for themselves.”⁵² This is an important observation with respect to the history of black Americans who, as slaves, could name neither themselves nor their family members. By naming herself “Zami,” and her text a “biomythography,” Audre Lorde resists being named by others. The fact of self-naming is alluded to quite early in *Zami*. As a young first-grade pupil at Mr Taylor’s School in Grenville, Audre revised her given name, Audrey. She comments, “I did not like the tail of

⁵¹ Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 24.

⁵² Perreault, *Writing Selves*, 4–5.

the Y hanging down below the line in Audrey and always forgot to put it on, which used to disturb my mother greatly. I used to love the evenness of AUDRELORDE at four years of age.”⁵³ She only used 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.”⁵⁴ In a certain strict sense, this foreshadows her revision of the symbolic images and myths that define her identity as a poet and as a lesbian. Specifically, her tendency towards the “evenness” of her revised name prefigures her poetic talent and also points to her protest against rigidly imposed identity markers on the sole basis that “it has to be because that is the way it is.” The fact of self-naming also suggests her aspirations for a self-definition that “contests her mother’s authority over her identity while using her mother’s lineage to link up with her ‘foremothers.’”⁵⁵ In this regard, her mother literally represents the stifling conventions and rules that she must overcome in order to realize an “independent self,” yet symbolically she represents the bridge to Lorde’s mythical forebears as she journeys towards personal growth and coherent sense of self. The mother’s role is both literal and symbolic; hence, she may appear rather ambivalent. On the one hand, the mother is realistically portrayed as a parent who attempts to mold her daughter within the expected standards. On the other hand, she is elevated to the status of a symbolic bridge that reconnects Lorde to her mythical forebears. In order to achieve independence of thought, Lorde has to resist being a carbon copy of her mother. Yet on the symbolic front, she appropriates the maternal myth of origin as a counter-discourse to the mainstream patriarchal hegemony. In this regard, Lorde gains her identity through identifying with her mother and *not* objectifying the mother.

Lorde interrogates the relevance of “autobiography” for her species of self-referential writing that figures metaphorical representations of mothers, friends, and lovers. She challenges autobiography’s rigid rules and generic conventions by naming her self-referential writing a “biomythography.” This is a type of experimental writing that attempts to rewrite and revise the formal and generic confines of mainstream autobiography. It draws on myth, history and biography. Significantly, Lorde conceives it as fiction that “has the elements of biography and history of myth. In other words, it’s fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision.”⁵⁶ One reason why she refers to her text as fiction is that it is conceived as a mythology for all black lesbians. She does not regard her text as written in the confessional mode. Rather, she views it in terms of restorying her black identity within a white world, restorying her “womanness” within a patriarchal world, and restorying her lesbianism within a mainstream heterosexual cultural/social context.

⁵³ Lorde, *Zami*, 24.

⁵⁴ Al Young points out that “Lorde was also known by African name, Gamba Adisa, and her pseudonym, Rey Domini” (Young, *African American Literature*, 425).

⁵⁵ Chinosole, “Black Autobiographical Writing,” 117.

⁵⁶ Tate, *Black Women at Work*, 115.

Lorde's mythmaking is therefore, first and foremost, a "political project aimed at overturning the patriarchal domination of culture and language."⁵⁷ Secondly, she envisions her text as an expository, "coming out" narrative. According to Humm, Lorde has carefully chosen the term "biomythography" to "mark the way in which all gay people's pasts are constructed mythologies."⁵⁸ The text, however, does not quite deal with the writer's life experiences from childhood to adulthood. Instead, it covers the experiences of the protagonist up to 1957. The "observer" perspective is, however, located in the early 1980s. In other words, the point of view reflective of the mature Lorde of the 1980s conceives the text as a "coming out" narrative. The narrative could therefore be read as Lorde's exposition on "How I became the 'journeywoman' that I am today." Indeed, the interpretive/observer point of view begins the narrative by posing the questions: "To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from under the bruised skin's blister?"⁵⁹ The other questions are, "To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?" and "To whom do I owe the woman I have become?" The answer to these questions is:

To the journeywoman pieces of myself.

Becoming.
Afrekete.⁶⁰

Lorde prefers this poetic style and formal structure. By combining "journey" and "woman" as one compound word, she emphasizes the multiple strands of her identity. The "pieces of myself" are aspects of the composite, "journeywoman." This emphasizes her fluid yet integrated identity. "Becoming" calls attention to itself not merely as a verb denoting a type of transformation, but as an important ingredient in her transformation and self-definition. It symbolically suggests how she became, or redefined herself as, Afrekete. Having become Afrekete, all the "journey pieces of myself" find a satisfactory home.

However, in terms of political function and narrative purpose, *Zami* presents a new "myth" meant as a model for other black lesbians. It is a "biographical myth" that rewrites and subverts the hitherto Euro-American Sappho myth. It is a "biomythography" as it combines elements of biography, myth, legend, fantasy, poetry, intertextual narrative points of view and storytelling. It is a "new spelling," not only of Audre's name, but also of autobiography. In this respect, it is a narrative that attempts to "restory" the margins in terms of both form and content.

Born in New York of West Indian parents, Lorde represents herself as an exile. She states that home was once a "far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother's mouth."⁶¹ The present home space in Harlem is "some temporary abode, never to be considered forever nor totally binding nor defining"

⁵⁷ Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women*, 21.

⁵⁸ Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 170.

⁵⁹ Lorde, *Zami*, 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

and “if we lived correctly . . . then someday we would arrive back in the sweet place, back home.”⁶² Home takes on a symbolic significance as “the root of my mother’s powers” and “the country of my foremothers, my forbearing mothers, those Black island women who defined themselves by what they did.”⁶³ Carriacou is endowed with mythical characteristics as the place “from where the Belmar twins set forth on inter-island schooners for the voyages that brought them, first and last, to Grenville town.”⁶⁴ Although it is not even listed in the index of the Goode’s school atlas, for the young Lorde it is a “private paradise” with “blugoe and breadfruit hanging from trees,” a place of “nutmeg and lime and sapadilla, of tonka beans and red and yellow Paradise Plums.”⁶⁵ Lorde forms this nostalgic image of home from her mother’s description. She later on discovers its latitudes “when Carriacou was no longer my home.”⁶⁶ She rewrites her identity in terms of this “absent” home. Her “biomythography” thus privileges her mother’s ancestry as the symbolic anchor for her multiple selves and the principle that defines her politics of location.

Although Audre Lorde’s father (originally a native of Grenada) “leaves his psychic print upon me, silent, intense and unforgiving,” it is “the images of women flaming like torches” that define “the borders of my journey” and “lead me home.”⁶⁷ Home could be interpreted in two ways. First, Lorde considers herself physically exiled from home in Carriacou. The “absent home” thus refers to the geopolitical space that is her mother’s place of birth. The quest for home is linked to the quest for a new identity. Secondly, “home” exists as a primeval memory of lost Paradise “where women work together as friends and lovers.”⁶⁸ In this respect, home is nostalgically associated with a “lost Eden.” Being a lesbian, she is the “perverse outcast” in a patriarchal home space. The quest for home emerges as a symbolic journey back from exile to a home whose foundations are built after a mythical maternal home. Home is imagined as a mythical place of origin that Lorde regains once she meets Afrekete. The “Mother, female power, women’s bodies; all create a home for the traveler along the borderlands.”⁶⁹ Lorde’s longing for home takes the form of private nostalgia that entails “those symbols, images and allusions from the past that by virtue of their source in a particular person’s biography tend to be more idiosyncratic, individuated, and particularistic in reference.”⁷⁰

In the context of *Zami*, black identity relates to both skin pigmentation and political struggle. Being black in America means being “othered” in terms of racial heritage. Being black also entails being discriminated against. Her mother got her first

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 256.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 255.

⁶⁹ Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women*, 193.

