

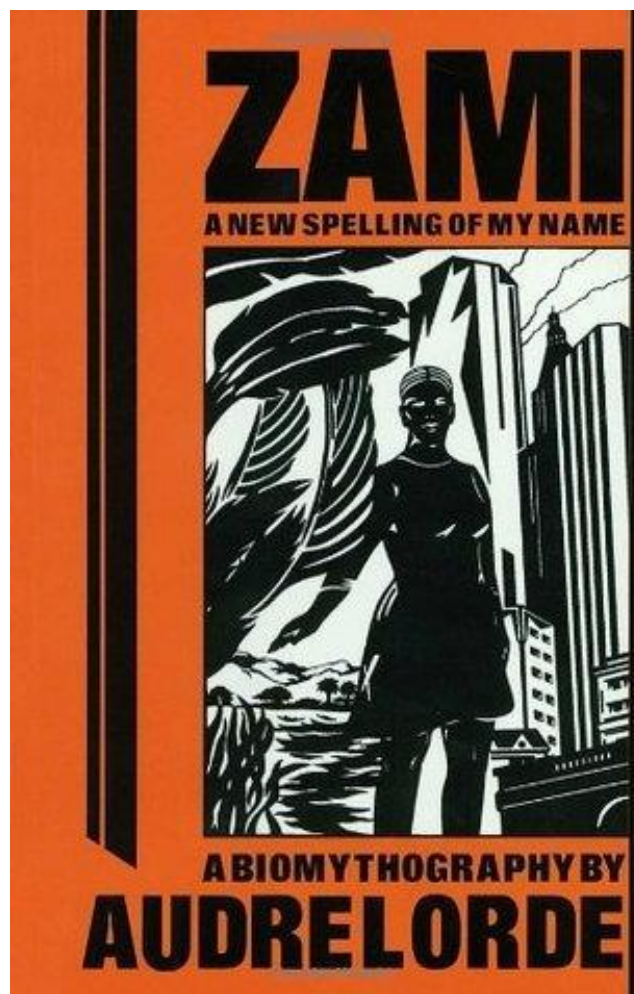
RADICAL TEACHER

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Teaching Note

Teaching Subjectivity, Intersectionality, and Personal Politics with Audre Lorde's *Zami*

by Katy Hull



ZAMI BY AUDRE LORDE

Since 2018, I have taught a seminar-based class on New Left autobiographies for BA history students at the University of Amsterdam, where I am a lecturer in American Studies. Most of the students whom I teach come from middle-class backgrounds; a large number of them are in full-time study while working part-time jobs. Due to high housing prices, they often live outside of Amsterdam with their parents. In other words, my average student is not a member of a social and economic elite. Nonetheless, there are (often unexamined) privileges at play in Dutch society, particularly related to the privilege of whiteness. People of color, who make up twenty percent of the Dutch population, are underrepresented in higher education; around ten percent of my students are people of color. In my experience, the class on New Left autobiographies encourages students to reflect not only on structures of inequality in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, but also on systems of privilege and discrimination in their own lives.

When teaching the course over the past four years, I have assigned excerpts of autobiographies from across the New Left, including the writings of civil rights and black power activists (Angela Davis, Mary King, Anne Moody, and Malcolm X) and of anti-war student activists (Tom Hayden and Todd Gitlin). Among the subjects that we discuss in the classroom are: the continuities between non-violent civil rights and more militant forms of black power; the sources of second wave feminism; and the intersection of race and gender discrimination for black female activists. Since Davis's and Moody's memoirs tend to be of particular interest to students, I am currently planning a new iteration of the course, which will focus exclusively on black female autobiographies. In preparation for this version of the course, I recently read Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*.¹

Zami is a challenging text to introduce into the classroom for two reasons. First, its genre of "biomythography" might be a source of confusion for students. Second, although published in 1982, Lorde's narrative ends in the late 1950s. It does not cover the 1960s and 1970s, when she established herself as a leading voice in black radical lesbian feminism. The text is valuable, however, because it can: i) provoke reflections on the subjectivity of all historical sources; ii) offer insights into how sexuality, gender, and race intersected for queer women of color; and iii) breathe meaning into the concept of the "personal is political."

Autobiography, History, and Memory

Because of the lessons they have learned in Dutch high schools, some of my students draw strict distinctions between "biased" or "subjective" sources, on the one hand, and "unbiased" or "objective" sources, on the other. Lorde's memoir can help to challenge this kind of sharp distinction. *Zami* was a "biomythography," according to Lorde, because, in addition to recounting her memories of childhood, youth, and her twenties, she incorporated female-centric myths, drawn from her mother's native Carriacou (a small island in the Grenadines). The personal stories that Lorde recalled, which dominate the book, were not fiction.² Yet the genre of

"biomythography" is likely to evoke initial skepticism among students who have fixed ideas about what constitutes a credible historical source.

