

An Intercultural Analysis of *Zami* (1982) by Audre Lorde as a feminist Bildungsroman

GEORGIA SCRIBELLITO

English Institute, University of Warsaw

Abstract

This article analyses *Zami* (1982) by Audre Lorde in light of feminism and interculturalism and the “*Bildungsroman*.” Specifically, it considers *Zami* as a Bildungsroman although as defined by the author this book is a mythical-auto/biography. The article argues that, although in the form of an autobiography, Lorde describes how she achieves “*Bildung*.” In particular, highlighting the complexity that transpires from this work, the article argues that Lorde had multiple identities, which she struggled to balance and after all, she was a complex person with a well-defined identity as a lesbian, Caribbean, and “black/mixed” woman. Although defined in many different ways in terms of genre, *Zami* offers innovative and challenging visions of “gender” and sexuality, which are still actual today and lay the ground for important reflections on current American, but also European, African, and Latin American societies, in general for society at large. Ultimately, this article argues that *Zami* is a complex *Bildungsroman*.

Keywords: *Audre Lorde, interculturalism, Zami, narratives, feminism, theory of literature*

The aim of this article is to analyse what lies beneath narratives that discuss cultural matters through the use of an intercultural approach, specifically referring to *Zami* (1982) by Audre Lorde. The underlining argumentation is that one can study cultural works through an “interliterary” and intercultural perspective, highlighting similarities and differences among texts from a specific region. The article suggests that the given methodology offers an innovative perspective on texts from the Caribbean diaspora. Books that address cultural concerns in the United States are often scholarly studied only on the basis of language or ethnic divisions, thus undermining the importance of culture in American society. The intent of the article is to challenge this division, and to uncover the significance of culture in American “minority” literary production, focusing on *Zami*.

Intercultural Literature and “Interliterariness”

According to Ülker Gökberg, Heidi Rösch, Christian Von Zimmerman, and Carmine Chiellino, the notion of intercultural literature has been developed mainly within the German context (Gökberg, (1997) 19 ff; Rösch, (2004) 89–109; Von Zimmerman (2006), and Chiellino Ed.



(2007)). Furthermore, Gökberg specifies that this term was introduced in Germany in the 1970s (Gökberg 1997, 21). The concept, or rather the approach to literature called “interliterariness,” which comes from comparative literature, is a valuable method to understand intercultural literature. This term is used mainly in Central Europe literary scholarship. According to Roman Jakobson, in the article, *Noveishaia Russkaia Poezia* (Recent Russian Poetry) (1921), those who advocate this idea are indebted to “Russian Formalists and Czech Structuralists” (Jakobson, 1921, 11).

The term “Literariness”, which is a forerunner of “interliterariness,” was coined by Jakobson himself in 1921. Jakobson argued that “[the] object of literary scholarship is not literature but literariness, i.e. which makes a given work a literary one” (1921, 11). Furthermore, in his article “The Crisis of Comparative Literature” (1959), René Wellek specifies that “literary scholarship will not make any progress methodologically, unless it determines to study literature as a subject distinct from other activities and procedures of man” (Wellek 1963, 282-95). According to Wellek, “we must face the problem of ‘literariness’, the central issue of aesthetics, the nature of art and literature” (1963, 282-295). Lastly, in *Theory of Interliterary Process* (1989), Dyoniz Durisin defines literary as “the basic and essential quality” of literature, which embodies “all relations within the literature, their intensity, amount, and manner of their conditionality within the framework of various individual literatures” (Durisin, 1989, 21).

Zami* as an intercultural *Bildungsroman

Although *Zami* is a well-known text, as it has been established, the article approaches it from the established much-less-common intercultural perspective in the context of *Bildungsroman* narratives. It does not pay so much attention to “racial” formation in the book but rather focuses on the use of an intercultural point of view to articulate innovative visions of “gender” and “sexuality” while mentioning their correlation to “racial” problems, in the United States. The article argues that *Zami* is an intercultural *Bildungsroman* that describes the development of Lorde’s “gender” and “sexuality” from childhood up to early youth across the Caribbean and American culture and that, at the end, the author achieves a reconciliation with her “Self,” at different levels, and thus, “*Bildung*.” The article shows that, thanks to an intercultural perspective, Lorde articulates challenging feminist visions, which complicate “essentialist” perceptions in the United States. Unearthing something that it is seldom acknowledged, it also notes that, written eight years earlier than Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Lorde's vision foregrounds Butler's famous work on “gender” and “sexual” identity but complicates it.