⁷⁰ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 123.

job in the United States as a scullery maid in a teashop because her employer thought she was “Spanish.” Since “Linda was Black, she would never have been hired at all.”⁷¹ In terms of gender and racial politics, being black for Lorde implies the explicit or implicit identification with other women of color. She explains:

When I say I am Black, I mean I am of African descent. When I say I am a woman of Color, I mean I recognize common cause with American Indian, Chicana, Latina and Asian-American sisters of North America. I also mean I share common cause with women of Eritrea . . . as well as with Black South African women.⁷²

Whether as “black” or as “woman,” Lorde “frames a ‘we’ that situates her clearly among those who are vulnerable to being named from the outside and thus, paradoxically, created for others’ purposes while being eliminated from their own.”⁷³ Black identity implies a “chromatic fact” as well as a geographical fact of culture and heritage emanating from the continent of Africa.⁷⁴ Being black marginalizes Lorde until she meets her lesbian lover, Afrekete. She is not quite at home as a black woman in a white patriarchal American society. Part of her struggle to make her way home involves finding Carriacou, “the island home for Black lesbians floating in the maternal safe sea of women.”⁷⁵

Lorde’s black identity, at first, is conceived in terms of homelessness in a white world. She begins to grapple with the issue of race at quite an early age. The fact that her mother and siblings are reluctant to discuss racial issues adds to her sense of confusion about her racial identity. As a six-year-old, she ventured to ask her older sisters what a “colored person” meant; but, to her bewilderment, “neither one of my sisters was quite sure.”⁷⁶ When she was registered at St. Catherine’s school, “the sisters of Charity were downright hostile. Their racism was unadorned, unexcused, and particularly painful because I was unprepared for it.”⁷⁷ The white children in her class not only made fun of her braids but also wrote on her desk, “You stink.”⁷⁸ Her complaints to her mother about these experiences met with, “What do you care what they say about you, anyway? Do they put bread on your plate? You go to school to learn, so learn and leave the rest alone.”⁷⁹ By the time she joined high school, Lorde was “close to crazy with believing that there was some secret thing wrong with me personally that formed an invisible barrier between me and the rest of my friends, who were white.”⁸⁰ This sense of alienation is a consequence of social circumstances that she has to overcome on her way to realizing a positive sense of self.

⁷¹ Lorde, *Zami*, 9.

⁷² Lorde, *A Burst of Light*, 66.

⁷³ Perreault, *Writing Selves*, 6.

⁷⁴ Lorde, *A Burst of Light*, 66.

⁷⁵ Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women*, 194.

⁷⁶ Lorde, *Zami*, 58.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

Within the social and political context of the United States in the 1950s, when Lorde was coming of age, black identity as a color-coded term implied identification with non-whites. She recalls her mother's piece of advice when she was leaving home for high school, "'Remember to be sisters in the presence of strangers,' She meant white people."⁸¹ Black identity as a political position, a rallying call for all oppressed people of color, was something the young Lorde was to identify with later on in adulthood, although it was shaped by her childhood experiences of racism. Black identity is thus addressed in *Zami* in two ways: first, in terms of racial skin pigmentation; and secondly, as a chosen political stand after racist experiences. In other words, marginalization based on skin pigmentation endows color with a social meaning. When, for instance, Lorde comments that "I grew Black as my need for life, for affirmation, for love, for sharing—copying from my mother what was in her unfulfilled,"⁸² black identity emerges as socially constructed and entails certain cultural qualities and values. Audre "discovers" these qualities and values not in the Sapphic paradise of the white Euro-American lesbians but in the equally mythical Carriacou, her "truly private paradise of blugoe and breadfruit hanging from the trees."⁸³

Lorde links her black identity to her lesbian identity, and both are constituted and represented in terms of historical/cultural heritage of the values of her mother's mythical home, Carriacou. As a black lesbian, she often found herself on the margins in terms of race and sexual orientation. For instance, on the one hand, her "straight Black girlfriends...either ignored my love for women, considered it interestingly avant-garde, or tolerated it as just another example of my craziness."⁸⁴ On the other hand, although most of her lovers were white, being black invariably brought into sharp focus the question of acceptance. When her white lover, Rhea, moved out of their New York apartment, ostensibly to take on a new job in Chicago, Lorde soon realized that Rhea had in fact been denounced for sharing a "house with a homosexual, and a Black one at that."⁸⁵ Being black was also a factor in her break-up with another lover, Muriel: "I was Black and she was not, and that was a difference between us that had nothing to do with better or worse or the outside world's craziness."⁸⁶ Over time, Audre came to realize that this fact "colored our perceptions and made a difference in the ways I saw pieces of the world we shared, and I was going to have to deal with that difference outside of our relationship."⁸⁷

If being a lesbian estranged her among her black heterosexual girlfriends, being black estranged her among her white lesbian friends. At a gay club, the Bagatelle, in 1956, she recalls an inner door "guarded by a male bouncer, ostensibly to keep out

⁸¹ Ibid., 81.

⁸² Ibid., 58.

⁸³ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 180.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 198.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 204.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 204.

those women deemed ‘undesirable’ yet ‘‘frequently, undesirable meant Black.’’⁸⁸ She soon realized that she was an ‘‘outsider.’’ She observes, ‘‘when I, a Black woman, saw no reflection in any of the faces there week after week, I knew perfectly well that being an outsider in the Bagatelle had everything to do with being Black.’’⁸⁹ Being a lesbian did not modify the racist attitudes she encountered. Being black in a white world was a source of concern; being gay among ‘‘straight’’ black friends was equally disturbing; but being black and gay led to feelings of estrangement and loneliness. She observes from her perspective of the 1980s, ‘‘Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different.’’⁹⁰

Black lesbians, as Humm observes, ‘‘face particular problems claiming an identity when representations of race and sexuality are split and contradictory. Identity is further problematized: socially by the denial to Black lesbians of a public *Black* self.’’⁹¹ Eventually, Lorde explains, ‘‘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.’’⁹² In this respect, *Zami* reads like a ‘‘coming of age’’ autobiography. It is about how the young Lorde came to constitute a composite sense of self that incorporated the multiple facets of her identity. It is about the experiences and events that led to her transformation and acquisition of a new sense of self and a new mode of political struggle against racism, heterosexism, and sexism. In this respect, she has explained:

When I say I am a Black feminist, I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my Blackness as well as my womanness, and therefore my struggles on both these fronts are inseparable. When I say that I am a Black Lesbian, I mean I am a woman whose primary focus of loving, physical as well as emotional, is directed to women. It does not mean I hate men.⁹³

As a black, lesbian, feminist who ‘‘usually find myself, a part of some group defined as other, deviant, inferior, or just plain wrong,’’⁹⁴ Lorde’s decision to name herself, ‘‘Zami’’ (a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers) is an act of protest. It is a revision of self-identity that suggests a symbolic connection to her maternal mythical world. Her adult self-definition, based on her childhood experiences, takes the form of protest against:

Racism: The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance. Sexism: The belief in the inherent superiority of one sex and thereby the right to dominance. Heterosexism: The belief in the

⁸⁸ Ibid., 220.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 226.

⁹¹ Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 169.

⁹² Ibid., 181.

⁹³ Lorde, *A Burst of Light*, 20–21.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance.⁹⁵

Zimmerman explains that the “lesbian hero, in all her various shapes, journeys through patriarchy to its point of exit, the border of an unknown territory, a ‘wild zone’ of the imagination . . . where male culture, male law and male power” can no longer touch her.⁹⁶ Audre journeys through racism, sexism, heterosexism and other related forms of exclusion and oppression.

