AUDRE LORDE'S *Zami* AND BLACK WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY: TRADITION AND INNOVATION

María Pilar Sánchez Calle
CESSJ Ramon Carande, Madrid

I

When we refer to a literary tradition we must take into account that the coherence of such a tradition consists as much in unfolding strategies of representation as in experience itself. The coherence of black women's autobiographical discourse derives from the experience of black women, which is conditioned by race and gender, and, to an even greater degree, from the tension between these conditions and the discourses available to these women for the representation of their life experiences. Black women's autobiographies are grounded in the experience of slavery and in the literary tradition of the slave narratives (Fox-Genovese 1988, 65). The political and collective nature of the genre, whose original aim, according to William Andrews was "to tell a free story" (1986), is something they have in common with black men's autobiographies.

Race oppression connects black women with their black brothers, and gender oppression connects them with other women. Black women share a situation of marginality with both of them, which has contributed from the start to the creation of unique selves-in-writing to document their individual and collective experiences (McKay 1988, 177).

The political element is central to black autobiography. The first black autobiographies were written to reveal the negative consequences of slavery and then of racial discrimination. I agree with critic Chinosole when she says that art and functionality seem to be linked for these black autobiographers (1986, 10). The correlation of freedom and literacy is an important element in Afro-American letters. The fact that the black race lacked what a European point of view understood as literary tradition contributed to create an image of black people as irrational beings, and thus served to justify slavery. Most black men and women therefore wrote to prove that they were normal human beings capable of participating in the political and literary discourses of their communities; and to attract a white audience, the only one with the power to change their condition in life (Werner 1990, 204-6). Besides, due to the condition of double jeopardy of their lives, black women in their autobiographies expose the racism of white American society and the sexism of their black brothers (Blackburn 1980, 134).

In black female autobiography, the collective nature of the genre is reflected in the creation of a bicultural self, African and Euro-American, in the solidarity and responsibility towards other members of the community, and in matrilineage.

This collective meaning of the genre contradicts the notion of a unified and individual subjectivity prior to autobiography, as it is known in the western male autobiographical tradition.

Other recurrent motives in black women's autobiography are those of the journey and the home. The journey constitutes a metaphor for black women's life experience in search of themselves. It appears as a reality in the escape of slave narratives, and it is a reality as well in the tradition of the spiritual autobiography, which portrays Afro-American women's travels to other countries with religious aims. This journey motif became synonymous with action and commitment to stimulate social change, one of the most significative contributions of Afro-American women's autobiography (Mason 1990, 338-339).

The home motif possesses mythic connotations in most black women's autobiographies. As a child, the protagonist learns from her foremothers the idea of home as a far and magic place, in connection with one of the cultures that forms the protagonist's bicultural self. This feeling of nostalgia for a lost home runs parallel to the alienation experienced by many black women autobiographers. As the narration progresses, this home ceases to be associated to a geographic location in order to become a metaphorical space or a utopian place where the limitations imposed by race and gender have been overcome.

Also, the question of audience must be addressed by any autobiographer, male or female. At first, black women autobiographers had to face the challenge of displaying virtue and individualism while, at the same time, fitting into the discourse customary in their communities. This has led to the use of narrative techniques and stylistic strategies which alternate between self-display and self-concealment (Fox-Genovese 1988, 71), and to the creation of two narrative voices as they try to unify their public and private images (Mason 1990, 340).

The audience for the black narrative has changed since the nineteenth century. Nowadays, black women writers address a multiracial audience through texts with multiple levels of writing. Besides, the issues have become more diverse, sometimes less political and more personal. Group identity continues to be at the centre of the self in black male and female autobiographies. In spite of this, black female autobiographers, although respecting their traditions, are not afraid to re-examine traditional discourses in search of a space for personal freedom and autonomy (McKay 1988, 179).

II

Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982), by the black writer Audre Lorde, takes part in this autobiographical tradition, while distancing itself from it in several respects. To begin with, *Zami* is both autobiography and *biomythography*, that is to say, *bios* or life experiences, *graphe* or writing, and myth. We are not dealing here with the traditional autobiographical work that reflects past experiences in a chronological sequence. *Zami*, although heir to an important autobiographical tradition, expands and enriches the limits of this genre. Lorde is more interested in juxtaposing her internal and external landscapes than in

documenting the linear progression of her life as male autobiographers do (Chinosole 1986, 118). For Lorde, *biomythography* is a method of self-exploration, and not a limited genre whose validity depends on the authenticity of the content of the narration. Lorde does not hide herself in her writing, on the contrary, her intention is to define her life experience in her own words. In doing so, Lorde gains the power of naming without waiting for other people's judgements about her existence.

