

# “Start with Truth and end with Art”

Understanding the biomythography through “Zami: A New Spelling of my Name” and “On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous”

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## Abstract

Through a reading of Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), this thesis attempts to define the genre-characteristics of the biomythography. The biomythography is a genre created by Lorde specifically for her text *Zami*, and has never become widely used. Yet, it joins several other terms in seeking alternatives to traditional genres.

The thesis argues that the genre of the biomythography offers a way of analysing how literary texts portray the multi-layered experiences of queer people and people of colour, emphasizing textual elements of community, myth, and desire. First, it examines the defining genre-characteristics of the biomythography through an analysis of *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Thereafter, it offers a biomythographic reading of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* to illustrate the possibilities offered by reading texts as biomythographies.

The thesis finds that while there are alternative terms to the biomythography that seek to describe those books which are both autobiographical and fictional, they do not include elements which Lorde considers to be crucial to her book. It argues that the biomythography allows for both personal and communal storytelling, and that it provides a focus on the individual as part of a larger community. Furthermore, it finds that the biomythography offers a reading of the way myths are used as a form of alternative knowledge and history writing. It argues that the flexible form of the biomythography allows for desire expressed in non-conforming ways. Finally, it finds that several elements of Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* supports a reading of the book as a biomythography, but that it differs from *Zami* in the use of myths. Whilst Lorde uses mythological creatures to centre the black female as divine, Vuong uses mythological stories alongside personal ones to rewrite history as a mythology. Ultimately, biomythographic readings of texts offer a way of examining how authors queer genre in order to express their multidimensional selves and the experiences of their communities.

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# 1 Introduction

Is it possible to differentiate between truth and fiction in life writing where identity is at the core, and is this actually a goal in the literature which mixes lived experiences with art? Different forms of life writing continue to hold relevance as discussions on identity continues to shape culture, academia, and politics. As these forms of writing expand and develop, the truth is no longer a given. And as countless texts blur the lines between truth and fiction, and understandings of genre expand, the role of genre in how we read texts becomes significant. As literary production and genre traditionally has catered to, and centred, the heterosexual, white, man, an effort has been made to rethink how people who do not fit into this image should engage with the literary world, and whose stories we prioritise. Breaking with traditional genre conventions can involve creating new genres, or utilising genres which already exists in new ways. Ultimately, both become a way of queering genre, thus challenging the literary establishment, and centring those voices which historically have been excluded from literature.

Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*<sup>1</sup> (1982) is neither a novel nor an autobiography. Instead, Lorde has given it the name *biomythography*, a hyphenation of the words *biography* and *myth*. This hints at a text that is neither fact nor fiction, and that breaks with traditional rules of genre. Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*<sup>2</sup> (2019) is also a text that is not easily categorized into established genres. Vuong himself has stated that the book is closely inspired by his own life and his own relationship with his mother (Haber), but the book is advertised as fiction (Penguin Random House). These books join several other texts in existing in the realm between fiction and autobiography, refusing to choose between the two.

Audre Lorde (1934-1992) grew up in New-York to West-Indian parents (Lorde 2018). Her publications include several poetry and essay-collections, as well as the biomythography *Zami*, and *The Cancer Journals* (1980) which includes sections of her personal journal detailing her battle with breast cancer. In 1992, she died of her illness in her parents' homeland Grenada (Keating 1996, 1). *Zami* is a primarily chronological recount of the protagonist Audre's life from birth to mid-twenties. The story details her relationship with her mother, her romantic relationships, and her experience as a black lesbian in New York in the '50s. Alongside Audre's life-story is a historical narrative about American domestic politics. It was Lorde's language

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<sup>1</sup> *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* will from now on only be referred to as *Zami*.

<sup>2</sup> *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* will from now on only be referred to as *On Earth*.

which first captivated me when reading *Zami*. Her use of poetry and poetic language produces some beautiful and authentic passages. Additionally, I was drawn towards Audre's relationship to her mother. Audre's mother is strict but seeped through the descriptions of her firmness there is an understanding of the complex and scary task of raising children in a racist, hostile society. Throughout the text, there is an underlying love for her mother which I was intrigued by.

The complex portrayal of motherhood was also what initially intrigued me when reading *On Earth*. Ocean Vuong (1988–) is a Vietnamese American poet, writer, and professor, who has published several poetry collections. *On Earth* is his first and only published work of fiction. Vuong was born in Vietnam, but grew up in Hartford, Connecticut where he was raised by his mother, grandmother, and aunt (Wolk). *On Earth* received critical acclaim and widespread popularity when it was published in 2019 (ibid.). It is an epistolary novel formed by letters the protagonist writes to his illiterate mother. The book portrays a mother-son relationship which is complex, similar to in *Zami*. In 2020, Vuong was chosen as one of a hundred writers to write a text for the Future Library, a project where select writers will write pieces for an anthology which is to be released in 2114. In May 2023 Vuong handed over his manuscript at a ceremony in Oslo.

Although their shared focus on motherhood was what made me initially consider paring *Zami* and *On Earth*, it was their similar ways of queering genre which ended up as my focal point. The choice to pair *Zami* with *On Earth* was made because both texts include the same fragmentation of the text in the form of poetry and lyrical elements, as well as experimenting with linearity and voice. Additionally, both authors have written texts which depict upbringings that bear close resemblances to the authors' own lives, but simultaneously insist that the books are fictional. Therefore, I was interested in whether Lorde's term *biomythography* was appropriate as a description of *On Earth*, or if it was just easy to draw this conclusion because of the many similarities between the texts. I also I wished to challenge the biomythography-genre to see how applicable it was to different types of text, and thus chose one that was written in a different time period, and that already had a clear genre as an epistolary novel.

With this thesis I aim to develop an understanding of what the biomythography is, and what possibilities reading texts as biomythographies opens up for. Furthermore, I intend to develop a wider understanding of autobiographically based fiction writing in general. I want to examine whether the distinction between biomythography and established genres such as biography, autobiography, and the novel is needed, or whether biomythography is just a new name for concepts that already exist. Relatedly, I will touch upon alternative terms that are similar to biomythography and explore whether these evoke the same meaning.

This thesis argues that the genre of the biomythography offers a way of analysing how literary texts portray the multi-layered experiences of queer people and people of colour, emphasizing textual elements of community, myth, and desire. First, the thesis will examine the defining genre-characteristics of the biomythography through an analysis of *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Thereafter, it will offer a biomythographic reading of *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* to illustrate the possibilities offered by reading texts as biomythographies. In this introduction, theory concerning auto/biography and life writing will be presented, before a discussion on genre will highlight why the classification of texts is important.

The thesis uses several essays from *The Routledge Auto/Biography Studies Reader*, edited by Ricia Anne Chansky and Emily Hipchen, to form a theoretical understanding of the auto/biography genre. Additionally, it draws on the important work of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, especially their book *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. The scholarship on Lorde is extensive, and includes countless books, articles, and reviews, which will accompany the analyses in the first chapter of the thesis. Additionally, some of Lorde's essays from her essay collection, *Sister Outsider* (1984) will be employed. Scholarship on *On Earth* is sparser but is complemented with interviews with Vuong in which he discusses his works and his approach to literature.

### **1.1 Auto/biography and life writing**

Various terminology is used to describe the different forms of writing about oneself or another person. *Auto/biography* is a term created by Professor of English Timothy Dow Adams which refers to scholarship that encompasses both autobiographies and biographies (Chansky xxi). Other scholars prefer to use the term *life writing* to include the broad spectrum of texts about the self beyond auto/biographies, such as memoirs, blogs etc. (ibid.). Marlene Kadar, Professor of English, explains that she prefers life writing to auto/biography because autobiography requires "too much unity of the narrative, and too much 'objective' or reasoned thinking" (89). This suggests that life writing is a more flexible genre that allows for more experimentation and play, whilst auto/biographies aim for an objective truth. As the differences between autobiography and biography will be significant when discussing the etymology of biomythography, this thesis will employ the term auto/biography when discussing both at the same time, and autobiography and biography when a distinction is necessary. Life writing will sometimes be used as an umbrella term, with biomythography functioning as a form of life writing.

Contemporary auto/biography studies formally emerged as a field of study after James Olney's symposium in 1985, which gathered scholars devoted to writing about life stories (Chansky xx). Chansky points out that auto/biography studies were able to develop because of the space created by women's studies and post-colonial studies for analysis focused on identity construction (ibid.). Autobiography is often separated into three components: *Autos* (self), *bios* (life), and *graphie* (writing) (Adams 49; Olney; Smith 2016, 82). Biography then consists of *bios* (life) and *graphie* (writing). Thus, autobiography implies the writing about one's own life, whilst biography implies writing about another person's life. Several scholars seem to reach the same conclusion: because of the massive variation within the field, auto/biography cannot be defined, and consequently it is difficult to establish as a genre (Adams 49-50; Olney). It can be particularly difficult to distinguish between autobiographies and novels, as they share several features, for example plot, dialogue, setting, and characterization (Smith & Watson 10). Thus, the boundaries between autobiographies and novels become blurred. Because the biomythography most obviously resembles, and is confused for, an autobiography, the remainder of this section will focus primarily on autobiographies.

The question of truth in the context of autobiography is significant because it seemingly separates an autobiography (true) from a novel (fictitious). The importance of truth to autobiographies was vocalised by Philippe Lejeune in 1975 as "the autobiographical pact", which he later defined as "... the engagement that an author takes to narrate his life directly (...) in a spirit of truth" (Lejeune 2005, quoted in Miller 538). Still, the history of American autobiography is full of works that either intentionally or unintentionally blur the boundaries between truth and fabrication (Adams 51). The late 1960s saw authors deliberately mix novel and autobiography or memoir in the titles of their books because of an emerging awareness of the complicated nature of truth in writing (ibid.). This shows how complicated the idea of truth in autobiographies is.

Although auto/biography may claim truth, it is difficult to imagine being able to recount an absolute truthful account of a life. The biographer will not have access to another person's life in its entirety, and so even if she tells the truth, she will not be able to tell the *entire* truth. Still, because biography is grounded in history, whilst autobiography is generally grounded in memory, biography is often considered a more precise genre (Banner 103). Remembering involves reinterpretation, and therefore narrated memory becomes an interpretation of the past, an interpretation which can never be retold with complete accuracy (Smith & Watson 22). Relatedly, no autobiographer can be completely objective about her own life. Adams points out that "the truth of one's self can be very different from the truth of one's life" (54). A person



may have experienced her life in a way that does not fully align with the historical truth of her life. It is therefore unlikely that we can talk about absolute truthful auto/biographies, which may be why authors such as Lorde seem to be rejecting the expectation of truth altogether.

The significance of life writing for people who are, or have traditionally been, marginalised by society makes sense when considering their lack of representation in literature and history writing throughout history. Originally, autobiographies allowed the white, male, bourgeois, heterosexual human being to write themselves as representatives for the universal human subject (Smith 1993, 393). And yet, Olney points to autobiography playing a significant role as the focalising literature for so-called “identity-studies”, such as postcolonial studies and women’s studies (8). Autobiography allows people to claim space, thus claiming subjecthood and creating themselves as subjects. Additionally, it ultimately allows an author to portray a collective cultural experience through a personal narrative (ibid.). It then makes sense that it was through autobiographies that people who did not fit into the mould of the white, bourgeois heterosexual man initially entered the literary sphere.

Autobiographies have played a key role in the development of literature by people who have been marginalised in society, such as black people, queer people, and women. Black history was preserved in autobiographies rather than in history, and it was through autobiographies that black people in the U.S. were first allowed to participate in the production of literature (Olney 9). Autobiography was one of the most significant genres when developing a black literary culture (McKay 96). In America, black, female autobiography has roots in the writing by African American women who took inspiration from both the slave narratives written by black men, and from the female sentimental novel (Willey 27). Because African American women had to express being both black and women, they often created “generic hybrids” instead of remaining completely true to established genre conventions, as Lorde’s biomythography is an example of (ibid. 27-28). For women in general, autobiography has been important in allowing for alternatives to male history writing. Sidonie Smith, Professor Emerita of English and Women's Studies, writes that the women who dared to write autobiography “transgressed the culture’s boundaries of legitimate female self-representation, staying from the margins into another’s country, there to engage competing narrative figures of selfhood” (2016, 83). By centring women’s domestic lives, autobiographies are important tools in writing women into history. This point can be extended to include queer people, who to a certain extent have been made completely invisible in history, as public discourses on homosexuality didn’t occur until the late nineteenth century (Sommerville 16). Thus, autobiographies become a way to

assert one's own place in history, and to give one's own identity a value that it has not been given historically.

## 1.2 Genre

The categorisation of texts into genres might seem arbitrary, but as the previous sub-chapter has highlighted, genre is something that is coded with cultural significance. The discussions about which role genre plays in shaping how we read and talk about texts are extensive and cannot be answered within the limitations of this thesis. But those who assign value to genres beyond simply being a form of categorisation, emphasise that because we have certain expectations of specific genres, a text's genre influences how we read that text. John Frow, Professor of English, argues that genres involve a structuring and shaping of meaning and value (73). He writes that genres produce "effects of truth and authority that are specific to it" (ibid.). Thus, genres work at a level of semiosis (ibid. 19), and a text's genre guides our engagement with the text (ibid. 104). The genre which we assign to a text affects how we read this text, and therefore the genre functions to assign meaning and influences the expectations we have of a text whilst reading it.

The context from which a genre emerges will influence the meanings and values we associate with the genre. In his highly influential book 'The Rise of the Novel' (1957), former Professor of English at Stanford University, Ian Watt, suggest that the period of formation of a genre establishes the essential characteristics of that genre, i.e., that a genre cannot evolve or change from its original purpose (Schwarz 59). He argues that the rise of the novel must be seen in an historical, institutional, and social context, and that the characteristics of the novel are influenced by the time period from which it originated and gained popularity (ibid.). When arguing that Jane Austen's novels are the first examples of the English novel, he highlights her emphasis on social and moral problems, marriage, and "the proper norms of the social system" (Watts 29, quoted in Schwarz 61). The use of the word 'proper' shows a clear prejudice towards certain manners and morals, and the focus on marriage and the "proper feminine role in the matter" (ibid.) shows how the novel played a significant role in upholding heteronormative family ideals and sexual morality. Thus, genres are not exempt from the larger discourses in our society, making some authors question how best to reject the patriarchal history of established genres.

