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Transcript of: To Be Young, Lesbian, and Black in the '50s: Audre Lorde, a program produced by Helene Rosenbluth from an interview conducted at Hunter College in New York City. Broadcast on KPFK-FM, November, 1982. Pacifica Radio Archives number KZ1240. Program length 00:58:00

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Transcript

Audre Lorde Interviewed by Helene Rosenbluth, 1982.

[Music]

NAR: The following program is brought to you by the  
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[MUSIC, Billie Holiday]: Yesterday/ Yesterday/ Days are new  
as happy sweet/ Sequestered days/ Olden days/ Golden days/  
Days of mad romance/ And love/ When gay youth was mine/  
Truth was mine/ Joyous free and flaming life/ Then sooth  
was mine/ Sad am I/ Glad am I/ For today I'm dreaming of/

Yesterday. [Billie Holiday, "Yesterday"]

Helene Rosenbluth (H.R.):

It wasn't so easy back then, yesterdays, to be out, and to be a lesbian. Audre Lorde, who's a Black lesbian feminist poet, writes about it extensively about it in her new book entitled Zami: *A New Spelling of My Name*. She talks about what it's like growing up in a West-Indian household in Harlem, and coming out in the fifties in Greenwich Village. Let's listen, as she reads from her new book, Zami.

Audre Lorde (A.L.): [Reading]:

" I remember how being young and Black and gay and lonely felt. A lot of it was fine, feeling I had the truth and the light and the key. But a lot of it was purely hell. There were no mothers, no sisters, no heroes. We had to do it alone, like our sister Amazons, the riders on the loneliest outposts of the Kingdom of Dahomey. We, young and Black and fine and gay, sweated out our first heartbreaks with no school nor office chums to share that confidence over lunch hour. Just as there were no rings to make tangible the reason for our happy secret smiles, there were no

names nor reasons given or shared for the tears that messed up the lab reports or the library bills.

We were good listeners, and never asked for double dates. "But, didn't you know the rules?" Why did we always seem to think that friendships between women were important enough to care about? Always, we moved in a necessary remoteness that made, "What did you do this weekend?" seem like an impertinent question. We discovered and explored our attention to women alone, sometimes in secret, sometimes in defiance, sometimes in little pockets that almost touched. 'Why are those little Black girls always either whispering together or fighting?' But always alone--against a greater aloneness. We did it cold turkey. And although it resulted in some pretty imaginative tough women, when we survived, too many of us did not survive at all.

I remember Muff who sat on the same seat in the same dark corner of the Pony Stable bar, drinking the same gin year after year. One day she slipped off onto the floor and died of a stroke right there between the stools. We found out later her real name was Josephine.

During the fifties in the Village, I didn't know

the few other black women who were visibly gay at all well. Too often, we found ourselves sleeping with the same white women. We recognized ourselves as exotic 'sister-outsiders' who might gain little from banding together. Perhaps our strength might lay in our *fewness*, our *rarity*. *That* was the way it was, Downtown. And Uptown, meeting the land of Black people, seemed very far away and hostile territory.

Diane was fat and Black and beautiful, and knew it long before it became fashionable to think so. Her cruel tongue was used to great advantage, spilling out her devastatingly uninhibited *wit* to demolish anyone who came too close to her. That is, when she wasn't busy deflowering the neighborhood's resident virgins. One day, I noticed her *enormous* bosom, which match my own, and it felt quite comforting, rather than competitive. It was clothed in a CCNY [City College of New York, now the City College of the City University of New York] sweatshirt, and I realized in profound shock that someone else besides me in the Village gay-girl scene was a closet student at one of the Uptown -- meaning past 14th Street -- colleges. We would rather have *died* than mention classes, or

tests, or any book other than those everyone *else* was discussing; this was the fifties. And the gulf between the Village gay scene and the college crowd was sharper and far more acrimonious than any town-gown war." [End Reading]

H.R.: How did you decide to write a novel after all of your books of poetry?

A.L.: Well, (laughter), I didn't start out to write a novel, because I don't know -- I didn't know how to write a novel. But, um, I taught myself to write prose -- really, English is a second language because I had always written poetry. And, in a sense, I practiced it in the same way that I taught my students at John Jay how to write prose, how to think in a linear fashion. And, it was very, very difficult. And I always have a feeling about teaching in general, that you have no right to teach something that you are not willing to learn yourself. Right? Which is why I would always choose to teach poetry. But, having to teach, ah, Freshman English *really* put an incredible burden upon me because I had felt that I was in a position to -- that I was then in a position having to teach something that I knew about *theoretically*, but

