

## **Text as fetish: *Zami* by Audre Lorde**

Peter Kalu

There is this one book I have which is more precious to me than any other. It's a battered, broken-spined, pages-adrift paperback copy of Audre Lorde's *Zami*. I love this book. I bought it on impulse off an internet book supplier for 99 pence. It was one of those ex-public library copies, originally owned by Brent library if I recall rightly, and has all the stamps and sellotaped Dewey Decimal numbering system stickers on the spine and a label stamped with withdrawal dates on the flyleaf. It spilled rather than slid out of its delivery envelope and I guess 99% of people might have sent it back or cursed the internet gods for their misleading sellers' descriptions. Me? I was delighted.

Because it was not only a book containing the autobiography of one of the foremost feminist poet-thinkers of the twentieth century, it was actually also, through the many scribblings in its margins, a strange, unique, curious, bespoke history (or *herstory*) of the feminist movement. I found the scribblings urgent and wondrous. I can't quote them here (even library book scribblers must retain copyright in their words) but the jottings were both incisive and dramatic and, since my impression was these etchings had occurred over two or three decades, full of the shifting nuances or emphases of their times: *'I'm going to show this to Georgina'*; *'Loretta needs to read this: will see her at Group tonight'*; *'How true, how true'*; *'I am furious'*. From the handwriting, it was possible also to guess at age. The

florid, looping cursives of the seventies alternates with the simplified neat links of the nineties and everything in between. Excited, spluttering, blotchy pens of high school students are overwritten by the pigeon-scratching, spluttering, slanted scrawl of inflamed academics, who cede to the soft, sumptuous, looping rise and falls of the dreaming poets. From the gal-dem book clubs, to the 1970s consciousness-raising groups, to the yoga and mindfulness workshops of now, the book feels like a sheaf of UK feminist movement inheritance letters more than a dry text. Not that the content is at all dry.

What does the book, *Zami* tell me about Audre Lorde, biography-wise? She was born in 1934 to a poor Caribbean family in New York, grew up with a stern mum and a distant dad. She was very short-sighted, designated as 'legally blind' at an early age, and depended on powerful glasses.

As adolescence arrived and she began to explore her sexuality, she found there were no templates at the time for her that gave any take on how to live your life as a Black lesbian; there were no support groups, no books, no nothing. In what struck me as an act of great courage, Audre Lorde sailed out into the world while remaining true to her nature, her feelings. Lorde writes of her life in her late teens to early twenties with great candour and pathos, not a little humour, and with a rich, aching open-heartedness and sense of others' vulnerable circumstances. Two snapshots from the book: I love how she lugs her typewriter around from place to place (those things were heavy in those days, not like iPads, etc.). I also love her descriptions of hanging out at night clubs, the subtleties and inside humour she reveals. My copy of *Zami* is a treasured book. For the words written by Audre Lorde. And also for the sense of a community history that the physical copy I have contains.

## Peter Kalu

Born to a Danish mother and a Nigerian father in Manchester in the sixties, Peter Kalu grew up in Manchester. His short stories can be found in *Seaside Special* (Yorkshire: Bluemoose 2018), *A country to call home* (London: Unbound 2018) and *Closure* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press 2015).

He is currently interested in the problematics of closure in the narrative form — the sense that, in providing neat endings, the story form suggests the world is fixable. The questioning of essentialist or intrinsic identity – as that may or may not relate to the authenticity of lived experience, black ‘double-consciousness’, the narrative text as an attempt at reproducing consciousness, and the fundamental contingency of culturally-inflected notions of personality – also keeps him up at night, along with worry about paying bills. An associated concern is the nature of self-narrative, and the dynamic between storytelling and selfhood in answering the question ‘who am I?’ (as opposed to the question ‘what am I?’).

Retrieving lost, elided and disavowed British black histories is a further trope in his work, and he has written three short stories as part of the Leicester University co-ordinated *Colonial Countryside* project. His chapter ‘Strangers at the Gate: Intermediality, Borders and the Short Story’ can be found in the Palgrave Macmillan academic publication: *Borders and the Border Crossings in the Contemporary British Short Story* (2020). He tried but was unable to squeeze the word ‘ontology’ into this paragraph.

A recording of this talk can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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