

SQUAD GOALS: FEMALE COMMUNITY IN ZAMI, THE GILDA STORIES, AND LOVE

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Abstract

This paper seeks to excavate the multifaceted portrayal of female community in African-American women's fiction through recourse to a brief engagement with Audre Lorde's autobiography, *Zami* (1982), Jewelle Gomez's lesbian vampire fiction (1991), *The Gilda Stories*, and Toni Morrison's novelistic enterprise, *Love* (2003). Despite belonging to variegated generic formulations, the three texts, belonging to the decades of the 80s, 90s, and 2000, demonstrate a marked proclivity for positing feminine relationships as occasions for reflections on community and conflict.

Keywords: African-American, Femininity, Community, Lesbian, Personal, Political.

African-American women, have had to historically contend with the double bind of oppressive patriarchal and racial structures of power. Even the revolutionary emancipatory movements for women's rights and civil rights that sought to establish self-determination for African Americans and women never fully acknowledged the intersectional nature of Black women's marginalization. Conveniently utilized as instruments in the reclaiming of 'masculinity' by Black men, and sidelined by the blatant racism of White suffragettes in their bid for self-determination, African-American women devised their own "nontraditional" methodological tools for the establishment of a distinct Black womanhood (Prestage 88). Apart from the overt political imperatives of forming their own collectives like the National Black Feminist Organization (1973), the Combahee River Collective, the Black Lesbian Caucus (1971), second-wave Black feminists also raised the rallying ideological cry of 'personal is political'. Obliterating the exaggerated distinction between a reality that is 'out-there' and divorced from private individual lives, they instead underscored the broader discursive framework wherein the individual functions as a palimpsest for surrounding historical forces.

Literature presented a crucial arena in which Black women writers negotiated with historical structures through personally mitigated narratives. Analysis that assumes a seamless continuum between the social context and concomitant literature would be fallacious for disregarding the constructedness of the artistic text. However, African-American women writers' deliberate miscegenation of the personal with the political demands that a coherent critical attempt be made to deconstruct these distinguishing features of their fiction. Frittering the desire for a universal race-blind sisterhood that the first wave of feminism chased after, Black feminist writers have alternately posited a nuanced awareness of female community by

acknowledging not just similarities, but also the differences that portend attempts at womanly communion:

It is the *representation* of black lesbian lives, not simply its analysis and deconstruction that has the most immediate, broad-based and long-lasting cultural and historical impact. Only by telling our stories in the most specific, imagistic, and imaginative narrative do the lives of black lesbians take on long-term literary and political significance. (Gomez 290)

Audre Lorde's lesbian feminist biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), Jewelle Gomez's lesbian vampire fiction *The Gilda Stories* (1991) and Toni Morrison's *Love* (2003), despite belonging to variegated literary genres are nevertheless premised on questions of connections between women. Relationships forged not out of simplistic solidarity, but ones arising from the complex matrices of family, friendship, motherhood, love, and hate. What does it mean to be black, lesbian, woman, vampire, artist, are interrogative themes that are inextricably intertwined in these narratives of identity formation.

Barbara DiBernard in her incisive engagement with Lorde's work references "Gloria Joseph's 1979-1980 nationwide survey on the relationship between mothers and daughters" (203) to discuss how Black women are more likely to view their mother's contribution to their lives positively and apprehend the relationship through the lens of strength and sacrifice while the fear of turning out like their mothers is one that only White women articulated. African-American women's formulation of womanhood as women-oriented has been the founding stone of conceptual categories like Alice Walker's 'womanism' and Lorde's conception of the 'lesbian'.

Walker's womanism encapsulates the wider relational tendencies of African-American women as a natural sisterhood premised on deep cultural bonds:

... a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility... and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people... (Walker 231-43)

Audre Lorde, in an interview with Karla Hammond in 1981 states that all Black women are lesbians owing to the influence of their matriarchal heritage, an erotic feminine force that powers literary and biological creation. These perspectives portray an inherent way of viewing the world through a connected, communal lens for African-American women that stands in contrast to the hard-fought solitude and "a room of one's own" that a woman hungers for in Virginia Woolf's understanding of artistic creation. Not only is this womanist conception of literary community different from that demonstrated by White female artists, it also stands apart from the individual centric narratives of racial oppression by prominent Black male authors like Richard Wright (*Black Boy* (1945), *Native Son* (1940)), and Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man* (1952)).

Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved some invaluable piece of myself apart from me, so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her... *Zami*. A Carricou name for women who work together as

friends and lovers... Recreating in words the women who helped give me substance.
(*Zami* 303-304)

Lorde's biomythography, which is about her development as an artist unfurls not just as an internal journey of self excavation, but one that is enmeshed with her physical encounters with the bodies and minds of a host of women – Black, White, Lesbian, set against the backdrop of significant historical milestones in the Civil Rights era. The combination bears perfect testimony to her deliberate terming of her autobiography as a biomythography, grinding fact, fiction, with female myth in the mortar and pestle of her story. This polyphony of female voices that sing through the Black woman artist is also the theme of another influential work that had appeared a decade before *Zami*. Alice Walker's seminal essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" (1972) pays homage to the ventriloquism that Black women artists effect when they channel centuries of stifled creative pursuits of their enslaved mothers through poetry: "And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealer letter they could not plainly read" (407). Both Lorde and Walker's ideas establish the individual as a conduit for the past, effortlessly entwining the personal with the political through literary praxis.

Lorde's biomythography courageously confronts the problems that portend someone who is a woman, Black, and gay in 1950s America through a nuanced engagement with these markers of identity, offering a sense of revolutionary sisterhood that forms and re-forms in shifting subject-positions rather than an imposed one that privileges only one of these ways of envisioning the self. It is through relationships with others that Lorde achieves an understanding of her artistic self. The narrative of self-expression is harmoniously conjoined to the theme of the blossoming and acceptance of her sexuality. The text tenderly explores a myriad net of concerns; the changing relationship between Lorde and her mother, her friendships with The Branded, Gennie, Rhea and others, her love for Ginger, Bea, Muriel, Afrekete, as well as Lorde's fraught connection to the idea of America. Historical events like the Rosenberg trial, McCarthyism, the desegregation of schools, the change in service laws in Washington DC, are poignantly explored through incidents with personal import like the refusal of ice-cream to the Lorde family on their Washington trip.

The multitudinous layers and types of marginalization faced by Lorde are evinced through the interaction with Muriel, who being a White Gay woman, flippantly equated the Black experience with that of being gay, something that inflamed Lorde, and the incidents of casual racism exhibited by her gay friends regarding her sun-tan in the bar. The complexity of inhabiting various identity markers is laid out when Lorde discusses the potential of oppressed groups like the lesbian community turning around to oppress others within their ranks. The text, thus, engages with a host of way of belonging to a collective without devolving into an insular form of identity politics that only seeks to form associations within homogenous groupings.

The race and lesbianism of the protagonist against the chronotope of America helps to connect the discussion to our 1991 text where similar strategies are used to propel the narrative. *The Gilda Stories*, an exercise in speculative fiction, also amalgamates fantasy and history mediated through the story of Gilda, the runaway slave. Here, it's vampirism that functions as the mythic thread around which the other themes are quilted. The immortality of the vampire allows for the presentation of the tableau of changing history, with chapters in

the book divided by spatio-temporal imperatives. Discourses of race, gender, class, copulate in the bloodline of *The Gilda Stories*, offering themselves up for succor to the willing reader.

The narrative is focalized through a character initially called only Girl till she is turned by Gilda and then takes on the eponymous identity of her creator. Gilda never knew her father and her ties with her mother and sisters at the plantation comprise of a stolen intimacy due to the dehumanizing effects of slavery that made the development of any affectionate filial bonds impossible. After the turning, she rises, her new a life a matriarchal rebirth and renaming through blood sharing with Bird and the older Gilda.

Gilda's story is not just about the myriad relations, sexual and emotional, that she forges with a host of other characters Bird, Julius, Effie, Anthony, Sorel, Aurelia, but also about the larger American culture which is foregrounded as Gilda dons a different occupational garb for every new era that her story inhabits. *Rosebud, Missouri 1921* opens with a setting where Alice Dunbar had just addressed a gathering of women at Aurelia's house about working for the race; *Off-Broadway 1971* sees her telling Julius about the rampant patriarchy within the African-American community, evinced in the case of a Black friend of hers who had done all the grunt work for a Black company, but had ultimately been overlooked for Grant money, which "went to every brother in the place but not her" (170).

Gomez in her essay "Speculative Fiction and Black Lesbians" references the conspicuous absence of Black women writers of speculative fiction, charting it up to the "need by some writers and readers for Black literature to serve a higher purpose" (951). She goes on to critique the desire of the African-American community to always appear as a united mass, quoting the backlash against Walker and Hurston's books for exposing the patriarchal oppression within the African-American community.

A fictional text, unlike Lorde's autobiography, the discussion of race, gender, and sexual affinities in *The Gilda Stories* is interwoven with the vampiric mythos and the politicality of Gomez's work has to, therefore, be uncovered by peeling back the extra layer of her artistic 'native soil'.