As far as similar perspectives on *Zami* to the one employed in this chapter are concerned, it can be noted that in examining this book in a chapter of her dissertation, titled *Re-Reading Audre Lorde: Declaring the Activism of Black Feminist Theory*, Surya A. Nayak (2013) makes a similar argument to the one we propose regarding the anticipation that *Zami* offers of contemporary theories on “gender” and “sexuality.” Nayak comments that “the intervention of Lorde's byomitography anticipated the debates within feminist and queer theory that have evolved, and are evolving, concerning gender signification and the relationship between gender and sexuality (Butler 1990a, 1990b, 1993b, 2006; Namaste 2000; Stryker 1008; Whittle 2002)” (Nayak 2013, 292). Nayak’s observation is very poignant and she

mentions an important aspect of *Zami*, namely, its foregrounding current debates on “gender” and “sexuality” as debated by Butler and other theorists. However, one can argue that Nayak does not dwell on it in her very insightful dissertation, meaning that she does not compare and contrast Lorde's ideas to that of any current scholar on these issues, preferring to focus on another aspects.

In a similar vein, in her thought-provoking Master Thesis, titled “Feminist Activist Politics and Sisterhood in the Life Narratives of Audre Lorde and June Jordan” (2017), Ezgi Ilimen assesses the implications of Lorde's “multicultural” vision on her identity-formation but emphasizing different aspects than this article does. Throughout her scrutiny of Lorde's work, Ilimen draws a parallel between Butler's revision of gender fixity in terms of “agency and transformation” in *Gender Trouble* (1999)—relative to the possibility of challenging essential gender constructs and creating “changing and shifting notions of gender identity” (Ilimen 2017, 39)—, and Lorde's vision of gender in *Zami*. However, one can observe that Ilimen does not go further securitizing *Zami* in light of Butler's theories. This article, therefore, seeks to go further than Nayak and Ilimen discussing *Zami* in light of recent feminist theories.

The recently published *History of the Bildungsroman* (2018) edited by Sarah Graham and published by Cambridge University Press seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the *Bildungsroman* genre in Europe outside Germany (Graham 2019, 3). In her chapter on the “Lesbian, Gay, and Trans” *Bildungsroman*, in the volume edited by Graham, Meredith Miller refers to both Bakhtin and Moretti's conceptions of the *Bildungsroman*, which focus on historical becoming that entails “historical anachronism” (Miller 2019, 239-266.). Miller writes:

”Lesbian, gay and transgender *Bildungsromans* can be read through both critical strands laid out here. They quite clearly work to historicise the individual and her desires, posing the individual precisely ‘between two epochs’ (before and after sexual liberation) at the threshold of social recognition. They do this specifically by posing an essential, sexualised self against the social and familial structures of bourgeois modernity. The liberation of this self is constructed as the emergence of the new, modern relation between individual and state. Finally, they deploy those specific strategies for representing the desiring body and for hailing it which were developed in the Gothic romance” (Miller 2019, 241).

In the quoted passage, Miller underlines how *Bildungsroman* narratives capture the passage between different epochs, as underlined by classical theories on this genre. Such passage is what Miller means by “historical anachronism,” following the lead of the famous Russian literary critic and scholar Mikail Bakhtin (1895-1975). In Miller’s view, in the case of lesbian narratives, this historical passage occurs “before and after sexual liberation” (Miller 2019, 241).

Taking up on Miller’s perspective, the article argues that it applies very aptly to *Zami*. This article notes that *Zami* agrees with Miller's view, following Franco Moretti's lead in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* [1987] (2000) that lesbian narratives exemplify a modern relation between citizens and state. Challenging, however, Miller's argument that Lesbian texts present “an essential, sexualised self against the social and

familial structures of bourgeois modernity,” the article shows that, at least, as exemplified by the text under examination, lesbian texts pose a *hybrid* self, which, indeed, rebels against bourgeois modernism, but also against Western canons, trying to reshape the relationship between “individual and state” in a dissident way. Nevertheless, one can fully concur with Miller on another argument she makes later on, in the same book chapter. She argues:

”novels most central to the tradition of queer *Bildungsroman* sit uncomfortably at the limit of the modernist canon. Their articulation of the sexually dissident self is embedded in formal strategies which place them alternately in alignment with and in opposition to the orthodoxy of modernist ‘literariness’, posed self-consciously against nineteenth-century realism” (Miller 2019, 242-243).