Resistance to the norm can be found both within the confines of genre, or by rejecting established genres. Smith notes that formerly excluded subjects can use genres such as

autobiography, biography, and life writing in different ways than they were intended by centring themselves and their experiences, thus undermining the original intent of these provided forms (1993, 404). She claims that traditional autobiography “allows no space for female desire and subjectivity” and that “in telling her own women’s story, she [the female autobiographer] wrenches autobiographical form, vision, and language to her own ends” (Smith 2016, 87). In this way, excluded subjects are utilising the already existing genres as a type of protest and to claim subjecthood. But for those who, like Watt, believe that the characteristics of a genre can never be separated from the context from which it originated, the established genres have to be replaced by new genres. Kadar argues that whilst there are merits to “holding on to the old word and creating a case for ‘women’s autobiography’”, as Smith does, it is still crucial for women to reject autobiography, and instead theorise a new genre that “goes beyond and yet includes the old word, the old gender, and the old style” (90). The belief is then that these new genres, untainted by the established genres’ history, will be more equipped to portray the multifaceted subject-identities of those who have been othered by patriarchal structures.

If utilising Lorde’s own terminology, continuing to use traditional genres of literature can be seen as an attempt to use ‘the master’s tools’ to dismantle the patriarchal values that traditional genres serve to maintain. But as Lorde states in the title of her famous essay: ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’. The essay was originally a speech, where Lorde emphasised the importance of recognising and acknowledging difference instead of pretending that it does not exist (Lorde 2019, 105). She concluded that we cannot fight against oppression from the patriarchy by mirroring their oppressive practises such as racism and homophobia, and asks: “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable” (ibid. 103). In the same way, using the existing, patriarchal genres cannot allow for the amount of change that needs to occur. Thus, by creating the biomythography, Lorde herself is rejecting the patriarchy’s tools in favour of her own genre.

### **1.3 Biomythography**

Biomythography is a term that was coined by Audre Lorde specifically for her text *Zami*.<sup>3</sup> In interviews, she explains that she created this genre because no other genre did specifically what

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<sup>3</sup> In *Literary Biography: An Introduction* (2009) Michael Benton uses the term biomythography to refer to literary works that are influenced by their authors’ celebrity status. Benton’s definition is more focused on biographies than autobiographies. His book does not make any reference to Audre Lorde or her use of the term, thus it is uncertain whether he believes that he has created it himself, or whether he has chosen to apply his own definition to the term created by Lorde.

she wanted the biomythography to do, which, among other things, was to combine several genres in order to tell a story (Nolle-Fischer 155; Tate 115). The term seems to have been created because the established genres were too limiting for a text like *Zami*, as they did not allow for a representation of the multifaceted experience of being a black, lesbian woman in the United States. Monica B. Pearl, Professor of English and American Studies, notes that when *Zami* was published, there was limited representation of black lesbians in literature: literature by and about lesbians was mostly white, whilst literature by and about black people was mostly heteronormative (309). This made it difficult to rely on the genres and styles of writing that already existed, which led Lorde to create the form she needed to fully express all her identities and the different interlacing aspects of these identities and experiences (ibid.). Thus, by creating a new genre, Lorde creates space for the expression of her full self and for the various forms of storytelling she wishes to utilise.

Because the term biomythography is created by Lorde herself, the etymology of the word might be significant in understanding the specific characteristics that make up the genre, and the way it is different from other genres. Karen Weeks, Professor of English, has researched its etymology and concludes that biomythography does not exist in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* or *The Encyclopaedia of Life Writing* (333). Lorde does not explain which elements the biomythography is comprised of, which opens for at least two separate ways of reading the word. It can either be understood as comprising of *bio – myth – ography* or *bio – mythography*. In the first alternative, the word *myth* splits the word *biography* in two, whilst in the second definition, *bio-* is a prefix to the word *mythography*. This thesis chooses to understand biomythography as a hyphenation of *biography* and *myth*, primarily because of Lorde's own use of the term *myth* in interviews (Tate; Jay). It uses OED's first definition of myths as: "A traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon" (OED, Myth, n). This definition aligns with the purpose of myth in the biomythography, in that Lorde includes West-African myths in *Zami*, which will be further explored in the following chapter.

Although *Zami* bears closer resemblance to an autobiography than a biography, Lorde has chosen to call it a *biomythography* instead of an *automythography*. Karen Weekes notes that this choice suggests that the text is not merely personal, it also tells of a collective experience, in Lorde's case the history of black lesbians in the United States (335, 337). A defining feature of the biomythography thus might be that it tells a collective story as well as personal one, making it a form of history writing that seeks to include those people whose

histories have not traditionally been (allowed to be) told. The bio- prefix connecting the genre closer to a biography than an autobiography also suggests that Lorde is writing about a person separate from herself, creating a distance between herself and the text (ibid. 334). This becomes an acknowledgement of the fact that the book is fiction, even though it bears resemblance to Lorde's own life. The term biomythography then suggests both collective storytelling and a distance between the author and the protagonist.

Lorde has answered the question about what the biomythography is several times, and given several explanations of how she considers the biomythography to be different from other genres. And yet, these answers in themselves do not seem to give a distinct definition of what the characteristics of the biomythography is. Lorde highlights that the biomythography is an intermixing of autobiography, mythology, and psychology (Jay 110; Tate 115). Furthermore, she emphasises that *Zami* includes both personal stories and stories from other women (Jay 110). From this we understand that the biomythography is comprised of several genres and of stories from several women. This understanding is supported by the more detailed definition Lorde gives of the biomythography to the German translator of *Zami*, Karen Nolle-Fischer:

If I call it a biomythography and not a novel, although it is for me fiction – narrative prose – that's because it embraces so many genres, certainly autobiography, but also history, mythology, psychology, all the different channels through which we, in my opinion, absorb information, process it, and create something new. Through much in *Zami* is autobiographical, it is not an autobiography (Nolle-Fischer 155).

This answer again stresses that the biomythography consists of many genres, and that it is not an autobiography even though it contains several autobiographical elements. Thus, we might read the biomythography as a genre which utilises several different genres in order to tell a story, and which does not aim for an accurate and truthful recount of one person's life but for a representation of a set of collective experiences.

Several scholars have attempted to define the biomythography and its characteristics. Caren Kaplan, Professor of American Studies, summarises the strategy of biomythography as focusing on "... the process as well as the materials of autobiographical narrative without insisting on any rule or form" (212). This definition suggests that the biomythography is a genre which has sprung out from the autobiography, but which is more flexible in terms of form. Smith and Watson posit that "Lorde redefines life writing as a biography of the mythic self (...), a self she discovers in imaginatively affiliating with a mythic community of other lesbian women. In *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, Lorde uses the term to refer to an affiliation with her mother's place of origin and a sisterhood of lesbian friends" (263). This definition

emphasises the significance of myth, heritage, and (lesbian) communities to the biomythography. Karen Weeks gives perhaps the most detailed definition of the term, writing that biomythographies are:

(...) fragmented and non-linear, blend fiction with myth with fact, are highly imaginative and imagistic, speak both collectively and individually, and repudiate forces that attempt to distort the protagonist's development. The result is an identity-mosaic resonant with themes of Otherness and disenfranchisement (Weekes 334).

Weekes' definition points to the biomythography as a genre that is not dependent on linearity or truth, and which speaks both collectively and individually. She also alludes to its significance for writers who are othered by society. Additionally, Smith and Watson's emphasis on community and myth point towards a focus on these themes as a way of reading texts as biomythographies.

As the previous sections have suggested, biomythographies do not appear to require linearity, but uses fragmentation intentionally to tell a story. They do not follow normative genre conventions and are not bound by a promise to give a truthful, linear account of a life. Both *Zami* and *On Earth* include poetic elements throughout the text and mixes personal memory with later anecdotes. This flexible structure allows for queer conceptions of time and space. Jack Halberstam, Professor of Gender Studies and English, has created the term queer time to refer to how time functions differently in a queer context, and how a queer lifespan might look different to heteronormative ideas of a lived life (2012, 368). Halberstam's essay, 'Queer Temporalities and Postmodern Geographies' (2005), introduces a definition of queer that is separate from sexual identity, one which refers to "nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (2012, 368). The heteronormative concept of time is centred around birth, marriage, reproduction, and death, but queer time allows for an imagined life outside of these structures (ibid. 364-365). Queer time then becomes a way to acknowledge how the lifespans of queer people might look drastically different than for those who fit into the mainstream, heteronormative structures. Thus, the biomythography's rejection of linearity becomes a reflection of the particular function time has in a queer context.

Some scholars have suggested that Lorde did not in fact create a new genre, but merely created a term for a genre that already existed. Pearl suggests that biomythography is in fact a combination of the American slave narrative and the lesbian coming out story, and argues that this makes it a text that fits seamlessly into the tradition of American literature (307). She adds that *Zami* ends up highlighting the similarities between these two types of life writing, which

suggests a “common narrative trajectory of marginal American identities in the tradition of American life-writing” (ibid.). But as Pearl herself states, *Zami* cannot be placed into any of these categories because they do not leave room for all of Lorde’s identities, and the specific experience of being both gay and black, hence why the biomythography is necessary. It is also important to reiterate the significance of Lorde herself insisting that *Zami* is fiction. This means that even though the biomythography might have roots in autobiographical genres, this is only one element of the genre, which as previously stressed uses elements from several genres.

There are several terms used to describe those texts which exist between autobiography and autobiographical fiction. Weekes suggests alternative terms to biomythography such as automythography and autofiction (331, 343). However, removing the *bio-* prefix, as in automythography, would remove Lorde’s emphasis on the biomythography as a form of collective storytelling. Similarly, the term autofiction does not allude to the significance of myth to the story in the same way that biomythography does. The biomythography very specifically functions to do what Lorde wants it to do, and the specific components of the name allude to different aspects of the genre which are significant to understanding its purpose. Nevertheless, the term does fit into a wider group of terminology employed to those texts that exist between fiction and truth, between autobiography and the novel.

Ultimately, the biomythography is a genre which queers established genre conventions by refusing to choose between truth and fiction. It does not put limitations on form or structure, which opens for different modes of storytelling. Furthermore, it uses individual stories to portray a collective experience. This thesis specifically focuses on how the biomythography provides ways of reading community, desire, and myth in texts. The choice was made to focus on these three elements because of how prevalent they are in *Zami*, which in several ways becomes the base from which the biomythography is constructed. The following chapter will analyse what makes *Zami* a biomythography, focusing in particular on how community, myth, and desire function in the text, and how they contribute to expressions of the multi-layered experiences of queer people and people of colour.

## 2 *Zami*: A New Spelling of My Name. A Biomythography.

Audre Lorde describes herself as a ‘Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet’ (Lorde 2019). It then makes sense that her semi-autobiographical work should be one that is able to encompass all these identities. Because the biomythography is a genre created by Lorde for her own text, it is perfectly tailored to fit her needs. It is not bound by established autobiographical genre conventions such as linearity or truth, and thus can be formed to allow for the exploration of the self in the way that Lorde wants it to. In the same way that Lorde takes different parts of herself and creates a cohesive self, the biomythography is multifaceted and allows space for different forms of the self and self-expression. In this way, it is recognising that our identity is not set, but is complex, ever evolving, and malleable. At the centre of this exploration of identity are the women in Lorde’s life; lovers, neighbours, family, friends, and god(desse)s. It is through community, desire, and mythology that Lorde constructs her multifaceted identity, and it is these elements that hold both the story and the self together. Through an exploration of community, desire, and mythology, we can form an idea of what the biomythography is, and how it both forms and is formed by *Zami*.

There are several elements of *Zami* which suggests some level of autobiographical truth. The “I” used throughout the text paired with the use of her own name ‘Audre’ suggests that the text is autobiographical.<sup>4</sup> Audre has the same background as Lorde and goes to the same schools. Just as Audre, Lorde grew up in New-York with West-Indian parents who immigrated to the U.S. from the Caribbean. She went to Hunter college, which Lorde also did (Keating 1996, 1). All this suggests that the Audre in the book is closely aligned with the real Audre Lorde. Lorde herself blurs the line between fiction and reality in instances such as when she refers to meeting her former girlfriend Muriel “more than twenty years later” (Lorde 2018, 224). The passage gives a clear impression of being voiced by Lorde herself, thus suggesting autobiographical truth. Still, although there are elements of the book that hint that this is a true account of Lorde’s life, Lorde herself describes the book as fiction (Nolle-Fischer 155; Jay 110).

*Zami* being classified as fiction even though it contains autobiographical elements is important because Lorde is telling a collective story as well as a personal one. Throughout the book there are several stories being told: Lorde’s personal recollection of her own life, but also

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<sup>4</sup> To distinguish between the author Audre Lorde and the book’s protagonist Audre Lorde, this thesis will use ‘Lorde’ when referring to the author, and ‘Audre’ when referring to the character in *Zami*.



a story about the political life in America. Her descriptions of her upbringing are accompanied by facts about America during World War 2, facts which young Lorde cannot have been fully aware of at the time. Thus, she tells both of memories of her personal experience during this time, and of what happened generally in New York and America. Later, information of this kind is often accompanied by descriptions of how it affected Audre, such as when she learns that the Supreme Court has ruled against segregation in schools, something she learns of while she is in Mexico, and which gives her a glimpse of hope. In an interview with Karla Jay, Lorde states that *Zami* includes stories from the women she surrounds herself with as well as her personal stories (110). She explains: “There were stories that had to be told, not only my stories but the stories of many black women, black West Indian women raising children, raising daughters, stories of black lesbians on the street in the ‘50s, stories that just weren’t being told” (ibid.). This reflects the bio- in *biomythography* – this is not merely a story about Lorde’s life, but a story Lorde is telling about the experiences of black, gay women at the time. By choosing the prefix *bio-* (life), thereby omitting the *autos* (self) which would have aligned the book more closely with an autobiography, Lorde is emphasising that this is a story about ways several women experience life in America, not a personal story about a single life.

*Zami*’s structure allows for the exploration of the self in that it is not restricted to chronology, but uses storytelling, poems, and other forms of lyrical writing to form a cohesive story of Audre’s early life and development. The story consists of different elements pieced together, similar to how Lorde sees herself as pieced together by different identities. It follows the girl Audre from her childhood through her mid-twenties. While the book does seemingly have a normal form in being divided into chapters, it breaks with a set structure by suddenly including headings within a chapter (“How I Became a Poet”), poems, lyrics, and sections written in italics. The sections that are written in italics do not serve one, specific purpose throughout the book, but are used in various ways. Similarly, the use of poetry varies throughout the text, but it is often used to express moments of intense desire. In this way, the flexibility of the structure allows for the use of different modes of expression which all function to convey the full range of Lorde’s emotions.

Community is significant in *Zami* as a biomythography because the building of collective identity that occurs is a departure from autobiography, which traditionally has involved personal identity construction. *Zami* is permeated by Lorde’s inherent love for women, and it is female communities that are explored in the book. Community becomes one of the most beautiful and significant aspects of the book when Lorde ultimately credits her community of women for forming her identity, thus establishing identity-formation as a communal process

rather than a personal one. Furthermore, community is significant in *Zami* because it tells both the story of an individual life and the story of a collective experience. Community is a significant part of the long literary tradition of autobiographical writings by black people. Pearl and Gregory F. Stewart both emphasise the importance of community in slave narratives, particularly those by freed African American women (Pearl 308; Stewart 208). To Lorde, community was central to her understanding of feminism in that she believed in the power of female communities and unity. In 'The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House' she states that "For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world" (2019, 104). This power is explored in *Zami* through Audre linking her community of women to the god(dess) Afrekete. Audre surrounds herself with people who in varying ways experience themselves to be different than the majority culture, and celebrates the differences between them as something which empowers them. But at the same time as community is celebrated, Lorde acknowledges that it comes with certain challenges. She points to the challenges these differences can create, and is honest about the difficulties involved in existing within communities.

