

"THE EROTIC AS POWER": LESBIAN EROTICISM, RESISTANCE, AND
DIFFERENCE IN AUDRE LORDE'S *ZAMI* AND ALISON BECHDEL'S *FUN HOME*

by

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ABSTRACT

Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* are both coming-out memoirs by lesbian identified authors. Lorde's biomythography was published in 1982, and retrospectively describes her experiences as a black, African-Caribbean lesbian navigating lesbian communities in the 1950s-60s. As the protagonist, Audre embraces Lorde's theory of the erotic through her intimate relationships with various women. These erotic relationships contribute to the development of Audre's critical, political consciousness.¹ Audre confronts oppressive discourses concerning the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality.

Bechdel's graphic novel memoir, published in 2006, illustrates her life with her father Bruce, a closeted gay man, and how she comes to identify as a butch-lesbian. Bechdel's protagonist, Alison, considers her father's history pre-Stonewall, in seeking to understand her own experiences of coming-out post-Stonewall. Alison rejects the oppressive heterosexist discourses that lead to her father's probable suicide, and embraces counterhegemonic lesbian-feminist discourses of resistance.

Both Lorde and Bechdel note how relationships between women and communal support among lesbians can be a source of erotic power. Specifically, the characters, Audre and Alison, demonstrate how intimate relationships between women are a source of erotic power that connects women, bridges divisions between them, and allows them to embrace differences in order to forge the solidarity necessary to challenge society's injustices.

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¹ Ana Hua notes *Zami* as a "story of a black lesbian woman coming into political consciousness and voice" in the article "Audre Lorde's *Zami*, Erotic Embodied Memory, and the Affirmation of Difference" (119).

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INTRODUCTION

Examining the historical and ideological contexts of literature affords the opportunity to discern how literature challenges systems of oppression and “represents the world in discourse” (Montrose 9). Such an examination allows one to appreciate how literary discourse represents the patriarchal, homophobic, and racist systems of oppression in its own world. Audre Lorde’s biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, and Alison Bechdel’s autobiographical graphic novel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, both fictionalize each author’s biography and confront and expose systems of oppression. Each text highlights a “coming out” story in which a young lesbian reaches an understanding of her sexual identity. Lorde’s *Zami* highlights LGBTQ+ history pre-Stonewall, before the struggle for equality of sexual and gender minorities took to the streets, adopting a more militant strategy. Bechdel’s graphic novel highlights her post-Stonewall coming out, and reflects upon her father’s earlier experiences as a closeted gay male in the era before the Stonewall Rebellion. Using a New Historicist approach to analyze the systemic oppression of LGBTQ+ people, I focus on the specific decades in U.S. history that form the context for each work. I also note how the young protagonist-narrators, Audre and Alison, reject this oppression through the power of the erotic, by embracing their complex and multiple sexual identities.

The thesis considers how major events in LGTBQ+ history in the United States, such as the McCarthy Era Red Scare in the 1950s and the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969, have shaped both society and literature. David K. Johnson explores the experiences of lesbian and gay individuals during the Red Scare, which, in its targeting of sexual minorities, was also a “Lavender Scare.” After one McCarthy Era State Department purge, Deputy Undersecretary John Peurifoy “revealed that a number of persons considered security risks had been forced out, and that among

these were ninety-one homosexuals” (1). The purging of LGBTQ+ employees from the State Department reignited a wave of homophobia across the United States and led to the “ouster of thousands of governmental employees” (2). Both Lorde and Bechdel discuss the significance of the Lavender Scare on lives of LGBTQ+ individuals. Johnson states that LGBTQ+ individuals were considered “moral weaklings,” “sexual misfits,” “moral risks,” “undesirables,” and/or “security risks” (7). The homophobic discourses espoused by the government affected the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals in various personal, political, social, medical, psychiatric, and academic settings. After an increase in institutionalized homophobia in the 1950s, the 1960s ushered in a new era of LGBTQ+ resistance. In 1969, “six officers of Manhattan’s First Division Public Morals Squad” raided the Stonewall Inn and were met with resistance by the bar’s LGBTQ+ patrons (Faderman 174). The Stonewall Rebellion made the public aware of the oppression of LGBTQ+ people, as well as their activism and resistance.

In both *Zami* and *Fun Home*, each protagonist finds a Foucauldian “point of resistance” to the discourses that shaped their oppression. Michel Foucault stresses that discourse is not solely repressive or monolithic, but is “polyvalent.” According to Foucault, discourses can provide a “point of resistance” to the “regulatory regimes” of various social apparatuses such as the family, the educational system, religion, psychiatry, the law, etc. Foucault’s theory of the relations among discourse, power, and subjectivity can be applied to the experiences of each protagonist as she resists oppressive discourses. Foucault states that “discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (101). Further, he argues that discourse “also undermines and exposes power, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (101). Both

Lorde and Bechdel resist the discourses that seek to silence them, and they craft their own discourse of the erotic as a “hindrance” and “stumbling block” to the imposition of power.

Audre Lorde’s theory of the erotic is central to the analysis of both texts. Each protagonist embraces the erotic, as defined by Lorde in her essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” She begins her essay by asserting that the roots of the erotic lie in women’s deep emotional and spiritual resources. She suggests that to find the erotic is to find power:

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power[. . .] For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives. (53)

Lorde notes how oppressive discourses have sought to suppress the erotic power within women. She describes her own experience with the erotic by noting, “When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55). Considering the texts through Lorde’s theory, each protagonist uses the erotic to resist systems of oppression and to bridge and embrace differences among women. While the erotic is a wellspring of sexual, political, social, and creative power in women’s lives; for lesbians, this “lifeforce of women” has faced suppression, erasure, and silencing by a heterosexist society.

Lorde defines the erotic and how the erotic acts within her life, but she also notes what the erotic is not. She states that the erotic has been “misnamed by men and used against women” (54). According to Lorde, an example of this misnaming and misuse is pornography, which

“emphasizes sensation without feeling,” while the erotic embraces feeling (54). The erotic can be an expression of power in multiple facets of women’s lives. By noting how the erotic functions in her own life, Lorde states how an “erotically satisfying experience” can be found in “dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea” (56-7). While the erotic can be a sexually satisfying experience, Lorde claims that the vast power of the erotic is one of the reasons why “the erotic is so feared” and “relegated to the bedroom” (57). Lorde stresses the importance of embracing the erotic: “I find more and more women-identified women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic’s electrical charge without having to look away, and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange” (59). While Audre finds the erotic’s electrical charge through intimate, feminocentric relationships, Alison finds it within lesbian-feminist texts and communities. By employing the power of the erotic, Audre and Alison both cultivate their political identities.