The word *biomythography* also announces the plurality of the textual self and of the narrative voices to be found in this work. From the very beginning, the conventional autobiographical voice is interrupted to give way to other mythic and poetic voices which include a poem, recreate a feeling, or evoke a specially dramatic or happy moment for the author. When juxtaposing historical facts, life experiences, dreams, songs, and poems, Lorde reminds us that these are the elements subjectivity is made of, and that it is not a unified and individual entity. Therefore, it cannot be represented in a linear and chronological way. Fragmentation and chronological disorder reveal Lorde's plural self, her refusal of uniformity, and her celebration of difference (Raynaud 1988, 230). To consider *Zami* only as autobiography would be insufficient, so Lorde invents a wider and novel term, *biomythography*, in order to suggest and express her rich subjectivity.

The title of this book, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, places it in the tradition of the slave narratives, in which slaves changed their names after reaching freedom. Likewise, Lorde, by choosing for herself a different name from the one her parents gave her, challenges the control of the dominant culture, and prevents others from speaking and naming on her behalf (Chinosole 1986, 116-117). Besides, she shows her intention to establish links with the tradition of black women's autobiography and, at the same time, to highlight the personal in her narration.

As regards to the collective part of her textual self, we should say that it is formed by a mythic community of women, some real, some legendary, and by the Afro-Caribbean myths Lorde uses in *Zami* to tell us about her life experience. Lorde considers herself to be a part of a continuum of powerful female figures that belong to her ancestors' land, the West Indies. The author is grateful to these women because of their contribution to the development of her identity and her survival. However, she also extends this collective responsibility to the present and the future. Lorde wishes to offer a mythic sub-stract and a history for all those women who feel foreign to western Judaeo-Christian patriarchal myths. The personal vision gives way to a collective one of a community of women that has to be built.

This mythic sub-stract appears throughout the book and serves to oppose the banality and ordinariness of daily life. By evoking this mythic community of women, Lorde connects past with future, relieves her isolation and suffering caused by her position as sister outsider, and defines and names herself in her own words (Raynaud 1988, 236).

Nevertheless, the collective part does not prevail over the individual one. However important this collective sub-stract is, Lorde places the individual

experience at the same level as the collective one. One is related to the historical responsibility towards her community and the other is linked to the necessity of obtaining personal gratifications in her life.

Another aspect where Lorde distances herself from the Afro-American autobiographical tradition is in the treatment of her racial and sexual identity. In *Zami*, Lorde projects a plural self: she is black and lesbian, a poet, worker, mother etc., and she places her racial and sexual identity at the centre of this. But her aim is not racial protest. Her aim is to show the development and forging of her plural identity.

Lorde transcends the limits imposed on her development by her race and gender, and rejects the role of victim, which appears in other autobiographies by black writers. Lorde considers that she has to justify neither her race nor her lesbianism (Smith 1990, 238). Her parents' silences on the issue of race create confusion in Lorde's childhood and adolescence. Later on, as a young lesbian in New York in the fifties, Lorde realises that the lesbian community also lacked words to deal with race, and although she recognises that lesbians were the only black and white women trying to establish connections with each other, they could not face up to their differences in a creative way. Therefore, racism will be a reality in Lorde's life, but it will not prevent her from developing a positive vision of herself as a black woman, based on the powerful image of her mother, on the connection with other women in their fight for survival, and on her trust in difference as a source of energy and creativity.