The “wild zone” where she could say, “I am my true self, as I really am” is reached when she meets Afrekete, the black lesbian. Their intense but short-lived relationship cannot be viewed solely in terms of lesbian relationships, since the description mixes realism and myth and Afrekete emerges more a symbol of Audre’s rebirth than a recalled person. Afrekete becomes the symbolic representation of the “journeywoman pieces” of Audre Lorde. She emerges as the gatekeeper who ushers Audre into the “wild zone” where racism, sexism and heterosexism cannot touch her. Afrekete, as a character, comes into Audre’s “young life briefly, helping her collect the ‘journeywoman pieces of herself’—her converging experiences and identities—which allow her to chart a course for a living.”⁹⁷ Audre first meets Afrekete (Kitty) at a party in Queens, New York. She recalls fondly that “Kitty smelled of soap and Jean Nate’s, and I kept thinking she was bigger than she actually was, because there was a comfortable smell about her that I always associated with large women.”⁹⁸ Two years later, in 1957, she meets Kitty again. Kitty “was still trim and fast-lined but with an easier looseness about her smile and a lot of make-up.”⁹⁹ Kitty is presented in sensuous terms. At first she emerges as a remembered figure, but soon she acquires a character of symbolic proportions. By the time Afrekete leaves for the South, her print remains “upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo.”¹⁰⁰ In this respect, Afrekete appears like a symbolic bridge that reconnects the young Lorde to her mother’s mythical world. She becomes the symbolic link to Lorde’s absent fore mothers. Lorde regards her as the great mother’s “youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become.”¹⁰¹ As McKinley puts it, “Afrekete’s mythic self becomes an icon, both in Lorde’s other writings and in the early critical discourse concerned with fictional representations of Black lesbians.”¹⁰²

In Afrekete, the “journeywoman pieces” of Lorde’s “migratory subjectivities” find a common fountain founded on the heritage of Carriacou women in the form of the “new living the old in a new way.”¹⁰³ Once this reconnection has

⁹⁵ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 45.

⁹⁶ Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women*, 75.

⁹⁷ McKinley, “Introduction,” xiv.

⁹⁸ Lorde, *Zami*, 243.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁰² McKinley, “Introduction,” xiv.

¹⁰³ Lorde, *Zami*, 253.

been established, she can then buy “boxes of Red Cross Salt and a fresh corn straw broom for my new apartment in Westchester.”¹⁰⁴ Her movement to a new apartment is thus symbolic, suggesting her new coherent sense of self and self-definition.

The source of Lorde’s identity as a poet, although traceable to her mother’s speech patterns, finds symbolic configuration in *Afrekete* also. The section of the autobiography subtitled, in bold face, “How I Became a Poet” focuses on Linda’s characteristic coinage of new words and phrases that influenced her daughter’s poetic and idiomatic expressions. Lorde recalls that her “mother had a special and secret relationship with words, taken for granted as language because it was always there.”¹⁰⁵ In an interview with Adrienne Rich, she recalls that as a poet, she had many complex emotions that “I had to find a secret way to express my feelings.”¹⁰⁶ She learned this secret way of expression, including nonverbal communication, from her mother. She explains that her mother “had a strange way with words: if one didn’t serve her or wasn’t strong enough, she’d just make up another word, and then that would enter our family language forever and woe betide any of us who forgot it.”¹⁰⁷ Most of her mother’s words were not entirely made up, but could be traced to her original home in Carriacou. This was something the young Audre had to recognize later. For instance, “impossible distances” according to her mother were measured in terms of, “from Hog to Kick’em Jenny.”¹⁰⁸ These sounded as neologisms to the young Audre. However, when she had “grown a poet,” she found out that her mother’s words for measuring distances related to “two little reefs in the Grenadines, between Grenada and Carriacou.”¹⁰⁹ It is not surprising that Lorde’s autobiography is replete with poetic symbols, images and expressions. For instance, the section “How I became a Poet” is framed by the poetic lines, “Wherever the bird with no feet flew she found trees with no limbs.” This suggests the journey motif characterizing her quest for a positive sense of self.

Some chapters of the text recalling profoundly experienced moments conclude with poetry texts that capture those intense feelings. At times the prose description takes a magical, dream-like tone that effectively captures her state of mind—like the following, when she is leaving her parents’ home for the last time:

Hickory-skinned demons with long white hair and handsome demonical eyes stretch out arms wide as all tomorrow, across the doorway exit from a room through which I run, screaming, shrieking for exit. But I cannot stop running. If I collide with those long arms barring my pathway out, I will die of electrocution... I then pass into another room of my parents’ home... And

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰⁶ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 82.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁰⁸ Lorde, *Zami*, 32.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

then suddenly I realize that in this house of my childhood I am no longer welcome. Everything is hostile to me . . . This is no longer my home, it is only of a past time: Once I realize this, I am suddenly free to go, and to take Rhea with me.¹¹⁰

The description of the nightmare reflects her sprouting lesbian feelings for a future lover, Rhea. Significantly, Lorde is able to capture the profundity of her confused feelings in persuasive poetic style. Her decision to leave her parents' home suggests the symbolic journey towards self-fulfillment. In a nutshell, Lorde's narrative strategy also appears as if seeking to transform prose into poetry and this partly suggests her mode of restorying stifling generic conventions.

Afrekete is portrayed in terms of a linguistic trope and becomes once more the symbolic bridge reconnecting Lorde's poetic language to her mythical foremother. In this regard, Afrekete becomes the symbolic representation of a new beginning associated with a "mythical goddess." The new beginning is marked by "MawuLisa," the "great mother of us all," and Afrekete is "her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become."¹¹¹ As a linguistic trope, Afrekete represents for Lorde a new and fresh poetic mode of expression that links her black lesbian identity to her identity as a poet. As Carlston points out, "the identities—West Indian, her mother's daughter, lesbian and poet—are inextricably entwined."¹¹² The old idiom of the mythical Mothers' world is rejuvenated as a new mode of poetic expression. In Afrekete, Lorde's identity as a poet is linked to the other facets of her identity and presented in terms of reference to the mythical world of her mother. It is also in this respect that *Zami* reads like a symbolic "rediscovery" of the mother's "mythical" home space in poetic language. If Afrekete serves as the symbolic bridge to the mythical maternal home space, the site of convergence where black and lesbian identities exist in harmony, she also, therefore, serves as the transformative agent from whom Lorde rediscovers the old maternal idiom.

Lorde's new self-definition is thus constituted in terms of the mythical Carriacou and all black women who "have a history of the use and sharing of power, from the Amazon legions of Dahomey through the Ashanti warrior queen Yaa Asantewaa."¹¹³ These are "the women who helped give me substance."¹¹⁴ They are a source of strength in the face of the present challenges and tyrannies she "swallows" day by day because "I am a woman, because I am Black, because I am a lesbian, because I am myself—a Black woman warrior poet doing my work."¹¹⁵ These facets of identity are all linked by the symbolic maternal principle. *Zami* is thus constructed as a "coming out"

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 198–199.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 255.

¹¹² Carlston, "Zami and the Politics of Plural Identity," 228.

¹¹³ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 151.

¹¹⁴ Lorde, *Zami*, 255.

¹¹⁵ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 41–42.

narrative that resists as it revises stifling forms of exclusion—including racism, sexism, and heterosexism—while at the same time suggesting a new restorying mode of self-representation that takes cognizance of a new set of maternal myths.

MIRIAM MAKEBA'S ANCESTRAL "AMADLOZI" ALTER-SELVES: *MAKEBA: MY STORY*

Makeba's self-referential story is also constructed in terms of a symbolic journey from self-estrangement to self-awareness. The narrative trajectory develops towards a new sense of self after a realization that her "essential" identity and talent as a musician are all linked to some mystical *amadlozi* alter-selves she inherited from her mother.¹¹⁶ In this regard, she suggests a linkage between her self-definition and the collective mythic past of her ancestry. By representing herself in terms of her mother's myth of origin, she also suggests an alternative counter-discourse to the patriarchal hegemony. The quest for a coherent sense of self figures prominently as a quest for "home." The quest for home, by implication, emerges as a quest for a symbolic reunion with a maternal forebear and a mythic collective past. In this respect, quite like *Zami*, *Makeba: My Story* combines art and social/political protest.