The first chapter focuses on Audre Lorde’s *Zami*. Her biomythography provides a semi-autobiographical look into the protagonist-narrator Audre’s life from the 1940s to the 1980s. Lorde retrospectively notes the development of Audre’s identities as a black, African-Caribbean lesbian. Lorde fictionalizes aspects of Audre’s experience by employing myth, particularly through her relationship with the African trickster goddess, Afrekete. Lorde confronts the intersections of Audre’s complex and intersectional identity navigating the self-segregated lesbian communities in New York in the 1950s. In her essay, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” Lorde references Paulo Freire and highlights how “revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (123). Lorde highlights the importance of confronting oppressive discourses by developing what Freire calls “critical consciousness” that enables the subject to perceive

injustices and to take action so that the world might “be transformed and humanized” (77).² Lorde’s reference to Freire provides the reader with a theoretical lens to analyze how she develops her own intersectional, critical consciousness. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire suggests that an “intervention in the world as transformers of that world” is essential for the development of a critical consciousness (60). Lorde elaborates on this in her essay by stating, “We sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals” (123). Freire’s theory notes the importance of dialogue to critique and overcome systemic oppressions. Lorde’s text also examines dialogue when discussing how black and white lesbian communities attempted to desegregate their bars and bridge their differences when few other U.S. institutions were doing so. Lorde’s biomythography shows how she develops her own critical consciousness, specifically in terms of race, gender, and sexuality, through her erotic relationships with women who love women.

The second chapter focuses on Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. Much like *Zami*, *Fun Home* is also set in the 1950s-1980, but it is told retrospectively from the turn of the twenty-first century. I use a New Historicist approach to understand the history featured in the novel and how oppressive discourses surrounding sexuality affect the two main characters, Alison and her father Bruce. Bechdel’s description of Bruce’s experiences as a gay man, pre-and post-Stonewall, focuses on his struggles with heterosexist discourses, his internalized homophobia, his destructive behaviors, and his ultimate suicide. While Bruce discovers his sexuality pre-Stonewall and never achieves self-acceptance, Alison embraces her sexual identity post-Stonewall, in a feminocentric, lesbian, feminist community. Once Alison is free of her parents’

² See Hua’s mention of this in “Audre Lorde’s *Zami*, Erotic Embodied Memory, and the Affirmation of Difference” (119).

home, she discovers her sexuality through lesbian-feminist literature and her erotic relationships with other women-loving women. Alison's erotic engagement with other women serves as a point of resistance to the homophobic discourses that tortured her father as a member of a sexual minority in 1950s America. Through her activism, sexual relationships, and creation of her memoir in graphic novel form, the fictionalized memoirist, Alison, constructs an artistic, intellectual, and sexual space for herself within lesbian-feminist erotic discourses of resistance.

**CHAPTER I. “FORGED IN THE CRUCIBLES OF DIFFERENCE”: EROTIC
INTERSECTIONALITY, CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS, AND AUDRE LORDE’S *ZAMI***

Audre Lorde’s biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, fictionalizes aspects of her life in which she retrospectively confronts the intersection of differences within her identity as a black, lesbian, daughter of immigrants from the island of Grenada growing up in New York City, pre-desegregation and pre-Stonewall. While Lorde shows how oppressive discourses affect her complex identity, she also notes how one must engage with those discourses to construct a “critical consciousness” (Freire 60). In terms of complex identities, theorist Kimberle Crenshaw states that “if you’re standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by” multiple and intersecting forms of oppression (2). Lorde establishes the power of the erotic as “a well of replenishing and provocative force” with which to confront the oppressions that “corrupt or distort those various sources of power ... that can provide energy for change” (“Uses” 53-4). Lorde also notes that the erotic “is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (53). Through intimate, erotic relationships with other women, Lorde creates a fictionalized version of her younger self, Audre, who navigates the intersections of heteronormative, patriarchal, and white supremacist oppressions that pervaded her life.³ Audre uses the erotic to establish intimate relationships with women that facilitate her political growth.

Lorde’s biomythography is equally a creative work and a work of activist resistance. Lorde states that “the erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the

³ In Lorde’s biomythography, she partially fictionalizes herself. I will refer to the author as “Lorde” and the character as “Audre.”

power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person” (“Uses” 56). Audre uses the erotic, through her relationships with women, as a Foucauldian “point of departure” from hegemonic discourses of nationality, class, race, gender, and sexuality (Foucault 101). The erotic can be an exertion of power in multiple facets of women’s lives, specifically, the power to resist the forces that seek to divide women. Audre’s erotic connection begins with her mother, Linda, is further developed through friends and lovers, and culminates during her relationship with Afrekete. Throughout the narrative, Lorde constructs an erotic discourse of resistance through her intimate relationships with women in which erotic connections foster the development of Audre’s critical consciousness (Foucault 101; Freire 73).⁴

Lorde’s feminocentric Carriacouan heritage affords her a critical perspective on her experiences as a black lesbian in the United States, beginning with her relationship to her mother, Linda. She begins her biomythography by discussing her mother’s West Indian inter-island migration from Carriacou to Grenada, and from there to the U.S. She also notes the difficulties her parents, Linda and Byron, face when adjusting to a new culture. Not only must Lorde’s family confront racism and xenophobia in the U.S., but discourses concerning gender roles in her mother’s ancestral home of Carriacou are strikingly different from the hierarchical gender relationships in the U.S. Despite the more rigid, separate gender spheres that Lorde’s parents observe in the U.S., they mutually make decisions about their family: “[T]hey shared decisions and the making of all policy, both in the business and in the family” (15). Anatol notes that Linda and Byron leave Grenada, “a place of economic immobility only to end up in a location that, while it allows them some upward social mobility restricts them along racial and

⁴ Foucault notes that any analysis of discourse “must make an allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault 101).

cultural lines” (132). As Lorde ages, she realizes that her parents attempt to shield her from the racism and xenophobia they encounter in the U.S.