Mythology has traditionally been treated as fiction in western literature because it transcends western ideas of science, history, and truth. By centring West African mythology, primarily through the god(dess) Afrekete, Lorde is rejecting Western political and social hegemonies. In an interview with Marion Kraft, Lorde explains the role of myths in *Zami*:

It [*Zami*] partakes of myths and history and a lot of other ways we use knowledge; and I used those myths in *Zami*, the myth of MawuLisa and her youngest daughter, Afrekete, who is changed into Eshu, the prankster because I believe that there are some very, very definite ways in which African women, women of African descent, raise their children that hold true in many different places, and that does in fact reflect the sources of our power (Kraft 49).

This thesis will lean heavily on Lorde's simple categorisation of myth as one of the ways that we use knowledge. She refers to a 'power' possessed by women of African descent, a power which is tied to myth. Myth thereby works to claim space in history, filling the gap left by the exclusion of marginalised people. Thus, it becomes a form of revisionist mythmaking which centres the black female.

In *Zami*, desire is something which empowers and unites women. Lorde steers away from the trajectory of portrayals of gay desire which centres the subject's shame, instead giving detailed and experimental descriptions of love and desire. Desire is often expressed in sections of the book that deviate from the prose that is used for the majority of the story, for example

through poetry or through paragraphs in italics. This shows a need to portray gay desire in ways which breaks with the norm, generating new ways of seeing and exploring desire. These descriptions further function to reject the notion of female desire and eroticism as something negative, instead linking it to power and community.

The following sections will focus on community, myth, and desire to discover how these elements work to form a cohesive book and genre. These three themes are inherently linked to Audre renaming of herself as Zami, and the book itself becomes a journey towards her ultimate recognition of herself as made up of her communities of women and the god(dess) Afrekete, ultimately linking community, desire, and myth to her multifaceted identity.

## **2.1 “Sister-outsiders”: Community**

Audre’s reliance on community for support is a contrast to her parents, who insisted on enduring injustice in private. Her parents left their home in Grenada and moved to America in 1924, most likely leaving a Grenadian community in the process. Audre’s mother Linda is well regarded in their neighbourhood in New York, but still, their sole community appears to be their immediate family. Her parents choose to go through life on their own, solely confiding in each other. When they experience racism on a trip to Washington, DC, it is something that they endure by themselves, not something they discuss with others, especially not their children: “American racism was a new and crushing reality that my parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to this country. They handled it as a private woe” (Lorde 2018, 78). Linda in particular refuses to discuss racism with her children, and avoids it by for example claiming the white people who spat at them when they were young did so because they were ‘low class people’ (ibid. 17). She is strict and harsh when it comes to the upbringing of her daughter, such as when she scolds Audre for being sad after not being elected class president, reminding her that life is not fair (ibid. 73). Her strictness appears to be grounded in an effort to protect her and prepare her for a world which does not treat everyone equally, but she does not explain this to Audre, thus creating distance between them.

A continuation of this is Linda’s scepticism towards Audre’s friends. Her parents do not approve of friends ‘in general’ and seem to consider them a distraction (Lorde 2018, 106). Lisa D. McGill, PhD, argues that because Lorde’s parents never intended to remain in the U.S., instead planning to return to the Caribbean (a plan they were forced to abandon because of the Great Depression), they reject their daughter’s participation in (African) American communities (118). Audre rejects this attitude of separation and seeks out friendships from a

young age. Her focus on community becomes evident when she leaves home right after high school. Although Audre comments that moving out was not a conscious and planned decision, it does occur at a time where she feels alienated from her parents due to their lack of emotional support after her best friend Gennie's suicide, and because of their general distrust of her friends. This period is difficult for Audre, who is living without her family for the first time. She lacks money, works a lot, and goes through an unplanned pregnancy and subsequent abortion. However, the period is made better by the women she surrounds herself with. In contrast to her parents, she seeks out friendships and relies on them to survive:

I began to seek some more fruitful return than simple bitterness from this place of my mother's exile, whose streets I came to learn better than my mother had ever learned them. But thanks to what she did know and could teach me, I survived in them better than I could have imagined (...) And there I found other women who sustained me and from whom I learned other loving. How to cook the foods I had never tasted in my mother's house. How to drive a stick-shift car. How to loosen up and not be lost (120).

This passage reminds the reader of Audre and her mother's differing relationship to America. Like McGill, Stella Bolaki, Senior Lecturer of American Literature, emphasises that for Linda, America was supposed to be temporary: "Unlike her mother who sees America as a 'temporary abode' (p. 13), Audre locates home on the hyphen between the Caribbean and America" (782). This means that they approach life in America differently. Linda has taught Audre to be strong, but Audre teaches herself to also be soft, thus surviving in a different way than how her mother has taught her. Instead of living in the same way as her mother, Audre is determined to use her strength in a different way, and to rely on her community of women. Her friends, The Branded, treat her apartment like a 'second home' (Lorde 2018, 139), and she finds strength in these friendships, instead of enduring life on her own like her parents have done.

Audre's early relationships show the significance of communities in fighting against oppressive systems and people. The friendships Audre forms in her youth are often formed because of a shared feeling of being different or being discriminated against. One of the first alliances she forms is with her desk-mate Alvin in primary school. At one of the schools Audre goes to, the class is divided into 'brownies' and 'fairies', the 'brownies' supposedly being the children who struggle the most in school, and the 'fairies' being the 'advanced' children. Audre comments: "In this day of heightened sensitivity to racism and color usage, I don't have to tell you which were the good students and which were the baddies" (Lorde 2018, 28). Because young Audre struggles with reading numbers, she is placed in the 'brownies' class, even though she can read. There she befriends Alvin, who can read numbers but not text. Together they cooperate so that Alvin finds the page number, whilst Audre whispers the words to read.

Eventually, they are both placed in the ‘fairies’ class. Maja Milatović, PhD, draws attention to how this early friendship shows Audre how forming alliances within the oppressive system can allow people to work against it together (42). This relationship is strategic and benefits them both, creating an alliance. However, it ends abruptly when Alvin does not return to school after a holiday, after which Audre quickly goes back to being placed in the ‘brownies’ class. Still, Audre has experienced the power of collaboration and teamwork in the face of injustice, which continues to be important to her throughout her life.

Later, Audre goes to Hunter High School where she meets both black and white women who understand her and whom she understands (Lorde 2018, 94). At this period in her life, she makes friends with different people and forms different friend groups: The Branded, Maxine and Genevie. The friends she makes are different from each other and serve different purposes in her life. Audre comments that her friends do not mix, and that they would not understand each other if they did. This is an early indication of the value Lorde places on difference. The Branded are a group of girls who feel like they are outsiders, and with them Audre experiences talking about world-issues with likeminded people. The relief Audre describes in being able to form friendships based on outsider-status further emphasises the importance of forming communities when facing the realities of living in a society permeated by injustice and discrimination. Still, The Branded are white except for Audre, and they never discuss racism: “We never talked about those differences that separated us, only the ones that united us against the *others*. ... we never talked about what it meant and felt like to be Black and white, and the effects that had on our being friends” (ibid. 92). The lack of discussions around what makes them different from each other illustrates Lorde’s general focus on the need to recognise difference and how difference affects our relationships. The hesitancy to discuss race is something that will be repeated in some of Audre’s later friend groups, and which ultimately illustrates that there is still room for growth even within these seemingly accepting groups.

The limits of community and unity is also apparent in Audre’s experience in Stamford. After leaving New York, Audre experiences how black women are discriminated against in the workforce. She works at a factory, alongside several black women, whom all are given dangerous jobs and low wages. However, instead of working together against their oppressors, these women work for their own self-interests. Audre chooses not to romanticise a community of women working together against their oppressors and is instead honest about how she herself ultimately prioritises her own self-interest, even at the risk of negatively affecting the other women. Milatović notes that by not idealising an imagined community of sisterhood, Lorde is acknowledging their differences and allowing for learning and introspection (43). The Branded

were seemingly the perfect sisterhood, but had underlying issues which were not discussed. Here, there is no illusion of sisterhood, in that everyone primarily works towards their own self-interests. Still, Audre takes this one step too far by cheating to earn more money, which ultimately makes her leave Stamford. Her actions would ultimately hurt a lot of other women, and shows Audre choosing to portray herself honestly, admitting to her imperfections. The incident serves to reinforce how divisive institutionalised discrimination can be even within a marginalised group, in that it promotes mistrust and forces individuals to act for themselves without regard for others.

Audre's experience in Mexico regenerates her love for female communities. Audre early on communicates a wish to go to Mexico. When she goes there, she experiences 'blending in' for the first time because she is surrounded by people who look like her. Her initial reaction is exclusively positive: "Friendly strangers, passing smiles, admiring and questioning glances, the sense of being somewhere I wanted to be and had chosen" (Lorde 2018, 180). Here, she experiences community in the form of feeling like she fits into the majority culture. Sarita Cannon argues that even though Lorde does not explicitly draw a parallel between Mexico and Carriacou, her description of Mexico and Cuernavaca echoes the imagery she uses when imagining Grenada (346). As she moves to the village Cuernavaca and is surrounded by women, she experiences a closeness to the mythologised women-centred island Carriacou her mother has told her about. Here, women, many of them lesbians, live closely together, just as Lorde's description of the women in Carriacou, who "*work together as friends and lovers*" (Lorde 2018, 303, her italics). When Lorde ultimately leaves this place, after she and her lover Eudora have parted ways, she feels herself to have left girlhood behind, and now considers herself to be a woman: "I was hurt, but not lost. And in that moment, as in the first night when I held her, I felt myself pass beyond childhood, a woman connecting with other women in an intricate, complex, and ever-widening network of exchanging strengths" (ibid. 205). Mexico has been transformational for her, and this transition from girl to woman is connected to her community of women and the strength she derives from the women she surrounds herself with.

When Audre goes back to New York she begins to immerse herself in the gay community, in which she simultaneously experiences feelings of belonging and alienation. Whilst gay bars were a meeting place for New York lesbians, Audre feels like an outsider in these bars, and notes that all the outsiders generally were black women. Furthermore, she emphasises the loneliness of being a black lesbian at the time: "I remember how being young and Black and gay and lonely felt. ... There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sisters Amazons, the riders on the loneliest outposts of the kingdom of

Dahomey” (Lorde 2018, 207). Bolaki draws attention to the fact that Lorde’s descriptions of life in New York in the ‘50s is told from a distance, which produces a “layered and complex history” because Lorde is able to compare it to her present-day reality of the ‘80s (789). Lorde describes the difficulty of paving the way, and of living a life without being able to learn from other people’s experiences or talk about her romantic life openly. She discusses not being able to gossip with co-workers, and how alienated that makes you from everyday interactions. Audre longs for communication with other gay black women: “In the gay bars, I longed for other Black women without the need ever taking shape upon my lips” (Lorde 2018, 265). She refers to other visibly gay black women as ‘sister-outsiders’ (ibid. 208), suggesting a companionship even though they did not necessarily know each other. Still, she notes that she and the other black lesbian women mostly stayed away from each other. Eventually, she meets Felicia, who is also a gay black woman, and for the first time she is able to talk about issues connected to being black lesbians. For although her community of lesbian friends are open and supportive, they do not acknowledge the double discrimination facing those who are both gay and black.

Lorde’s descriptions of Audre’s lesbian community show the importance of recognising and celebrating difference. Her friend group is made up of mostly white women, except for Felicia. Audre states that “lesbians 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 2018, 210). Still, Audre brings attention to the limits of their discussions when it comes to talking about race. The recognition of difference is a cornerstone of Lorde’s ideology. In “The Master’s Tools will never Dismantle the Master’s House” she states that “difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged” (Lorde 2019, 104). Amongst Audre’s white, gay friends there is a view that because they are all gay, they have all felt discrimination: they do not consider that being gay *and* black can be experienced differently. Muriel even goes so far as to use a derogatory slur used against black people, implying that because they are gay, they all experience discrimination in the same way that black people do. Eva Lennox Birch writes that there was a silence about the realities of race within the lesbian community (118). She points out that even though you are a lesbian, that does not mean that you are given “insider status” within the black community (ibid. 118-119). By bringing attention to this, Audre is being honest about the realities of being a black lesbian at the time. As in with Audre’s experience in Stamford, her community of lesbian women consists of individuals who in some ways are acting in their best self-interest: it is easier to focus on their personal suffering than others’. Audre does not condemn her white friends but

does not shy away from the truth. Even though these communities Audre is describing are comprised of people who have shared experiences, that does not mean that they are able to talk openly about the differences that may exist within these communities, or that they are exempt from being discriminatory or prejudiced. Therefore, although Lorde idealises community, she also shows the limits of these communities.

By showing Audre's exploration of different ways of being together as female lovers, Lorde draws attention to the exploration and innovation involved in female partnerships at a time where there were few role models or examples of what female romantic relationships should look like. This is especially visible in Audre and Muriel's attempt of creating a polyamorous relationship between themselves and Lynn, a friend of theirs who has recently become homeless. They let her stay with them, initially because of their idealistic view of the gay community: "For a while that summer, we had a vision and possibility of women living together collectively and sharing each other's lives and work and love" (Lorde 2018, 249). However, this arrangement ultimately fails. Audre and Muriel are primarily devoted to each other, and Lynn remains a guest in their apartment as well as in their relationship. Ultimately, Lynn leaves, taking all of their saving with her, and the project fails. Still, the relationship shows their willingness to explore different ways of being together as women. Audre explains how because no one else were talking about alternative ways of living together as gay women, they had to experiment and experience for themselves:

We were certainly the first to have tried to work out this unique way of living for women, communal sex without rancor. After all, nobody else talked about it. None of the gay-girl books we read so avidly ever suggested our vision was not new, nor our joy in each other. (...) So we knew there was a world of our experience as gay-girls that they left out, but that meant we had to write it ourselves, learn by living it out (Lorde 2019, 251).

This was an idealistic project based on a belief in community of women. The attempt of a polyamorous relationship illustrates a wish to redefine relationships and to not take for granted the heteronormative ways of living together they are surrounded with, but also how difficult this is without any role models to learn from.