Makeba's self-referential story, in common with Lorde's narrative, reads somewhat like a "coming out" narrative. Unlike *Zami*, however, it basically narrates how she came to the recognition and acceptance that, like her mother, she was a conduit for the *amadlozi* alter-selves. These spirits serve as the symbolic "bridge" that connects her to her mother's mythic origins. They manifest themselves principally during her live performances as a musician. Whereas Lorde's self-definition entails the identification with the foremothers of the mythical Carriacou Island, Makeba takes stock of her mother's mystical *amadlozi* spirits in defining her identity as a musician.

However, the concept of "self" as represented in Makeba's autobiography, unlike that of Lorde, shows strong linkages to a constellation of ancestral spirits. These spirits manifest themselves in spirit possessions, and whoever is under such possession trembles and speaks in tongues. In this respect, an individual temporarily surrenders his/her self-agency and self-awareness and submits to vital forces beyond the realm of self-consciousness. In most African cultures, the view of self and others is formulated as folk models of personal soul, ancestral spirits and kinship in such a way that the actual social structure, with its inherent preferences, is fairly consistent with the ideal, normative pattern of personal

¹¹⁶ According to Karp, spirit possession "can be related to resistance to the imposition of alien rule and constitute a means of political assertion under conditions of foreign domination" ("Power and Capacity", 80). In this respect, Makeba's "spirit possession" while on the performance stage could be regarded as a complex political strategy, although it manifests itself as "involuntary dispossession of the knowing self" (Karp, "Power and Capacity", 82).

responsibilities and social loyalties. An individual “is born into a unilineal descent group or clan, which is the focus of collective identity and social obligations. This collectivity is symbolized by ancestral spirits, who are reincarnated in new born individuals.”¹¹⁷ Hence, apart from the personal soul, each individual has an ancestral soul, a collective alter ego.

Makeba had a rather traumatic childhood. Born in 1932—the daughter of Caswell Makeba (a Xhosa) and Christina Nomkomndelo (a Swazi)—due to the patriarchal lineage of her ancestry, she considers herself a Xhosa “since I am his daughter.”¹¹⁸ However, she is quick to caution that in South Africa, “tribal differences are not important . . . the real differences are between blacks and whites and Coloreds.”¹¹⁹ From the beginning of the story, her black identity is presented as much more significant than her ethnic identity. This sets the framework for appreciating her identity politics in terms of the bipolar divide of black and white in the context of the South African apartheid system that classified people along racial lines. Since she was born into a patriarchal social/cultural environment and had to also endure sexist and racist attitudes in South Africa and abroad, one important feature of her self-definition and self-portrayal is protest and resistance against the stifling aspects of sexism and racism. In a certain sense, her spirit possession could be viewed as one of the avenues by which she unwittingly challenges the excesses of racism and sexism.

The description of the circumstances of her birth foreshadows her marginality and suggests some of the salient aspects of her autobiography. When she was born, Makeba was “so thin and terribly ill” that for two days, “my father prays for me to die.”¹²⁰ Her father prays for her to die because her “skin is hot” and she is “in such pain that it is painful for others to look at me.”¹²¹ Her mother, a trained nurse, did not go to deliver at the hospital since “Doctors are for white people. They are a rare luxury.”¹²² This suggests the privileged status of the white people. Class and skin pigmentation seem to intersect and define social status. She explains, in a kind of infantile amnesia, “[my mother] has had five children before. Three of them have lived beyond infancy. But this pregnancy has been difficult. For her. For me.”¹²³ The parallelism in “For her. For me” suggests the close bond between mother and daughter from the time of Miriam’s birth. But it also suggests a symbolic separation from her mother that begins from the moment of her birth. This is further emphasized by, “My mother cuts the cord that joins us . . . I made it. We made it . . . The neighbors come. I may be scrawny, but have I got a voice!”¹²⁴ This prefigures her career as

¹¹⁷ Jacobson-Widding, “Introduction,” 17.

¹¹⁸ Makeba, *Makeba*, 4.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

a musician. Her “voice,” and by implication, the inherited mother’s voice, would be her future weapon for fighting racism and other stifling forms of oppression. Her struggle is conceived at both individual and collective levels. Her mother had been warned not to have another pregnancy, since that would endanger her life. Makeba was therefore named “Zenzi,” following her grandmother’s characteristic “Uzenzile” (“This is your own fault”) in reference to Christina’s pregnancy.

Miriam Makeba seems to address a foreign audience that is not fully conversant with certain cultural aspects and institutions of her South African community. For instance, she explains:

It is the custom for a child’s African name to comment on the events surrounding his or her birth. My mother, Christina, was born the day her father was commandeered into the British army during the Anglo-Boer War. Her African name, Nomkomndelo, literally means, “the child was born the day the father was commandeered.”¹²⁵

When Miriam was barely eight days old, her mother was arrested on charges of brewing and selling an illicit drink, *umqombothi*, and sent to jail for six months together with her newborn baby. From quite an early age, “forced” exile had thus become a feature of Miriam Makeba’s life. Her father died when she was five years old. Consequently, she was sent to live with her grandmother in the Pretoria neighborhood of Riverside. Her mother went to work as a domestic servant in Johannesburg. Makeba had to quit school at the early age of 16 to work as a domestic servant in order to make ends meet. At 17, she became pregnant by James Kubay, a Colored young man of Italian and Shangaan parentage. By this time, her mother had been recognized as a conduit for the *amadlozi* spirits and taken to Swaziland, her country of birth, in order to undergo the mandatory transformative ritual, *ukuthwasa*. This ritual would formally initiate her as an *isangoma* (fortune-teller and healer). Although Makeba’s maiden career as a singer began as a church choir member at a tender age, it was when she joined her cousin’s son, Zweli, in his new band, the Cuban Brothers, that she was catapulted to the initial limelight as a gifted singer. Her success as a singer led her abroad and landed her a lucrative career in the United States, following “Big Brother” Harry Belafonte’s help.

Structurally, the detail about Miriam Makeba’s early experiences suggests a symbolic parallel between her mother’s developing new talent as an *isangoma* and her own (Miriam’s) fledgling talent as a singer. Although the “cord” that connected mother and daughter had long been cut, there seems to be a suggestion that both were fated to be conduits for the *amadlozi* spirits from the time Miriam was born. Just as the spirits had charted out her mother’s path as an *isangoma*, it would seem, they similarly charted out Miriam’s own path as a singer. Significantly, both mother and daughter, although at different periods, came to recognize their spiritual alter-selves in Swaziland. Hence, quite early in her

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

autobiography, Miriam Makeba suggests the symbolic maternal principle that links the facets of her identity. While she was pursuing a singing career in the United States, her mother died in 1960. Her attempts to return to South Africa in order to be at the funeral aborted when her South African passport was revoked. This marked the beginning of her life as a political exile. The text concludes with the death of her only child, Bongi—a kind of misfortune Makeba attributes also to the *amadlozi* spirits.