that I myself was not able to do. So I had to go through the steps myself. And that's in a sense how I learned how to write prose. But Zami first began as a series of stories. And happened was I had gone to a MLA -- the Modern Language Association Meeting -- oh, hmmm, 1977. And I went to a meeting, a very large panel discussion, and a young Black woman stood up and said, "I'm a lesbian, feminist, literary critic, really asking myself a question, whether it's possible to be that and survive." It was Barbara Smith. But, I was so *taken* with this young woman's beauty and her bravery, and also the fact that that was really a question. And I thought to myself, "All right, Audre, there's some things that you really [laughter] -- There's some things that you just have to be saying. There are a couple of stories that you have to tell. This young woman needs to know, *Of course* it is. It's *hard*. But, it's certainly *more than* possible. And, I -- We got to be friends, and I got to know her." But, that always stayed in my mind. And I wrote a couple of pieces of that. ahh -- But it really started being a bio-mythography; it started being a concentrated body of work after -- in the period when I was

recuperating from my mastectomy, when -- after I found out that I had cancer, and there were a lot of things -- some of which I talk about it in the Cancer Journal, which is a step-by-step, really, account of both the psychic and the physical healing. There are some other aspects, and I think probably physiological, but also emotional, of the *real* despair that centers upon one when we are vulnerable -- that we're surrounded with so much horror so much of the time, and we all use various ways of keeping it afloat, of keeping it separate from ourselves. When you must attend one *particular* thing. As, for instance, how do I plan my meals [laughter] so that I make sure I'm not continuing to poison myself. How do I mend myself physically? It's as if you withdraw a lot of attention from keeping this stuff fielded, and it really all comes in. And, I think there's that. And I think also that perhaps one of the -- one of the real effects of cancer is an increased vulnerability to the kind of despair that we have to recognize and fight all the time. It's that I was fighting it less, or perhaps fighting it in a different way. And at that particular point, one of the things that I needed

was to reaffirm for myself the ways in which I had gotten -- the ways in which I had worked through difficult times in my life before. I was surrounded in that period with so many really loving women. When I say that it's the love of women that saved me, I really mean that. But, I also needed to recognize that it didn't just happen then. And these two things, these two -- these two elements just really came together: the thing that had happened the year before in MLA [Modern Language Association], my sense of the stories. And at that point it was, that I needed to tell these stories for other people, [laughter] for young Black lesbians who were growing up, to say, "Hey, this is how it was. Not how it was for everyone, but this is how it was for me." Well, that was one thread, but then also realizing that I needed to tell it for myself, that I needed to put this stuff down in some way that made sense to me -- how it had always been the love of women in some essential way, women who were kind, as well as women who were cruel, that had always seen me home in some essential way. And I started thinking about this, and I started from the very beginning, which was of course

my mother. And as I did this, I began to think more and more about the ways in which being -- growing up in a West Indian household, growing up with West Indian women -- And then, as I remembered more and more, I remembered things, and I did research, and so many things in my background started coming together: that I had always wanted to write about African women, about the way that black women raise their children. How is it different? Where does it come from? What are some elements? And I thought about West Indian women. I thought about things that I remember my mother saying that seemed very strange, the ways in which I knew I was different when I was growing up. I knew my family was different. What did different mean? All these things started coming together, and I started examining them. And there grew out of us a real realization of how, in some very essential ways, I was my mother's daughter, no matter much battling that we had done and how she had raised us to be who we are, how she had raised to be who I am, and what this meant in terms of being a woman-identified woman; and then remembering things that had been said in my household; and then tracking down; and the question of

"Zami" and Carriacou and what it means to grow up in -- You know, all of this stuff started just flooding through me. And I tried to put it -- I wrote maybe six times as much as what is there, trying to find different kinds of threads, and then crafting this material in some way that would make sense because it is not -- This is not an autobiography. Zami is not an autobiography. It's my mythography. And I say that because it is in the deepest way a collection of history and myth, as well as the stories of what exactly happened. Do you see? All of it is true, but it is the truth of so many women and so many places and so many times. And that's what I think of course fiction is all about. [laughter] That's what I would like to think that fiction is really about.

H.R.: And the fascinating thing that I found in reading it, was that it really ga-- It opened up a sense of history for me, giving me a sense of what my lesbian sisters were doing back in the fifties, which is something that you hear very little about. You also hear very little about black lifestyle during that period, during any period. And it was fascinating to me, especially taking a look, a very deep personal

look of the relationships that you had with these women during a time in our history -- during the McCarthy era, during the time -- a very repressed time in our history. And I wonder if you can talk a little bit about that, about what it was like being "out" at that time, and what kind of correlations can you draw to the political climate today?

A.L.: It was *hard*. That's how it was. It was hard. But, there's something that you have to understand, which is I grew up as a young Black woman in New York City in the fifties. Now, you can say I grew up as a young Black *lesbian* in New York in the fifties, and that would be coming from a *slightly* different direction. But, feeling oppressed and feeling that there was no place, that I was silenced, and I was -- that my life was always at stake -- came much more from being Black than it did from being a lesbian. And that's something that I try to illustrate in *Zami* because from the time I left home, I moved down to the Village, right? And it was a largely *white* lesbian ahh, milieu, environment, right? Or at best, certainly bohemian. But, there were very few Black people and very few Black women, and those of use who

were there were very separate, and very apart. And so, our consciousness of ourselves -- I know my consciousness of myself as being different, as being set apart, and under threat, was much more being black in a milieu that was really hostile to me. And was even being a lesbian, although being lesbian also had a part of it. It was as much being a progressive person, right? Of being involved in really progressive pursuits. It was that, in other words, I knew that I was *embattled* on every single level. I *knew* that the structures that were aligned, that the power structures were aligned against me. No matter who I was, whatever kind of protective coloration I might *want* to assume, I knew that there basically was a difference. And that, somehow, when -- I try to talk about that in Zami too -- When that is a consciousness all the time, then you know, either you survive or you don't. And if you do survive, it leaves you with a certain kind of toughness. You see, because there is no place to go, except what you make. And I remember feeling that as a very, very young woman, knowing that, that the only places that I would ever have would be the places I would have to make

myself with people who I loved.