Ultimately, community in *Zami* functions as a part of Audre's identity construction. In *Zami*, Audre has several different friends and friend groups, who all serve different purposes in her life, and ultimately contributes to her understanding of self and identity. At Hunter high school she has friends from three different places who don't interact with each other; in Cuernavaca she is close to the female community in the village, but also to the outsider Eudora; in New York she befriends an array of lesbian women, but it is only her black friend Felicia she



feels she can discuss her experiences as a black lesbian in New York with. AnaLouise Keating, Professor of Multicultural Women's and Gender Studies, draws attention to Lorde's ability to form and establish connections between different people and people who exist in different communities, using differences to create new forms of bonding (1996, 2-4). Throughout the book, Audre is able to form connections to different women she meets, and to be open minded and generous, even when faced with their shortcomings. She credits each woman as having formed parts of her identity, having "left her print upon me" (Lorde 2018, 303). The emphasis on identity construction as a communal process runs through the entire book, and the importance of it being several different types of women and god(desse)s shows Lorde's focus on *all* women, reinstating the importance of difference. In *Zami*, community is not only the women surrounding her, but the women in her past and those who have influenced her. Audre's identity is created through impulses from the women she surrounds herself with, and from the mythological god(dess) from African mythology, *Afrekete*.

## 2.2 Becoming Afrekete: Myth

"To whom do I owe the woman I have become?"

...

To the journeywoman pieces of myself.

Becoming.

*Afrekete*. (Lorde 2018, 2-4, her italics).

It is through mythology that Lorde's identity-construction takes place, an ongoing, women-centred, and communal process connected to the god(desse)s Afrekete and MawuLisa, and to her choosing *Zami* as a new name for herself.<sup>5</sup> Afrekete and MawuLisa are figures from West-African mythology. They are mentioned in the epigraph, prologue, and epilogue to *Zami*, and thus function to frame the story.<sup>6</sup> As the previous subchapter has emphasised, Lorde's identity construction is a communal journey. She thanks women in her neighbourhood growing up, women from her family, women she loves and have loved, and Afrekete for contributing to her understanding of self. She thanks MawuLisa, "thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all", and Afrekete, "her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become" (Lorde 2018, 303). By including Afrekete and MawuLisa when crediting

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<sup>5</sup> Taking inspiration from Lisa B. McGill, this thesis will use god(desse)s to highlight the gender ambiguity of the mythological figures in *Zami*.

<sup>6</sup> In the epigraph, prologue, and epilogue the distinction between Lorde and Audre becomes complicated, as she seemingly speaks as the author, but it is through the main body of the book that both her and Audre's identity construction takes place. The thesis will use Lorde when referring to these sections but recognises that the distinction in this case becomes arbitrary.

the women who have “helped me give substance”, she is equalling the women in her life to these god(desse)s. Milatović argues that “Ending her biomythography with diverse women and merging with Afrekete underscores Lorde’s emphasis on differences and contestations as integral parts of feminist alliances and sisterhoods and necessary prerequisites for strategising against oppression” (46). Afrekete’s multifaceted identity mirrors Lorde’s own multidimensional understanding of self, and the linking of god(desse)s to the women in Lorde’s life underlines the significance of difference to her ideology. Ultimately, as someone “whom we must all become” (Lorde 2018, 303), Afrekete simultaneously offers a mythologising of the self, and a form of collective liberation where there is room for difference. This point is further underscored by Lorde’s emphasis on Afrekete and MawuLisa in the book’s prologue and epilogue, which makes the book in its entirety a journey towards apotheosis where Lorde aligns herself, her ideology, and other women to these god(desse)s, thus *becoming Afrekete*.

Lorde’s use of myth becomes a way to reject patriarchal, sexist, and racist world views. Contesting traditional phallogocentric myths which are often tied to Christianity and the male god, Lorde chooses figures from West-African mythology, and places emphasis on their female qualities. She rejects patriarchal western religion where God is “the Father”, instead celebrating the female, matrilineal qualities of Afrekete and MawuLisa (Keating 1992, 27). Thus, she challenges the myths which take god for granted and which equates the divine and the male without question. Furthermore, by focusing on West-African mythology Lorde rejects the notion that the white man is representative for a universal human experience, and celebrates and centres her own cultural heritage. Keating argues that *Zami* can be described as a revisionist mythic tale (1992, 20). Revisionist mythmaking can be defined simply as the use of myths for altered ends (Ostriker 71). Lorde extends this practice which had primarily been used to centre (white) women to centre women *and* black people.<sup>7</sup> McGill notes that Lorde’s focus on African god(desse)s is a way to counter the exclusion black women experienced from the feminist movement and Black Arts movement: “Lorde sought to reclaim affirming spaces for black diasporic women through the ancient resources of African women” (138). Additionally, Lorde’s work functioned to bring Afrekete and other god(desse)s to a mainstream white feminist audience (McGill 147-148). Mythology in *Zami* thus has the dual function of emphasising that mythmaking is a political act, and of promoting black, female mythological creatures. Claudine

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<sup>7</sup> In ‘An Open Letter to Mary Daly’, Lorde publicly criticised Mary Daly’s work *Gyn/Ecology* (1979), for only including white, western European and judeo-christian goddesses when exploring the role of the goddesses in opposing the patriarchy, citing the dangers of the assumption that “the herstory and myth of white women is the legitimate and sole herstory and myth of all women to call upon for power and background” (Lorde 2019, 60). The letter is signed “In the hands of Afrekete, Audre Lorde” (ibid. 62).

Raynaud, Professor emerita of African American Studies, notes that Lorde “believes in the power of myth to transform the deepest structures of society” (223). For Lorde, myths are an important alternative source of knowledge which holds political significance. It then becomes significant that the mythological figure Lorde has chosen to take on as a part of her own identity is Afrekete, an obscure god(dess) whose history is complex and suggestive, and who is not usually associated with feminine qualities.

Afrekete’s androgenous origin opens up for multiple readings of the function of the god(dess) in *Zami*. Afrekete is the daughter of MawuLisa, and has a counterpart, Es(h)u, who has been featured in other works by Lorde, notably her poetry collection *The Black Unicorn* (McGill 148). Afrekete is not a figure who is mentioned in standard books on African gods and goddesses, Es(h)u being a much more widely known figure (Keating 1992, 26). Es(h)u is genderless or of dual gender but is primarily associated with masculine qualities (Keating 1996, 166). The promotion of the god(dess)’s female qualities over the masculine then becomes a form of revisionist mythmaking which functions to accuate the black female with divine power.

While critics such as Raynaud and McGill emphasise the importance of Lorde’s use of myth in promoting female strength and unity, Keating argues that by choosing an androgenous god(dess), Lorde “transgresses heterosexual and homosexual norms, as well as binary systems of gendered meaning” (Keating 1996, 175). She contests her own past claim that “By naming the Black goddess herself, Lorde empowers other women to do so as well” (1992, 30), and instead argues that Lorde transcends gender binaries by promoting the genderless Afrekete/Es(h)u (1996, 176). Arguing that Lorde “denaturalizes the belief in two mutually exclusive genders by disrupting the boundary between them” (ibid.), she references Judith Butler’s ‘Gender Trouble’, which famously rejects the existence of two genders with inherent characteristics, arguing that gender is performed rather than a natural, set identity. Supporting Keating’s claim is *Zami*’s prologue, where Lorde expresses a wish to be both a man and a woman: “*I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me* (2018, 5, Lorde’s italics). I agree that Audre’s choice of identifying with Afrekete offers a reading which challenges the gender binary. However, I don’t consider Keating’s two readings to be mutually exclusive. What is unique in choosing specifically Afrekete/Es(h)u is that it allows Lorde to simultaneously call for the recognition of female power and divinity, whilst also critiquing the absolute gender binary. Afrekete and Es(h)u are one, and cannot be separated. Thus, by choosing to identify herself and other women with a god(dess) who is genderless, Lorde rejects limitations placed

on female identity and identity construction. Afrekete is the god(dess) whom ‘we must all become’, but this is an open, not restrictive, apotheosis.

Afrekete functions to legitimise Audre’s multifaceted and multidimensional identity. McGill argues that the characteristics associated with Es(h)u provide a map for understanding Afrekete in Lorde’s biomythography, as Afrekete and Es(h)u are two manifestations of the same god(dess). She quotes literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s description of Es(h)u, which emphasises that Es(h)u is the god of “unreconciled opposites, living in harmony”, as well as being the god of discourse who’s an interpreter and mediator of life (Gates, Jr. quoted in McGill 149). Similarly, Afrekete “inhabits and exceeds multiplicities”, just like the black woman who “connects and empowers multiple and seemingly irreconcilable communities” (McGill 149). Thus, identifying with Afrekete is a way for Audre to recognise her own role as someone who accepts and celebrates difference. Lorde herself writes that Afrekete is a “trickster and a linguist” (Lorde 2018, 303). Afrekete/Es(h)u being linguists connects the god(desse)s to Lorde’s understanding of herself as a poet. Furthermore, them being a ‘trickster’ suggests that the apotheosis does not equal self-worship or superiority but allows for imperfect subjects. Audre is not an idealised character, but instead someone who is open about her flaws, for example when she cheats her co-workers out of money in Stamford. Ultimately, Lorde has chosen to focus on myths which mirror the many identities which makes up her own self, and the fact that it is West-African myths means that she is asserting her multifaceted identity into black history and culture. This shows Lorde using myths as alternative sources of knowledge which might provide a unique insight into her many selves. And just as myths are imperative to her understanding of self, they are imperative to the biomythography as a genre which aims to be able to express these multi-layered selves.

Afrekete’s emergence in the last chapter of *Zami* as Audre’s lover Kitty challenges our conceptions of reality, and of corporal versus spiritual existence. Mortalised in the form of Kitty, Afrekete takes human form in the last chapter of the book. Kitty and Audre have a brief sexual relationship, which ends abruptly when Kitty goes home to spend time with her mother and son. The relationship is transformative for Audre in that it moves her towards her merge with the god(dess) Afrekete. When asked by Audre what Kitty is short for, Afrekete answers: “Afrekete ... That’s me. The Black pussycat” (Lorde 2018, 289). This answer is suggestive of the power Audre will come to associate with the name, as well as Afrekete’s significance as the black divine. Becoming familiar with the god(dess) Afrekete through Kitty allows Audre to see moments from her past in a different light, such as when she remembers Genevieve’s stepmother’s constant mumbling, and concludes that the god(dess) was speaking through her

(ibid. 299). Kitty's emergence blurs the line between real and false, as Audre does not verify if Kitty is a real lover or a mortalised version of a god, i.e., if she is simply spiritual or also corporal. McGill draws attention to how the categorisation of the book as a biomythography opens up for two different readings of Kitty: "If *Zami* is simply read as autobiography, Kitty's sudden disappearance proves the loss of an intense, ephemeral, yet life-affirming love affair. If *Zami* is read for its mythological utterances, however, Kitty's disappearance demands that Lorde, the new black goddess, usurp her place" (152). McGill's argument highlights the importance of reading *Zami* as Lorde intended, i.e., as a biomythography. If one reads *Zami* simply as an autobiography, the mythological implications of the book is missed, and so is the significance of myths as alternative forms of knowledge. This is affirmed when Lorde immediately follows this section with the end of the book where Lorde boldly identifies as Afrekete. Ultimately, the section proves the importance of a biomythographic reading of the text in order to fully recognise its mythological implications.

Kitty also links Afrekete to Audre's mother, Linda. Several critics have pointed to the connections between Afrekete and Linda, noting in particular Audre's comment that Afrekete, like her mother, buys things "under the bridge" (Pearl 315; Raynaud 238). Raynaud argues that because Afrekete reminds Audre of her mother, her final meeting with Kitty brings the story back to its beginning, bringing "the circle to a close" (223). Afrekete and Linda are "brought together and blended into one woman" (Raynaud 238). McGill acknowledges Raynaud's reading but argues that Linda "works in relation *to* Afrekete, but also *against* the lesbian, feminist, and politically black yearnings of the African god(dess)" (155). Linda "covertly symbolizes the masculinist and patriarchal frameworks Lorde has to work through, acknowledge, and engage in order to maintain dialogues across racial, sexual, and gender boundaries" (ibid. 156). She never spoke about difference or racism, and was less than accepting of Audre's lesbianism. Throughout *Zami*, she has been someone whom Audre has had to work against, rather than with. Thus, Linda as Afrekete is in some ways surprising, but ultimately becomes a way to include her mother in her mythologised community of women, as if to imagine a new beginning for her mother where she too can celebrate openness and difference.

Lorde uses mythology to place homosexuality in a non-Western context. Her focus on god(desse)s, which features not only in *Zami*, but in several of her poems and essays, was influenced by a visit she made to West African countries in 1974 (McGill 130). By giving herself the name *Zami* and emphasising its origins as a Carriacou name for women who love each other and are lovers, she is proving that lesbianism is not a Western concept, but one that

has roots in West-African history (ibid. 134). This was significant because of the pushback queer black people received from parts of the black community in the U.S. in the 1960s (ibid.). Some of this pushback stemmed from an idea that homosexuality was a bourgeois, white concept, and it was therefore significant that Lorde showed that homosexuality has a place in black history (ibid.). Talking about the black community in the 1960s, Lorde says: “In the mistaken belief that unity must mean sameness, differences within the black community of color, sex, sexuality, and vision were sometimes mislabelled, oversimplified, and repressed” (Tate 102). Thus, myths become a way to claim space, not only in majority culture, but within a black community that did not recognise difference. Afrekete/Es(h)u can then be seen as examples of unity despite difference, as they are two different manifestations of a god(dess) who exist in harmony as one. By retrieving Afrekete from West-African mythology and re-imagining her as a lesbian woman, Lorde legitimises gay desire, and creates space for it within black history.

### 2.3 “Zami”: Desire

“*Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers*” (Lorde 2018, 303, her italics).

In re-naming herself, Audre has chosen a name that embodies the community of women she surrounds herself with, the women she loves and have loved. *Zami* largely focuses on her relationships with different women, how they affect and change her, and ultimately how they contribute to her creation of self. As Lorde herself states, the name *Zami* refers to female communities where women are lovers. The word is patois for lesbians (Chinsole 12, quoted in Raynaud 236). It derives from her mother’s home, Carriacou, but originated from the French word *les amis* (Nolte 143). As the previous chapter has showed, the name becomes a way to connect Audre’s own queer identity to her parents’ homeland, thereby also situating queerness into black history. Lorde writes about the women of Carriacou: “Women who survived the absence of their sea-faring men easily, because they came to love each other, past the men’s returning. *Madvine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty.*” (Lorde 2018, 12, her italics). According to Birch, it is then “the legendary way in which Carriacou women love each other that Lorde sees as her own heritage in *Zami*” (111). The name functions to emphasise the importance of her female lovers to her own personal identity construction and understanding of self.