As for lesbianism, Lorde deals with it in an open way. In spite of homophobia, especially in the McCarthy era, and of isolation from other black women, and of loneliness, Lorde transforms her lesbianism, considered as a deviance and a shortcoming, in a liberating factor and in a self-preserving and self-defining element. Lorde connects her lesbianism with her mother's Caribbean heritage and the tradition of "Black dykes" to which, according to Lorde, her mother belongs. These Black dykes kept emotional and physical links among themselves. Lorde refers to them explicitly, *"Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers"* (italics in the text) (Lorde 1982, 255). In the Caribbean, the word *zami* means lesbian, derived from the French expression *les amies* (Chinosole 1986, 143-144). By doing so, Lorde wants to establish the tradition of "women loving women" in Afro-American literature, and rejects the theory that blames the daughter's lesbianism on her mother. Not only does she owe her survival and self-definition to her mother, but to all the women she has met in her life, and especially to Kitty, who will trace Lorde back to her mother, and will allow her to integrate and celebrate her black and lesbian identities.

The affirmation of difference as a non-threatening fact has been present in Afro-American literature since the beginning (Chinosole 1990, 386). We find the theme of difference as a subtext through this book, related to Lorde's racial and sexual identity and to her relationships with other women. Lorde links difference with survival because she will only develop fully as a person if her identity is respected and diverse enough to face oppression.

Her rejection of uniformity agrees with her plural conception of identity and the multiplicity of positions from which she addresses us in *Zami*. But she goes beyond. Lorde extends this concept of difference to her relationships with other women. The author's dream of a community of women free from sexism, racism and classism falls to pieces as soon as she begins to frequent lesbian circles in New York. Lorde criticises black women's homophobia and white lesbians' racism. She is conscious that women's inability to cope with their differences and the response of silence produce a simplification of women's oppressions, which is a mistake because the variety of differences require diverse responses.

For Lorde, the house of women is "the house of difference", where they can openly express the different aspects of their personalities, without one representation prevailing over another. Lorde knows how difficult it is to put this into practice, but she is also conscious of the plenitude of showing one's own rich subjectivity. She considers it necessary to see the potential creativity of difference and multiplicity, and that is why she unmasks herself in this work, accepting her multiple identities, and contributing to the building of the house of difference. This house of difference was not built in the 1950s, nor was there a consciousness of its necessity then. Thanks to her perceptions and her sense of criticism, Lorde anticipates themes that will be of importance for the feminist movement twenty years later. The theme of difference structures the need for new concepts arising from the community of women, concepts which offer a response to its multiple challenges without imposed definitions or solutions.

For any female autobiographer, the exploration of the mother figure and her legacy becomes fascinating and difficult. In the re-creation and interpretation of her life, the autobiographer assumes functions different from those that her mother performed in her family. She now has the power that belonged to her mother during the autobiographer's childhood and adolescence (Bloom 1980, 292).

In *Zami*, Lorde goes back to the ambiguous relationship with her mother Linda to retrace the source of her creativity. From her mother's special relationship to language, Lorde learned new ways and words to name reality. As she herself recognises, "*I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers*" (Lorde 1982, 32). Most of the words Lorde quotes as an example of her mother's poetry come from Carriacou, Linda's homeland, and will appear in the text in emotional moments. As well, Lorde's attraction to the visual, oral, and concrete nature of letters is linked to Linda, who was her first teacher. To become a poet, Lorde moves from her mother's oral poetry to the written text, from silence to language, and from language to action. The maternal legacy reaches beyond language. Lorde's mother also introduced her to the world of non-verbal communication, based on feeling and intuition, which needed to be deciphered and used (Raynaud 1988, 222).

Lorde admires her mother's strength, her capacity for survival, and her ability to adapt herself to changing conditions, all of which she will inherit. But for Lorde, survival is not enough. She reacts to her mother's way of life, and searches for pleasure and personal gratification. The tension between Lorde and her

mother reflects a fundamental one in Afro-American female culture: women's drive for survival as a collective responsibility, and personal gratification perceived as an individual need (Chinosole 1986, 145). Lorde rejects her mother's silence in the face of oppression. Her attitude is to say "I am what I am", and this is the first step to fight oppression. Lorde realises that she has to stand apart from Linda to find and define her own identity.

Linda teaches her daughter to love the culture and tradition of the West Indies, which will form part of Lorde's collective identity. The transmission from mother to daughter of this legacy is a way of keeping links with her homeland and of affirming cultural differences in the country where they live (Chinosole 1986, 137). In many women's autobiographies, we find that this sense of identification with a national, racial or cultural group has been provided by the autobiographer's mother (Bloom 1980, 300). What distinguishes *Zami* from the Euro-American matriarchal tradition is the emphasis on black women. For Lorde, matrilineal signifies the legendary and mythic connections with Caribbean women, and her autobiographical closeness with her mother and the other black women who shared the same childhood with her in the community (Chinosole 1986, 143).