H.R.: One interesting thing that you -- A little interesting tidbit that you threw in there, a piece of information which I never knew about, was about how *difficult* it was being out, even in the bars, in the gay bars -- that were some undercover people who would be there to check to see if you had, if women --

A.L.: Oh yeah.

H.R.: -- had women had three pieces of women's clothing on. If not, you would get arrested.

A.L.: Yeah. That was, that was always the going -- That was always the going story. And, it at times happened, that they could raid a bar at any time. Or, they could approach you as you left a bar, and demand to see your ID. You could be picked up on vagrancy, or picked up as transvestites, if you didn't have these three pieces of clothing.

H.R.: What were some of those three pieces? I mean, two we can come up with.

A.L.: Well, you can have bra, panties, and women's socks.

H.R.: [laughter]

A.L.: All right. I mean, it didn't matter too much

what you had, but that was -- that was usually what we thought of, right? Bra, panties, and socks. You'd always make a case for that.

H.R.: There were more role-playing, would you say, back then, than today?

A.L.: Well, I have -- I've had to think a lot about that, too. I think that, uh, role-playing was much more accepted. And I think that was the *standard*, so that those of us who felt, for one reason or another, that was not the way that we wanted to -- in -- we wanted to relate -- were not only in a *minority again*, but were really very suspect. They held a very, very suspect position. And that's something that I think we forget now. I think, on the one hand, we swung to the other extreme of rejecting the whole concept of what were women doing who were into roles, and what did it mean. And I can understand a lot of women who have said that this is a very *complex* question. I'm not prepared to take a position on it one or the other. What I do remember, *historically* speaking, is that it was a very easy thing within gay circles, within lesbian circles, to play "butch / femme," to assume roles, and this is what was expected. And

those people who, those women who did *not* assume roles, came under a great deal of, um, verbal attack, verbal abuse, and were objects of derision.

H.R.: Was it more difficult being a lesbian in the Black community or being Black in the lesbian community?

A.L.: Well, I would have to say that I did not have experience of being a lesbian in the black community because I left home when I was very young. I left home right after I was[in]high school, and I moved to the Village. So, it was never a question of being a lesbian in the Black community for me until much later. And -- I mean, until, say, the end of the fifties, beginning of the sixties. Now, being a Black in the lesbian in the lesbian community was difficult enough, was difficult enough. Now, I knew -- I met Black lesbians who lived within home, who lived uptown subsequently. And they had, again, different -- They had their own circles. I only began to get to know them at the end of Zami. That's essentially where Zami ends, where -- when I meet Kitty, and become involved with the Black lesbians out in Queens.

H.R.: I certainly hope you have a part two of Zami

because I'd love to find out what happens with that crowd.

A.L.: Well, you know -- That's interesting that you say that because part two of Zami would be a very, very different book. I mean, I may write another piece of fiction dealing with some of -- using some of the stuff from other parts of my life. But, again, it's always dangerous, I think, to read a piece of fiction as autobiography, which I keep saying, Zami is not, do you see? So, in order to find out, I mean, there's nothing -- You could ask me anything [laughter] you want to about the course in which my life took. How I will use the things that I remember, I guess I will. If I go on writing fiction, I have to. The one thing that I'm an expert on, if I'm an expert on anything, is of course, me. So, I have to take that stuff and use it, weave it, into the other things that I write. Because if I don't, and I think, for writers -- poets, as well as prose writers -- who don't, there is a real gap in authenticity. We don't only write about ourselves; we use ourselves to illuminate something that we really believe and we really feel. I think authentic fiction is so important because fiction is a

construct. But unless it's a construct that in some way *genuinely* illuminates our lives or makes us stronger or better who we are, then it only becomes a pastime. And I don't believe that art, that any kind of writing, any kind of art, is a pastime *only*. I think that it's beautiful and it's lovely, and I think we enjoy it -- God knows I really enjoy [laughter] writing this and reading it, but it has something else too. I think any piece of fiction has got to, in the same way that a poem does, somehow illuminate our lives. And in order to do that, we have to touch something that is deep, and something that is real inside of ourselves, and then we create from that. And I think therefore, we always put a great deal of ourselves in to whatever we write. As I said before, I think that's the original resource. That is *my* original resource. And if I can mine it in some real way, if I can really weigh what the artifacts, the minerals are, that I bring back up, then I can use them.