Indeed, in agreement with Miller's view, it can be mentioned that queer/lesbian tend to subscribe to the (post)modernist and “interliterary” tradition questioning modernist “literariness” by proposing an “interliterary” approach, which transcends the “boundaries of individual literatures” (Miller 2019, 242-243).

Zami is indeed a ‘queer’ *Bildungsroman*, although it has been regarded by scholars in many ways. In *Zami*, Lorde recounts her personal life growing up in Harlem, New York City, throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, as well as her subsequent move to other areas of the city, to neighboring states, and even to Mexico. In general, as urged by scholars, what can be considered central to the book is the development—*Bildung*—of Lorde's “gender” and “sexual” identity from early age until adulthood, in addition to her problematic dealings with “race” in the United States. More specifically, it can be observed that whilst the focus of *Zami* is on Lorde's “gender” and “sexual” development, Lorde shows, in this text, that “racial” issues intertwine with “sexual” and “gender” concerns.

Looking at an analysis of this Caribbean American *Bildungsroman* in terms of Bakhtin's understanding of the genre, it can be observed that Lorde's struggle in the socioeconomic as well as sociocultural environment, which is something that Bakhtin ascribed to the classic *Bildungsroman*, is an important ground for identity formation in *Zami*. In his seminal work, “The *Bildungsroman* and its Significance in the History of Realism” (1936-1938), Bakhtin specifically mentioned “socioeconomic factors” as characteristics of the *Bildungsroman* genre, but in another writing entitled “From Notes Made in 1970-71,” Bakhtin emphasized the concomitant role of culture (Bakhtin 1986, 140). As far as *Zami* is concerned, it can be observed that socioeconomic and sociocultural factors do not substantially change Lorde's identity-formation and road to maturity, although they contribute substantially to make this Caribbean writer more aware of herself. Lorde, in fact, states since the beginning of her book her preference for same-sex relationship and follows ups with the development of her desire throughout the text, thus suggesting a considerably linear narrative. In fact, while provoking substantial challenges and trauma, external factors do not affect Lorde's choices in life. This aspect of *Zami* is taken up by Heather Russell, although she specifies:

Lorde's narrative does follow a deceptively linear, chronological form. But she interrupts the narratological flow with italicized passages that appear to be narrated in dream-time, employing a hybrid prose/poetic form and narratively engaging in

spatial/temporal movements that are indicative of Great Time (Russell [2009] 2011), 64).

In the quoted passage, Russell observes that *Zami* follows a linear structure, only theoretically, emphasizing that it has a hybrid prose/poetic form. Like Russell, Rosemarie Garland Thomson agrees on the linear structure of *Zami* when she argues that

[t]he byomitography is a surprisingly linear, teleological, picaresque, selected account of relationships with women that together form a response to the work's initial, structuring question: To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become?" and "To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?" (*Zami* 3) (Thomson 1997, 258).

Thus Thomson emphasises that *Zami* is fundamentally a very linear narrative. Unlike Russell, therefore, Garland sees a more linear narrative in *Zami* rather than an hybrid one from a narratological point of view. The quoted passage by Thomson suggests, in fact, the linear structure of *Zami*, connecting the development of the protagonist to important questions Lorde poses at the beginning of the book. The passage by Thomson also evidences the philosophical and in many ways, picaresque/rogue character of *Zami*, and thus, relative to this last aspect, it can be argued, further evidences the ties between *Zami* and the classic *Bildungsroman* genre, as understood by Bakhtin.

One can argue, in general, that the evolution of Lorde's awareness as a lesbian throughout the book can be considered to be fairly linear, in the sense that Lorde establishes since the beginning of the book her preference for same-sex relationship, but, as the book progresses, her sexuality becomes more complex. It is possible to trace a number of phases that mark the development of Lorde's sexual awareness and the final formation of her identity. One can identify some key moments that mark her sexual and gender awareness and development. One of them, takes place at the beginning of the book, when Lorde meets another little girl called Toni, to whom she feels attracted. Another important phase occurs when Lorde goes through a crisis, following the death of her friend Gennie, that leads her to leave her family and, afterwards, to embrace her lesbian sexuality. A third focal moment happens when Lorde is left pregnant by Peter, whom she had met through mutual political affiliations, and she has an abortion. Subsequent to this episode, Lorde entertains multiple relationships with unconventional women in the United States and Mexico and, ultimately, thanks to these relationships, becomes confident in herself, her choices, and her sexual preferences.