Audre’s relationship with Linda provides her with a connection to her mother’s feminocentric ancestral culture of Carriacou and provides a starting point for her erotic resistance. Lorde highlights feminocentric aspects of the island, stating that it is home to “women who survived the absence of their sea-faring men easily, because they came to love each other, past the men’s returning” (14). When reflecting upon her heritage, she refers to the imperialist erasure of Carriacou from world maps. Lorde uses a footnote to state that it took “26 years” for her to find the island on a map (14). Concerning the imperialist erasure of Carriacou from maps, Hua claims that Lorde’s description of the feminocentric, collective value of the island actively “resist[s] the pervasive colonial and neocolonial erasure of postcolonial lives and Black women’s geography” (123). Donald R. Hill’s studies of Carriacou discusses the feminocentric aspects of the culture that facilitated relationships between women and “partially institutionalized” lesbianism within the culture (280). Lorde notes the institutionalization of lesbianism by stating, “*Madivine. Friending. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty*” (14 emphasis in text). Hill’s research notes that “one recourse for a woman whose husband is away for a long period is to become a ‘zami’ or madivine. Zamis are lesbians and are said by male informants to be mostly married women whose husbands have been abroad for many years” (280). Carriacou women maintained their intense, loving relationships with women even upon the return of men. Hill states that when a husband returns after an extended separation, “it is said to be difficult for him to regain his wife’s sexual favors,” leaving the husband to hope she “becomes bisexual” (281). Not only does Lorde

retell Linda's stories of Carriacou, she actively seeks the feminocentric values of her heritage through her relationships with other women, starting with her mother.

While oppressive patriarchal discourses were commonplace in the United States, Lorde's descriptions of her mother, Linda, highlight how she defied hegemonic discourses of femininity. From an early age, Lorde's critical consciousness is formed in a feminocentric space in which her mother is the powerful and erotic center. Lorde notes that she always perceived her mother to be a "powerful woman" even when "that word-combination of *woman* and *powerful* was almost unexpressible [sic] in the white American common tongue, except or unless it was accompanied by some aberrant explaining adjective like blind, or hunchback, or crazy, or Black" (15 emphasis in text). Here Lorde highlights the intersection of gender and race oppression that her mother confronts. As a child, Lorde witnessed her mother's struggle as a young, black immigrant woman trying to support her family in New York City. In stark contrast to Carriacou, the United States burdens the concept of a powerful woman with negative assumptions and prejudices. Lorde considered her mother to be "different," without knowing exactly why. Lorde says of her mother and some other West Indian low-island women, "*Redbone*, they were called. *Different how?*... to this day I believe that there have always been Black dykes around—in the sense of powerful and women-oriented women—who would rather have died than use that name for themselves. And that includes my mother" (15 emphasis in text). Hua refers to the lesbianism in Carriacou by highlighting that "lesbianism is a historical and social phenomenon in Carriacou, where the male population is small because the men must leave this spice-growing island to find work" (123). So while Lorde states that many of these women, including her mother, would never refer to themselves as lesbian, she paints the history of Carriacou women as feminocentric, powerful, and resilient. Lorde situates her history as a lesbian in terms of her mother's history

and the history of Carriacouan women-loving women. Through an intimate relationship with her mother, Audre connects to her Carriacouan heritage and finds a means to resist and defy the heterosexist discourses she faces in the U.S.

The racist discourses that plagued the United States during the first half of the twentieth century directly affect Lorde's relationship with her mother. Lorde reflects on her challenging relationship with her mother, Linda, in terms of how her mother reacts to the systemic, patriarchal racism of the U.S., in contrast to her own attempts to resist systemic inequality. Lorde highlights the consequences of classist and racist discourses by addressing how hegemonic images of family in the 1940s-1950s affect her perceptions of her own family, causing tension between her and her mother. Lorde notes that she wished her mother was "like all of the other mothers, one waiting for me at home with milk and home-baked cookies and a frilly apron, like the blond smiling mother in *Dick and Jane*" (55). Kismaric and Heiferman describe the seamless life of *Dick and Jane*'s nameless mother by noting that mother is "an effortless homemaker, who makes everything look easy[;] other's life had no frustrations or setbacks" (44-5). While *Dick and Jane*'s mother is a personification of 1950s white, middle-class, femininity, this character existed within a culture where the "nuclear family was an exaggeration of family harmony"; a story constructed by racism, sexism, and classism (56-7). As a child growing up in a systemically racist, sexist, classist society, Lorde absorbs the images of women being produced in the 1940s-1950s to consolidate the patriarchal family and household in a response to Communism.

In one instance, Lorde recalls Linda's anger when she tells her she was nominated for class president. After Lorde tells her mother she lost the election, Linda states, "What kind of ninny raise up here to think those good-for-nothing white piss-jets would pass over some little jaccabat girl to elect you to anything?" (65). Linda beats Lorde with her purse in anger: "She

cuffed me again, this time on my shoulders, as I huddled to escape her rain of furious blows, and the edges of her pocketbook” (65). In an analysis of rage, bell hooks notes how white supremacy can induce rage: “[M]any African Americans feel uncontrollable rage when we encounter white supremacist aggression. That rage is not pathological. It is an appropriate response to injustice” (26). Although rage against racial injustice is appropriate, Linda’s directing of that rage toward her daughter creates deep pain for Audre and tensions in their relationship. Lorde’s mother has a difficult time dealing with the racism and xenophobia of New York. Lorde recalls her mother’s experiences empathetically, noting that being “Black and foreign and female in New York City in the twenties and thirties was not simple, particularly when she was quite light enough to pass for white, but her children weren’t” (17). The complicated relationship between Audre and her mother is rooted in her mother’s will to survive and support her family in a white supremacist country. Deborah Gray White highlights the economic stresses placed on black families in the early to mid-1930s, particularly black women: “[O]n any given morning in any large city one could find groups of black women with brown paper bags and cheap suitcases standing on street corners waiting on a chance to get work” as domestic help (144). Not only must Linda deal with her own personal experiences with racism as a young immigrant from Grenada, she must also protect her children from experiencing the brunt of U.S. racism. In retrospect, Audre notes that her mother tried to shelter her from racism by making her believe that someone just spat in the wind and it happened to land on Audre: “[S]he fussed about low-class people who had no better sense nor manners than to spit into the wind no matter where they went, impressing upon me that it was totally random” (18). The economic stress of the 1930s on black families, combined with overt racism, likely affected Linda’s harsher disposition.