H.R.: Let's hear a little piece from Zami. We're talking about the new book by Audre Lorde entitled Zami, A New Spelling of my Name.

A.L.: [Reading]:

"There were not enough of us. But we surely tried. I remember thinking for awhile that I was the only Black lesbian living in the Village, until I met Felicia. Felicia, with the face of a spoiled nun, skinny and sharp brown, she sat on my sofa on Seventh Street with her enormous eyelashes that curled back onto themselves twice. She was bringing me a pair of Siamese cats that had terrorized her junkie friends who were straight and lived on a houseboat with the two cats, until they brought their new baby home from the hospital. And then both cats went bananas, back and forth all over the boat, jumping over everything including the box that the baby screamed in, because Siamese cats are very jealous. So, instead of drowning the cats, they gave them to Felicia, whom I ran into having a beer at the Bagatelle that night. And when Muriel mentioned I liked cats, Flee insisted on bringing them over to my house right then and there. She sat on my sofa with her box full of cats and her curly eyelashes, and I thought to myself, 'Well, if she must wear false eyelashes, you'd think she'd make them less obviously false.'

But we soon decided that we were really sisters, which was much more than friends or buddies. Particularly when we discovered, while reminiscing about the bad days, that we had gone to the same Catholic school for six months in the first grade.

I remembered her as the tough little kid in 1939 who came into class in the middle of winter disturbing our neat tight boredom and fear, bringing her own. Sister Mary of Perpetual Help seated her beside me, because I had a seat to myself in the front row, being both bad-behaved and very nearsighted. I remembered this skinny little kid who made my life hell. She pinched me all day long all the time, until she vanished some time around St. Swithins Day, a godsent reward, I thought. For what, I couldn't imagine, but it almost turned me back to God and prayer again.

Felicia and I came to love each other very much, even though our physical relationship was confined to cuddling. We were both of that 'freaky' bunch of lesbians who weren't into role-playing, and who the butches and femmes, Black and white, disparaged with the term Ky-Kyki, or AC/DC. Ky-Ky was the same name that was used for gay-girls who slept with johns for

money. Prostitutes.

Flee loved to snuggle in bed, but sometimes she hurt my feelings by saying I had 'shaggy breasts.' And too besides, Flee and I were always finding ourselves in bed together with other people, usually white women.

Then I *thought* we were the only gay Black women in the world, or at least in the Village, which at the time was a state of mind extending all the way from river to river below 14th Street, and in pockets throughout the area still known as the Lower East Side.

I had heard tales from Flee and others about the proper Black ladies who came downtown on Friday night after the last show at Small's Paradise to find a gay-girl to go muff-diving with and bring her back up to Convent Avenue to sleep over while their husbands went hunting, fishing, golfing, or to an Alpha's weekend [Alpha Phi Alpha -- and other prestigious, historically African American fraternities]. But I only met one once, and her pressed hair and all too eagerly interested husband who had accompanied her this particular night to the Bagatelle, where I met her over a daiquiri and a pressed knee, turned me off

completely. And this was pretty hard to do in those days, because it seemed an eternity between warm beds in the cold mornings seven flights up on Seventh Street. So I told her that I never traveled above 23rd Street. I could have said 14th, but she had already found out that I went to college. Therefore, I thought 23rd was safe enough because CCNY Downtown was on that street. That was the last bastion of working class academia allowed.

Downtown, in the gay bars, I was a closet student, an invisible Black. Uptown at Hunter, I was closet dyke, and a general intruder. Maybe four people altogether knew I wrote poetry, and I usually made it *pretty easy* for them to forget it.

It was not that I didn't have friends, and good ones.

There was a loose group of young lesbians, white, except for Flee and I, who hung out together, apart from whatever piece of the straight world we each had a separate place in. We not only believed in the reality of sisterhood, that word which was to be so abused two decades later, but we also tried to put it into practice--with varying results. We cared for and about each other, sometimes with more or less

understanding, regardless of who was entangled with whom at any given time. And there was *always* a place to sleep and something to eat and a listening ear for anyone who wandered into the crew. And there was always somebody calling you up on the telephone to interrupt those fantasies of suicide. And *that* is as good a working definition of 'friend' as most.

However imperfectly, we tried to build a community of sorts, where we could, at the very least, *survive* within a world we correctly perceived to be quite hostile to us. We talked endlessly about how best to create that mutual support which 20 years later was being discussed in the Women's Movement as a *brand new concept*. 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.

For both Flee and me, it seemed that loving women was something that other Black women just did not do. And if they did, then it was in some fashion and in some place that was totally inaccessible to us,

because we could never find them. Except for Saturday nights in the Bagatelle, where neither Flee nor I were stylish enough to be noticed.

Now, my straight Black girlfriends like Jean and Crystal, either ignored my loved for women, considered it interestingly avant-garde, or tolerated it as just another example of my craziness. It was allowable, as long as it wasn't too obvious, and didn't reflect upon *them* in any way. At least my being gay kept me from being a competitor for whatever men happened to be upon their horizons. It also made me much more reliable as a confidante. And I never asked for anything more.