Makeba: My Story is an autobiography that, like Audre Lorde's *Zami*, exploits the creative resources of language in representing the autobiographical self. Unlike Lorde's text, however, in terms of narrative chronology, Makeba's story covers the events and experiences of the protagonist from childhood in the 1930s to adulthood in the 1980s. The life-story is principally told in the present tense. This creates a sense of immediacy to the events narrated. The main narrator, the agent whose perception is presented in the present tense, is, however, often "disrupted" by an observer point of view that intervenes in the past tense in order to expound on certain issues that the principal narrator's consciousness seems incapable of fathoming. For instance, the narrator explains, "I have been baptized a Protestant. I go to Sunday school, often on the same day my family makes sacrifices to a dead relative."¹²⁶ The interpretive/observer point of view intervenes at this juncture to expound on this view in terms of the wider political context of South Africa:

When the Europeans came, they said we were nonbelievers. They denied the validity of our ancient religions. The Boers called us *Kaffirs*, which means pagan. To call a South African tribesman a *Kaffir* is to insult him in the worst way imaginable. It is like calling an American black a "nigger."¹²⁷

In this regard, *Makeba* bears some resemblance to *Zami*, although the interpretive narrative voice in the latter text is presented in the present tense. This suggests different emphases on points of view. While Makeba attempts to capture the immediacy of the events and experiences that shaped her identity from an early age up to the time of writing, Lorde emphasizes the immediacy of the events that characterize her struggle at the time of writing. While the younger consciousness in Makeba's text narrates the events in an experiential mode, the more experienced point of view takes an explicative mode. As the narrative progresses and the young narrator's consciousness matures into an adult's perspective, the explicative voice wanes; so that, by the end of the story, the two points of view have literally merged in the present tense. The narrative plot therefore suggests and emphasizes the "journey" motif from self-estrangement to self-awareness. This kind of narrative strategy sharpens focus on the immediacy and significance of the self-definition that privileges the maternal principle by the end of the story. In this respect, Makeba's autobiography reads like a self-making process. The narrative plot moves towards

¹²⁶ Ibid., 14.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

a disclosure of the aspects of the maternal principle that have shaped the identity of the autobiographical self.

Exile and alienation are two forms of marginality that both Lorde and Makeba deal with. Although Lorde emphasizes alienation, Makeba emphasizes physical exile that entails movement across geographic and political space. While Lorde recreates her mother's "lost" home, Carriacou, investing it with mythical symbols, Makeba regards herself as physically exiled from her own home space, her motherland South Africa. She conceives herself as a representation of her fellow South African blacks. She identifies herself as a "black, exile from South Africa," "one of the oppressed" South Africans, "an African singer . . . a symbol of my repressed people," "The Empress of African Song," and a conduit for the *amadlozi* spirits.¹²⁸ In this sense, personal "exile" is also viewed in terms political disenfranchisement of a collective group of people. She comments, "My life, my career, every song I sing and every appearance I make, are bound up with the plight of my people. I have been denied my home. We have been denied our land . . . I am in exile on the outside. We are in exile on the inside."¹²⁹ To be in exile, in a general sense, "means to be out of place, also needing to be rather elsewhere, also not having that 'elsewhere' where one would rather be."¹³⁰ That place where one would rather be, according to Makeba, is "home." Home, in this sense, does not merely refer to the place where the hearth is located, but to a space or site that offers a sense of belonging and a coherent sense of self.

The first chapter of the autobiography emphasizes Makeba's experiences of "homelessness at home." Significantly, she emerges as a type-figure when she comments on issues of racial exclusion and political disenfranchisement within the South African context. For instance, she observes:

Tribal ways have become mixed with Western ways by the years of my infancy. We worship our ancestors with sacrifices, but we wear suits and drive cars. Johannesburg is now a great modern city. But it is a white man's city. The native Africans live in isolated ghettos. There are black lawyers and doctors, but they have only other blacks as clients and patients. We are the servants of whites. Our wages assure us that we stay in poverty. We cannot vote, and a British colonial government of which we are not part decides our fate.¹³¹

The juxtaposition of blacks and whites suggests the kind of relationship existing between the races at the time Miriam was born. If exile refers to collective "homelessness at home," as she suggests by "We are in exile on the inside,"¹³² then, by implication, she was born an exile. The above passage, characteristic of most of the earlier chapters in terms of style, also suggests the kind of tension not only between the races but also in terms of narrative points of view. While the everyday tense draws attention to the point of view of the "years of infancy," such observations as

¹²⁸ Makeba, *Makeba*, 139, 1, 113, 219, 212.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³⁰ Bauman, "Assimilation into Exile," 321.

¹³¹ Makeba, *Makeba*, 6.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 1.

“Johannesburg is now a great modern city” suggest a mature, adult point of view. The exilic condition of the narrator is perceived in terms of a collectivity of people. In this respect, “the use of personal history as an illustration of the troubles of an entire community” is what transforms Makeba’s as well as many other South African autobiographies into literature.¹³³ It is significant that although the early chapters of Makeba’s narrative represent the narrated self as a type-figure, the later chapters tend to emphasize personal history and psychological alienation. The narrative plot thus develops, from a principally “collective” point of view towards more intensely private retrospection that culminates in self-discovery when Miriam is recognized as a conduit for *amadlozi* alter-selves. However, in symbolic terms, the narrative structure suggests a journey towards a new sense of collective self.

Quite like Audre Lorde, Makeba had to deal with hegemonic patriarchal/sexist prejudices from a relatively early age. Her marriage to Gooli (her first husband and the father of her only child) ends in a divorce due to his infidelity and physical abuses. When she begins her singing career with the “Cuban Brothers Band,” she is the only female on the stage and “Many people in our society look at it as something bad. The old thing that women are not supposed to go on stage and show themselves takes some time to die.”¹³⁴ As a female musician, she is regarded as going against patriarchal social norms and expectations. In this respect, she observes, “I can imagine what they are saying about me: ‘She left her husband to show herself on stage! Why isn’t she at home raising her child, instead of having her mother do it so she can sing?’”¹³⁵ In such instances, she draws attention to gender biases within her own black community beyond the bipolar white/black racial category.

Makeba’s physical exile is curiously predicted by her mother—or, perhaps more accurately, by her mother’s *amadlozi* alter-selves. Miriam recalls:

I still attend to my mother when she is in a trance. I must take care of the needs of the *amadlozi*. An old spirit friend comes to visit when I am present. Mahlavezulu, the great warrior. This day he speaks about me. I am very interested because this spirit has always been my favorite. The voice comes through my mother. It is stern and firm, “You will leave South Africa. You will go on a long journey, and you will never come back.”¹³⁶

A few months later, Miriam indeed leaves South Africa, at the invitation of Lionel Rogosin to participate at the Venice Film Festival. She observes, “I do not know what is in store for me. . . . But I am thrilled to be going, even for only a few months. Mahlavezulu, the spirit who spoke through my mother, said that when I leave, I will not be coming back.”¹³⁷ In this regard, Makeba elevates the mother to the status of “primary archetype embodying values of survival and endurance.”¹³⁸ Indeed, as Humm points out, myths are often, by their very nature, “sacred, affirmative stories

¹³³ Watts, *Black Writers from South Africa*, 125.

¹³⁴ Makeba, *Makeba*, 45.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³⁸ Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 25.

describing epic journeys outside social controls.”¹³⁹ Physical exile is thus also linked to the maternal principle. However, Makeba does not become a political exile until her mother dies and she is barred from returning to South Africa for her funeral. Her passport is stamped “Invalid” by the South African Consulate in New York, and for “an instant my breath catches in my throat” as “I realize what has happened. They have done it: They have exiled me. I am not permitted to go home, not now, and maybe not ever . . . I am in exile. I and my daughter, alone in a West that is bright and rich but is foreign to us.”¹⁴⁰ It is as if her mother’s predictions have come to pass.