Although gratitude and recognition towards her mother prevail, we also find episodes where Lorde expresses tension and pain, and refers to the silence between Linda and herself. Lorde appreciates her mother's role in her survival, but she also understands that she must leave her mother's house in order to live her own story, and build her identity without family pressures.

As we have seen, Lorde re-creates her links with her mother, but does so from a mature and independent position. The maternal legacy constitutes a significant part of Lorde's plural identity, and it will in time be transmitted to a new generation, enriched with her own personal experiences.

As previously mentioned, the theme of home is a common one in Afro-American literature. In *Zami*, home first appears as a mythic place, and later it is tied to the place of self-fulfilment. Since she was a child, Lorde learned that home was somewhere else, in Carriacou, her mother's homeland. Lorde appropriates this place, and turns it into her own private paradise.

Throughout the book, we realise that the theme of alienation and home go together. Each new home brings about a new feeling of alienation, and in each, either the sense of belonging or the feeling of alienation will prevail. At the end of the narration and after staying in different homes, Lorde will realise that Carriacou, the home of her childhood, cannot constitute a real option in her life because it is only a mythic reference related to dreams. Lorde will then associate home with an emotional rather than a geographic space, one made up by a community of women where each can express the different aspects of their identities and where the multiplicity of positions they speak from are not erased (Zimmerman 1990, 203).

Lorde considers that this place is "the house of difference", whose main features are its lack of safe limits, which contradicts the traditional idea of home as a place of shelter. I agree with Bernice Johnson Reagon when she says that once home has been opened to the other woman, whoever she is, home is no longer safe

(1982, 82). How can such a home be built? With this work, Lorde sets this project in motion by putting forth words and action against silence. She unmasks herself, and speaks from the point of view of her multiple identities. The idea of home gives up the mythic space, and turns into a challenge for the future, a reality that can be reached through dialogue and action.

The journey motif has been and is a very important one in black literature, and it is traditionally associated with changes in the traveller's consciousness that lead to new definitions of the self (Willis 1985, 220). This motif is both metaphor and reality in *Zami*. Lorde defines herself as a *journeywoman*, and refers to her life experience as a journey, "The first time I ever slept anywhere else besides in my parents' bedroom was a milestone in my journey to this house of myself" (Lorde 1982, 43), so she is taking part in this metaphor of the journey towards one's own subjectivity, which is as old as culture itself. The general sense of autobiography as journey gives way to other real and imaginary journeys that reveal changes in the way Lorde perceives herself and the world.

These trips provide her with a new vision of the world and new experiences that shape and strengthen her subjectivity. After leaving her parents' home, Lorde will go through difficult moments of loneliness and economic need. She will miss the security she had there. But it is known that to win, you have to lose. The journey opens up new possibilities of a better life, but it also conveys risks Lorde must accept in order to escape external requirements, build her identities, and find a new home, different from the one of her childhood.

III

Afro-American women's autobiographies are valid sources for the study of black women and the way they have perceived themselves through history. The life experience of these women has been conditioned by their race and gender, having suffered from the racism and sexism of American society. Each black woman possesses an image of herself as an individual person and as a member of the Afro-American community and of society which influences her general attitudes and demands towards life and, what is more important, towards herself. Their autobiographies show an attempt to define a personal life journey through the evocation of their most intimate consciousness.

Within this tradition, *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name* represents an extension and achievement of the autobiographical genre because it juxtaposes historical facts, myths, and fiction, and reveals a plural textual self. Lorde unmasks herself and defines her life experience in her own words. The diversity of voices in her narration attests to a plural identity which manifests itself in a discontinuous way. Unlike male autobiographers, who tend to lay claim to the merits they portray, Lorde displays in *Zami* a grateful attitude towards all those persons who have supported her and contributed to her survival in a hostile atmosphere. Through the use of myths, Lorde proposes new models for women who do not identify with the existing ones. Besides, Lorde places the collective part of her work at the same level as the personal one. With regard to difference, Lorde validates this concept as a

non-threatening one by proposing it as the basis for a dialogue among women. The house of women becomes, then, the house of difference.

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