While systemic racism complicates Audre and Linda's relationship, Audre also has an intimate bond with Linda that embodies the erotic and facilitates her emerging critical consciousness. Lorde's definition of the erotic states that "the sharing of joy whether, physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them" (56). The first-time Audre highlights the intimacy she shares with her mother, she states, "I remember the warm mother smell caught between her legs, and the intimacy of our physical touching nestled inside of the anxiety/pain [of hair combing] like a nutmeg nestled inside its covering of mace" (33). While Audre's mother could be cold with her, these moments of ambivalence do not completely overshadow the moments of physical bonding spent with her mother (33). Audre also recalls the connection she shares with Linda, and Carriacouan traditions, when she cooks with her mother. When reflecting on the cultural significance of Linda's mortar, she states, "Every West Indian woman worth her salt had her own mortar" (71). Specifically, Lorde discusses how the mortar symbolizes her mother by noting, "It stood, solid and elegant, on a shelf in the kitchen cabinet for as long as I can remember, and I loved it dearly" (71). The scene in which Audre grinds spices with Linda's mortar is overtly sensual. She describes "the feeling of the pestle held between my curving fingers, and the mortar's outside rounding like fruit into my palm as I steadied it against my body" (74). These moments highlight how the erotic serves as a means of bridging the distance between Audre and Linda and as a precursor to Audre's emotional and physical development as a young woman. The sensual moment Audre experiences when she is grinding the spices with Linda's mortar happens during the summer of her fifteenth birthday—the same summer she starts her period (74-6). After Audre tells Linda that she has started her period, Audre recognizes something different in her mother: "There was something else coming from my mother that I

could not define. It was the lurking of that amused/annoyed brow-furrowed half smile of hers that made me feel ... that something very good and satisfactory had just happened” (77). Audre experiences a connection with Linda that alleviates the tension that is predominately associated with their relationship. Lorde describes the way she smelled the day she started her period: “I smelled the delicate breadfruit smell rising up from the front of my print blouse that was my own womansmell, warm, shameful, but utterly delicious” (77). In retrospect, Lorde notes the significance of this smell and its intimate association with her mother: “[W]henver I thought about how I smelled that day, I would have a fantasy of my mother, her hands wiped dry from the washing, and her apron untied and laid neatly away, looking down on me lying on the couch, and then slowly, thoroughly, our touching and caressing each other’s most secret places” (78). Lorde establishes an intimate connection between Linda, the kitchen, and menstruation; this association culminates in an erotic moment in which Lorde juxtaposes the feeling of pounding spice to that of an orgasm. Through these connections with Linda, Audre becomes more critically attuned with her Carriacouan heritage and the power of the erotic.

As a teenager, Lorde has a friendship with a young woman named Gennie that allows Lorde to develop her first intimate connection with a woman other than her mother. Lorde’s time with Gennie provides her with the opportunity to test her role as a sister-outsider as they engage in playful acts of resistance that facilitate the development of her political consciousness. Lorde’s parents transfer her out of a Catholic school to Hunter High School, where she develops a friendship with a number of rebellious teenage girls: “There was The Branded, with whom I held seances and raised the ghosts of Byron and Keats. There was Maxine, my shy piano-playing Jewish friend with whom I roamed the locker rooms after curfew[;] And there was Gennie” (85-6). Gennie and Lorde become politically active together “in the summer of 1948,” in which

Lorde notes, “There was a wind blowing all over the world, and we were a part of it” (87). Lorde and Gennie spend the summer of 1948 skipping school, stealing change from their parents, cat-calling adult men, and dressing up as different people: “[T]here were appropriate costumes for every role, and appropriate places in the city to go to play them all out” (87-9). Describing her time with Gennie, Lorde states, “[W]e did a lot of talking[. ...] Our budding political consciousness had already soured us on Coca-Cola democracy” (86). Lorde’s relationship with Gennie provides a foundation for her to try on the role of an outlaw, a sister-outsider, with the fire of resistance she embodies as an adult. This connection between Audre and Gennie reflects Lorde’s understanding of the erotic and how it operates within relationships between women. According to Lorde, the erotic “is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves” (54). Lorde states that the erotic is significant to the formation of one’s sense of self and personal power, and once experienced, the erotic serves as motivation to keeping seeking this erotic power. Audre finds this eroticism with Gennie, despite their many differences. Soon after they meet, Gennie drops out of school and Audre learns that Gennie comes from a dysfunctional family with an abusive father (86-7). In terms of Lorde’s theory of the erotic, she notes that it is essential to “make connection with our similarities and our differences” (58-9). Audre and Gennie use their similarities and differences to establish an erotic relationship.

For Audre and Gennie, the erotic serves as an intimate and political connection that transcends difference by recognizing that difference is a force that can bond women to each other rather than divide them. The erotic is that power that keeps differences from dividing women, so

they can stand in solidarity and work on social transformation. Audre's political discussions with Gennie reveal the roots of her resistance: "[M]y revolutionary fervor that had begun with a white waitress refusing to serve my family ice cream in the nation's capital was becoming a clearer and clearer position, a lens through which to view the world" (87). Audre becomes Gennie's only intimate connection with a woman after Gennie leaves her mother to live with her father whose violent, patriarchal household eventually kills her (90-1). Despite Audre and Gennie's fulfilling relationship, Gennie's abusive father eventually causes her to die by suicide, leaving Lorde distraught with what could have been between them: "*Things I never did with Genevieve: Let our bodies touch and tell the passions that we felt. Go to a village gay bar[. ...] Make love*" (97 emphasis in text). While Lorde reflects on what she wanted to experience with Gennie, the time she spent with Gennie exposed her to political activism as well as the desire to experience sex with another woman. Freire stresses that developing one's critical consciousness entails recognizing one's "situation as an historical reality susceptible of transformation" (73). Lorde significantly develops her political consciousness through her relationship with Gennie although breaking free from society's heterosexual norms and working to transform them requires even more defiance for Audre.