In an interview, Lorde brings attention to the importance of names when describing the traditions surrounding renaming in *Zami*: “In African cultures, the ritual bestowing of a name is of great significance. A child receives its first name eight days after birth, but it receives new names at decisive events its whole life long” (Nolte 143). This opens up for using naming to mark changes in your life and identity. Audre does this early in her life, choosing to remove the ‘y’ in her name, thus changing it from ‘Audrey’ to ‘Audre’ (Lorde 2018, 24), and again through this book by naming herself *Zami*. Thus, renaming is given transformational power. María Pilar Sánchez Calle argues that the title *Zami* also places the book into the tradition of slave narratives, where slaves would change their names after reaching freedom (163). For Audre’s case, her renaming happens at a time where she has met Afrekete and found the god(dess) within herself, reaching a type of freedom and ease in her relationship with herself and other women. But this renaming does not mean that she is a new person, only that she sees herself differently (Keating 1996, 162). For she does not give herself a completely new name, but ‘a new spelling of my name’.

The biomythography’s lack of restrictions regarding form allows for the exploration of desire in sections which are made separate from the rest of the text by being written in italics. These paragraphs written in italics often give an impression of being short glimpses of thoughts, similar to a short stream of consciousness. They can be related to what is happening to Audre in the main story, or they can be renditions of thoughts that are unrelated, such as Audre’s recurring thoughts surrounding Genevieve, illustrating that these thoughts about her deceased friend continue to distress her. As Audre is contemplating whether she and Ginger are lovers, there is a sudden line break, followed by a section of paragraphs written in italics in which Audre recalls a moment of heartbreak shortly after losing Gennie: “*A few months after Gennie’s death I walked down Broadway late one Saturday afternoon.*” (Lorde 2018, 162, her italics). The section concludes: “*The secret to not being hurt like this again, I decided, was never depending on anyone, never needing, never loving*” (ibid. 163, Lorde’s italics). When the section ends, her hesitation about a relationship with Ginger can be seen with new eyes. At another instance, Audre’s description of a day with Ginger is interrupted by a short section where Audre describes Ginger: “*Ginger. / Snapping little dark eyes, skin the color of well-battered caramel, and a body like the Venus of Willendorf. Ginger was gorgeously fat, with an open knowledge about her body’s movement that was delicate and precise*” (ibid. 157, Lorde’s italics). The description is detailed and allegorical, and shows Lorde using her poetic abilities to describe feelings of love and desire which are so strong that they cannot be expressed

adequately in the main text. Thus, italics function to mark a departure from the rest of the text by creating sections where Audre's inner thoughts can be expressed.

In *Zami*, poetry and poetic language is used to give honest, passionate, and exploratory descriptions of desire. Poetry surfaces at the crucial moments of the story (Raynaud 230). When discussing what she views as lacking or disappointing descriptions of intercourse in books in general, Lorde explains how she wanted to represent desire in *Zami*: "In mine, I wanted to share a sense of joy, tenderness, and poetry. I've re-written them often – deleted many of the clichés (...) I wrote these parts just as I would have written poems" (Nolle-Fischer 156). When describing intercourse between Audre and Kitty, Lorde writes: "*I held you, lay between your brown legs, slowly playing my tongue through your familiar forests, slowly licking and swallowing as the deep undulations and tidal motions of your strong body slowly mashed ripe banana into a beige cream that mixed with the juices of your electric flesh*" (Lorde 2018, 297, Lorde's italics). The figurative language and the repetition of the word 'slowly' creates a passage reminiscent of poetry. In other instances, Lorde directly includes poems. Preceding Gennie's death, a dated poem suggests the horror to come. The poem ends: "We did not weep for the thing – weep for the thing – / we did not weep for the thing that was / once a child." (ibid. 110). The poem expresses the despair Audre experiences and the brutality of losing youth to suicide. By leaving room for different forms of expression, the biomythography allows for descriptions of desire that are not restrictive. Instead, Lorde can utilise her full poetic arsenal in order to show the full depth of Audre's desire.

By describing Audre's early experiences with feelings of desire and curiosity, Lorde rejects the view of desire as something forbidden and inherently sexual. As a young child Audre's desire is linked more closely to a curiosity than to sexual desire. She sees her father sleeping and desires to see his penis, but as she explains later, it is his 'ordinary humanity' that she is most interested in (Lorde 2018, 75). She views her parents as elevated creatures, and to see her father in such a relaxed state counters this view of them. The second time Lorde describes any type of desire is when four-year old Audre meets Toni. Whilst this meeting primarily is exciting to Audre because of her strong wish for a sister, there is also a suggestion of a sexual desire from Audre's part: "I reached up under the welter of dress and petticoats and took hold of the waistband of her knickers. Was her bottom going to be real and warm or turn out to be hard rubber, molded into a little crease like the ultimately disappointing Coca-Cola doll?" (ibid. 43). While there is an element of young curiosity, there is also a sexual appetite in the wording of 'hard rubber' being 'disappointing'. This shows Lorde's willingness to break with mainstream notions of acceptable desires. Lorde was concerned with eroticism, which she



believed to be an unacknowledged power for women. In her essay 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', Lorde argues that the erotic is a source of female power (Lorde 2019, 43). She writes that for women, the erotic is something which has been suppressed, and that women have been "made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of [the erotic's] existence" (ibid.). By acknowledging young Audre's early feelings of desire, Lorde breaks a taboo which sees eroticism and desire in women as a thing to be suppressed, something Lorde continues doing throughout her descriptions of Audre's emerging sexuality.

Through suggestive euphemisms, metaphors and poetic language, Lorde details Audre's wakening desires which emerge as she starts menstruating. When using her mother's mortar to grind spice, the language used is suggestive to the point that the act becomes clearly sensual:

As I continued to pound the spice, a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach (Lorde 2018, 89).

The 'new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach' suggests a uterus ready for what her new status as a woman entails. The 'smooth pestle' is phallic, and at odds with Audre's future as someone who primarily engages in intercourse with women. The 'vital connection' suggests a body that is cohesive and has reached its full potential as a woman. This connection becomes an invisible thread, 'taut and sensitive as a clitoris exposed' (ibid.), that links the act to every inch of her body, whilst also being suggestive of sexual pleasure to come. The use of the mortar from her mother's homeland to pound West Indian spice firmly links Audre turning into a woman to her Caribbean roots and connects her new identity as a woman to her matrilineal heritage. Her body starts emanating smells connected to the mortar: "into the moist reality of my armpits, whose warm sharp odor with a strange new overlay mixed with the ripe garlic smells from the mortar and the general sweat-heavy aromas of high summer" (ibid.), thus uniting the West Indian mortar to her 'new' body.

The experience is also suggestive of Audre's ultimate rejection of heteronormativity, in that Audre pounds the spice differently than her mother has taught her. Audre has immersed herself in pounding the spice, and has forgotten her mother completely: "The downward thrust of the wooden pestle slowed upon contact, rotated back and forth slowly and then gently altered its rhythm to include an up and down beat. Back and forth, round, up and down, back, forth, round, round, up and down" (Lorde 2018, 89). When her mother comes home, she is furious at Audre for not having finished pounding the spice, and for using ineffective methods at odds with the way she has taught her to do it. Bolaki notes that Audre is 'queering' the ritual in that

she is discovering a new movement which is different from her mother's 'efficient motions', something her mother reprimands her for (787). She highlights that Audre's mother shows her how to do it "in the old familiar way" (Lorde 2018, 91) (ibid.), which is suggestive of the traditions and rules linked to the act. By pounding the spice differently than her mother, she queers the act, ultimately hinting at her impending rejection of her mother's heterosexual legacy.

*Zami* functions as a coming out story, but treats coming out as a process which occurs gradually. Coming out becomes not just one event, but a series of events which all lead towards an eventual familiarity with oneself and one's desires and how these are presented to the world. Pearl argues that Lorde's own words "becoming Afrekete" shows how coming out is not one single moment, but rather a 'becoming' (301). By focusing on the desire, love and passion of her relationships, Lorde is rejecting the shame assigned by others to her sexuality and the common trajectory of coming out stories of detailing a subject's struggles with coming out and the shame associated with this. She does not express agony over coming out, but instead focuses on her relationships, and how they lead her towards her ultimate, sensual self.

Each relationship Audre explores is different, and moves her towards her 'becoming' in differing ways. Her different lovers show how she is always moving, as each lover moves her closer to her eventual renaming of herself. Throughout *Zami*, Audre goes through several sexual and romantic relationships. She has one unsuccessful relationship with a man, with whom sex is described as 'dismal' and 'frightening', something Audre is told by her partner and friends is something that she will eventually get used to (Lorde 2018, 120). The first time Audre has sex with a woman is with Ginger, and it is influenced by the fact that Ginger believes Audre to be experienced, to be 'a slick kitty from the city' (ibid. 156). When they do sleep together, Audre experiences that she knows exactly what to do: "Uncertainty and doubt rolled away from the mouth of my wanting like a great stone, and my unsureness dissolved in the directing heat of my own frank and finally open desire. / Our bodies found the movements we needed to fit each other" (ibid. 160). Even though she has never had sex, she becomes confident because Ginger considers her to be so. Thus, she finds that her body knows what to do even though she's inexperienced. Afterwards, Ginger proclaims: "I could tell you knew how" (ibid. 161). This first experience shows the relief of finally succumbing to a desire, and how their closeness removes any fear and uncertainty she initially experienced. While Audre is in Mexico she meets Eudora, and risks their friendship by being honest about her desire to sleep with her. She proclaims: "I want to sleep with you" (Lorde 2018, 195). This boldness and openness shows a growth for Audre, and provides a contrast to her being too scared to admit she had never had

sex with a woman before the first time she slept with Ginger. Thus, when she returns to New York, she is ready to emerge herself in the lesbian community, having reached a new ease and assertiveness connected to her sexuality.

In Audre's relationship with Kitty, myth and desire merge. Kitty is Audre's last lover in *Zami*. Her emergence raises questions on how to be together as women. This relationship is passionate and loving, and even though it ends, it does so at a happy moment, giving the impression that it was a relationship that lasted as long as it was meant to. Their relationship is intense and filled with desire, and there are clear links to the female power Audre associates with the god(dess) Afrekete: "*Afrekete Afrekete ride me to the crossroads where we shall sleep, coated in the woman's power. The sound of our bodies meeting is the prayer of all strangers and sisters, that the discarded evils, abandoned at all crossroads, will not follow us upon our journeys*" (Lorde 2018, 300, her italics). Intercourse becomes unifying as 'the prayer of all strangers and sisters' brings forth Lorde's emphasis on difference and female communities. Intercourse between women then comes an execution of 'the woman's power', and desire is given transformational power. McGill argues: "The eroticism explored in the sexual encounters between Kitty/Afrekete and Lorde symbolizes the moment beyond the "crossroads" when women recognize the power in each other, acknowledging the intuitive, spiritual resources in their lives" (McGill 152). Ultimately, Afrekete links myth, desire, and community, as the god(dess) is mortalised as a lesbian woman, whose lovemaking brings forth feelings of power and unity. Afrekete is the ideal, 'whom we must all become'.

This chapter has examined *Zami* in order to establish the defining genre-characteristics of the biomythography. It has highlighted how *Zami* tells both a story about Audre and her life, and a story about a collective experience of life as a gay, black woman in America. Lorde uses mythology to imagine alternative histories, and urges all women to identify with the god(dess) Afrekete. The chapter has shown how poetic language is used to express desire, and how renaming becomes a way to connect Audre's lesbian identity to her mother's home, Carriacou. Community, myth, and desire ultimately merge through Audre's renaming of herself. As she renames herself, Audre chooses *Zami*, a name which emphasises the significance of community, desire, and a mythological god(dess) to her identity-construction in being a name for '*women who work together as friends and lovers*'. The forthcoming chapter will use the genre-characteristics established in this chapter to conduct a biomythographic reading of Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*.

### 3 On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is both prose and poetry, personal and political, truthful, and fictional. The book is categorised as a novel by its publishers (Penguin Random House), but Vuong himself has stated that it is heavily influenced by his own life and experiences, as well as his family's (Haber). In this way it fits into this abstruse space between novel and autobiography which Lorde has called *biomythography*. But as the previous chapter has explored, the biomythography is much more than simply a novel with autobiographical features. If *On Earth* is to be considered a biomythography, it also has to include some of the elements which makes *Zami* a biomythography, such as myths as a form of alternative history writing, exploratory ways of portraying desire, and a focus on the communal as well as the individual. But because *On Earth* is written in the form of letters, a significant question also becomes whether a book which is categorised as an epistolary novel simultaneously can be considered a biomythography.

The book is written in the form of letters from a son, Little Dog, to his illiterate mother, Rose. Little Dog is now a 28-year-old man living in New York, attempting to piece together and make sense of different parts of his own life and his family's history. The story takes place in Hartford, Connecticut, where Little Dog grew up with his mother and grandmother. It is comprised of sections reminiscent of chapters, though they are unnamed and unnumbered. Within these sections, several stories are told in parallel. The narrator is simultaneously telling his mother's story, his grandmother Lan's story, and his own story. At the same time, historical facts give insights into the fates of several others. The language in the book is lyrical and elliptical, and reflective on Vuong being a poet. The title of the book, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, is also the title of a poem from Vuong's poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (2016), which deals with intimacy, violence, and alienation (Cho 130). These themes are also relevant when analysing *On Earth*, which grapples with issues of assimilation, family maltreatment, and queer desire.

In *On Earth* the mix of personal stories and historical facts create an impression of truth, whilst the categorisation of the book as fiction gives the writer the freedom to tell the story without being tied to a promise of complete accuracy. Vuong's personal history is similar to Little Dog's. He also grew up in Hartford with his mother, grandmother, and aunt. He was born in Saigon, Vietnam in 1988 and moved to the United States with his mother at age 2 (Wolk). The close similarities between the stories told in the book and Vuong's personal life, suggest

some level of autobiographical truth. When asked how much of the novel is based on his own experiences, Vuong answered:

It was important to me to insist that these lives are real, that these folks who live in poverty—white, brown, yellow—are actual people. The inventions in the book are based on true, inspiring lives and they are worthy of literature with a capital L. A lot of the characters in the book are Frankensteins—composites of people. But the underlying set-up is based on my life. (...) These basic truths were important to me, but when you live them, they become daily minutia. As a novelist, I had to create intentions and offer heightened and charged moments to impact the narrative (Haber).

In using the truth as a foundation, but utilising fiction in order to tell a story, Vuong gives value to his characters and their stories whilst also maintaining the freedom of a novelist. By emphasising that these lives are in fact real, he is highlighting that these stories are all stories that could be, and are, happening to actual people all over the U.S. Thus, even though every aspect of the book might not be, and does not attempt to be, truthful, the way it depicts being a Vietnamese immigrant in America is real. Accompanying the personal narratives are facts which place the story in a historical context, for example information about the opioid-epidemic in the U.S., which is included in the sections detailing Trevor's death. These historical facts further work to maintain that these stories are all real in that they are things that could have happened to anyone. Thus, whilst *On Earth* is a novel, the frame of the story is true. Calling the book a novel accomplishes similar things as the *bio-* prefix does in the biomythography, in that it makes the story a collective one and creates distance between the author and the protagonist. But because of the elements of truth, the book still serves some of the same purpose as traditional autobiographies by highlighting the lived experiences of people whose stories historically have not been given space, and situating these stories in the actual real world.