But only on the full moon or every other Wednesday, was I ever convinced that I *really* wanted it different. A bunch of us, maybe Nicky and Joan and I, would all be standing around having a beer at the Bagatelle, trying to decide whether to inch onto the postage stamp dance floor for a slow, intimate fish, garrison belt to pubis, and rump to rump. But, did we really want to get that excited after a long weekend and with work tomorrow? When I'd say, "Sorry," but I was tired, and would have to leave now, which in

reality meant I had an already late paper for English due the next day, and needed to work on it all that night.

That didn't happen too often because I didn't go to the Bag very much. It was the most popular gay girls' bar in the Village, but I *hated* beer. And besides, the bouncer was always asking me for my ID, to prove I was 21, even though I was *older* than the other women with me. Of course, 'you can never tell with Colored people.' And we would all rather die than have to discuss the fact that it was because I was Black, since of course gay people weren't racists. After all, didn't *they* know what it was like to be oppressed?

I was gay and Black. The latter fact was irrevocable. Armor, mantle, and wall. Often, when I had the bad taste to bring that fact up in a conversation with other gay-girls who were not Black, I would get the feeling that I had in some way breached some sacred bond of gayness, a bond which I always felt was not sufficient for me.

This was not to deny the closeness of our group, nor the mutual aid of those insane, glorious,

contradictory years. It is only to say that I was acutely conscious, from the ID 'problem' at the Bag on Friday nights, to the summer days at Gay Head Beach where I was the only one who wouldn't worry about burning, that my relationship as a Black woman to our shared lives was different from theirs. And would be, gay or straight. The question of acceptance had a different weight for me.

In a paradoxical sense, once I accepted my position as different from the larger society, as well as any single sub-society, Black or gay, I felt I didn't have to try so hard. To be proper. To look nice. To be liked. To be loved. To be approved. What I didn't realize was how much harder I had to try merely to stay alive. Or rather, to stay human. How much stronger a person I became in that trying."

[End Reading]

[Music.]

H.R.: Audre Lord, reading from her new book, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name.

MUSIC, Billie Holiday: I'll get by/ As long as I have you/  
Lord, there'll be rain/ And darkness too/ I'll not  
complain/ I'll live with you/ Poverty/ May come to me,  
that's true/ But, what care I?/ I'll get by/ As long  
as I have you... [Billie Holliday, "I'll get by"]

A.L.: [Reading]: "Every Black woman I ever met in the  
Village in those years had some part in my survival,  
large or small, if only as a figure in the head-count  
at the Bag on a Friday night. Black lesbians in the  
Bagatelle faced a world only slightly less hostile  
than the outer world which we had to deal with every  
day on the outside, that *world* which defined us as  
doubly nothing because we were Black and because we  
were Woman. That world which raised our blood  
pressures and shaped our furies and formed our  
nightmares.

The temporary integration of war plants and the  
egalitarian myth of Rosie the Riveter had ended abruptly  
with the end of World War II, and the wholesale return of  
the American woman to the role of little wifey.

So far as I could see, gay-girls were the *only*

Black and white women who were even talking to each other in this country in the 1950's, outside of the empty rhetoric of patriotism and political movements. Black or white, Kt-Ky, butch, or femme, the only thing we shared often, and in varying proportions, was that we *dared* for connection in the name of woman. And we saw that as our *power* rather than our problem.

All of us who survived those common years had to be a little strange. We spent so much of our young-womanhood trying to define ourselves as women-identified women before we even knew the words existed, let alone that there were ears interested in trying to hear them beyond our immediate borders. All of us who survived those common years, *have* to be a little proud. *A lot proud*. Keeping our selves together and on our own tracks, however wobbly, was like trying to play the Dinizulu War Chant or a Beethoven sonata on a tin dog-whistle." [End Reading]

H.R.: [laughter]

A.L.: Oh -- I really loved -- I really *loved* these young women. I just have a -- I'm glad I read that piece before, because it is -- Like, we have to be a

little strange. What we survived, we really had to --  
It was like building -- We had to invent the wheel --  
*Every single time*, you had to go the store for bread.  
So, you know, perhaps if we had read more, or if we  
had even known that there were things to read, that  
there were women who had been through a lot of this --  
But we weren't -- We were very ignorant; we were  
ignorant of women's culture. You know? We were  
ignorant of so many things in so many ways. And all  
we had was what we wanted, what we believed was  
possible.

H.R.: You're also pioneers then, too. When people look  
today to see who were the role models, who could young  
lesbians emulate -- And now there are things to read.  
Your books of poetry and other women's books of  
poetry, and now, novels.

A.L.: Well, that's one of the reasons why I'm so happy  
that this book exists. When I talk about it -- I mean  
to go out into the world and do its work -- Like, I  
just wanted to be there, I think that *we were not the  
first*. You know? I think about a poem that I'm  
writing, we were not the first black woman and white  
woman to try and alter course in some way. We were

not the first Black women to get together. We were not the first women to live communally. But, we never saw the stories. We never even knew the dreams of possibilities. We just never knew them. We had nothing to bounce off of, in other words. And that's kind of what I want Zami to be, something to bounce off of. It's not a bible, it's not a how-to book.