The fact of physical exile is closely related to the nostalgic quest for a lost maternal “home.” The quest for “home,” as I have argued, is a crucial theme in Makeba’s autobiography. Home emerges as unstable, elusive and marked by constant mobility across geopolitical space. The search for home emerges as a quest for an integrated sense of self. Consequently, the “absent” home is intertwined with a nostalgic recall and “involvement with the existential problem of sustaining continuity of identity in the face of the new demands.”¹⁴¹ For instance, while in Venice at the invitation of Mr Rogosin, she feels estranged as a black person within a predominantly white world:

People begin to follow me. A few at first, but soon a whole crowd . . . All these white people—why are they following me? . . . A woman with three children comes up to me. She speaks to me in Italian. I don’t know what to do. The man at the desk tells me in English, “She is asking if you could please let her children touch your hair . . . because she has never seen hair like yours.”¹⁴²

Being an exile in America, South Africa becomes the “old home.” During a trip to East Africa, she reflects, “I stand at the base of Kilimanjaro, near the Kenyan border. I am far away from my homes—my old home in South Africa that is being denied me, and my new home in America.”¹⁴³ But America is only a home of compulsory confinement, since, as a banned person in South Africa, “If I go back home now, jail awaits me.”¹⁴⁴ Suleiman explains that all “travelers are outsiders somewhere . . . but not all outsiders are travelers. Travelers can go home, by definition . . . but one can be an outsider in one’s own home town.”¹⁴⁵ Makeba appears to fit into both categories. Home is a place to which she cannot return, since the South African regime has banned her; but South Africa as “home” is equally stifling, especially for the politically disenfranchised black people. Her identity shifts as her home space also shifts from South Africa to America to Africa, and so on. During the March on Washington in 1968, where Martin Luther King Jr delivered his “I have a dream” speech, the event for the exiled Makeba evokes nostalgic reflections about home: “Yes, ‘I have a dream’ too. I would like to see my people free . . . I would like to go

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Makeba, *Makeba*, 98.

¹⁴¹ Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday*, 41.

¹⁴² Makeba, *Makeba*, 78.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 110.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.

home again.”¹⁴⁶ Although she considers Africa “home,” and every time “I go back to Africa, it is like being reborn,” she is aware that “it is bittersweet, because I cannot really go home—not to the place of my birth and family.”¹⁴⁷

If at the “old home” in South Africa, she ceases to be regarded as singer and “I become something else: a criminal,”¹⁴⁸ America as home does not offer the satisfaction and peace of mind she longs for. Her marriage to her second husband, Sonny Pilay, ends when she chooses to settle in America. Her third marriage, to her childhood boyfriend, Hugh Masekela, ends in what she refers to as a “Mexican divorce” as she feels that her success as a musician has made him jealous and prone to sulking. Once she parts ways with Harry Belafonte, her mentor, America begins to appear distant. When Belafonte excludes her from a musical tour of Hawaii, her immediate reaction to her musicians’ concerns is, “We’re going home.” When they inquire where home is, she emphatically states, “Africa.”¹⁴⁹ In other words, having been estranged in America, Africa promises a secure home. However, Africa (Guinea) as home soon presents her with new challenges, especially when Guinea-Bissau unsuccessfully invades Guinea. She reflects at this point, “My home is South Africa. And so I have to ask myself a terrible question: Will I ever find peace in my lifetime? Will I ever go home?”¹⁵⁰ Home is associated with peace of mind. Such a home could only be South Africa, not Guinea. Yet the South Africa of her ancestry is a place to which she can no longer return. The maternal home can therefore only be relived nostalgically. Nostalgic evocation of the absent home becomes one of the readily accessible psychological tools she employs in her never-ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing her exilic identity.

Although she settles down in Guinea as her new home, her marriage to Stokely Carmichael (President of the SNCC during the black civil rights movements in America) ensures that her home space becomes mobile as she oscillates between Africa and America. Marriage to Carmichael brings with it its own share of “homelessness.” First, some members of the press try to cast her as an appendage of Carmichael; but she resists, and clings to her own identity: “I am Miriam Makeba first and Mrs Stokely Carmichael second. I am a singer, not a revolutionary.”¹⁵¹ Secondly, marriage to Stokely leads to her being regarded as a political revolutionary, and this exposes her to a lot of police harassment.

Two significant interpretations could be drawn from this. First, Miriam resists being an appendage of her husband by rejecting the hegemonic patriarchal identity markers, insisting instead on her individuality. In common with Audre Lorde, therefore, one of the challenges she has to contend with is sexism. Secondly, her insistence on being a singer suggests and privileges her linkages to her mother, who happens to have been a talented singer and dancer in her own right. In other words,

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 124.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 145.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 112.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 145.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 178.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 159.

her identity as a singer is not an appendage of her identity as a political activist. Eventually, when she decides to leave America for good, it is because “they want me home, in Africa. Not just Guinea, but other countries have asked me to come and stay. The diplomatic passports they have given me are their way of saying, Come, be with us.”¹⁵²

Her settlement in Guinea with Carmichael soon proves far less fulfilling for three reasons. First, she believes that he has yet to adjust to African ways of life. In this regard, she sees African ways of life in terms of a collective identity and psychic social processes:

The spirit of the place must get inside you. There are things that cannot be put into words that rule life in Africa. We respect these things, even if we cannot explain them. We know what our ancestors can do if their will is ignored. So we pay them homage with sacrifice. We know that the spirits of the dead inhabit the *isangoma* in order to help the living.¹⁵³

Secondly, she comes to the realization that—unlike in America, where she had been a celebrity—America’s many attractions are not to be found in Guinea. She nevertheless considers Guinea her home, since “what is there are my roots, and I have found that these roots cannot be transplanted.”¹⁵⁴ Thirdly, her settlement in Guinea soon leads to the break-up of her marriage to Carmichael. After celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary in 1978, “There comes another woman, a Guinean woman. Stokely does not just have an affair with her,” he brings “her to his wife’s house.”¹⁵⁵ They eventually divorce.

Miriam’s career as a singer provides her with a new sense of self-awareness. Her talent as a singer, in a symbolic sense, provides a means of reaching “home” or a means of reconnecting with her “absent” mother and collective past. During her performances, she is able to comment on some stifling racist and sexist attitudes and prejudices. In an interview, she observes, “The things that I can recall about the places we sang these are not very nice. First of all, we were not allowed to join the white musician’s union because of the policy rules of South Africa.”¹⁵⁶ Being a black musician in South Africa was tantamount to being on the margins.

If Lorde attributes her talent as a poet to her mother, Miriam’s early initiation into a singing career was similarly influenced by her mother. She observes that “My mother has a wonderful voice, and she is a good musician. She plays many traditional instruments: the mouth organ, the thumb piano, and the drums. My mother performs the traditional dances.”¹⁵⁷ As a young girl, Makeba learned the

¹⁵² Ibid., 166.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 173.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 150.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 204.

¹⁵⁶ Mutloatse, *Umlaba Wethu*, 90.

¹⁵⁷ Makeba, *Makeba*, 14.

“healing power” of music, not just from her mother but from the Bapedi women singers:

I watch the women dance. Their lively movements are fascinating. The Bapedi shout and laugh and act very happy. This is strange, because these people are even worse off than we are. Is it the music that makes them act like they don't have care in the world, I wonder? It must be. Already I have discovered that music is a type of magic. Music can do all sorts of things . . . Music gets deep inside me and starts to shake things up . . . The Bapedi stomp and sing out in the field, and there I am, on the edge, singing with them, apart from them but sharing their joy. Who can keep us down as long as we have our music?¹⁵⁸

Music is viewed as a political weapon that connects all the oppressed people. Its therapeutic effect and political function is collectively and individually experienced. Significantly, she retraces the sources of her talents to some mythical maternal ancestors.

It is as a musician that Miriam revises her name. Whereas Lorde revised her name so that it sounded poetic, Makeba assumed her new name, “Miriam,” and dropped her given name, “Zenzi,” in keeping with the demands of her new career in music. Once she joins the Manhattan Brothers Band, “the band leader, Nathan Mdlhedlhe suggests the new name, ‘Miriam,’” and soon “New handbills and posters are made for the Manhattan brothers. They say: ‘And Introducing Miriam Makeba, *Our Nut Brown Bay*.’”¹⁵⁹ With this initial introduction, Miriam soon rises and joins the ranks of her music idol, Dorothy Masuka of the “African Jazz.” With Hugh Masekela (later husband) and Letta M'Bulu, she performs in the orchestra, *King Kong* (a musical documentary about a black person's life in South Africa). Her stellar performance in *King Kong* soon propels her to launch her own musical group, “The Skylarks.” With Abigale Kubeka at this new outfit, she recorded some of the classic songs that were soon to boost her career and earn her international fame. Importantly, Makeba portrays this early success and career abroad as predetermined and foretold by her mother's mystical spirits. Long before she could foretell her career, the spirits, she alleges, had foreseen her future.

