Cassie Premo Steele

Drawing Strength from Our Mothers

Tapping the Roots of Black Women's History

In an essay from 1984, Audre Lorde, the African American poet and writer asked Afro-German women to ask themselves, "How can I draw strength from my roots when these roots are entwined in such a terrible history?"(Lorde, 1992: viii). Lorde's own writings can be read as an answer to this very question.[1]

In her biomythography, *Zami*, Lorde (1982) turns to the mother as both a literal and a figural image that will provide her with mother roots from which she can draw strength and survival. By turning to the figural image of the mother, she fits her narrative into the traditions of American women's writing, black women's autobiography, and lesbian narratives. Lorde's *Zami* ends with a final scene of reunion with the mythological, sexual/spiritual mother, Afrekete, through whom Lorde regains her connections to her sexual and spiritual motherland, Africa, and in whom Lorde finds the sexual and spiritual ritual that will enable her to heal from the historical traumas of slavery and colonization.

Before turning to the mythological mother, Afrekete, I will first discuss the personal and historical mothers Lorde embraces. For while other critics have emphasized the significance of this figural black goddess in Lorde's work, I will show how Lorde not only is left to *imagine the figure* of the mother in her writing, but also is able to take from *her own real mother* both the literal and figural roots that she needs.[2] Her mother provides her with a way of turning to history and also writing her story into history. Lorde's specific history places her in a line of descent that can be traced through her mother, an immigrant in Harlem, to her mother's birthplace, the West Indian island of Carriacou, and back to Africa, from where her mother's ancestors were sold as slaves. Further, her mother also provides the seeds for the "metaphor"

of the sexual and spiritual mother-figure, Afrekete, through whom Audre creates a ritual of healing.

Grounding her narrative in matrilineal history and myth allows Lorde to find and take root: to form her identity. In this section, I will examine the ways in which Lorde digs this root through, first, her portrayal of her mother and the particular knowledges about spirituality and sexuality that her mother gives to the young Audre. In the next section, I will look at how Lorde incorporates her reasearch into the culture and myths of Carriacou, her mother's place of birth, and into her narrative in ways that give Lorde's own life meaning and context. Ultimately, Lorde's matrilineage will take her back to Africa to the myth of Afrekete, the great mother.[3] As we will see in the final section, these scenes of healing union between sexuality and spirituality, and between Lorde and the mother, are all the more powerful given Lorde's own history of sexual abuse, numbness, and silence. As Lorde comes to union, feeling, and writing, she connects her own healing journey with the historical journeys of women of the global diaspora, women whose histories are laden with personal and collective sexual trauma.[4]

Lorde's narrative in *Zami* begins by focusing on her mother, Linda, and the wisdom that she passes on to Audre from her birth place of Carriacou.[5] Linda Lorde had emigrated to America with Audre's father, a Barbadian, in 1924, when she was 27 and he was 26 (1982: 9). Their new home in America never really feels like home to them. To counteract her feelings of loss, Lorde's mother tells her daughters "stories about Carriacou, where she had been born" (1982: 13) amid "the hills of Carriacou between L'Esterre and Harvey Vale" (1982: 14).

By these stories, Lorde's mother teaches her a form of spirituality that was different from the Catholicism she was learning in school:

> She knew about mixing oils for bruises and rashes, and about disposing of all toenail clippings and hair from the comb. About burning candles before All Souls Day to keep the soucoyants away, lest they suck the blood of her babies. She knew about blessing the food and yourself before eating, and about saying prayers before going to sleep. (1982: 10)

Although Audre did not know it at the time, her mother was passing on the particular mix of Catholic and African spirituality of the people of Carriacou, which includes beliefs in witches who suck the blood of babies and the celebration of All Souls Day on November 2 (Hill, 1977: 330). Similarly, Lorde writes that her mother "taught us one [prayer] to the mother that I never learned in school" (1982: 10), a prayer to the Virgin, "*my sweet mother*" (1982: 10). In these ways Lorde's earliest spiritual teachings included mixes of Catholicism and African spirituality, held together by the female imagery of a mother who would care for and protect her.

At the same time that she was learning about spirituality from her mother, Lorde also learned an appreciation for the female physical body. This is demonstrated early in the narrative in a scene where her mother combs her hair as she sits between her mother's legs: "I remember the warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain like a nutmeg nestled inside its covering of mace" (Lorde, 1982: 33). Claudine Raynaud writes that this scene:

> expresses her rapport with her mother, her sense of belonging to the island of Carriacou, and discloses the source of her lesbianism.... The rich red color of the mace netting before the nutmeg is dried.... is the secret sign of home, the island of Carriacou, of Grenada, one of the main producers of nutmeg. (1988: 227)

And directly following this scene in the narrative is a tender scene of Saturday morning in bed with mother where "Warm milky smells of morning surround us" (Lorde, 1982: 34), a scene that likewise shows the importance of the physical, maternal presence in Lorde's development.