As emphasized by Tracy Curtis in *New Media in Black Women's Autobiography: Intrepid Embodiment and Narrative Innovation* (2015), Peter plays an important role for Lorde's development because she wants to introduce him to her father, but her male parent does not let him in because he is "white." As a result, as pointed out by Curtis, Lorde remarks: "[t]hat immediately catapulted what would have been a passing teenage fancy into a revolutionary cause célèbre" (Lorde, *Zami*, 103)" (Curtis 2015, 32). Thus, Curtis emphasizes that Peter stirs up Lorde's revolutionary fervor, strengthens her will, and makes her resolute to live her home. Moreover, after this event, Lorde leaves New York for Connecticut and starts exploring concretely lesbian relationships. Hence, one could argue that the ending of the

relationship with Peter makes Lorde more decisive to pursue her lesbian involvement (even though, she will later get married and have children, and subsequently, divorce, which evidence her “hybrid” sexuality, but these episodes are not recounted in *Zami*).

Relative to Mexico, as pointed out by Joel Wendland in *The Collectivity of Life: Spaces of Social Mobility and the Individualism Myth* (2016), Lorde's time in this country was important for her *Bildung* because,

reflecting back on this time, in her life, Lorde constructs two important moments in her theoretical development: 1) she recognized that skin's color and “race” have distinctly different meanings outside of the social context of the U.S.; 2) she understood that it was possible for a woman to perform multiple gender roles, identities, and behaviors and remain “beautiful” despite dominant, heteronormative values (Wendland 2016, 59)

What Wendland emphasizes, in the quoted passage, is the importance of the trip to Mexico for Lorde's *Bildung*, as well as the intersection between “race” and “gender” in determining Lorde's well-being.

Whilst, undoubtedly, there are other critical moments throughout *Zami* that help shaping Lorde's personality and confidence (such as her relationship with “The Branded,” in high school), one could mention the above events because they are very important in shaping Lorde's “gender” and “sexual awareness” and they follow through, in many ways, with Bakhtin's ideas regarding the classic autobiographical *Bildungsroman*. In Bakhtin's view, this type of *Bildungsroman* follows in the pattern of books such as St. Augustine's *Confessions*, where there is a “crisis” and a “rebirth.” Similarly, the above-mentioned moments in *Zami* signal a “crisis,” which happens when Lorde realizes that she is a lesbian, although very young, subsequently, when Gennie dies, and “a rebirth,” marked by Lorde leaving home and starting a life of her own, even though there is no radical rupture between the “before” and “after,” since, as we have mentioned, Lorde's narrative is pretty linear. *Zami* also agrees with Bakhtin's perception in the famous text “*The Bildungsroman*” that “the conception of life that underlies a biographical novel is determined either by life's objective results (...) or by the category of happiness/unhappiness” (Bakhtin 1990, 17). With the quoted words, Bakhtin sought to underline that feelings and emotional crises eventually led to a situation of mental wellness. In Bakhtin's view, they are characteristic of the *Bildungsroman* in the autobiographical variant.

In agreement with Bakhtin's perspective, one can observe how, in *Zami*, Lorde seeks to find an emotional balance in her life, which she achieves in Mexico by meeting unconventional women like herself; a feeling she carries with her, once she goes back to the United States. Furthermore, one can note that, following the traditional path of the *Bildungsroman* inferred by Bakhtin, in terms of “becoming,” Lorde starts in a condition of initial insecurity about her “gender” and “sexual” identity but, in the end, she achieves “maturity” and becomes fully confident about her “gender” and “sexuality.” In fact, first, she explores her sexuality in her relationship with her mother only afterwards, upon leaving home, she embarks in lesbian relationships.

On the basis of the narrative recounted in *Zami*, it can therefore be reasonably argued that this autobiography can be acknowledged as a linear narrative. As far as the structure is

concerned, in many ways, it follows through with the classic *Bidungsroman* genre as understood by Bakhtin, even though the protagonist is a woman. Also, in agreement with Miller's view on the lesbian *Bildungsroman*, which was mentioned above, *Zami* describes the coming-of-age of the protagonist from the point of view of “gender” and “sexual” development.