Before leaving South Africa she pays homage to her mother, father and the only daughter she is leaving behind: “I slip into the Gallotone to record two songs.”¹⁶⁰ The two songs—“Good-bye, Mother” and “Stay Well, My People”—mark the end of Miriam's singing career in South Africa and the beginning of her life in exile. In terms of the narrative project, this turning-point is somewhat symbolic. First, the songs suggest the marriage between her political activism and her singing career. Secondly, her farewell song indicates the complete physical separation from her mother initially suggested at her time of birth by reference to the cutting of the umbilical cord. Thirdly, the songs suggest separation from her mother as each embarks in own career in terms of public service. While her mother becomes

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 48.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 73.

a full-fledged *isangoma* (fortune-teller), Miriam drifts further and further into music as an instrument of political protest and agitation on behalf of her fellow black people. Both mother and daughter are however, aided in their respective careers by the mystical *amadlozi* alter-selves. It is as though the baton has been passed on from mother to daughter. From now on, Miriam becomes a “motherless daughter,” yet still endowed with her mother’s spiritual powers. In order to realize a coherent sense of self, she would from now on have to overcome racism, sexism, and other oppressive forms of exclusion on her “journey” towards a symbolic reunion with the same mother. Her mother is first recognized as a conduit for the spirits in her home country of origin, Swaziland. Ironically, Miriam is also later recognized as such a conduit when on a tour of Swaziland, her mother’s ancestral home. Hence, the physical separation from her mother, which begins with Miriam’s travels abroad, paradoxically marks the beginning of a spiritual quest for a reunion with her mother. Swaziland emerges as the symbolic mythical space, similar to Carriacou in Audre Lorde’s autobiography.

Makeba’s self-definition not only privileges the maternal myth of origin; her identity as a singer is also traceable to her mother’s influences. Satisfactory political protest and a coherent sense of self are realized on the concert stage. On the performance stage, she can at last “speak out against the racism and murder that makes bloody and foul my home.”¹⁶¹ It is also on the concert stage that she symbolically reconnects with the mother through the mystical *amadlozi* spirits. The concert stage thus provides the opportunity to redefine her identity. It is the important site, the “one place where I am most at home, where there is no exile.”¹⁶² The performance stage is the only location where the facets of her identity as a black political activist, a woman, a singer, and a political exile intersect and acquire a composite self. As in Lorde’s case, it is a composite identity that is constituted symbolically in terms of the maternal principle and a mythical collective past.

Makeba explains that there are three things she was born with: “hope, determination, and song. These things I also hold in common with my people.”¹⁶³ While on a trip to East Africa during the wave of political independence, she reflects, for instance, that “I think that I have one thing in common with the emerging black nations of Africa: We both have voices, and we are discovering what we can do with them.”¹⁶⁴ What they could do with “voice” is to agitate for liberation from the stifling colonialist and racist regimes. In this regard, she identifies her politics with the collective political struggle of African nations. She also recalls that her mother had “always been a good dancer” until she started developing swellings on her feet.¹⁶⁵ When Miriam had just been born, she was quite “scrawny,” but had “a voice.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 245.

¹⁶² Ibid., 230.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 1.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 110.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 3.

The principal denominator is “voice.” “Voice” does not simply refer to a point of view, it “can imply an empowerment in a political sense.”¹⁶⁷ Voice could also be “associated with the concept of identity. The phrase, ‘in my voice’ means ‘in my name.’”¹⁶⁸ Makeba thus deploys “voice” in two ways: first, as a medium for political agitation; secondly, as a medium for self-definition. In both cases, the power of her voice is attributed to her mother’s spiritual alter-selves. In this respect, her career as a singer on the concert stage links all facets of her identity, including her being a spokesperson for her people, a political exile, and a citizen of all Africa, as well as being her mother’s daughter.

Makeba’s symbolic arrival “home,” or her attainment of a new sense of self, is marked by her recognition of the role the *amadlozi* spirits have often played in her singing career. It is noteworthy that she regards these spirits as inherited from her mother. She explains that the “*amadlozi* are mischievous if their will is not heeded. People who have been told that they have *amadlozi* but who do not go through *ukuthwasa* suffer depression, illness, and financial problems.”¹⁶⁹ The problems could worsen if the spirits are ignored, sometimes culminating in death. Her recognition that she is under the influence of these mystical powers comes when on a musical tour of Swaziland, her mother’s birthplace, in 1980. Although she had suspected that “something” was “seriously wrong with me,” it was during that trip that she came to discover and redefine her identity as a conduit for the spirits. Earlier, whenever she reviewed the films of her shows or listened to tapes, “there I am dancing with all the life that is in me, and there is my voice and no other’s. I cannot explain why I should ‘black out.’ And no one can explain it to me.”¹⁷⁰ The *amadlozi* often seem to be on the prowl whenever she mounts the concert stage to sing: “I do a song, but I am not conscious of it. After we leave the stage, I ask my musicians, ‘Did I sing such-and-such song?’” and their answer is in the affirmative, whereas Makeba herself has “no memory of it.”¹⁷¹ For instance, while performing at the inaugural Organization of African Unity (OAU) meeting in Addis Ababa, she is given “a big ovation, and this encourages me. But as I say, I am never shy on stage. Something takes over.”¹⁷² This “something” is the *amadlozi* spirits.

Makeba attributes the death of her daughter, Bongi, to these spirits, too. Bongi, already having two children of her own, was seven months pregnant when she experienced premature labor pains. A caesarian performed to remove the baby ended in her own death. While mourning her daughter’s death, Makeba reflects:

When I think of the hurt I saved you from then, and the other times I was a good mother to you, it cuts me deep to think that in the end I might have failed you. You were consumed by *amadlozi* as surely as I was consumed by cancer . . . The spirits destroy anyone whom they possess but who defies them. In my grief for my

¹⁶⁷ Gable, “Finding a Voice,” 13.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁶⁹ Makeba, *Makeba*, 33.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 118.

daughter there is the fear for myself. I, too, fear *ukuthwasa*. Have my spirits, displeased, taken Bongi from me?¹⁷³

Barely four days after her daughter's funeral, Miriam had a scheduled concert to do, but although she "was not whole," and "beaten down," once she stepped on the concert stage, "I sang and moved and urged them to do so also." She recalls, "I think the *amadlozi* within me must have taken over. But the concert was a success."¹⁷⁴ Singing "seemed the only way to keep the pain and the numbness away for a little while."¹⁷⁵ What is striking is the therapeutic effect of singing and the way she attributes the successful performance to the mystical spirits.