Closely connected to the spiritual and the physical are the sensuous descriptions of her mother's West Indian mortar: "I loved to finger the hard roundness of the carved fruit, and the always surprising termination of the shapes as the carvings stopped at the rim and the bowl sloped abruptly downward, smoothly oval but abruptly businesslike" (1982: 71). In her mother's kitchen, Lorde feels the stirrings of sexual desire:

> with one hand firmly pressed around the carved side of the mortar caressing the wooden fruit with my aromatic fingers. I thrust sharply downward, feeling the shifting salt and the hard little pellets of garlic right up through the shaft of the wooden pestle. Up again, down, around, and up.... All of these transported me into a world of scent and rhythm and movement and sound that grew more and more exciting as the ingredients liquefied. (1982: 74)

Raynaud (1988) connects this with African culture and myth since the "stone for oil crushing is a symbol for female genitalia" in a village of Sudan (Griaule qtd. in Raynaud, 1988: 95). And on the day of her first menstruation, Audre's mother shows again an appreciation for the female body by agreeing to cook Audre's favorite dish for supper. While her mother is gone to get tea, Audre prepares the spices: "I smelled the delicate breadfruit smell rising up from the front of my print blouse that was my own womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious" (Lorde, 1982: 77). Then the narrator, as a grown woman, relates her fantasy of her mother and herself, "slowly, thoroughly, our touching and caressing each other's most secret places" (1982: 78). As she grinds the spices, "There was a heavy fullness at the root of me that

was exciting and dangerous" (1982: 78). In the narrative to follow, Lorde will trace this root through her matrilineage to arrive at an understanding of the connection between the spiritual and the sexual. At this point, however, this root is "shameful" and "dangerous" because of the pain associated with it, coupled with the prohibitions against speaking of the pain. In breaking these prohibitions, Lorde rewrites history, both personal and collective.

While as a child Audre was learning these sexual and spiritual lessons from her mother, it was not until she was an adult that she was able to connect the teachings of her mother with a larger, historical narrative. Lorde writes that as an immigrant from an island that could not be found on any map, "my mother was different from the other women I knew" (1982: 15). Her parents speak in patois (1982: 15), using words the meanings of which Lorde can only guess, words that she calls "my mother's secret poetry" (1982: 32).[6] Growing up, her mother would tell her of "the Sunday-long boat trips that took her to Aunt Anni's in Carriacou" (1982: 11). Carriacou first enters Lorde's consciousness as a legend that provides her with a vision of women together:

> Here Aunt Anni lived among the other women who saw their men off on the sailing vessels, then tended goats and groundnuts, planted grain and poured rum on the earth to strengthen the corn's growing, built their women's houses and the rainwater catchments, harvested the limes, wove their lives and the lives of their children together. Women who survived the absence of their sea-faring men easily, because they came to love each other, past the men's returning.
>
> *Madivine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty.* (1982: 13-14)

As she grows older, Lorde begins to think that her mother is crazy or mistaken, that there really is no place called Carriacou, but she still harbors hopes for its existence: "But underneath it all as I was growing up, *home* was still a sweet place somewhere else which they had not managed to capture yet on paper" (1982: 14).

When she is 26 years old, Lorde finally locates Carriacou on a map in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which underlines the island's history as a colony. Anna Wilson (1992) writes that "The reality of Carriacou as a mapped space indicates the inexorable colonization of the world; but it also reinforces the need for Lorde to redescribe it, to give it a voice and a significance that is not the strangled one of the former colony" (Lorde, 1982: 83). As an adult, Lorde visits Grenada, the island where her mother lived after her family left Carriacou. There, she writes, "I saw the root of my mother's powers walking through the streets" (1982: 9). Although Lorde's visit to Grenada is not ostensibly part of the narrative, she incorporates this visit and her newfound knowledge of Carriacou into the narrative.