Such skepticism could provide a starting point for classroom discussions about the ways that *all* autobiographies are consciously constructed. Rather than questioning whether a particular detail in an autobiography is factually correct, students can learn to pose more productive questions, such as: "why did the author recall this event?" and "what did they want the reader to derive from this anecdote?" This could also open up a conversation about how all sources—including seemingly authoritative government reports, for instance—are constructed through subjective processes of selection and elimination. In short, a discussion around *Zami*'s genre could help students to get beyond relatively simplistic notions of "biased" versus "unbiased" sources.

Intersections of Race, Gender, and Sexuality

Most of my students are informed about the concept of intersectionality, often through social media. But I have noticed that many of them have difficulty grasping how intersectionality functions in practice for people who experience simultaneous forms of discrimination based on their race, gender, and sexuality. One advantage of the autobiographical genre is that the reader feels a sense of connection with the author-protagonist, as they follow her through childhood into early adulthood. This sense of connection could help students to understand on a more empathetic level the various forms of discrimination that Lorde experienced.

For example, *Zami* lays bare Lorde's experiences of racism. She recalls that white people frequently spat on her in New York in the 1930s. She remembers how her first-grade teacher in her majority-white school accused her of cheating when she produced excellent homework. And she recollects sitting at a lunch counter on a family trip to Washington, DC in the late 1940s, only to be refused service. Through discussion of these incidents, students can learn about the lived realities for black Americans in the North as well as the South in the early twentieth century. They can also consider how *Zami* belongs to the broader African American autobiographical tradition of exposing racism and asserting the author-protagonist's humanity, which began with slave narratives.³

Zami also testifies to forms of discrimination—including in pay and working conditions—which Lorde encountered as a woman of color. In a necessarily lurid chapter (which teachers would of course need to approach with sensitivity), she describes the "homemade" abortion that she underwent around the time of her eighteenth birthday. Students could be prompted to reflect not only on the precarious position of all women who chose to terminate their pregnancies in the pre-Roe v. Wade era, but on the especially dangerous circumstances for working-class black women, who had neither the economic nor social capital to secure an abortion in a medical setting.⁴ This classroom discussion could also help students to recognize the disproportionate impact that

the recent *Dobbs v. Jackson* decision has on lower-income women of color.

Particularly in the latter half of *Zami*, Lorde describes the reality of being black, gay, and female in a world that demeaned all three of these identities. She writes eloquently about the loneliness of her identity, both in society at large and within her predominantly white lesbian community. For instance, she recalls:

I was gay and Black. The latter fact was irrevocable: armor, mantle, and wall. Often, when I had the bad taste to bring that fact up in a conversation with other gay-girls who were not Black, I would get the feeling that I had in some way breached some sacred bond of gayness.⁵

Analysis of passages such as this could encourage a conversation in the classroom about the interlocking webs of racism, sexism, and homophobia that dominated American society in the 1950s, as well as reflections about what has—and has not—changed for queer people of color today.

Giving Meaning to Personal Politics

Generally, my students do not connect immediately to the second wave feminist adage, “the personal is political”: they need evidence to understand how processes such as “consciousness raising” played out in practice. Reading *Zami* would help students to realize how Lorde came to her own awareness of the personal dimensions of politics. Students will readily recognize that *Zami* consists of multiple love stories. They may need some prodding, however, to understand one of Lorde’s intentions in writing the book, which was to show how each relationship (starting with her first love—her mother) was a catalyst for her own self-realization as a black lesbian woman. While the links between the author’s early life and later activism may be less explicit in this “biomythography” than in some other New Left autobiographies, *Zami* exposes the roots of Lorde’s conviction that gay rights must accompany economic justice, freedom of speech, and civil rights. And in our contemporary moment, in which the right frequently maligns and misrepresents “identity politics,” this text could prompt classroom discussions about the relationship between various forms of freedom, fairness, and justice.

Notes

1. Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (New York: Crossing Press, 1982).
2. Audre Lorde, “To Be Young, Lesbian and Black in the ‘50s,” Radio interview broadcast on KPFK, November 28, 1982, produced by Helene Rosenbluth, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=nS8_5Dm-sg.

3. David Dudley, “African American Life Writing,” in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. Margaretta Jolly (London: Routledge, 2001), Vol. 1, 23–25.

4. Lorde, *Zami*, 103–15. In addition, *Zami* contains a number of relatively short sections that teachers would need to approach with sensitivity, including two references to sexual abuse of a minor and use of a pejorative racial epithet. Lorde, *Zami*, 49, 75, 203.

5. Lorde, *Zami*, 180–81.

Katy Hull is a lecturer in American Studies at the University of Amsterdam. She earned her doctorate in American history at Georgetown University, supervised by Michael Kazin. She is the author of *The Machine Has a Soul: American Sympathy with Italian Fascism* (Princeton, 2021).



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