While Audre begins to develop her political consciousness, Lorde also points out the pervasiveness of heteronormative discourses. Prior to exploring her sexuality as a lesbian, Audre has a relationship with a man named Peter. While Audre notes that she initially assumes she is in love with Peter, that feeling quickly subsides: "Peter and I saw each other a lot, and slept together, since it was expected" (104). Her relationship with Peter makes sex obligatory even though, as Audre states. "[S]ex seemed pretty dismal and frightening and a little demeaning"; however, Peter and her closest friends assure her that she will "get used to it" (105). Audre's

experience with Peter affirms what Adrienne Rich terms “compulsory heterosexuality,” in which systemic heterosexist discourses compel one to deny same-sex desire and to seek heterosexual relationships (227-28). Concerning the enforced conformity to heterosexual norms, Rich notes that “the retreat into sameness—assimilation for those who can manage it—is the most passive and debilitating of responses to political repression, economic insecurity, and a renewed open season on difference” (228). While the “renewed open season on difference” refers to conditions in 1982 when Rich’s essay was published, Audre’s relationship with Peter occurred in the 1950s, when there was a violent repression of sexual minorities in the United States.

In 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy announced that he possessed the names of card-carrying Communists employed by the United States Department of State. A decade of federal fear-mongering would bear the title “the McCarthy Era,” as governmental agencies worked to dismiss any federal employees accused of being Communists, Communist sympathizers, or homosexuals, who were considered more susceptible to blackmail than straight federal employees. Gallo states that as Senator Joseph McCarthy reigned terror upon any hint of resistance or deviance, McCarthyism helped “to popularize the conflation of ‘security’ with ‘loyalty,’ ‘disloyalty’ with ‘nonconformist,’ and ‘unconventional’ with ‘Commie,’ and ‘Red’ with ‘queer’” (xxvii). Examining the historical context of Audre’s circumstances is essential for understanding how she survived as a black lesbian during the McCarty-era Lavender Scare, which persecuted gay men and lesbians employed by the government.⁵ The institutionalization of compulsory heterosexuality by the federal government undoubtedly silenced the public and personal lives of LGBTQ+ individuals.

⁵ For an exhaustive history of the persecution of sexual minorities during the McCarthy Era “witch hunts,” see David K. Johnson’s essential study, *The Lavender Scare*.

Audre confronts the pervasiveness of homophobia, which extends to her activist circles. Lorde states that even among progressive individuals, she felt like an outsider: “[F]or [progressives], being gay was ‘bourgeois and reactionary,’ a reason for suspicion and shunning” (149). Gallo notes the fear many LGBTQ+ individuals may have felt while openly interacting with others: “[T]he message [to LGBTQ persons] was clear: you couldn’t be too careful, and you couldn’t trust any strangers [,] ... further fueling a sense of isolation and seclusion” (xxv). Johnson notes how homophobic discourses produced by the federal government exacerbated “postwar fears that America was in a state of moral decline, and threatened by communism...” (10). Gallo highlights the Republican-led campaign to exploit “the American fear of sexual, social, and political vulnerability” by demonizing sexual minorities as a threat to national security, particularly those working for the government (xxv). For sexual minorities, like Audre, living openly as a member of the LGBTQ+ community increased one’s risk of facing persecution and violence. Gallo explains how “discovery of one’s homosexuality put gay men and lesbians in de facto positions of defiance[. ...] For many, the possibility of ostracism and punishment meant that they had no choice but to live in two worlds—‘normal’ and ‘deviant’” (xxxii). Audre resists McCarthy-Era oppressive discourses as an out lesbian “working with the Committee to Free the Rosenbergs” (148). Even within her progressive circle of activist friends, however, “racial differences could be openly examined and talked about,” but sexuality was treated with suspicion (149). She states that she could envision them “asking me accusingly, ‘Are you or have you ever been a member of a homosexual relationship?’ ... Besides, it made you ‘more susceptible to the FBI’” (149). As a black woman trying to come out as lesbian in the 1950s, Audre’s intersecting identities are illuminated when she is confronted with the realization that progressive activists were not always progressive on issues concerning sexual orientation.

During this polarizing and paranoid political climate in which LGBTQ+ individuals were being targeted, Audre develops a relationship with a young woman named Ginger, which provides her with the support needed to defy heterosexist discourses. Lorde's narration of Audre's sexually intimate relationship with Ginger emphasizes how this relationship helped her develop a political consciousness by providing her with the strength to openly identify for the first time as gay. As Audre recognizes how deep her feelings are towards other women, she resists the dominant heterosexist discourses of the 1950s and decides to seek romantic and sexual relationships. Prior to meeting Ginger, Lorde notes acknowledging her sexuality; she writes, "[T]hat summer I decided that I was definitely going to have an affair with a woman—in just those words. How I was going to accomplish that, I had no idea, or even what I meant by an affair" (119). Audre and Ginger meet as they are working in a small factory in Stamford (125). Audre's time with Ginger provides her with the companionship and confidence she needs to come out as a lesbian; Ginger asks, "Are you gay or aren't you?" to Audre's surprise (135). She is overcome with anxiety and questions about how the answer to that question may change her life: "I could not bring myself to deny what I had just this past summer decided to embrace[;] yet, to say yes might commit me to proving it" (135). Audre tells Ginger that she is gay and, despite her anxiety over the thought of making love to Ginger, the two spend the night together: "I had no idea what making love to another woman meant. I only knew, dimly, it was something I wanted to happen, and something that was different from anything I had ever done before" (138). Despite Ginger's being the first woman Audre is sexually intimate with, Ginger assumes that Audre is more experienced in making love to women: "[S]he saw me as a citified little baby butch—bright, knowledgeable, and secure enough to make the first move" (133). Audre internalizes Ginger's perception of her and refuses to receive sex from Ginger, adopting the role

of a stone butch in their sexual relationship: “Ginger had reached out to touch the wet warmth of my own body and I had turned her hand aside without thinking, without knowing why” (140).

While Audre is not sure about her role in her relationship with Ginger, she is finally in a relationship with a woman and has acknowledged her same-sex desires. Seeking same-sex relationships in such a sexually repressive and overtly racist decade highlights Lorde’s insistence upon actively resisting racist, heterosexist discourses.