Yet, it must be noted that identity concerns are something that were absent from Bakhtin's characterization of this genre. In general, although being regarded as a *Bidungsroman* and, as this article has mentioned, fitting into the patterns of the classic coming-of-age genre, in many ways, *Zami* has also been read as a *Künstlerroman*, which is to say an artist novel, in that it is a very creative piece of work. As Di Bernard notes, Lorde contends that *Zami* is “a biomythography, which is really fiction. It has the elements of biography and history and myth. In other words, it's fiction built from many sources. This is one way of expanding our vision” (Di Bernard 1991, 195-196). With the quoted words, Di Bernard wishes to emphasize that “[t]he image of a connected artist-self who is able to identify and draw on the strengths of women around her and before her is an important image for all of us to consider” (ibid. 195-196). DiBernard, in fact, analyses *Zami* from the perspective of female creativity, which is what characterizes the *Künstlerroman*, and this is an important perspective which is not usually employed.

While Lorde's creativity in constructing *Zami* is a very powerful and extremely valuable perspective to analyze this book, it can be observed, though, that *Zami* is generally regarded as a “lesbian” or “queer” coming of age narrative by scholars rather than as a *Künstlerroman* (c.f. Bolaki 2011, 185). Although both perspectives are extremely valuable and, in some ways, also complementary, while this paper emphasizes Lorde's creativity in writing *Zami*, it does not focus on examining this book as a *Künstlerroman*. Instead, as mentioned before, it examines *Zami* from the perspective of the *Bildungsroman*.

This paper pays attention to the complexity that transpires from Lorde's book starting from an observation by Stella Bolaki concerning classical *Bildungsroman* narratives. According to Bolaki, Moretti observes that the coming-of-age-novel “has produced a phenomenology that makes normality interesting and meaningful as normality” (Bolaki 2011, 185). Bolaki explains that, for Moretti, “[t]he heroes it has opted for are normal, in the sense of unmarked, but not uninteresting. The normality articulated by the genre is an interesting and lively normality—normality as the expulsion of all marked features, as a true semantic void” (ibid. 187). Bolaki remarks, however, that, Moretti's account does not address the conditions that underlie normality, in particular the violence that enforcing such an ideal presupposes” (ibid.).

Following up on Bolaki's observation, one can note that, indeed, notions of “normality” and “violence” play a central role in *Zami*, since Lorde had to contend with multiple and problematic visions of “normality” in American society. First of all, Lorde has to grapple with her family's attempt to impose a “normal” life-style on her, which suffocated her, denying the freedom to be herself. “Normality” by her family is understood in terms of Caribbean cultural norms and in terms of survival strategies associated with their position as “Black” people in the United States. In addition, Lorde had to deal with the notion of “normality” existing in the society outside her home, which generally condemned homosexuality in addition to regarding as “normal” discrimination against Black people. Furthermore, Lorde had to put up with the

“normality” of a Manichean society, grounded on the opposition “either/or,” where it is extremely difficult to reconcile a Black identity with a homosexual one.

There are several instances where Lorde's problematic experience with “normality” both outside and inside the home environment emerges. As it has been already mentioned, one instance occurs when, as a young girl, Lorde is sitting next to another little girl called Toni whom she felt attracted to. Lorde observes her mother's reaction to her initiative noting:

My mother stepped over the two of us. I flinched, expecting instant retribution at her capable hands. But evidently the enormity of my intentions had escaped my mother's notice. Perhaps she did not care that I was about to usurp that secret prerogative belonging only to mothers about to spank, or to nurses with thermometers (Lorde, 1982, 40-41).

While, as Lorde states, her mother did not realize the implications of her gesture, she felt, nevertheless, uncomfortable in this situation, realizing the terrible consequences of her mother's understanding of Lorde's feelings for/intentions towards Toni.