The idea of spirit possession relates to Makeba's concept of selfhood. She suggests her community's idea of "self" quite early in the story by showing the linkages between individual and collective identities:

My mother. She was an extraordinary woman. And though she died in 1960, she is still a very real part of my life. What is 1960? A date. A number. It has no meaning in my culture. In the west the past is like a dead animal. It is a carcass picked at by the flies that call themselves historians and biographers. But in my culture the past lives. My people feel this way in part because death does not separate us from our ancestors. The spirits of the ancestors are ever-present.¹⁷⁶

In this regard, not only does she emphasize her symbolic link to her absent mother, but also suggests a concept of self regarded in terms of the encyclical web of the unborn, the living, and the dead. When her mother is first recognized as a conduit for the spirits, "she seems to always be waiting for them to come out and take possession of her. She seems to be quietly listening for her spirits . . . When she needs someone to help her when the *amadlozi* come, I am the one."¹⁷⁷ In this way, mother and daughter develop a close bond. Due to their closeness, Miriam herself begins to identify with some of the spirits. For example, it is hard to differentiate between Miriam's mother and the visiting spirits:

I get to know the spirits when they come. My favorite is Mahlahvezulu. He was once a very young, athletic man, and very strong. He has a lot of charisma. When she becomes him, my mother puts an *ibeshu*, or loincloth, over her skirt. She puts on the traditional bracelets over her upper arms that African men wear to make themselves look regal. Because he was a warrior, Mahlahvezulu will sometimes want a shield, a spear, and a *knobkiri* stick. I have to find these things for him.¹⁷⁸

Some of the alter-selves are malicious, while others are quite friendly. For instance, Makeba explains:

And so, because these spirits really are show-offs, they sometimes take complete possession of my mother. She becomes them . . . My mother is no longer

¹⁷³ Ibid., 241.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 244.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 245.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 2.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 42.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 43.

my mother. She is the *amadlozi* who has come forth from within her. She speaks in their voices. If the *amadlozi* is a man, a man's voice comes from her. Through my mother they sing, dance and tell tales . . . There are a group of *amadlozi*, both men and women, who are called *abandzawe*. No one can understand a word they say . . . The *abandzawe* are a lively people. They dance and sing and really wear out my poor mother's body.¹⁷⁹

It is as though the mother has temporarily lost her self-consciousness and self-awareness and submitted to ancestral vital forces. This concept of "self" is quite at variance with Western ideas of selfhood. The journey motif in Makeba's narrative could therefore be appreciated in two principal ways. First, it relates Makeba's actual physical exile from her homeland in South Africa. Secondly, in terms of narrative plot structure, it relates to the movement towards the climactic self-discovery that she is a conduit for the spirits inherited from her mother. Hence, the turning-point in the narrative occurs when she tours Swaziland. She is prevailed upon, while in Swaziland, to consult with an *isangoma*, and "She tells me what others have suggested over the years: that I, like my mother, am possessed by *amadlozi*."¹⁸⁰

Although the *amadlozi* spirits could make their host ill or even kill them if they do not undergo the *ukuthwasa* ritual, Makeba had been excused due to her singing:

Amadlozi are show-offs. This is why they made my mother dress in their clothes and carry on when she was in their spell. I sing before the public, and the spirits get a chance to steal my mind and present themselves. That is why to this day I have been excused . . . from going through the hard ordeal of *ukuthwasa* and becoming an *isangoma*.¹⁸¹

This suggests a linkage between her identity as a singer and the spirits of her ancestors. Her daughter, Bongi, however, was not a singer, and hence quite prone to ambush by her own inherited spirits. Makeba comments, "If my mother is possessed by spirits, and they say that I am, also, then what about my daughter? Bongi's behavior is so unnatural that I see signs within her. And I am scared, because I know what the *amadlozi* can do. My daughter must also consult with an *isangoma*."¹⁸² However, she dies before such a consultation could take place.

The maternal myth of origin emerges as the key structuring principle in *Makeba: My Story*. First, it defines both her physical journey into exile and her symbolic return. Secondly, it defines her self-definition from estrangement to self-awareness. Thirdly, it links her individual story to the master narrative of her maternal ancestry. In other words, the maternal principle structures the quest narrative in symbolic ways. It links the facets of Makeba's composite identity and provides the symbolic bridge that reconnects her individual identity to the collective past of her ancestry. In this way, the maternal principle provides not only an alternative cultural pathway

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 212.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

towards a composite self-definition, but also a means of political protest and resistance against stifling structures of forms of domination and exclusion.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have employed myth criticism as a framework to evaluate self-representation in *Zami* and *Makeba*. Mythology, as Humm explains, “can help to reformulate traditional historical accounts of women’s lives with female-centered stories.”¹⁸³ I have argued that both Lorde and Makeba use the maternal myth of origin as a defamiliarization technique in resisting racial and other forms of domination and exclusion. In this regard, I have argued that both writers provide alternative means of self-definition beyond the racial category. Their forms of protest include, but also transcend, the category of race.

I have demonstrated that self-representation in *Zami* takes on a symbolic form that figures the mythical “images of women flaming like torches” that “stand like dykes between me and chaos.”¹⁸⁴ By contrast, what stands between Makeba and chaos is the concert stage, the “one place where there is no exile.”¹⁸⁵ Lorde restories the facets of her identity by referring to her mother and foremothers of the mythical Carriacou. On the other hand, Makeba represents her autobiographical protagonist in terms of symbolic linkages to her mother in the form of mystical spirit possessions. The maternal principle is thus fairly central in both Lorde’s and Makeba’s self-representation.

In certain instances, the presentation of certain aspects of the maternal principle appears similar. Makeba’s singing performance often tends to be influenced by the *amadlozi*. On the other hand, Lorde has to guard against “subversion” as well. She observes, “When the strongest words for what I have to offer come out of me sounding like words I remember from my mother’s mouth, then I either have to reassess the meaning of everything I have to say now or re-examine the worth of her old words.”¹⁸⁶ According to Makeba, “My mother . . . she is still a very real part of my life.”¹⁸⁷ This finds echo in Lorde’s “I am a reflection of my mother’s secret poetry as well as her hidden angers.”¹⁸⁸ Makeba believes that “My mother has certain psychic powers that frankly make my life miserable.”¹⁸⁹ Along similar lines, Lorde observes that “My mother was nothing if not a psychic.”¹⁹⁰ She believes that “My mother was different from other women and . . . sometimes it gave me pain and I fancied it the reason for so many of my childhood sorrows.”¹⁹¹ In Makeba’s view, “My mother.

¹⁸³ Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 17.

¹⁸⁴ Lorde, *Zami*, 3.

¹⁸⁵ Makeba, *Makeba*, 230.

¹⁸⁶ Lorde, *Zami*, 32.

¹⁸⁷ Makeba, *Makeba*, 2.

¹⁸⁸ Lorde, *Zami*, 32.

¹⁸⁹ Makeba, *Makeba*, 33.

¹⁹⁰ Lorde, *Zami*, 236.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

She was an extraordinary woman,”¹⁹² and in Lorde’s view, “My mother was a very powerful woman.”¹⁹³ Due to her special powers as an *isangoma* (healer), Makeba observes of her mother, “People come to the house to be treated by her and to consult with the spirits through her.”¹⁹⁴ Since Lorde’s mother was also similarly influential and powerful, “Strangers counted upon my mother and I never knew why, but as a child it made me think she had a great deal more power than in fact she really had.”¹⁹⁵

Comparing the two texts highlights for us two crucial issues. First, the extent to which identities are “constructed and lived out on the historical terrain between necessity and choice, the place where oppression and resistance are simultaneously located.”¹⁹⁶ Secondly, the extent to which “restorying” the textual self in terms of the myth of origins of the “mother” constitutes a radical political act. Being black women of the contemporary period, both Lorde and Makeba, as Humm observes, make use of mythical language and themes “to define a womanist culture in a racist, masculine literary tradition.”¹⁹⁷ Indeed, Lorde suggests that such racist and homophobic terms of abuse and exclusion as “black,” “gay,” and “dykes,” if collectively combined, can be turned into an affirmation. The mythical framework therefore ties the threads of identity together. It also emerges as an alternative narrative for restorying forms of exclusion beyond the racial category.

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¹⁹² Makeba, *Makeba*, 2.

¹⁹³ Lorde, *Zami*, 15.

¹⁹⁴ Makeba, *Makeba*, 70.

¹⁹⁵ Lorde, *Zami*, 70.

¹⁹⁶ Bammer, “Introduction,” xviii.

¹⁹⁷ Humm, *Practising Feminist Criticism*, 25.

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