It's something to bounce off of. You know?

H.R.: OK, now give us something that we can bounce off of.

A.L.: All right, well --

H.R.: Especially around --

A.L.: Communal living.

H.R.: Ah yes, that's what I want. Did that happen --

Did that really happen in the fifties, communal

living? You mean it wasn't invented by hippies in the seventies?

A.L.: No, it wasn't invented in the seventies or in the sixties *at all*, by any means.

[Reading]: "Muriel and I decided that nothing could break the bonds between us. Certainly not the sharing of our bodies and our joys with another woman whom we had come to love also. Our taking Lynn to our bed became not merely a fact to be integrated into our

living, but a test for each one of us of our love and our openness.

It was a beautiful vision, but a very difficult experiment. At first Lynn seemed to be having the best of it. She had both of us totally focused upon her and her problems, as well as upon her little horsewoman's body and her ribald lovemaking.

I helped Lynn get a job in the library at another branch, and she rented a basement space over on West Bleeker Street to store her furniture. But mostly she lived at Seventh Street.

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 ever 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. Certainly Beebo Brinker didn't. Nor Olga of The Scorpion. Our much-fingered copies of Ann Bannon's Women in the Shadows and Odd Girl Out never so much as suggested that the perils and tragedies connected with loving women could *possibly* involve more than two at a time. And of course none of these books ever mentioned the joys. So we knew there was a world of our experience as gay-girls that these books left

out. But that meant that we had to write them ourselves. We had to learn by living it out. And we tried to make it all work out as gracefully and with as much finesse as possible. Muriel, Lynn and I made spoken and unspoken rules of courtesy for ourselves that we hoped would both allow for and allay hurt feelings. For instance, 'I thought you were staying with me tonight.' The pressures of close quarters, 'Hush, she's not asleep yet.' And of course, guilt provoking gallantry, 'I'll go on ahead, and the two of you meet me later. But, don't be too long now.' [laughter]

Sometimes it worked. And sometimes it didn't. Muriel and I attempted to examine why, *endlessly*. For all her manipulative coolness, Lynn was seldom alone with either of us for any length of time. Increasingly, she got the message that, try as we might to make it otherwise, this space on Seventh Street was Muriel's and my space, and she, Lynn, was a desired and sought-after visitor, but a visitor forever.

I had wanted it to be different. Muriel had wanted it to be different. Lynn had wanted it to be different. At least in all of the places that we consciously touched. Somehow, it never was. But

neither Muriel nor I wanted to notice that, nor how unfair such a stacked deck was. She and I had each other. Lynn had only a piece of each of us, and was here on sufferance.

We never saw nor articulated this until much later, despite our endless examinations and theme writing about communal living. And by then, it was too late, at least for this experiment, in living out our visions. Muriel and I talked about love as a voluntary commitment, while we each struggled through the steps of an old dance, not consciously learned, but desperately followed. We had learned well in the kitchens of our mothers -- both powerful women who did not let go easily. In those warm places of survival, love was another name for control, however openly given." [End Reading]

H.R.: In the very beginning of the book, you write, "In the recognition of loving lies an answer to despair."

What do you mean by that?

A.L.: Well, on a personal level, the writing of that book, as I spoke about earlier, came in two parts: as a response to what I felt was a need outside of myself

to tell certain stories, just to underline the fact that, yeah, a lot of us were there. And a lot of us lived a lot of different lives, and here are some of the ways. But also, as an answer to inside of myself. And the time -- During the time that I was writing that book, it really was an answer to despair for me. I found that I had to go back down inside myself and reexamine the places, reexamine the ways in which the connections between me and the women who've occupied my life, who had been so formative in my life, really kept me alive in other hard times. This period of time when I wrote that book was a very hard time for me. I was dealing with some very essential questions of survival, of mortality, of disease, of sickness, and, um, also facing what has -- what we are all facing, which was the increasing oppressive environment of this country. This was from 1978, really, through 1981, the kinds of hyper-conservatism, the growth in racism and anti-Semitism and homophobia -- in other words, the increased intolerance of *anything* perceived as difference just felt so much greater and so much more threatening. And in a way, the power to *fight* on these levels, in the

communities, on the street, to move through it day by day, was really strengthened by my reaching inside of myself and recognizing that it has always been hard -- that I had lived always in hostile territory, and that I've handled it in different ways at different points of my life, but the one thing that was always consistent was love. And that that was probably the most powerful stoking of the furnace that there could be. And so, writing this book, for all of the other things it was, was also a way station, a reminder to myself, of what was possible -- a reminder to myself where the *real* power comes from. I don't want you to misunderstand. There's a kind of easy, almost "flower child"-like, "love-will-conquer-all," that I am not talking about at all. What I am speaking about is a very difficult and very intensely complicated recognition of how love functions -- that it isn't "happiness ever after," and it isn't, "oh, everything is going to work out hokesy-pokesy for all of us." It is the real [unintelligible] and the real contact that can happen between two human beings. It can happen between two women. The ways in which we share our triumphs *and* our failures that makes a connection.