Although the role of parents in society tends to be viewed, and was especially viewed in the past, as that of educating children according to commonly acceptable principles of education (as implied in fairly “standard” tests of social psychology such as, for example, Van Lange, Kruglanski and Higgins, 2012), or, it should be argued, in the case of Lorde, in terms of survival in American society. In Lorde's case, survival as a “black/mixed” person in American society even though Lorde perceived her “racial” self in different terms. As Louise Aikman notes, Lorde perceived her relationship with her mother as a symbol of the “dysfunctional relationships present within a society which encourages individuals to accept discrimination such as racism and sexism rather than confront these issues” (Aikman 2001, 320). The quoted passage by Aikman evidences that Lorde's mother's reaction places Lorde in an uncomfortable situation because her “ab”-“normal” feelings towards the little girl she has just met contrasts with the “ab”-“normal” expectations of her mother relatively to her sexual preferences, but it also made Lorde reflect on American society at large.

Another instance when Lorde has to contend with a problematic understanding of “normality” in American society occurs in high school, when, talking to “white” friends about different subjects, she is unable to address “racial” differences. As Lorde states, they considered “who studied German or French, who liked poetry or doing “the twist”, who went out with boys, and who was “progressive.” We even talked about our position as women in a world supposed to be run by men” (Lorde 1982, 81). However, deep dialogues encompassing “racial” differences between them never occurred. As Lorde observes, “we never ever talked about what it meant and felt to be Black and white, and the effects that had on our being friends” (Lorde 1982, 81). Thus, Lorde stresses how with this group of friends “race” and “racism” were a taboo. In contrast, later on in life, she would engage in dialogue with people she met in progressive circles, with whom she could openly examine color and “racial” differences (Lorde 1982, 149). Yet, with them, she could not engage in open talks about her homosexuality and for this reason the feelings of connection with them “were as tenuous as those” she had with her “co-workers at the Health Center” (Lorde 1982, 149). Only after coming back from Mexico

to New York City and having started attending Hunter College, Lorde was able to find a circle of lesbians with whom to engage in mutual support.

Lesbians, according to Lorde, “were probably the only Black and white women, in New York City, in the fifties who were making any real attempt to communicate with each other; we learned lessons from each other, the values of which were not lessened by what we did not learn” (Lorde 1982, 179). What the quoted words reveal is that, for Lorde, lesbian groups were the only circle with whom she was not confronted with the dichotomy “gender” vs. “race,” prevailing in American society at the time (but not only at that time, as we shall see), and with whom she felt truly comfortable.

In short, what the above-mentioned episodes reveal is Lorde's struggle with prevalent conceptions of “normality and “a-”“normality” in American society. Although these words had different meanings according to the circle she interacted with, they hardly coincided with Lorde's “ab-”normal” search for an “intercultural” dialogue, which encompassed “racial,” as well as “gender” issues/differences. This is to say that Lorde sought dialogue across different and contrasting realities to break up with the Manichean “racial” and “gender” divide, according to which you either focused on your gender or on your race, prevailing in the United States. Confirming this interpretation of Lorde's work in the *Encyclopaedia of Postcolonial Studies*, Kara Provost points out that, in the same way that the sexually ambiguous Afriquete mentioned in *Zami* functions as a mediator “between gods and humans,” Lorde sought communication across groups “that either cannot or do not interact, including blacks, whites, women, men, heterosexuals, working-class people, and academics (Provost 2001, 45-59). Provost's perspective on Lorde's autobiographical work confirms the contention, in this article, that interculturalism and intercultural dialogue were very meaningful for her as a way to challenge problematic notions of “normality” in society.

This view is also articulated by Lisa Diane McGill in her book, *Constructing Black Selves-Caribbean American Narratives and the Second Generation* (2005), where she argues that “the byomitography provides a ‘dialogue’ that attempts community-building with various populations despite perceived dissimilarities in the human experience” (McGill 2005, 154). In other words, one can reasonably conclude that in *Zami*, communication emerges as a necessary and powerful tool to deflate commonly held assumptions of “normality” in American society. This is to say, as *Zami* explains, that it is only through dialogue that Lorde was able to reconfigure the relationship between herself and other citizens and also between herself and the state, in a new, challenging “outsider” hybrid fashion.

