

## From Mothers to Lovers: Desire, Power and Writing the Self in Duras's *The Lover* and Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

Love and sex are customary markers in the passage towards womanhood; in two seemingly disparate novels, *The Lover* by the avant-garde French film-maker and writer Marguerite Duras, and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* by Black/gay/Feminist author Audre Lorde, they play a pivotal role. Several other commonalities unite these two works both of which are written as memoirs from the perspective of a mature sensibility. Both novels explore a coming of age where an early and conflictual split from the mother is necessary; both take place in environments where the protagonist is an Other; and both feature main characters who embrace difference as a means of uncovering and creating the Self. However different their experiences as, on the one hand, precocious French-colonial adolescent, and on the other, Black, gay, Harlem teen, Duras and Lorde alike deliver lyrical and often raw accounts of girls defying the sexual, psychological and social confines of the societies they find themselves in, girls upon whom erotic desire empowers the transformation into women and artists.

These are not stories of a simple evolution from girl to woman. Both *The Lover* and *Zami* are reflective of twentieth-century developments in psychoanalytic and post-modern thought, particularly feminism. Neither Duras's story nor what Lorde has termed her "biomythography" can be read as a straight autobiographical account. Indeed Duras's "oddly disjointed" structure in which the narrator's voice switches from first to third person and back again in a-chronological sequences creates a "no man's land between truth and fiction" that defies characterization in traditional literary genres (Margaronis 494). And while Lorde's telling may be more straightforward, more traditional in narrative technique, the novel succeeds as "linguistic portraits of her own hybridity or fluidity of identity" (Walk 815), and is informed by post-modern discussions not only of identity but of body politics and positionality as well. Indeed, at the heart of both books is a wrestling with questions of self and how to represent it, of autonomy, and of power, particularly as determined by gender.

This question of power or lack thereof is an early stimulus for both the unnamed narrator of *The Lover* and for Audre Lorde's "biomythographical" protagonist and it is the figure of the mother in which the question is first worked out. While it is debatable that the mother is "the key figure in the life and work of Marguerite Duras," as journalist and writer Jean Louis Arnaud asserts in his essay "Marguerite Duras: The unspeakable, she said...", or that she occupies that place in Lorde's work, in these two books she none the less must be dealt with decisively before the sexual awakening that is the key to self-determination can be achieved.

The ambivalent yet passionate feelings the mothers arouse complicate the process of separation: Duras reveals the intensity of these feelings for her mother early on; "The beast, my mother, my love," she writes (22), and again, "My mother, my love..." (23). She is thankful for "that good fortune... that mother" (81) even though she recognizes her powerlessness as the "head of that common family history of ruin and death" (25). The fact that the father is absent and his place has been usurped by a cruel and dissipated elder brother fuels a rage in her, "black, murderous fits of anger you only see in brothers, sisters, mothers" (59-60). She would like to kill the brother, remove from her "mother's sight the object of her love...to punish her for loving him so much" (7). Finally the

realization that her mother “was a child,” that she “never knew pleasure” becomes a catalyst; her mother must die, if only symbolically. When, after she initiates her first sexual encounter with the Chinese man, she at last speaks, it is of her mother: “I tell him my mother will die, it can’t go on like this. That my mother’s approaching death, too, must be connected with what has happened today” (40).

This preoccupation with the mother suggests a feminist twist to Freud’s “Electra Complex”; it is not the father or his replacement, the brother, whom the girl subconsciously wants to possess; it is the mother. That she chooses a feminine man about whom “there is nothing masculine . . . but his sex” (38) underscores this, as does the similarity of the feelings engendered by her connection to him and to her family. As Margaronis observes, “The girl’s desire for the man is sharpened by the knowledge it brings her of loss, emptiness and shame, and by the thrill of her passive power over him, which is like her mother’s power over her” (494). In similar fashion, the female object of the girl’s later infatuation, H el ene Lagonelle, can be seen as a stand-in for the mother whose affection the girl is unable to secure. That H el ene is equally unattainable is beside the point. As Staley and Edson suggest in their essay, “Objectifying the Subjective: The Autobiographical Act of Duras’s *The Lover*,” what Duras/the girl is after here is not so much a woman’s body, (be it her mother’s or her classmate’s), but the appropriation of male desire itself. Duras “seeks to control the terms of her own pleasure” (Staley and Edson (7). In so doing, she not only acquires sexual autonomy but also gains the control over her life that her mother and H el ene relinquish by their adherence to the class and gender norms of their day.