And I am speaking about love in that sense, love as the most basic connection. And renewal, mutual renewal. And in that sense, I think that is what I am speaking about, as fuel. Not anything in -- I am not speaking about romance and glamour.

H.R.: I think that that is very evident in the writing. Once again, we're talking about Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, by Audre Lorde, which is out on Persephone Press.

In the book, you talk about very real relationships, and what you have learned through the relationships. Not that after a while, being with one person, your life is crushed, and that's it, you can never go on anymore. And I, I was able to feel that, to feel the despair at certain points, and yet the almost brushing yourself off, picking yourself up, and going out, and doing it again. And looking not for the romance, for the flowers, but for personal growth, and what you can find out about yourself in each of the different relationships you enter. And I think that is universal. That is something that we all can look to no matter what point in our life that we are looking for a book to read, for something that we can relate

to, because relationships *come and go*.

A.L.: Well, I'm just really glad. I hoped -- That's how I hoped Zami would function for, you know, [laughter] the women who read it. And I hope lots and lots of women do read it because I think that when two people come together, if they make a commitment to share as much as they can, then that is what they do. And whatever the length of time that that relationship exists through, if they get as much from each other, and give as much to each other as they can, then when they part -- and this is something that happens over and over again in Zami -- then, when they part, they each leave a piece. They are each richer for it. They live a piece of each other. They take a piece of each other and they leave a piece of themselves with each other. And this is what happens. That's on one hand. On the other hand, I would have to say that the woman with whom I live and whom I love very, very much, we have been together now for 15 years. And we still continue to make it *new*, do you see? And this is what happens. It's not that you stop reaching, you stop growing. It's that you continue -- We're like -- We have, how many -- We have maybe 15 new

relationships, and more coming. In other words, we make ourselves new over and over again. We come new to ourselves, to each other, and to the relationship. And when this happens, it's very, very wonderful. Sometimes it happens, and sometimes it doesn't. When it doesn't happen, though, we have to also be able to take what we get from each other, and to carry it with us, and to move on.

H.R.: I do hope you write more about that, the sense of being together with somebody for 15 years, and giving another side of that as well. Because it's always good to know that we can function after our heart is broken so to speak.

A.L.: *Oh yes*, [laughter] we certainly can. We certainly can. Sometimes, you know -- I have to tell you, Helene, sometimes I think it -- I knew this in high school, because I remember looking through my high school magazine just recently and find a poem, a little poem about, you know, being broken-hearted and having to learn that the most painful thing about being broken-hearted is knowing that it can happen again, that this -- I mean, that this doesn't mean death, right? But, I think that sometimes we need a

little of that kind of heartbreak to know that to know the difference. If we don't open ourselves to that, we also don't open ourselves to recognizing when it isn't necessary. What I'm saying is, we talk about heartbreak. And what we're talking about is the pain of *really* recognizing this has no place else to go. All right. Isn't that what -- The pain of separation *before* you feel you're ready for it, that's what heartbreak is. Sometimes, I think, we need that pain, and we need to move into it and through it with our *eyes open*, so that we know -- if know how to avoid it the next time, at least what we can learn it, or to prevent it happening the next time. I don't think that's something that you learn from books, or from observing other people. I think what you learn from books and from observing other people is that it is not fatal.

H.R.: You talked a little bit earlier about what style you're writing in, which is a bio-mythography. Tell me a little about the myth in the bio-mythography, and what you've tried to bring to it.

A.L.: I don't think that I can explain it, Helene. I can tell you that for instance Afrekete is an African

goddess. She's one of the -- In the sky-god pantheon, she's the youngest child of MawuLisa. Now, the youngest child of the sky-god, gets translated into Eshu, Legba, who is more recent. And, Eshu, or Legba, is the trickster god, is the linguist. He is the god of chance and the unpredictable, the one who carries the messages from one god to the other, and from the gods to the humans. Well, this is also Afrekete, you see. She's the linguist, she's the one who makes known the desires of Mawu -- MawuLisa, the mother of us all, the sky-god principal. She's the one who also you have to propitiate because, honey, she's full of devilment, and she's constantly getting everybody into trouble, right? So, it's interesting, because that's Afrekete, but she also is the essential, the creative, generative part of all of us, too. So, I don't know if it's really possible to tell you how *that* is also a principal that informs this whole book. All right, the function of the youngest, the one who sheds the light and confusion, both at the same time -- but who brings everything together -- ultimately, who has got to bring everything together inside herself. This is one of the pieces of myth that weaves through the

book. It's part of the thing that I found from founding out, "Wow, in Carriacou, there are lesbians running around [laughter], women making love to each other, right, on the West Indian island, and they is just taken for granted because that's the way things are." So, now how does that feed into all of these years later, you know, through my mother to me. So, there's a lot of mythic stuff involved in there. I leave it for you [laughter] to thread it out.