As far as notions of “a-”“normality” are concerned, it can be further noted that challenging notions of “normality” is the reason why Lorde's books stood out when it was published, but also why it continues to constitute an extremely valuable and challenging piece of literature today. When she was looking for an editor, in fact, no one offered to publish her work precisely because it did not fit into one single category. According to Barbara Smith, Lorde's work was refused by “a dozen or more mainstream publishing houses,” “a house known for publishing gay titles” included (Smith 1989, 123). In Smith's view, the “white male editor at that supposedly sympathetic house returned the manuscript saying, ‘if only you were just one,’ Black or lesbian” (Smith 1989, 123). As it is evinced by Smith's explanation for the gay editor's refusal to publish Lorde's book, the profound dichotomy that characterizes American society, according to which you have to fit into one specific category only. As a result, the

publication of *Zami* was a very difficult task for Lorde, who, in contrast, subscribed to multiple and hybrid identity constructs. Eventually, *Zami* was published by Persephone Press, an independent press, in 1982 (Graham 2019, 257, 259).

In agreement with the established argumentation on the importance of perspectives of “a/normality” in Lorde's text, introduced, earlier on, one can note that Bolaki and other authors focus on how Lorde constructs the “normality” and “abnormality” of her body marked by cancer, or on how she builds the “normality” and “abnormality” of the “black” woman's body marked by racism, in *Zami* as well as in other narratives. They leave, in part, “race” aside. In contrast, this article pays attention, to the “a”-“normality” (the hybridity/simultaneous combination of normality and a-normality presented in the text) of Lorde' understanding of “gender” and “sexuality.” As it will be argued, in the last part, “normality” considerations are made by Lorde using both American and Caribbean narratives, an intercultural but also, in some ways, already postmodern vision, where “cultural anachronism” plays a central role.

In many ways, *Zami* recounts Lorde's life throughout the 1930s, 1940s 50s, and 60s, and foregrounds the subsequent sexual liberation that took place at the end of the 1960s, and especially in the 1970s (McGraw 2019, 57ff, 70 ff.; Stein 2012). *Zami* clearly espouses views “in between different epochs” and, as explained by Bakhtin, this is a characteristic of the classic *Bildungsroman* (Morson and Emerson 1990, 405). It is evidence of “historical anachronism,” (ibid.), which, according to Bakhtin, is a characteristic of the classic *Bildungsroman*. This view is also taken up by Miller (2019) in her chapter on the lesbian and gay *Bildungsroman*. According to Miller, “[t]his twentieth-century version of the form involves an enhancement of the psychological fiction of the late Victorian age, an elevation of psychic interiority to mythic status. That is to say, it is to some degree modernist” (Miller 2019, 247). What Miller, evidences is the important function of myth in gay and lesbian *Bildungsromane*, almost as a means to legitimize their identity outside canonical contexts. As Miller further argues relative to E.M Forster's novel *Maurice* (another *Bildungsroman* from 1917), “[t]he triumphant queer self is mutually exclusive with national and social belonging here. It is outside borders which are figured as national and as ‘civilised’” (ibid.). These two functions of mythology as historical anachronism and as a legitimization of the protagonist's identity outside prevailing social and cultural norms fulfill, indeed, an extremely important function in *Zami*.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the article has argued that *Zami* is a classic *Bildungsroman*, although it also departs from the genre. Set between the 1930s and 1950s, *Zami* articulates important and innovative vision of “gender” and “sexuality,” thanks to Lorde’s intercultural perspective, which would be later articulated in the subsequent gay and lesbian movement of the 1960s-1970s. Moreover, the article has observed how *Zami* invites important considerations on the *Bildungsroman* genre as written by feminist women. In particular, the article shows that while maintaining ties with the classic *Bildungsroman*, *Zami* also departs from it.

To end this article, it can be noted that Lorde constructs “gender” and “sexuality” in both “homo” and “hetero” sexual terms, thus challenging fragmentary “cultural notions” on these themes in two ways. On the one hand, *Zami* simultaneously accepts what could be defined as the homosexual “culture” and the heterosexual one thus, disrupting the fixity of “gender”

and “sexual” constructs. On the other hand, it embraces the Caribbean and American culture to contribute culturally hybrid visions to the construction of sexuality. It can be observed that *Zami* challenges Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble* that “sex” is a socially constructed notion. In *Zami*, Lorde ultimately shows that “sexual” choices are a matter of inclination and preferences. Receiving a heterosexual upbringing, in fact, Lorde discovers since an early age an inclination for same-sex relationship, but she also retains an interest in heterosexuality, thus challenging the idea that “sex” is socially constructed. Additionally, Lorde subverts both homosexual and heterosexual norms. Although Butler is critical of “choice” and “feelings” as a revolutionary social force, Lorde shows that “love” is necessary to sustain changes in “sexual” and “gender” social constructs.

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