Lorde describes the first sexually erotic moment between Audre and Ginger by resisting heteronormative depictions of lesbian eroticism. Lorde highlights the anxiety she felt during her first sexual experience with Ginger: “[U]ntil the very moment that our naked bodies touched in that old brass bed ... I had no idea what I was doing there, nor what I wanted to do there” (138).

Hua asserts that Audre’s discovery of “her sexual awakening and same-sex desire through narrative and narrative control is tied to her self-authorization, writing her subjectivity and history through the embodied erotic” (117). Lorde embodies her theory of the erotic when narrating sex with Ginger: “I felt her and tasted her deeply, my hands and my mouth and my whole body moved against her. Her flesh opened to me like a peony and the unfolding depths of her pleasure brought me back to her body over and over again throughout the night” (139).

Audre also embraces lesbian, feminist discourses of resistance. Judith Roof highlights how lesbian sex is filtered through a heteronormative lens in heterosexist representations: “[L]esbian encounters function as a second or mediate state—a transitional step—between autoeroticism and heterosexuality” (21). In terms of Roof’s criticism of heterosexist depictions of lesbian sex, the scene between Audre and Ginger is not a transitional step towards heterosexuality, nor is there a phallic substitute as Roof argues there is in heterosexist representations of lesbian sex. Lorde explicitly places sex with Ginger in a lesbian-centric context, leaving no room for the

reader to speculate about her desires. In fact, Audre describes “the sweetness of her [Ginger’s] body meeting and filling my mouth[;] ... wherever I touched, felt right and complete, as if I had been born to make love to this woman, and was remembering her body rather than learning it deeply for the first time” (139). The sexual completeness Audre describes as she recalls making love to Ginger highlights the pleasure she finds in an intimate relationship with a woman, despite the presence of oppressive, violent heteronormative discourses in her life.

The intersections within Audre’s identity as a black, diasporic African-Caribbean lesbian are highlighted when she seeks a relationship after Ginger. After their relationship ends, Audre expresses the difficulty many black lesbians faced when trying to find partners. According to Lorde, “meeting other lesbians was very difficult, except for the bars which I did not go to because I did not drink” (150). Seeking partners during a time in which queer communities were facing violent oppression from the U.S. government created a host of concerns: “[Y]ou never could tell who was who, and the protective paranoia of the McCarthy years was still everywhere outside of the mainstream of blissed-out suburban middle america” (187). Lorde notes that there was some unity among black and white lesbians: “[L]esbians were probably the only Black and white women in New York City in the fifties who were making any real attempt to communication with each other” (225). Kennedy and Davis note how “the ability of lesbians to achieve a more multiracial social life than most other social groups at that time suggests that tough bar lesbians, Black and white, created a lesbian consciousness that crossed racial divisions” (114). With a thriving bar culture, lesbians who frequented bars had a higher chance of finding a partner; however, LGBTQ+ communities were not immune to segregation. Lorde highlights how racial tensions in lesbian communities left many black lesbians feeling like outsiders: “[T]oo often we found ourselves sleeping with the same white women. We recognized

ourselves as exotic sister-outsiders who might gain little from banding together” (177). Lorde’s narration of her own intimate relationships with black women provides a discourse of resistance for other black lesbians who feel like sister-outsiders among lesbian communities that are overwhelmingly white.

While some black and white lesbians were trying to desegregate their communities to establish a queer sisterhood, many of these communities could not escape the white supremacist discourses that pervaded the United States in the 1940s-50s. Referring to the intersections of her identities, Lorde notes that “it was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female, to be Black, female, and gay. To be Black, female, gay, and out of the closet in a white environment, even to the extent of dancing in the Bagatelle, was considered by many Black lesbians to be simply suicidal” (224). Lorde highlights the intersections of her identity, as a black lesbian, after almost being turned away from a lesbian bar: “[W]e would all rather die than have to discuss the fact that it was because I was Black” (180). Lorde sarcastically criticizes the white lesbian community for letting their differences divide them: “[O]f course, gay people weren’t racists. After all, didn’t they know what it was like to be oppressed?” (180). Despite feeling marginalized in her own communities, Audre’s developing political consciousness assists her in finding comfort in her differences. According to Barbara Smith, *Zami* “provides a vision of possibility for Black lesbians surviving as a whole” (72). This vision of communal survival is apparent in Lorde’s insistence upon the erotic to bridge divisions among women even when the bridging of racial difference, for example in the lesbian bar scene, cannot entirely combat white supremacist discourses that exoticize black women.

Audre’s relationship with Felicia is an example of an intimate relationship with another black lesbian that is not sexual, but provides her with an erotic connection to a fellow sister-

outsider in her lesbian community. Through her relationship with Felicia, Lorde analyzes the butch/femme dynamics among lesbian communities and lesbian bars: “[W]e were part of the ‘freaky’ bunch of lesbians who weren’t into role-playing, and who the butches and femmes, Black and white, disparaged with the term Ky-Ky, or AC/DC” (178). Kennedy and Davis explain how gender and sexual presentation were perceived in lesbian communities in the 1950s by highlighting that some lesbian communities “had little tolerance for those lesbians whose sexual behavior was not consistently butch-fem. Such people were considered ‘ki-ki’ (neither nor), or more frequently ‘AC/DC,’ both pejorative labels imposed by the community” (212). Audre states that “non-conventional people can be dangerous, even in the gay community,” which likely influenced why many black lesbians adopted a butch or stone butch gender presentation despite what may have felt the most natural to them (224).

As noted by MacNeil, there were racial differences in terms of how one was perceived in terms of lesbian role-playing: “[E]ven as [Lorde] identifies her own resistance to such portrayals of the most gorgeous femme as regulated by white, patriarchal culture, she recognizes that many other black and white lesbians within lesbian communities did not” (83). Despite some divisions in terms of gender presentation and sexual roles, Audre stresses just how important her lesbian community was in the 1950s: “[W]e all cared for each other[;] there was always a place to sleep and something to eat and a listening ear[;] there was always somebody calling you on the telephone, to interrupt the fantasies of suicide” (179). Audre notes the importance of these relationships through her connection with Felicia.