In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* the almost erotic early love for the mother is even more pronounced and is also tied in with questions of power. The young Audre recognizes her mother’s difference as a Black, albeit one who can “pass,” and as an immigrant early on, a difference that gives her both a sense of pleasure and of pain (16). Though Audre comes to realize that her mother “hides the many instances of her powerlessness,” she also sees her as strong and capable, a woman who displays an “imposing, no-nonsense exterior” to the world (17). While the mother maintains a strict control over their relationship, and the roles of mother and daughter are rigidly defined according to her Grenadian culture, Lorde recalls the rich and sensuous sensations a simple hair brushing incident evokes: She remembers “her warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of” their “physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain” (33).

This attraction to the mother seems connected to an early desire for Toni, a pretty girl who briefly appears in the neighborhood. In the young Audre’s approximation of the “doctor” games played out between children of the opposite sex, it is the little girl whose “live little brown body” she would like to touch and whose dress, petticoats and knickers present an alluring mystique (40). While the incident is also the first that provokes feelings of shame and fear as the mother interrupts her intended exploration of the girl’s bottom, it does not derail the narrator’s sexual orientation and the girl remains sensitive, in a very intimate way, to her mother’s femaleness. In an uncharacteristic show of warmth and affection as Audre suffers the first pangs of menstruation, the mother hugs her. The young woman “could smell the warm herness rising from between her arm and her body . . . and the scent of her thick bun of hair . . . Her arm across my shoulders was warm and slightly damp (80). As Audre becomes aware of her own erotic physicality,

“the delicate breadfruit smell” that was her own “womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious” (77), she longs to connect with the mother more intimately. The only avenue for a communion, however, is in the kitchen where the preparation of food takes on a sensuousness suggestive of lovemaking. It is only years later that Audre can confront the erotic feelings her mother has evoked in her, when she can at last fantasize of “slowly and thoroughly ...touching and caressing each others’ most secret places” (78). Until she reaches that place of honest reflection and acceptance of her forbidden feelings, she can only pass from one unsuitable woman to another, mimicking the empty promiscuous male act of taking them into her bed. It is only with Eudora, a woman old enough to be her mother, that she first finds real communion with a woman, and that she feels herself “pass beyond childhood” (175).

While Lorde champions what it is to be female and “all of her separate selves... come home to rest in the erotic, the lyrical, the feminine, the mother and the earth” (Walk 817), like Duras she cannot escape traits traditionally associated with the masculine. Indeed, though she abhors the role-playing required by the gay-girl scene of 1950s New York, in *Zami* she seems to present herself as the “dyke” and is attracted to more “femme-like” women. It would be wrong to pigeon-hole her though. In terms far more graphic than Duras’s, Lorde reveals her vision of fluid identity, one that integrates the sexes, a sort of physical interpretation of Jung’s theory of the animus and the anima, a yin-yang holistic vision where women are not confined to the traditional feminine model of passivity and receptivity but can be assertive, even aggressive. “I have always wanted to be both man and woman,” she writes in the prologue. “I would like to enter a woman the way any man can, and to be entered...to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving” (7). If Duras appropriates the male prerogative to initiate and control the sex act, Lorde moves beyond to a realm where sexually, erotically, she can be both one and the Other.

It is not only erotically that the narrators of these two works engage Otherness. Both Lorde and Duras find their positions as Others essential elements in the construction of their independent identities. Both find what Lorde calls “a house of difference” (226) to occupy. If Lorde’s Otherness is imposed upon her by virtue of her race, sexual orientation and gender, Duras’s is the result of her position as a white girl in Indochina, the unusual circumstances of her family, and the act of her taking a Chinese for a lover. Consciously choosing to defy the taboo against any sort of intimate inter-racial connection, Duras further distances herself from the cultural norms of her class and gender, norms from which she has already begun to stray with her refusal to bend to her mother’s and elder brother’s expectations. As Tamara Cox points out in her review of Bethany Ladimer’s *Colette, Beauvoir, and Duras: Age and Women Writers*, “Duras never accepted patriarchal social roles for women” (2). In *The Lover*, she seems to seek out an experience that will be an outlet for “the burning passion of life” she has inherited from her daring but powerless mother (Renaud 2). Thus, unlike her classmate, the beautiful but passive H el ene who will be married off at the earliest opportunity to a French colonial, she prefers the Otherness of “the obscure man from Cholon” and the “harsh pleasure” he can give her (74).