The epistolary form gives the narrator the freedom to tell a story that does not require linear chronology in order to create unity. The book provides an account of an experienced upbringing, but does so by including different tangents, stories, and historical facts. When asked about his choice to write the book in the form of letters, Vuong answered: “The form allows you to go on every detour and then come back, because no matter where you go with the plot, or the tangent, you're still talking to somebody. That's the thread. That was what allowed so many little divergences, the little tributaries of thought” (Haber). This flexibility allows for several stories to be told simultaneously to form a cohesive story altogether. It also mimics the fragmented way Little Dog learns about his family history, which was through stories and snippets of information given at random instances throughout his life. In another interview, Vuong draws parallels to poetry when discussing the book's form. He states that the novel was

“purposely fractured, consciously fragmented”, and that the frequent line breaks were an “elongation of the line breaks that I navigated in poems” (Filgate). The poetic language and the paragraphs which vary in length, means that the book sometimes has to be read as a poem: it slows down or speeds up the reading, and it is elliptical which means it requires attentiveness. The only constant then becomes Little Dog, who functions as a red thread throughout the different layers of stories. Thus, the epistolary form allows for both freedom from linear chronology, and for different forms of expression that do not rely on traditional rules of form, such as line breaks and sections of poetry.

In order to consider the elements of *On Earth* that might make it a biomythography, the function of the textual elements of community, myth, and desire in the book will be explored. The book explores how memories are transferred through generations, going from personal to communal, and how communities are created because of a shared experience of being excluded from the majority population. Different people’s stories are told, from the man Tiger Woods was named after, to immigrant workers employed at nail salons, to young Americans dying from overdoses during the opioid-epidemic. Because the use of myths is less explicit in *On Earth* than in *Zami*, a re-examination of what myth is and what it can do is needed. This thesis has used OED’s definition of myths as a traditional story which “embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something (OED, Myth, n).<sup>8</sup> Because of Lorde’s statement that the biomythography “partakes of myths and history and a lot of other ways we use knowledge” (Kraft 49), an emphasis is placed on myths as alternative modes of understanding history which centres Vietnamese myths and folklore, as well as individual experiences and stories. Regarding desire, the way the biomythography facilitates for different expressions of desire is central. Through poetry and experimentation with form, desire and how it’s unfolding in a hostile environment is examined. *On Earth* shows the difficulties of living according to non-normative desires in a society which does not fully embrace you, and in an environment whose primary focus is integration into this closeminded society. Although these themes often overlap, the thesis will consider each one separately, starting with exploring how the individual and communal converge in Little Dog’s story.

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<sup>8</sup> The other definition of myth as “A widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth” (OED, Myth, n), is used by Ha & Tonkins when discussing the ways *On Earth* undermines the myth of the American dream and social mobility, an analysis which could also be transferrable to a reading of *Zami*. Regardless, this thesis will use the first definition of myth as it aligns with the way Lorde uses myths in *Zami*, which then becomes a base of how myths are used in biomythographies.

### 3.1 From the personal to the collective: Community

*On Earth* is an intergenerational story that shows all of the individual life-stories that make up Little Dog's family, and how they affect the family as a whole. It shows the community that can be found in family, and how strong these bonds are despite their obvious fragility. Little Dog grows up in a household that is severely affected by their experiences with war and migration, as well as their struggle to survive in America. In the first pages, the narrator recounts times his mother hit him when he was a child: "The first time you hit me, I must have been four. A hand, a flash, a reckoning" (Vuong 5), "That time with a gallon of milk" (ibid. 9), and several other stories all starting with "The time...". The blunt, infrequent repetition gives the feeling of urgency, as if the stories come at the reader in the form of punches: startling, and alarming. The stories of violence evoke instant sympathy towards Little Dog. This unfavourable introduction to Rose is later countered with stories offering a more nuanced look at her, showing her motivations and struggles. The descriptions of Little Dog's upbringing in America are given next to the story of a sometimes-violent mother attempting to shield her child, in order to protect him from a society she fears and partly does not understand because she does not know English. We are told the story of Rose's mother Lan, who left her arranged marriage with her young daughter, who has to resort to prostitution to survive, and who eventually marries an American soldier only to part with him when he leaves for America. Simultaneously, more recent stories show how these experiences still affect each individual person as well as the family as a whole. It is his matrilineal history Little Dog chooses to advance and give space. Although his father is mentioned briefly, he is given little attention, most likely due to him not having been a part of most of Little Dog's life. By focusing on matrilineal history, Little Dog is centring the women in his life. Ultimately, the story that is told is an intergenerational story, where each person's individual experiences shape the other members of the family and the way they live life together.

These intergenerational stories contribute to collective remembering, where Lan and Rose's experiences become ingrained in Little Dog's own memories. Smith and Watson argue that personal remembering is fundamentally social and collective: "Memory is a means of "passing on," of sharing a social past that may have been obscured, thereby activating its potential for reshaping a future of and for other subjects" (26). By retelling his family's life-stories and mixing them with historical facts, Little Dog is painting a picture of Vietnam and the Vietnam War based on collective memory: his mother's, Lan's, and his own. He is retelling stories that have happened to Rose and Lan in the past, as well as more recent stories which

show how Rose and Lan are still affected by this past, and how this in turn affects his life. Thus, the book shows the prolonged repercussions of war and how these may extend even to those who did not experience the war themselves. Ma and Tompkins claim that Little Dog “recreates and reimagines history to preserve his family’s experiences as well as to understand his own heritage and claim his place in it” (207). Vuong himself suggests that Little Dog’s American identity does not start when he first comes to America, but with the Vietnam War (Filgate). In this way, the war becomes integrated into Little Dog’s own identity as he learns about it from Rose and Lan’s memories.

When Little Dog then repeats these memories in *On Earth*, he mixes them with historical facts. Smith and Watson distinguish between private and public modes of remembering, where family stories are categorised as private, whilst historical events are categorised as public (25). By mixing these two modes of remembering, Little Dog shows how these vulnerable women were able to survive during a period of violence. This serves the dual purpose of telling a personal story about these women, and a collective story about the violence of the war. Mixing the personal stories with historical facts allows Little Dog to take on the role of a translator, providing connections and ultimately telling a complex story of a war which he himself did not experience. Thus, the collective memories in *On Earth* are the memories which Lan and Rose repeat to Little Dog in the form of stories, and which he repeats in these letters. The memories shape his understanding of Vietnam and the Vietnam war, and contributes to his understanding of self and of his place in the world.

The way Little Dog takes on these memories to form his identity shows how the legacy of trauma affects him and his family, and the book itself becomes an attempt at personal and collective healing. Through this long letter from Little Dog to his mother, Rose, Little Dog starts a process of communal healing which involves himself, his mother, and his grandmother. In the process of understanding his own trauma, such as his mother’s violence during his childhood, Little Dog has to delve deep into his family’s trauma as well. The stories about his grandmother and mother helps him understand them and their actions, and are testimonies to their traumatic pasts. Factual information is included where it might influence how we read the story, such as noting that trauma may influence posture, before adding that Lan’s back was perpetually bent (Vuong 19), inadvertently letting the reader know that Lan has experienced trauma. Because Rose and Lan do not outright share their experiences and how it has affected them, Little Dog is developing a picture by piecing together their history through the snippets of stories they have told him over the years. It becomes up to Little Dog to interpret these stories and to make sense of his mother and grandmother’s trauma. These stories replace open



conversations, in a way that makes what is essentially one-way communication into a conversation, where Rose's stories, retold by Little Dog, becomes her way of answering him. Jeffery T. Gibbons, Professor of English, argues that both Little Dog and Rose engage in "acts of repair" so that they can understand each other and each other's struggles better, something that is emphasised by the epistolary narrative (142). Thereby, healing becomes a collective task which can only be achieved by developing a common understanding of the family's private and shared experiences, the collective trauma of the war, and their individual suffering as a result of it.

The end of the book affirms that healing is a communal process, when, during a trip to Vietnam, Rose and Little Dog encounter a public funeral procession informally organised by the community of neighbours. The public procession at a time when Little Dog and Rose are healing the loss of Lan evoke a feeling of shared loss: "In Saigon, the sound of music and children playing this late in the night is a sign of death—or rather, a sign of a community attempting to heal" (Vuong 226). Furthermore, the presence of drag-performers offers Little Dog an "illuminating perspective into trauma and healing" (Gibbons 140). Gibbons argues that traumatic memory is inherently queer because there is nothing "normal" or "logical" about it (ibid.). It then makes sense to utilise queer modes of storytelling to express trauma and healing, something Vuong does in *On Earth* by mixing personal memory, his family's stories, folktales, history, and poetry. In its entirety, *On Earth* is a son's struggle to come to terms with the fragmented parts of his sometimes traumatic upbringing, something he can only do by attempting to understand how trauma has affected the other members of his family. By attempting to understand each other's trauma, the family can begin a communal healing-process, something Little Dog does in this book by revisiting his own memories and recontextualising them by seeing them in connection to his family's memories and what he now knows about the war. The emergence of the drag-performers as Rose and Little Dog are attempting to heal then become a reminder of the queer and communal nature of healing.

Vuong further emphasises the link between the personal and the communal by using individual stories to tell an overall story about a collective experience of struggle in America. By recounting the different individual stories that make up the communities that Little Dog is a part of, Vuong is bringing attention to all the different ways people are attempting to fit into the American way of life, and the effort this involves. At the tobacco farm, he describes the lives and fates of his fellow workers such as George, Brandon, and Manny (Vuong 92). Their stories illustrate the struggle of poor immigrants labouring under terrible working conditions in an attempt to provide for their families. When cycling around his neighbourhood, he remembers

his neighbours, such as his friend Sid, the Canino brothers, and Marin among others (ibid. 145). He details the different troubles that make up their lives through stories which emphasise just how hard they have to work in order to get by in America, and how sometimes even that is not enough. These stories work to counter the myth of the American dream, which assumes that everyone has equal opportunity for financial stability and social mobility. The narrator sees all of the individuals that make up the communities he is a part of, and considers their different lives, experiences, and troubles. This brings back Vuong's quote on wanting to insist that "these lives are real, that these folks who live in poverty—white, brown, yellow—are actual people" (Haber). By including several different stories from different individuals, he shows the universality of their experiences. The book then becomes a form of communal storytelling, which is reminiscent of the way the *bio-* prefix in the biomythography opens up for both personal and collective stories, as it did in *Zami*. Each individual story combines to paint a picture of a collective experience of struggle and determination, showing the difficulties involved in attempting to fit into the American way of life. Succeeding is a collective effort and struggle, where everyone has similar goals, although their stories may look different from each other. Thus, each individual story Little Dog recounts interlocks and tells an overall story of a collective experience.

The descriptions of the working conditions of Vietnamese immigrants who are employed at saloons across the U.S. also serve as a form of collective storytelling, where individual stories become collective stories. Little Dog uses 'we' and 'our' when describing the working conditions of the women working at the nail salon, such as "our children" and "our women" (Vuong 80). Thus, he aligns himself with a group of people whose fates and experiences he only partly shares. His descriptions are not specific to the salon that his mother works at, but become general descriptions of nail salons run by Vietnamese people in America:

It's a makeshift classroom where we arrive, fresh off the boat, the plane, the depths, hoping the salon would be a temporary stop—until we get on our feet, or rather, until our jaws soften around English syllables—bend over workbooks at manicure desks, finishing homework for nighttime ESL classes that cost a quarter of our wages (Vuong 80).

The use of 'we' and 'our' suggest a strong feeling of community and unity, and emphasises that this is a collective experience shared by countless other Vietnamese immigrants. It suggests that the story he is telling is not solely a story of his own, and his family's, life, but a story of general experiences a lot of Vietnamese people immigrating to America may share. This brings out Little Dog's role as a translator: he observes his mother's and other people's experiences, and transfers this to a general understanding of the experience of Vietnamese women and

immigrants. Thus, he is translating his observations of individual experiences to the reader, in order to tell a universal story about a community.

His descriptions work to further challenge the idea that America is a country of equal opportunity, where people enjoy social mobility and where immigrants have the possibility of working hard in order to become a part of American society. This is particularly significant when it comes to Asian-Americans because of the stereotype that Asian people possess some inherent unique intelligence which makes them superior to other immigrants, and which makes it easy for them to climb the socio-economic ladder in American society. This is damaging because it suggests a shared experience of ease between Asian people immigrating to America, one which does not reflect the actual experiences of many immigrants from Asian countries. There is an expectation that Asian Americans “enjoy social mobility through unapparelled achievements of educational and financial success and continued alignments with whiteness through physical, linguistic, and ideologically performative acts” (Cho 136). But as Vuong shows, the pursuit of financial stability is difficult for a great deal of immigrants, and one is not White in America without English (Vuong 52). Vuong’s descriptions show both the lack of opportunity for financial and social stability for immigrants in America, and the hard work, strength, and determination Little Dog witnesses from immigrants attempting to secure their own, and their families’, well-being and stability. By making these descriptions not only apply to the people Little Dog himself encounters, he reinforces that the struggle to enter American society is a shared and collective effort.

When Little Dog and his mother visit the church that his classmate goes to, community becomes not merely a community of Vietnamese American immigrants, but a community of people who all experience life outside of the white, hegemonic majority. Little Dog recounts that he and his mother were “the only yellow faces in the church”, but that they were “received with warm smiles” (Vuong 58). During prayer song, Rose speaks Vietnamese to her real, dead father, and Little Dog remembers observing that no one paid any attention to this:

It might have been the first time Vietnamese was ever spoken in that church. But no one glared at you with questions in their eyes. No one made a double take at the yellow-white woman speaking her own tongue. ... It was there, inside that song, that you had permission to lose yourself and not be wrong (Vuong 59).

Rose experiences freedom in not being looked at, and in not being made to feel like an outsider, something she experiences frequently because she does not speak English. Although she is light-skinned, her language keeps her from passing for white. But among these people who have also been othered by American society, she gets to speak her language freely, without being

alienated. The song provides a cover, under which Rose is free from scrutiny. The event suggests a community and alliance based on the experience of being othered. This is not a community that is dependent on sameness, but one that accepts difference. Although these people do not share the same history, and do not experience life in the same way, there is a community in the shared experience of being othered, being glared at, and of being excluded from the white majority culture in general.