Freire’s theory of developing critical consciousness notes the importance of dialogue to critique and overcome systemic oppressions, which Lorde’s text illuminates when discussing how her community supported each other. Freire states, “dialogue is the encounter in which the

united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized” (77). In Lorde’s essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” she references Freire and states that “the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (123). Audre notes the significance of dialogue within her community by noting that “we all care for and about each other, sometimes with more or less understanding[;] ... we talked endlessly about how to best create that mutual support” (179). Lorde also notes that while the concept of sisterhood developed out of black, lesbian circles in the 1950s, black women and lesbians were overwhelmingly excluded from the sisterhood of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s (179). While Audre is involved in a community that sought to grow and support each other, the most transformative support she receives is through individual erotic relationships with women.

Critics who analyze Lorde’s use of the erotic connect her exploration of the erotic to her mother, her memories, her journey back to her roots in Carriacou and Africa, and to liberation (Kemp 26; Anatol 134; Hua 116; Ferguson 297). I argue that in addition, the erotic also assists Lorde in developing her political consciousness, bridging division, and accepting difference within communities of women. In her essay, “Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde states that “our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives” (57). Lorde notes how the erotic is a lens, a source of critical analysis, for one’s existence—“erotic knowledge” sharpens one’s consciousness. Collins notes the power of the erotic, by stating, “Just as harnessing the erotic is important for domination, reclaiming and self-defining the same eroticism may constitute one path toward Black women’s empowerment”

(139). For Lorde, the erotic serves as a source of power and connection between women that enables them to embrace differences rather than rejecting them; Audre's erotic knowledge from this feminocentric resistance assists the development of her critical, political consciousness as it is engendered and expanded by her relationships with women.

Audre's critical consciousness concerning her own identification as a lesbian is further developed through her relationship with a lesbian-identified woman named Eudora. Audre meets Eudora when she goes to Mexico, a place that she has desired to go for as long as she can remember (147). Eudora invites Audre to her home, where Audre notes, "From the moment I walked into her house, I knew Eudora was gay, and that was an unexpected and welcome surprise" (162). After spending time with Eudora, Audre discovers that she hates the word "gay" and prefers to call herself a lesbian: "Eudora was the first woman I'd met who spoke about herself as a lesbian rather than as 'gay'" (162). Audre is relieved at the fact that Eudora asserts her life as woman-centered. Eudora also reaffirms to Audre that women need not adhere to butch/femme roles in the bedroom (169). Before they make love, Audre tells Eudora that she "didn't like to be made love to," and Eudora responds by saying, "[T]hat's probably because no one has ever really made love to you before" (169). Eudora shows Audre that giving pleasure to her partner, but not asking her partner to actively give her pleasure, is not the only way to love another woman.

Audre's experience with Eudora broadens her critical consciousness in terms of Eudora's identification as a woman-identified lesbian and through her suggesting that Audre allow herself to be pleased by other women. The "erotic knowledge" that Audre gains with Eudora allows her to critique her role as a "stone butch," and the erasure of lesbians as women in the homogenizing term, "gay." Not only does Eudora open Audre up to new sexual experiences, she

also informs her about her work on the African presence in Mexico by teaching her about the massive Olmec heads, which some scholars speculated were products of the African diaspora in ancient Latin America: “[I]t was Eudora who showed me the way to the Mexico I had come looking for, that nourishing land of light and color where I was somehow at home” (170). Anatol refers to the comfort Audre finds in Mexico by suggesting that Audre chooses to visit Mexico because the “nation and culture” of Mexico “resemble her Caribbean culture” (134). Although Audre’s time with Eudora in Mexico is temporary, she returns to the U.S. with a new perspective on her own identity and her role in relationships with other women. Audre’s experience with Eudora opens her up to a committed and “out” sexual relationship with Muriel.

Although Muriel considers herself “apolitical,” Audre’s political consciousness, concerning her intersecting identities, deepens during their relationship. Audre makes the decisions to live with Muriel in a committed relationship: “[W]e had said *forever*” (231 emphasis in text). Audre and Muriel’s decision to commit to a relationship is a decision to no longer hide their love, which makes their relationship more visible and an act of resistance to a heterosexist society’s idea of who is supposed to maintain committed relationships. While Muriel is a lesbian, she is white and does not consider the added oppressions that come with intersecting identities such as Audre’s. Audre notes Muriel’s racism by remarking how she “seemed to believe that as lesbians, we were all outsiders and all equal in our outsiderhood. ‘We’re all niggers,’ she used to say, and I hated to hear her say it” (203). While Muriel cannot understand Lorde’s experience as a black lesbian, Audre cannot understand Muriel’s experience as a lesbian with schizophrenia. In her relationship with Muriel, Audre finds herself a sister-outsider from the rest of their lesbian community: “... [W]e were Ky-Ky girls because we didn’t play roles. And for the fast set at the Bag we were weirdos who deserved each other because Muriel was crazy and I was Black”

(208). The two find comfort in each other within their acknowledged, and unacknowledged, differences.

Despite Muriel and Audre's relationship problems, she highlights how their intimacy assists the development of her critical consciousness. According to Lorde, "When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (Lorde, "Uses" 55). Lorde continues by stating that "there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into the sunlight against the body of a woman I love" (58). Audre's relationship with Muriel embodies the erotic: "[W]e were reinventing the world together[; ...] Muriel and I were making the lessons become real together" (209). Remembering her short romance with Eudora, Audre notes the lessons she learned and how she and Muriel were embracing their lives as out lesbians: "I had learned from Eudora how to take care of business, be dyke-proud, how to love and live to tell the story, and with flair" (209). Despite living in a country that rejects their love as perverse and unnatural, she and Muriel actively resist heteronormative discourses and establish the erotic as a point for this resistance. The end of Audre's relationship with Muriel devastates Audre; however, shortly after their relationship ends, Audre hears a gospel hymn on the bus: "Gonna die this death on Cal—va—ryyyyy, BUT AIN'T GONNA DIE NO MORE ...!" (238 emphasis in text). She describes the song as a "surge of strength" to make "a new way through or beyond the pain" (239). As Audre listens to the hymn, she describes how the music hides the "physical realities of the dingy bus" as she imagines herself "upon a hill in the center of an unknown country, hearing the sky fill with a new spelling of my own name" (239). In reference to the title of the book, Audre's new spelling of her own name is Zami—the Carriacouan term for women who openly

love other women. Audre's pivotal moment on the bus highlights a transformative moment for the development of her critical consciousness.