What Lorde discovers is that the love between women in Carriacou is not

only legend; it is also history. Since in Carriacou men go away for long periods of time on fishing and trade expeditions, the women have a practice of *zami*, or lesbianism, while the men are away.[7] In Carriacou the men say "women are hotter than men" and only women can satisfy other women (Smith, 1962: 199). Donald Hill (1977) writes, "One informant claimed that virtually every wife whose husband had gone away several years or more is a zami" (280). Further, the women very rarely stop lesbianism once they start (Smith, 1962: 200). When a man returns, it is often difficult for him to regain sexual favors from his wife, so he permits her to remain zami, "hoping she will become bisexual" (Hill, 1977: 281). Thus, through the history of Carriacou, Lorde finds the context that gives her own life meaning, the context of lesbian desire and practice.

However, this sexual matrilineage is not entirely separate from the spiritual roots that Lorde finds in Carriacou. From Hill and Smith, Lorde would have learned that Carriacou had been a French colony in the West Indies that imported slaves from Africa. The island became a British colony briefly during the American war of Independence in 1763 and then again in 1784. By then, French cultural forms (including Catholicism) had been established. After 1808, when Britain prohibited the importation of slaves to West Indian colonies, the elite left the island, leaving it an island of people of African descent whose inhabitants speak French patois and English dialect and in whom Catholicism is deeply rooted. Thus, the Catholic/African mix of religion that Lorde learned from her mother has its roots in the history of colonization and slavery in Carriacou. Further, the prayer to the "mother" that Lorde learned would be explained by the link between the Virgin and great goddess religions in Africa. Three basic elements of African spirituality that often survive colonization and are integrated into new forms of syncretic religion—mothering, the connection to the earth, and the connection of spirituality and sexuality—are dramatized in the narrative (see Mbiti, 1969; Karenga, 1882; Richards, 1990).

In describing her first sexual encounter in high school with her friend, Marie, Lorde writes, "We lay awake far into the night, snuggling under the covers by the light of the votive candle on Our Lady's altar in the corner, kissing and hugging and giggling in low tones so her mother wouldn't hear us" (1982: 120). Thus, Audre's first positive sexual experience happens in the presence of mothers—both the physical mother of Marie and the spiritual mother, Mary. This scene also sets up the connection between sexuality and spirituality that Lorde will draw in her subsequent sexual encounters.

In the description of Audre making love with a woman for the first time, Lorde writes, "I surfaced dizzy and blessed with her rich myrrh-taste in my mouth, in my throat, smeared over my face" (1982: 139). In this encounter, however, Audre goes down into blessing rather than up into danger, emphasizing the source of blessing from below, from the earth, rather than from heaven above. Also, the use of myrrh connotes a holy gift in Christianity, which shows Lorde's connection to elements of Christianity. We should note, as well,

that Audre's lovemaking with this woman, Ginger, happens with Ginger's mother's knowledge and in the mother's house.

Lorde again connects the syncretic nature of religion with the mother when in Mexico, her lover, Eudora, whom Lorde describes as having the mark of an Amazon from her mastectomy (1982: 169), teaches her how "the women in San Christobál de las Casas give the names of catholic saints to their goddesses" (1982: 170). Eudora also teaches her about the connections "between Mexico and Africa and Asia" and about the destruction of Aztec culture by the Europeans, a "genocide [that] rivals the Holocaust" (1982: 170). In addition to these lessons about history and mythology, Audre learns another lesson from Eudora, who "knew many things about loving women that I had not learned" (1982: 170): it is with Eudora that Audre allows herself to be made love to for the first time.

Finally, the Amazon from Africa and the myrrh from Jerusalem mix with the corn of America when Lorde writes of all her friends and lovers, fellow zamis, "Their names, selves, faces feed me like corn before labor" (1982: 256). This corn image again underscores Lorde's connection to goddess mythologies; the corn mother is a common image in many indigenous cultures of the Americas, and holds within it the power of fertility, the nourishment between generations, and the promise of democracy (see Awiakta). In all these ways, Lorde receives spiritual sustenance from her historical and cultural mothers in Africa, the Caribbean, and America.

The ultimate connection between sexuality and spirituality can be found in the final scenes of the narrative, which show Lorde's connection to her deepest mother root in Africa through the character of Afrekete. Significantly, just before the narrative turns toward Afrekete, there is a scene in which Audre boards a bus at a "corner," or crossroads:

> The bus door opened and I placed my foot upon the step. Quite suddenly, there was music swelling up in my head, as if a choir of angels had boarded the Second Avenue bus directly in front of me. They were singing the last chorus of an old spiritual of hope:
> Gonna die this death
> on Cal—va—ryyyyy
> BUT AIN'T GONNA
> DIE
> NO MORE...!
> ... I suddenly stood upon a hill in the center of an unknown country, hearing the sky fill with a new spelling of my own name. (1982: 238-39)

This scene prefigures Lorde's transformation of her own African, Caribbean, African American, Christian backgound into the new self in "an unknown country" through syncretic combination. As we will see, the figure of

Afrekete functions as the conduit for the healing of all the different aspects of Lorde's history.