### 3.2 “Manlike Monkeys”: Myth

As the previous subchapter has illustrated, Little Dog is constantly told stories by Rose and Lan, and these stories shape his understanding of history and their role in it. But mixed in with these truthful stories are myths and folktales, and it is sometimes difficult to ascertain which are true stories and which are myths. Whilst plucking grey hairs from her scalp, Lan tells Little Dog stories, and he mouths the words:

As I plucked, the blank walls around us did not so much fill with fantastical landscapes as open into them, the plaster disintegrating to reveal the past behind it. Scenes from the war, mythologies of manlike monkeys, of ancient ghost catchers from the hills of Da Lat who were paid in jugs of rice wine, who travelled through villages with packs of wild dogs and spells written on palm leaves to dispel evil spirits. / There were personal stories too (Vuong 22).

Storytelling connects Little Dog and his grandmother, and the sessions are described as communal by Little Dog. Lan is the storyteller, while he is the listener, who provides a service in return by plucking her grey hairs. The stories help shape Little Dog’s impression and understanding of Vietnam and connects him to his birthplace which he left at a young age. In these sessions, truth and fiction merge, as histories of the Vietnam War is followed by stories of manlike monkeys and ancient ghost catchers. This works to assign value to the mythological stories as both entertainment and sources of knowledge, in the same way as history is.

Vuong uses myths and stories in order to tell an alternative story of the Vietnam War and its effects on his family. This is reminiscent of the way he has previously used mythology in his poetry collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. Vuong has stated that this poetry collection involves a form of mythological retellings of history. In a video for the T.S. Eliot prize, he says that “A lot of the poems in *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* attempts to navigate history through a rewriting, or rather a recasting, of history into a mythology” (“Ocean Vuong talks about his work”, my transcription). He adds that writing the history of the Vietnam War and the history of a queer American body as a mythology allowed him to tell these stories that he himself had not experienced through “poetical reimagination”, and without appropriating the histories of

people who had actually experienced the war. This mythological retelling involves a retelling of history as mythologies. In *On Earth*, this is done by telling the story of the war through a combination of his family's stories, folktales and historical facts.

Little Dog continues his family's storytelling-tradition by writing this book and telling their stories to a wider audience. He repeats the stories Lan and Rose has told him during his upbringing in this long letter to his mother. Some of the stories, such as the story about a girl carrying a child who meets two American soldiers and survives potential rape, appears at different instances throughout the book, and it is slowly made clear that the woman was his grandmother, Lan. Vuong has stated that "I was the first to read and write but I was by no means the first poet in my family" (Haber), emphasising the significance oral storytelling has had in his family. By retelling some of their stories in this book, he is continuing this tradition. Additionally, Little Dog's storytelling is a continuation of his role as the family's translator. Because Little Dog knows English, and Rose and Lan do not, Little Dog takes on the role as their translator from a young age. In retelling their stories to a wider audience, and doing so in English no less, Little Dog is continuing this work.

Through mythological stories, Little Dog utilises his abilities as a translator to tell an alternative story of the Vietnam War. In a particularly gruesome scene which resurfaces several times in the book, Little Dog tells the story of a group of American soldiers eating the brain of a live monkey because they believe this will prevent impotence. This story is originally told to the reader by Little Dog, and it is not until the final section of the book that it is revealed that this is a story Rose used to tell him when he was younger, one which he would request again and again. Whether the story about the men eating a monkey is something Lan or Rose have witnessed, or whether it is a story they have been told, is unclear. It is apparent that these are stories Little Dog loved to hear and that they participated in shaping his understanding of Vietnam and the country's history. Coming back to OED's definition of myths as stories that explain a phenomenon (OED, Myth, n), the story of the monkey functions to illustrate the brutality of war. Vuong himself has stated that his intention with this story was to highlight the "legacy of human violence" (Wolk). Although *On Earth* never depicts actual violence conducted by American soldiers towards people, the brutality of this story is transferable to the general brutality of war. The paralysed and innocent monkey becomes an image of the lack of agency experienced by Vietnamese civilians, something which is highlighted by the fact that the story is told in parallel with the story about young Lan meeting the two American soldiers. Ultimately, Little Dog translates myths to reality by combining these stories to create a wider meaning and significance.

The process of being given a name or of naming oneself is given mythological and spiritual value in the text, because the names' meanings are derived from mythological stories. Little Dog was originally named by a shaman but is later renamed Little Dog by his mother:

As you know, in the village where Lan grew up, a child, often the smallest or weakest of the flock, as I was, is named after the most despicable things (...) little dog being the more tender one. Because evil spirits, roaming the land for healthy, beautiful children, would hear the name of something hideous and ghastly being called in for supper and pass over the house, sparing the child. To love something then is to name it after something so worthless it might be left untouched—and alive. (Vuong 18).

Naming then become an attempt to affect the fate of your child. The naming process implies that names have more value than simply being a way to address you: they carry with them some inherent value which will affect the trajectory of your life. Little Dog's father originally named him after a big conqueror, which he believed would lead to Little Dog achieving great success in his life. His mother on the other hand, named him after something 'worthless' in order to protect him. The naming process shows the value placed upon myth and spirituality in Little Dog's family and in their community. The idea that names carry with them some value which affects your life is reenforced by Lan renaming herself and her daughter after she leaves her first husband. She was originally named Seven, after "the order in which she came into the world after her siblings" (Vuong 39). When she leaves, she names herself after an orchid, and names her daughter Mai. Little Dog describes Lan's renaming of herself: "In that war, a woman gifted herself a new name—Lan—in that naming claimed herself beautiful, then made that beauty into something worth keeping" (ibid. 231). Here, renaming becomes an act of agency in which Lan reclaims a beauty which was taken away from her during her unhappy marriage. In an interview with Seth Meyers, Vuong ties the process of naming to claiming power: "So a name becomes a cloak, becomes a shield. And particularly with these women who have PTSD, who survived war, they're so powerless in America. They have very little agency. And their only one thing they can do with their mouth is to rename the child Little Dog to protect him" (Meyers, my transcription). Naming then is a process from which women can exert some power, and where female understandings of tradition, myth, and history is carried on.

Little Dog uses mythological stories to understand and process certain situations. When Rose has an episode in which she threatens a man she believes to be someone who previously hurt her sister with a machete, Little Dog is reminded of Lady Triệu, whom Lan has told him stories about. Lady Triệu is "the mythical woman warrior who led an army of men and repelled the Chinese invasion of ancient Vietnam" (Vuong 68). Little Dog ultimately associates this memory with female power, because it was Lady Triệu, a woman, who saved us [Vietnam]

(ibid. 69). Although it is revealed that Rose's sister Mai moved years ago, and left her violent partner in the process, the event is most likely Rose reliving a memory of a threat that has occurred previously. Thus, Rose becomes someone so fixated on protecting her sister that she remembers this event years after this man was actually a threat. Instead of seeing his mother as someone who has acted irrationally, Little Dog sees a woman fighting to protect those she loves, just as Lady Triệu fought for Vietnam. This exemplifies Little Dog using myths as alternative forms of knowledge in that it provides him with an alternative perspective from which to understand the situation.

*On Earth* illustrates how myth is communal and an important part of cultural heritage. In this case, we see how myths in the form of stories can lead to connection: Little Dog and his grandmother bond over stories from her youth, and all the women in the salon bond over myths and stories. When describing the environment in the nail salons his mother worked at, Little Dog writes: "A place where folklore, rumors, tall tales, and jokes from the old country are told, expanded, laughter erupting in back rooms the size of rich people's closets, then quickly lulled into an eerie, untouched quiet" (Vuong 80). This shows how they bring their stories with them when attempting to forge a future in America, emphasizing the significance of myths as ways of communicating history and as a bearer of cultural affiliation.

### **3.3 "You're already Vietnamese": Desire**

In *On Earth*, Little Dog examines specific issues related to being both an immigrant and queer, something he can do completely openly and without censorship because his mother cannot read the letters he is writing. His descriptions of his early experiences with queer desire are explicit and poetic. He details intercourse with Trevor, his experience coming out to his mother, the first times he experienced same-sex attraction, and taboo elements of intercourse such as the release of bodily fluids. Because his mother cannot read this letter that he is writing her, he is not influenced by a fear of her being hurt or affected in any way by what he is writing, and thus is able to express the full range of his desires honestly. The narrator himself comments on this when noting that "the very impossibility of your reading this is all that makes my telling it possible" (Vuong 113). The complete honesty about his desires in these letters becomes a way to be honest without having to face the repercussions his actions might have resulted in if his mother could understand his words. At the same time, the premise is contrived: we are not reading actual letters that a mother will never read or understand, but a published book intended for an audience. Thus, the reader knows that the book isn't actually addressing Little Dog's

mother, but them as readers. Yet, the addressee being someone who cannot read what is written still produces the effect of implying complete honesty. Ultimately, the intentional choice of addressee contributes to the overall validity of the stories told.

The book resembles a coming-out story in that it shows Little Dog's first indications of his own sexuality, his first encounter with love and desire, and his experience with coming out. When he comes out to his mother, her response is to say that she "gave birth to a healthy, normal boy" and to ask when it all started (Vuong 131). She is reproducing heteronormative bias which sees straight as normal, and gay as different. Her primary worry is that Little Dog is also cross-dressing, which she believes would be very dangerous for him. Although coming out to his mother appears to be difficult for Little Dog, he is not filled with the same shame connected to his sexuality that Trevor grapples with. When he comes out to his mother, he hides the fact that he has worn a dress, but does not express shame related to it. Gibbons links Little Dog's inward acceptance of his sexuality to what she refers to as the 'regimes of normal' (131). She argues that immigrants oftentimes already live outside of these 'regimes of normal', in that they have been displaced to a new country, and their lives may have been upended by war (ibid.). Thus, she suggests that because "everything up to this point in his life suggests to him [Little Dog] that the 'regimes of normal' serve only to subjugate and exploit him and his family", it is easier for him to embrace his queer identity (ibid.). Still, as Rose has reiterated to Little Dog throughout his life, standing out when you are already in an othered position can be dangerous. Throughout his childhood, Rose has reminded Little Dog that he's 'already Vietnamese': "'Remember,' you said each morning before we stepped out in cold Connecticut air, 'don't draw attention to yourself. You're already Vietnamese.'" (Vuong 219). This implies that Little Dog shouldn't do anything which will make him stand out further, appearing to be Rose's attempt to protect her son. The words remind the reader of the dangers connected to standing out in America, and contextualises Rose's largely negative response to Little Dog coming out as gay. Little Dog and Rose then come to represent two different approaches to life outside of the 'regimes of normal': Little Dog rejects these 'regimes' altogether by breaking with the norm, whilst Rose sees life within the 'regimes' as the safest goal, urging Little Dog not to stand out more than he already does.

The different modes of storytelling taking place in *On Earth* allows Vuong to highlight the dangers of being queer in a society where violence against both queer people and immigrants does occur, as well as shedding light on how this affects Little Dog's relationship with his own sexuality. After he has come out to his mother, Little Dog recounts actual scenes of violence that has occurred against queer people:



Sometimes, when I'm careless, I think survival is easy (...) / A few months before our talk at Dunkin' Donuts, a fourteen-year-old boy in rural Vietnam had acid thrown in his face after he slipped a love letter into another boy's locker. Last summer, twenty-eight-year-old Florida native Omar Mateen walked into an Orlando nightclub, raised his automatic rifle, and opened fire. Forty-nine people were killed. It was a gay club, and the boys, because that's who they were – sons, teenagers – looked like me: a colored thing born of one mother, rummaging the dark, each other, for happiness (Vuong 137).

This becomes an example of using actual events to situate the story into our actual world, so that even though the book is fiction, Little Dog's actions and his mother's reactions become plausible. It is significant because of the scope of the danger, a danger which is very real, and which influences how a queer immigrant would live life in America. The phrase 'colored thing born of one mother' reaffirms that this passage influences how we read Rose's response to her son coming out: there are actual dangers involved in being publicly queer. Furthermore, the inclusion of real events situates the story into an historical context. This is reminiscent of the way Lorde uses historical events both to engage in social criticism, to place her life in a historical context, and to show how these events change the trajectory of Audre's life. 'Sometimes, when I'm careless, I think survival is easy' shows how these realities of danger is something which goes in and out of Little Dog's consciousness, thus shaping how he expresses his sexuality, both to his mother and to the world at large.

Because of this awareness of how queer desire is viewed by society, Little Dog is conscious of the language he uses to talk about his sexuality. In a similar way to how Lorde places queerness in an African historical context by using mythological figures, Vuong's intentional word choices bring attention to the fact that the words we use to talk about queerness comes with certain implications. He is reminding the reader of the constraints Western colonisation has placed on queer bodies in Vietnam, for example by forcefully naming them. When coming out to his mother, Little Dog uses the words "I don't like girls" (Vuong 130), explaining to the reader that he does not want to use the Vietnamese word *pê-dê*, because it stems from the French word *pédé*, which is short for *pédéraste* (pedophile) and which was introduced by the French during the French occupation of Vietnam (*ibid.*). He writes that before this, there was no Vietnamese word for queer bodies because they were "seen, like all bodies, fleshed and of one source" (*ibid.*). Thus, the Vietnamese word for gay implies that there is something negative and predatory about queerness. Spivak draws attention to how Little Dog's role as interpreter for his family allows him to negotiate his queerness in a way he could not have done if they both spoke the language (743). By being intentional with his language, he gains autonomy of his coming-out to his mother. Similarly, when someone writes 'FAG4LIFE'

in front of his house, Little Dog intentionally translates it incorrectly to “Merry Christmas” (Vuong 181) thus protecting his mother and grandmother, but also claiming authority over when and how he comes out to his mother. His power over language lets him reframe the narrative and take control over how he presents his sexuality to his family.

Furthermore, Little Dog uses his power over language to express his desires in a way that is not restricted by form or structure. Little Dog’s constant fear of standing out contributes to his experience of himself as powerless. Desire then becomes something which emerges and claims space despite a feeling of powerlessness because of society’s expectations and prejudices. In an interview, Vuong emphasises that desire often is tied to power, and that America renders certain people powerless (Filgate). He states that he wanted to capture desire that “could not expand itself”, because lack of power makes one unable to act according to, and to express, desire: “I tried to elongate desire as a force of feeling when you cannot act, when you don’t have the agency or the means to act on your wishes, then you must sit with desire, and desire moves within you. It’s like a storm in a mason jar, you have to be there with it.” (Filgate). This storm is seen in Little Dog’s relationship with Trevor, where both of their powerlessness’ is expressed in a relationship where desire is simultaneously beautiful and shameful. The storm is also present in the form, which at times expands from prose into poetry. An example is the section of the book which directly precedes Trevor’s death, a section which is written as a prose poem. Ultimately, ordinary words and sentences are not enough to express the desire, love, and pain Little Dog associates with Trevor. Just as the biomythography is a form which allows for different ways of expressing desire, *On Earth* is a book where the flexibility of the form allows for different modes of expression which are exploratory and expansive.