However, in the anniversary edition of the book, Gomez makes explicit the underlying political and literary framework of her work, tracing the genealogy of concerns to that familiar cry of politicizing the personal and personalizing the political:

My impulse to shape Gilda into the heroic figure she became grew out of that sense of connection between art, politics and everyday life instilled by the activism of those periods... The urgency of those times informs Gilda's every act and observation as well as her personal development... The novel itself emerged from highly personal events, giving further credence to the feminist precept "the personal is political". (Afterword 257)

The subtext of factual historicity, usually in the form of concrete spaces and events, still surrounds the narratives of *The Gilda Stories* and *Zami*, but Toni Morrison's *Love*, like most Morrison texts blurs even that stabilizing force, and is set in the fictional town of Up Beach. The only thing made clear by the unnamed narrator who opens the text is that the decade is the 90s. She informs us that the ideological landscape of America has shifted; overt racism has been replaced by its systemic embeddedness in social structures, consumerism drives society, and half-naked women confuse nudity with freedom.

Unlike the cross-pollination between White and Black women (through love, friendship, sisterhood) in Gomez and Lorde's works, Morrison's novel narrows the focus to capture a small shard of the larger mirror of the African-American community. Like all shards, her story too has a jagged edge that draws blood when held too tight. Relations with white people recede into the background in this text as Morrison continues her artistic determination (and the Walker and Hurston tradition) to explore the internal fissures racking the African-American community. Ironically titled, this narrative is not about love, it's about hate, a love turned bad, a relationship between two women who once loved each other deeply now hating each other with a vengeance as strong as the affection it replaced.

Christine and Heed, once inseparable, are torn asunder by Mr. Cosey's devastating decision to take the 12-year-old Heed as his second wife. What is set into motion is a convoluted web of jealousy, intrigue, misunderstandings, lost dreams, and a gaggle of angry women inhabiting Cosey Resort. May dislikes Heed because the latter belongs to a lower-class Black family and she views them as money-grabbers who didn't think twice before 'selling' their daughter to Cosey. Christine feels betrayed because she feels that Heed's love has shifted to Will Cosey. Vida, always secretly taken with Cosey dislikes Heed on principle.

The story is populated with instances of the abuse of the women characters – Cosey's spanking of Heed at the dinner table, the Administrator's attempt at gaining sexual favors from Junior in return for a reduced sentence, Cosey's rubbing of Heed's nipples and then masturbating in her room. It's not just the Black men who are misusing their powers as patriarchal figureheads, but the women also leave no stone unturned to exact revenge and there is always the hint of racial injustice against the townspeople. The negativity piles on till one is forced to wonder whether any sense of unity is to be sought.

While some of Morrison's stories like *Beloved* and *Sula* were written with a specific political hinterland in mind, as Morrison specifies in the introductions to these works, *Love* is significant because it provides no such "safe welcoming lobby" (*Sula* 72) wherein to locate her political concerns. One must work hard to separate the threads that are not arranged into a web, to pick one and deconstruct the story, rather it is a messy contradictory tangle that demands attention but does not offer a clean ordering. By the twenty-first century, when the feminist movement has moved into what is traditionally seen as third-wave agendas; the ability to forge relations across shadow lines of gender, class, caste, race, sexuality having been rendered even more fraught. Set in the 1990s, the era of technological and consumerist boom ushering in a rapidly changing ideological and visual landscape, the beginning few pages of *Love* allude to what the narrator sees as a place where "all is known and nothing understood" (23).

Love demonstrates a proclivity for throwing established ways of relationality into disarray to achieve a fragile community of at least two women at the story's denouement. Christine and Heed form the feminine epicenter, surrounded by a host of women characters, and these diverse femininities move in a pulsating web of conflict and contradiction, attesting to the difficulty in bringing them together to function as a community. Where *Beloved* (1987) can offer the organic possibility of subsuming these feminine identities within the broader African-American community, *Love*, coming a decade and a half after that, does not posit anything but two aged women clutching each other in a finally realized solace after a lifetime spent fighting because of a foolish man. "He took all my childhood away from me, girl. He took all of you away from me" (2552-2553). Unlike the previously discussed novels in this

paper, Morrison's writing dwells on the enormity of the task of uniting a people even if they share the same skin color and a larger sense of communal oppression, nevertheless, proving in the process the very necessity of forging bonds out of a more durable sense of affinity.

While only three texts have been considered to discuss the Black woman writer's preoccupation with female community, other artistic works across the decades like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Bell Hooks's *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, Morrison's *Paradise*, a host of Black women's poetry, right up to the squad goals championed by contemporaneous African-American performers like Beyoncé bear testimony to the primacy, as well as the changing history of, an artistic conception of woman-love by African-American female writers.

The inextricable intertwining of race, gender, history, and art that African-American women writers adhere to demands that any historiographical project not only to try to place their contributions within the broader category of women's writing, or legitimize their place within the white-male literary canon, but to develop analytical tools particularly suited to contend with aesthetic strategies uniquely developed and utilized by African-American artists in their attempts to aesthetically rationalize and reorder their relationship with a history that has often been written dipped in the ink of their blood.

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