Further, the setting of the meeting between Audre and Afrekete shows that this union is not only one between Audre and Africa, but between Audre and all her cultural mothers. At the party where they meet, Afrekete and Audre dance to Frankie Lymon's "Goody, Goody," a Belafonte calypso, and a slow Sinatra (1982: 245), a particular mix of singers that parallels the mix of cultures that have combined to form Audre herself. After the party, Audre goes home with Afrekete to "Gennie's old neighborhood" (1982: 247), which connects Audre to her younger self and to the memory of her dead friend.

Background to the role of Afrekete in African myth will provide us with greater understanding of her significance for Lorde's "biomythography." According to Lorde herself in a conversation with Judy Grahn, Afrekete comes from the time of the "old thunder god religion," which preceded the Yoruban culture, in present-day Nigeria. According to Lorde, Afrekete is the female precursor to the Yoruban god, Eshu, the trickster, god of the crossroads. Henry Louis Gates characterizes Eshu as masculine:

> the divine linguist ... guardian of the crossroads, master of style and the stylus, phallic god of generation and fecundity, master of the mystical barrier that separates the divine from the profane world. (Lorde, 1982: 286-87)

Similarly, in *Women Reading/Women Writing*, Ana Louise Keating remarks that, through Afrekete, Lorde "appropriates for herself the linguistic authority generally associated with masculinity" (1996: 166). However, in defining Afrekete as *the precursor* to Eshu, Lorde stresses the figure's mixture of both masculine and feminine characteristics. As precursor, Afrekete is, we might say, the mother of Eshu.

In Yoruban mythology, the mother of Eshu is the god/dess of the crossroads, MawuLisa. Some critics do identify Afrekete as MawuLisa. Claudine Raynaud writes that Afrekete is a bisexual personification of Mawu (the moon, female) and Lisa (the sun, male): "Whenever there is an eclipse of the sun or the moon it is said that Mawu and Lisa are making love" (Parrinder, qtd. Raynaud, 1996: 237). Mary K. DeShazer (1986) also identifies Afrekete as MawuLisa, "a mother of both sorrow and magic ... [who] created the world" (185-186). Likewise, Ana Louise Keating connects Afrekete to MawuLisa by recalling that Lorde calls Eshu a son of MawuLisa in *The Black Unicorn*. (1996: 164- 65).

Rather than identifying Afrekete as either Eshu or MawuLisa, however, I want to stress the figure's syncretic function, as s/he brings together all the mothers—personal, historical, and mythological—in Lorde's narrative. Afrekete, thus, is part recuperation of cultural myth and part invention. Both cross-gendered and bisexual, Afrekete is both mother and master, nurturing and

philosophical; s/he shows that the values of "female" mothering and "male" competence with language and meaning are equally necessary in order to survive on these borders between cultures.[8]

The final scenes in *Zami* show the ultimate connection between sexuality and spirituality as they depict lovemaking as a rite, which includes references to mass, ritual, prayer, transubstantiation, and union. Lorde writes that her lovemaking with Afrekete is an act of "making moon honor love ... sacred as the ocean at high tide" (Lorde, 1982: 252). The site of the lovemaking occurs amid a "mass of green plants that Afrekete tended religiously" (1982: 250), and their motions imitate those of religious ritual: "squeezed the pale yellow-green fruit juice in thin ritual lines back and forth over and around your coconut-brown belly ... massaged it over your thighs and between your breasts until your brownness shone like a light through a veil" (1982: 251). Their coming together is a prayer: "Afrekete Afrekete ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman's power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters, that the discarded evils, abandoned at all crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys" (1982: 252). It is a prayer to leave behind her own sufferings, like many prayers, but this prayer goes out not to an external deity but to a meeting of bodies, a connection that is both sexual and spiritual.

Most importantly, the lovemaking as religious rite concludes in transubstantiation. Transubstantiation implies change and becoming, mystery and magic, which, as in Christianity, is performed through the body; in this case it occurs through the body of Afrekete. Here Afrekete is identified as the youngest daughter of MawuLisa, who Lorde herself becomes as she incorporates the inheritance of her mothers: "Mawu-lisa, thunder, sky, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become" (1982: 255). As biological daughter of her own mother and spiritual daughter of her cultural mothers, Lorde, through her spiritual-sexual union with Afrekete, loves her mother and becomes her. In loving and becoming Afrekete, Lorde bodily inherits the mothers' histories and myths that give her the sustenance, nurturance, and stability to grow strong and tall.