H.R.: I think I would have liked to have read more about that in the book, which is something that - that I missed. Through reading the book, I was waiting to hear more of the myth in it. And, it wasn't until the very end, um, the last two pages in the epilogue, that something came together for me with that.

A.L.: Well, that's interesting. Well, that may be. That may be a shortcoming of it. But, it may be that that theme is not as developed as others. But, we'll write about it.

H.R.: That's what I wanted to hear [laughter].

A.L.: [laughter]

H.R.: I must mention that we are conducting this interview at Hunter College [Hunter College of the

City University of New York], which in the book you talk about. And, here you are again. How does it feel to be back here after so many years?

A.L.: It feels very [laughter] strange. I'm teaching at Hunter College, and it really is like a time warp. I've been here for a year and a half, and it is still a time warp because I spent 13 years of my formative life *deeply* involved with this block. I mean, I walk through, for instance, places that Jennie and I used to hide out in. And it is very, very strange, particularly since I have just finished Zami I had just finished writing Zami when I came to Hunter. And this building is in -- It is almost another mythic story -- This building is in the process of being closed. In another year, it is going to be closed because the new Hunter is being built on Lexington Avenue, just a half block away. So, in a sense, this is like the *end* of it. It's like coming full circle. I'm grateful, and I believe very firmly in tying it altogether. Right? Bringing all of those disparate pieces, all of the extremes, back home. I have never been a middle of the road person. I believe in extremes, all kinds of extremes, and being able to

bring them together through ourselves -- that we are the connections between those extremes, as far out as we can get. But, they don't remain separate; they all essentially come back together. Well, I get a lot of, um, encouragement for those feelings as I move through my days here at Hunter.

H.R.: Do you get support for being all that you are here?

A.L.: No. But I don't think that I could possibly get support for being all of whom I am anyplace.

[laughter] I like to say very often that if I am really doing my work, there is going to be something about me that is bound to offend just about everybody. Right? It is about difference, Helene. I believe very strongly that part of what our task is, when I talk about survival and teaching, is to learn how to use difference in some real way: not to ignore it, not to kill it, not to pretend it doesn't exist, but to recognize it -- to recognize the *gulf* between those extremes, and to recognize that those gulfs can be bridged. You know? And the way that I find that is by looking inside of myself, by not denying the contradictions within me. By seeing extremes,

differences, contradictions, and knowing that they can come together -- that they can learn to lie down together inside of myself.

H.R.: Where to next?

A.L.: Helene, I think that we are in for some very difficult times in this country, as women, as lesbians, as Black people, as whatever. That, if we hold ourselves -- For those of us who wish to hold to what we believe and what we see as right -- are going to be severely tested. I think that anything which encourages us to *touch* our own strengths, anything that continues to remind us that we have not only an answer to the pressures upon us, but also a vision of a world we want to create, is to the better, OK? Whatever I do next will be in the service of that. I'm working now on a new book of poems that I hope will focus more attention on what I was speaking about before, the differences between us, on neither denying them, nor looking away from them; on what it means for black and white women to *really* begin to deal with each other -- not just in theoretical way, but in an actual -- to, for instance, examine what an inter-racial love relationship that lasts for 15 years,

means, and what it does *not* mean, for instance. These are some of the things that I am writing about and dealing with. About angers between Black women, the angers between Third World women and how we use that to move ourselves. All of these -- It's open season. And, I think that for instance coalitions between women are just beginning, and are probably really very hopeful, but also very difficult. It is not easy. And it won't be easy. We have to deal with the furies and the angers between us. We have to be able to look them in the eye and know that they will not destroy us, right? But that silence is will. All of this stuff. I guess that whatever I am doing will serve, as I say, power, and vision. And the pathways to that are the ways in which we have to come together. Coming together, without having to give up our differences.

H.R.: We're talking with Audre Lord, [Music] author of *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, out on Persephone Press. For Pacifica in New York, this is Helene Rosenbluth.

MUSIC, Billie Holiday: Yesterday/ Yesterday/ Days are new

as happy sweet/ Sequestered days/ Olden days/ Golden  
days/ Days of mad romance/ And love/ When gay youth  
was mine/ Truth was mine/ Joyous free and flaming  
life/ Then sooth was mine/ Sad am I/ Glad am I/ For  
today I'm dreaming of/ Yesterday/ Yesterday

### End of Lorde Interview

#### NOTES:

1. Audre Lorde's biomythography, Zami: A New Spelling of my Name, was originally published by Persephone Press in 1982. Crossing Press released the fifteenth printing in 2001.
2. Definition of "Zami", from the epilogue of Lorde's biomythography:  
"Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers."
3. Lorde discusses her book, The Cancer Journals, published by Aunt Lute books, 1980.
4. The books of Ann Bannon, the "queen of lesbian pulp fiction", are available in new editions from Cleis Press. <http://www.cleispress.com>
5. The music heard in the program, excerpts of the songs, "Yesterday", and "I'll get by" are from classic performances by the great jazz vocalist Billie Holliday.
6. Search "Audre Lorde" in the Pacifica Radio Archives catalog for more audio recordings, including interviews, readings, and documentaries.

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