As if seal their pact with Otherness, both Duras’s unnamed protagonist and the young Lorde adopt distinctive manners of dress that set them apart from their contemporaries. For Duras, the man’s hat, the gold lam e shoes and the silk shift transform

the girl and “the inadequacy of childhood” turns into something else,” becomes “a choice of the mind.” It is a deliberate revelatory act which allows her to see herself “as another, available to all” (13). Lorde, too, stands out from the conventional females of 1950s “america” in her favorite costume of riding pants and men’s shirts, sporting an “afro long before the word even existed” (182). For her though dress is only a slight added veneer of difference. As a woman who is both gay and Black, she must accept “her position as different from the larger society as well as from any single sub-society” (181). Thus she learns to embrace her differences, not as a survival mechanism now, but as an acknowledgement and celebration of the multiplicity of her identity. Moreover, and most importantly, she grows to understand that it is the very battle with her multiple identities as Black, female and gay which nourishes her literary articulation.

It is this last aspect of the forbidden paths that Duras and Lorde choose that is the crucial element: For both, the places of difference they inhabit bar them from usual society and fuel their transformation into artists, into writers. The moment Duras’s objectified younger self dons the felt hat is the same one that reveals her destiny to her: “I can see it’s all there,” she reflects. “All there but nothing yet done... I want to write... That’s what I want to do – write” (21). She keeps that essential certainty that later on “she’ll be a writer” (75) even as the pain of her desire for the Chinese man and for Hélène torments her. Sexual desire is linked to autonomy and thus is key to her transformation into writer, or as Staley and Edson put it, “Sexual autonomy configures Duras’s access to writing” (5). Thus the symbolic crossing of the Mekong by which the girl attains sexual autonomy parallels her crossing over into the life of a writer. Lorde, on the other hand, enjoys no epiphany as such. The tensions that exist among her myriad selves find expression gradually in her poems and later writings. It is only when “she interrogates those tensions” that “she writes herself into visibility” (Walk 815). Gradual though both processes are, her full sexual awakening as a Lesbian and the creation of herself as a writer, they form a symbiotic force that prefigures the reintegration of Lorde’s fragmented selves in the text that she writes for herself, a text that seems as yet incomplete at the conclusion of *Zami*.

This question of the text cannot be ignored in either of these works. Duras is well known to have rewritten the account of the affair several times in novels such as *The Sea Wall* (1950), *The Lover* (1984), and finally *North China Lover* (1991) (Renaud 4). Duras acknowledged the difficulty of finding a perspective from which to write about it. In an interview with Susan D. Cohen, Duras said that “from the beginning of my life that problem has been for me one of knowing who was speaking when I spoke in my books” (7). Thus, not only must the reader confront the textuality of Duras’s account, that is, what Cohen defines as the relation of a writer’s work to her life, but also the intertextuality of the work. How does *The Lover* relate to previous or later texts dealing with the same subject matter? The author deals with this problem in *The Lover* by simply referring to herself both as “I” and as “she.” It is the objectification of her younger self that the use of this shifting voice achieves which allows the reader to participate not only in her story, but in her process of writing it down; the reader is accessory to Duras’s “stripping away of the debris of an obscured past.” At the same time, she creates not so much an account but a series of dream-like vignettes “that is no more fiction than it is the desire to remember” (Staley and Edson 2).

In Lorde, too, there is intertextuality, in part provided for by the subject matter itself and in part by the earlier poems that the author inserts as companions to the events described in the book. She also intersperses italicized passages into the chronological account that serve to comment or expand upon the text. These passages may take the confidential tone of a diarist; they may be an acknowledgement or dedication to her female ancestors from whom she derives strength; they may record an internal dialogue that bears upon the events; or they may serve, as in the final pages describing her affair with Afrekete, to take ownership of her erotic self. The direct yet lyrical language in these last passages with its unashamed naming of the acts and its lush evocations of natural phenomena as symbols for passionate love between women leave the reader no choice but to participate in Lorde's creation of the self she will expose to the world. They allow her to have the last word, however, as to how her story should be understood.

It is this ability to invent themselves through their texts that unites these two authors across race and continents and even time, for Duras seems to inhabit the earlier part of the twentieth century while Lorde still resonates, and shocks, today. Still, when Lorde, in a poem about the breast cancer she survived, writes "I am a scar, a report from the front lines, a talisman, a resurrection" (Walk 815), one feels the words apply equally to Duras. And Renaud could very well have been writing of Lorde when he titled his essay on Duras "The unspeakable, she said..." Both writers braved ostracism, scandal and the loneliness of "outsider" status in their unwavering devotion to an honest reflection of themselves in their texts.

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