Lorde writes, "Afrekete taught me roots" (1982: 250). Indeed, all her mothers—personal, historical, and mythological—provide her with the roots she needs to work through traumatic history. Digging up these roots, entwined with violence, pain and silence, enables Lorde not only to envision healing but to make it possible. This healing comes through a sexual-spiritual reclamation of her personal, historical, and mythological mother roots. In weaving these mothers into her narrative, Lorde links history and myth by showing how myths can change history. The histories of slavery, rape, and sexual abuse, and their consequences of silence, numbness, and pain, may be transformed, Lorde teaches, not when we leave these histories behind but when we return to them, as together we are witness to and are touched by the pain of the past. Only after such a process may traumatic history be accompanied by a history of matrilin-

eage, which leads us toward speaking, and loving, and healing. Lorde's biomythography is, finally, the complex history of all these mother roots.

In digging these mother roots, Lorde not only envisions healing but makes it possible. To claim one's being as both sexual and spiritual is to refuse the limited choice of either whore or virgin, either Jezebel or Mammy, either body or spirit. To claim one's being as both sexual and spiritual also means refusing to tie oneself to a traumatic past. In showing how the erotic is both sexual and spiritual power that has been kept from women, Lorde encourages women to heal this split, to reclaim this power, and to move beyond mere surviving to living, and thriving, as whole and healthy, spiritual and sexual, creative and powerful women.

[1] For more on Lorde, see also my *We Heal From Memory: Sexton, Lorde, Anzaldúa and The Poetry of Witness*, forthcoming from St. Martin's Press.

[2]Such a focus on the positive aspects of the figural mother can be found in DiBernard and Lauter. In focusing on the positive lessons Audre's own mother teaches, I do not mean to downplay the many painful aspects of their relationship discussed by Ana Louise Keating (1996) in her excellent analysis of *Zami* in *Women Reading / Women Writing*: Audre's mother "would not openly acknowlege her own 'blackness'"; would not discuss "the differences in skin tone between herself, her husband, and her three daughters"; hit and chastised Audre when she lost for class president; and "ignored or condemned her anger" when she confronted racism (148-49). However, by focusing on the positive aspects of Audre's mother, I am going beyond other critics by showing that Lorde not only takes the model for Afrekete from her research into West African mythology, but also from her own reclamation of the positive lessons about sexuality and spirituality that she learned from her mother.

[3]Similarly to Keating (see note above), Jennifer Browdy de Hernandez (1998) contrasts the "disappointment and even anger with their biological mothers" that both Lorde and Anzaldúa express with the "idealized images they present of the mother-goddesses who serve as role models for their independent, emergent sense of self." As my readings make clear, I want to trace the sources of these "mother-goddesses" in the writers' personal as well as cultural biographies. See Browdy de Hernandez, 1998: 246.

[4]Chinosole similarly traces Lorde's text through the "matrilineal diaspora" back to slave narratives but does not treat the issue of sexual abuse in her essay.

[5]In this section I rely upon the work of anthropologists Smith (1962) and Hill (1977) to whom Lorde could have referred for her research; she explicitly mentions Donald Hill in her Acknowledgments, while Hill cites M. G. Smith as the expert on Carriacou. Further evidence that Lorde relied upon these sources can be found in the similarity between Hill's observation that "One man believed that women get the drive to become zami from their mother's blood" (Hill, 1977: 281) and Lorde's last line of her narrative: "There it is said that the

desire to lie with other women comes from the mother's blood" (1982: 256).

[6]It is interesting to note the connection between Lorde's mention of the songs "for everything" in Carriacou (1982: 11) and Hill's (1977) description of calypso, a form of music/poetry that expresses feelings about slavery, government, history, and community relations (Hill, 1977: 209). Hill also notes that the songs at festivals are in call and response pattern and are African in style (1977: 330).

[7]Chinosole (1990) writes that "'zami' is patois for 'lesbian,' based on the French expression, les amies" (385, 393).

[8]Suzette A. Henke (1998) writes of the encounter with Afrekete: "Virtually eating the Mother / Nature-Goddess, Audre/Zami breaks down the barriers that separate mother and daughter, humankind and nature, Demeter and Persephone, child and MawuLisa, male and female, East and West, body and spirit" (111).

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