This section becomes further exploratory when the ‘you’ stops being his mother, and instead becomes himself or a younger version of himself. The text has the form of a prose poem, and a section reads: “For your hands / were wet and Trevor’s name like an engine starting up in the night. Who snuck out to meet a boy like you. Yellow and barely there.” (Vuong 153). The letter has ceased to be to his mother, showing that Vuong does not limit himself by the ‘rules’ of the epistolary genre, but uses it as a foundation from which to construct his story. By changing who the letter is addressed to in the middle of the book, Vuong places emphasis on this section as particularly prominent and important. In the section, the intense feelings of love, desire, and shame are chaotic, which is mirrored by the infrequent line breaks and the use of repetition and metaphors. The purpose is not to ‘reach’ his mother, but to recognise the intensity of his young self’s relationship with Trevor. The effect of changing the ‘you’ becomes that

Little Dog is looking at the text from a distance, looking back at his past experiences through the eyes of his adult self. It gives validity to the force of his feelings, and further emphasises the necessity of queering form in order to adequately express desire.

Through poetic language and conscious wordings, Little Dog creates a picture of intercourse and ways of being together which transcends binaries and normative ways of thinking about love, intercourse, and desire. Little Dog describes feeling autonomy in submission, and in the pain that accompanies some of his and Trevor's sexual acts. Christina Slopek, PhD candidate, argues that Little Dog embraces bottomhood, thus: "Countering the heteronormative vision of sex as power exerted by a dominant person – man – over a submissive one – a woman – Little Dog is submissive but just as well shapes the dynamics between the two boys" (751). For Little Dog expresses pleasure from the pain associated with their sexual acts, and whilst he draws attention to the fact that all he knows of love is pain, he also notes that in his sexual relationship with Trevor the pain is his own choice. Ha and Tomkins draw parallels between this feeling of power and his powerlessness during childhood: "Despite patterns of shame and inconsistency with Trevor, feeling desired and reclaiming control over his body after years of being physically abused by Rose give Little Dog a sense of personal empowerment as well as a mode of expression in response to his violent upbringing" (200). However, the fact that Trevor does not stop afflicting pain on Little Dog even when asked to do so, shows that the pain is not always voluntary. And although Little Dog experiences pleasure and empowerment from bottomhood, the positions they take on are affected by their positions in society, and the power associated with these positions.

Through fragmented descriptions of their relationship, *On Earth* shows how the relationship between Little Dog and Trevor is impacted by the fact that Little Dog is Vietnamese, whilst Trevor is white. Initially, their sexual encounters mirror the power structures between Asian and white men in American society. Trevor is concerned with maintaining his masculinity, and initially refuses to perform sexual acts which he views as feminine, such as giving Little Dog a hand-job:

But it was over before it began. Before my hip brushed his greased palm, he tensed, his back a wall. He pushed me back, sat up. "Fuck." He stared straight ahead.

"I can't. I just—I mean..." He spoke into the wall. "I dunno. I don't want to feel like a girl. Like a bitch. I can't, man. I'm sorry, it's not for me—" He paused, wiped his nose. "It's for you. Right? (Vuong 120).

His words 'feel like a girl' illustrate how Trevor maintains a heteronormative view of sex and sexual acts, where some acts are seen as inherently masculine or feminine. 'It's for you'

reiterates that he believes that the acts he considers feminine should be performed by Little Dog, not by himself. Little Dog is inwardly frustrated by this, having believed that when they had sex, they left society's stereotypes behind, that "as long as the world did not see us, its rules did not apply" (Vuong 120). Trevor's words remind him that societal conceptions of race and power (the "rules") are very much still present. Jennifer Cho, Lecturer of Asian American Studies, reads Trevor's refusal to take on the bottom-position as unwillingness to transfer power to Little Dog, as well as an attempt to reject his own homosexuality, instead projecting the 'gayness' of their act to Little Dog (143). Slopek notes that gay, Asian men often get stereotyped as "bottoms" and as possessing feminine qualities (Slopek 751). Thus, Trevor's insistence of these positions cannot be seen as separate from his understanding of their differing positions in society.

Poetry allows Vuong to express Trevor's struggles with his sexuality and how it is situated between his desires and his view of his position in American society. Trevor, with his poor, alcoholic father, exemplifies that whiteness does not always equal privilege. By reiterating Trevor's struggles with his sexuality, *On Earth* illustrates the internal battle and shame involved in acting out desires which are not accepted in your environment:

Trevor later / on your steps in the grey dawn. His face in his arms. *I don't wanna*, he said. His panting. His shaking hair. The blur of it. *Please tell me I am not*, he said through the sound of his knuckles as he popped them like the word *But But But*. And you take a step back. *Please tell me I am not*, he said, *I am not / a faggot. Am I? Am I? Are you? / Trevor the hunter. Trevor the carnivore, the redneck, not / a pansy, shotgunner, sharpshooter, not fruit or fairy. Trevor meateater but not / veal. Never veal. Fuck that, never again (...)* (Vuong 155).

The poetic text shows the many contradictions that exists within Trevor. He is a 'hunter', 'carnivore', and 'redneck', not 'fruit' or 'fairy', a 'meateater' but '*Never veal*'. It illustrates the internal battle between his sexuality and his position as a white man in American society, and the conceptions of masculine identity this entails. Because masculinity ultimately is tied to notions of power, legitimacy, and privilege, it is closely connected to class, race, sexuality, and gender (Halberstam 1998, 2). Slopek uses Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) term "hegemonic masculinity" to describe contemporary American toxic hypermasculinity (741). Trevor's father is the archetype of this hegemonic masculinity, as he proclaims that "*We love eatin' what's soft*" (Vuong 156), providing a contrast to Trevor, who'll '*never again*' eat veal. Ultimately, Trevor hides the parts of him which does not fit into his ideas of masculinity, most notably his sexuality.

Trevor is clinging to hegemonic masculine practices where there is no room for homosexuality, but because he cannot do this, he experiences shame. Sara Ahmed describes shame as “an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body” (103). Shame is something we feel inwardly, but which can be intensified if one’s shame is witnessed by others, and even further if it is categorised by others as shame (ibid.). Thus, by reiterating Trevor’s Americanness, referring to his “all All-American beef” and calling him “John Deere” (Vuong 158), the book draws parallels between the intense shame experienced by Trevor and his position in the white hegemonic majority, showing that this masculinity is something that traps Trevor. Vuong has stated that *On Earth* is as much about whiteness as it about being a Vietnamese American immigrant (Wolk). Ultimately, through poetry, Vuong is able to express the multifaceted parts of Trevor’s identity and how white masculinity harms both those who are outside of it, and those who are captured within it.

This chapter has read *On Earth* as a biomythography, with an emphasis on the textual elements of community, myth, and desire. It has shown how a biomythographic analysis of texts involves examining how individual stories are used to highlight a collective experience, and how the individual functions in relation to their community. Furthermore, it has provided a way to read the way myths function in a story which does not utilise mythological creatures in the same way that *Zami* does. It has found that although *On Earth* does not use mythological creatures actively like Lorde does, the book does use myths in terms of stories as alternative forms of history writing. Furthermore, the chapter has demonstrated how explorations of queer desire requires queer forms of expression, something the biomythography facilitates for by not placing restrictions on form and structure. This flexibility of form makes *On Earth*’s epistolary form reconcilable with a reading of the book as a biomythography.

The three themes community, myth, and desire come together in Little Dog’s role as a translator. Little Dog functions as his family’s translator because of his knowledge of English, which he utilises to gain autonomy over his experience coming out to his mother. But his role as translator is expanded within the pages of *On Earth*, as he becomes the translator for entire communities by collecting individual stories to illustrate communal struggles. Finally, he uses personal and mythological stories to tell an alternative history of the Vietnam War, thus translating them to the reader of these letters.

## 4 Conclusion

Biomythography as Audre Lorde envisioned it is a genre that never became widely used or acknowledged. Yet it joins several other terms in seeking alternatives when traditional genres feel ill equipped to accurately make room for certain experiences. The goal of this thesis has been to use the biomythography to theorise new ways to read texts. As the original biomythography, *Zami* becomes the template for this genre which otherwise feels very difficult to summarise, a genre which at its core is fluid and non-restrictive. Still, this thesis has attempted to establish some distinguishing characteristics from which to understand the biomythography. It has argued that the biomythography offers a way of analysing how literary texts portray the multi-layered experiences of queer people and people of colour, and has emphasised textual elements of community, myth, and desire.

As a flexible and open genre, the biomythography allows for the use of different modes of literary expression. *Zami* and *On Earth* both have a non-linear structure. Although both books give the impression of providing a comprehensive insight into the protagonists' upbringings, this is achieved through fragmented stories. Whilst *Zami* is partly told chronologically, Lorde breaks with this linearity several times. She uses paragraphs in italics to create disruptions from the story, where Audre's deepest thoughts are explored. Vuong rejects chronology altogether, which is facilitated by the epistolary form of the novel. The fragmentation becomes a way to see and explore connections, which reflects Little Dog's journey of unifying his own life experiences with his family's past. Both authors use poetry and poetic language to express themselves in moments which create the impression of expanding out of the main narrative. The use of poetry becomes a way to express feelings of desire, unity, and alienation in sections of the books where traditional prose is inadequate.

The biomythography challenges our ideas of what fiction should look like by containing both fictional and autobiographical elements. Whilst Lorde and Vuong emphasise that their stories are fiction, both authors take clear steps to ground them in the real world. Thus, even though they do not tell the truth of *one* person's life, the books become truthful in that they portray a real, collective experience, grounded in the actual realities of American society. Lorde wanted to tell the stories of black women and black West Indian women raising children in the U.S., and of black lesbians in the '50s (Jay 109), whilst Vuong wanted to tell the stories of people, "white, brown, yellow", who live in poverty (Haber). Thus, the biomythography provides the truth of a collective experience.

The mix of truth and fiction allows the biomythography to tell both personal stories and collective ones. *Zami* and *On Earth* both involve an individual voice speaking out about a collective experience through a personal story. They use personal stories to shed light on political issues, thus affirming that the personal is political. A problem with the idea that one person's story says something about a collective experience occurs when authors are tokenised, and their individual stories are not allowed to simply be their own. However, in both these books, the emphasis on collective stories is intentional, such as when Vuong uses words such as 'us' when describing the experience of Vietnamese people immigrating to America. Thus, both authors use their texts to intentionally shed light on collective experiences shared by multiple people.

Examining the links between individual and collective experiences also involves seeing the individual in relation to their community. In *Zami*, identity construction is seen as a communal act. As Audre goes from adolescence to adulthood, the way she engages with communities is central. The book portrays several different types of communities. These are women-centred and show a need to rethink how we live life together. Although she emphasises the need to celebrate difference and female communities, Lorde also brings attention to the negative sides to community by being honest about the difficulties involved in existing within communities. Finally, she finds community in every woman in her life, and recognises that the self is communal. In *On Earth*, an emphasis is placed on the dynamics within a family, and the ways individual family members are affected by collective memory and trauma is explored. Little Dog retells his family's and other immigrants' stories to a wider audience in this letter to his mother, thus taking on the role of the entire community's translator.

Lorde's emphasis on myths as central to the biomythography highlights its political significance as an alternative to traditional forms of knowledge. The inclusion of myths is what most clearly separates the biomythography from other genres. Myths give value to non-western forms of history and remembering. Furthermore, it assigns value to oral history telling, i.e., the modes of remembering and conveyance of knowledge and traditions that were available to those who were excluded from education and from history writing. Whilst Lorde and Vuong both use myth to create alternative histories, they do so in different ways. Lorde actively uses myth and mythological creatures to ground her lesbian identity and her community of women to her mother's homeland, to black history, and to the divine. Vuong uses stories to create a mythical retelling of Vietnam, one which favours individual experiences and stories, as well as myths. Ultimately, the use of myths is less present in *On Earth* than in *Zami*. It is the limited use of mythological creatures which is most at odds with a reading of the book as a biomythography.

Nevertheless, Vuong's use of myths to tell alternative histories of a war becomes a way to rewrite history as a mythology, thus utilising myths as alternative forms of knowledge, which aligns with Lorde's emphasis on myths as one of the ways we use knowledge (Kraft 49).

The biomythography allows for descriptions of desire which are non-conforming and exploratory, utilising queer modes of storytelling to portray queer desire. Although both books depict the difficulties associated with being queer in a heteronormative society, they do not focus on the personal agony and shame sometimes expressed in coming out narratives. Instead, the descriptions of moments of intense desire function to centre the individuals and their experiences, instead of the world around them. Coming back to Smith's claim that traditional autobiography "allows no space for female desire" (2016, 87), both these books queer genre in order to allow for the full expression of the subject and their desires. In using poetry and poetic language, they are able to fully express the messy, scary, and exiting elements of desire in ways that are honest and bold.

One of the main questions posited in the introduction of this thesis was whether there is a need to create alternative, separate genres such as the biomythography, or whether we instead should expand our existing genres such as the novel or the autobiography. To create a new genre becomes an act of protest or a rejection of the established, but so is expanding genres which already exist. The act of creating texts which fall outside of the traditional genres becomes to queer genre itself, and the refusal to choose either autobiographical truth or fiction, or between poetry and prose, becomes a continuation of this. Lorde and Vuong represent the two approaches to queering genre: Lorde created a new genre, whilst Vuong used the novel-genre in a way that suited his needs. By doing this, Vuong shows how the novel is ever evolving and expanding, with authors continually creating texts which challenge its norms and conventions. Ultimately, both approaches exist simultaneously, and both participate in the continuing expansion of literature.

There are other genres that open up for several of the biomythography's characteristics which this thesis has highlighted, perhaps most notably the novel. As Vuong has shown in *On Earth*, the novel can be queered and moulded so as to adequately allow for the forms of expression the author wishes to utilise. What reading texts as biomythographies thus does, is guiding the way the reader reads, and engages with, a text. Because of the biomythography's non-restrictive genre conventions, a variety of books can be read through the lens of the biomythography. And whilst there are other terms which are similar in alluding to the blend of fiction and truth, the biomythography does something unique in promoting certain myths and understandings of history as alternatives to the norm. Thus, by highlighting how we might read



books as biomythographies, we open up for ways to engage with texts which highlight fragmented storytelling, the mix of personal and communal, myths as alternative forms of knowledge, and exploratory descriptions of desire.

What we are left with are stories that have truth as their starting point, but which expands truth to give room for art. In an interview with Karla Jay, Lorde explains that *Zami* is not solely a retelling of her own and other women's stories but an attempt of producing a piece of art (110). Vuong similarly explains *On Earth*: "I wanted to start with truth and end with art" (Meyers). Both authors reject the limitations a promise to tell the truth involves. In doing this, they are able to centre the multi-layered experiences of queer people and people of colour, ultimately creating texts which utilise all means available to accurately portray lived experiences. They combine their own and other people's experiences with art, refusing to differentiate between truth and fiction, creating a *biomythography*.

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