The power of the erotic in the development of Audre's political consciousness is illustrated through her intimate relationship with Afrekete. The mythical aspect of the biomythography is also elaborated through Audre's relationship with Afrekete, also referred to as Kitty, a woman she meets at a black lesbian house party that she remembers in exquisite detail (241-42). According to Saber, "the naming of Afrekete relates her to two figures in African pantheons[:] Afrekete-Eshu-Legba," who is the "gatekeeper between the human and divine landscapes," and "Aflakete ... who 'knows all the languages, rules all the domains, and behaves as the mediator between the divinity and humans'" (492). Not only is Afrekete Lorde's mythic intermediary between divinity and humans, she is also Audre's intermediary between Africa and the African diaspora. Audre and Afrekete begin a short, intense intimate relationship: "Would it be possible—was it ever possible—for two women to share the fire we felt that night without entrapping or smothering each other? I longed for that as I longed for her body, doubting both, eager for both" (246). For Audre, Afrekete is exactly what she needs in a lover, partner, and sister-outsider. McKinley refers to Afrekete as the "perfect creation of the Black lesbian feminist imagination" (xv). McKinley continues by noting that Afrekete is "many women"; a force for black lesbians that creates "a comfortable, reassuring image of ourselves [which] allow[s] for imaginings of the lovers who might be out there" (xiv-xv). According to Kemp, Afrekete's presence represents the "re-establishment of an emotional connection with 'blackness' and, significantly, Black womanhood" (26). Not only does Afrekete reaffirm black womanhood for Audre, she also reconnects her to her African-Caribbean heritage. Lorde struggles to find an inclusive lesbian community, outside of the bar scene, in which she can celebrate her race,

sexuality, and African-Caribbean diasporic subjectivity. Afrekete and Audre's identities, as young black lesbians, sit at similar intersections. According to McKinley, "Afrekete is a black Black woman, a primal link to a history and community many of us are accused for forsaking when we 'cross' over into the lesbian 'nation'" (xiv). Audre and Afrekete establish an erotic connection that holds the most influence over Lorde's developing political consciousness.

The eroticism between Audre and Afrekete is political and liberatory—resisting heteronormative depictions of lesbian sexuality. Roof notes that displays of lesbian sexuality in popular culture are often coopted by heterosexist discourses (15-16). Specifically, Roof highlights how lesbian sex scenes are often "shot entirely from the perspective of the voyeur, a third party, rather than from the perspective of one of the participants" (29). In contrast to the heterosexist gaze noted by Roof, the sexually intimate scenes between Audre and Afrekete embody an alternative depiction of lesbian intimacy. The language Lorde uses when noting the first time she and Afrekete make love is beautifully descriptive: "*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 bananas into a beige cream that mixed with the juices of your electric flesh*" (249 emphasis in text). Lorde's description is also non-voyeuristic as it is described from the perspective of Audre as she makes love to Afrekete. Kemp highlights how "Lorde's language" when describing her sexually erotic moments with Afrekete "conveys the feminine—woman's body engaged with woman's body" (27). Similarly, Kader notes how the physical body is portrayed in Lorde's writing, specifically claiming that "the lesbian body ... becomes a point of articulation for new meanings" (185). Lorde's descriptions of having sex with Afrekete create an alternative meaning for lesbian intimacy—one that resists heterosexist depictions of lesbian love. The scene in which

Audre and Afrekete make love on a roof under the “Midsummer Eve’s Moon” shows the sacredness of their eroticism and its power to heal (252). For Audre, their lovemaking is powerful and transformative as she remembers the images of their “sweat-slippery dark bodies, sacred as the ocean at high tide” (252). Not only do the descriptions of Audre and Afrekete’s lovemaking resist homophobic, racist discourses concerning black, lesbian identities, they resist the trauma caused by these oppressive discourses. After Audre and Afrekete make love, they proudly walk down 113th Street, “hand in hand,” near the neighborhood where Genevieve’s stepmother lives (251-53). The erotic power of Audre’s relationship with Afrekete brings Audre’s story full circle when Lorde connects the culmination of Audre’s critical consciousness to its beginnings with Gennie, the girlhood friend whose suicide left such a painful wound that Afrekete’s love now heals.

The erotic also serves as a point of activist resistance in which Audre and Afrekete cultivate their political consciousness. Audre and Afrekete use the “magical fruit” Afrekete buys from “West Indian markets” when they make love: “[T]hey were ripe red finger bananas ... with which I parted your lips gently, to insert the peeled fruit into your grape-purple flower” (249 emphasis in text). Afrekete offers Audre the most intimate, erotic connection to her African-Caribbean heritage, bringing her “cocoyams and cassava, ... [and] plantains” from the West Indian *bodegas* (249), as well as avocados with which to spread on her “coconut-brown belly[;] a veil of the palest green avocado, a mantle of goddess pear that [she] slowly licked from [her] skin” (251). She also notes how Afrekete is significant to her identity as a lesbian by stating, “We talked sometimes about what it meant to love women, and what a relief it was in the eye of the storm, no matter how often we had to bite our tongues and stay silent” (250). Conversations concerning their shared desires and experiences as black lesbians are not only political

resistance; the refusal to remain silent is a form of survival. Afrekete and Audre also discuss their shared experiences as black lesbians: “[W]e talked about how Black women had been committed without choice to waging our campaigns in the enemies’ strongholds, too much and too often, our physic landscapes had been plundered and wearied by those repeated battles and campaigns” (250). Lorde addresses the importance of “speaking truths” in her essay “The Transformation of Silence” by noting that “in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth” (42). During her relationship with Afrekete, Audre is reminded of Gennie and how she “lost” Gennie to her “silence” and to “both our angers and to a world’s cruelty that destroys its own young in passing” (251). Audre’s intensely erotic and unapologetically open relationship with Afrekete establishes how personal perseverance through the destruction caused by racism, sexism, and homophobia becomes an act of political resistance.

Audre’s political consciousness as a black, lesbian feminist is fully affirmed upon Afrekete’s departure. Lorde pays homage to her time with Afrekete by stating, “*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 ... will not follow us on our journeys*” (252 emphasis in text). Lorde puts theory into practice when she suggests that solace will be found within the “woman’s power,” or the erotic. Lorde reiterates the political aspect of the sexually intimate moments between her and Afrekete by suggesting that the sound of them making love is a prayer for other women seeking to discard the evils that have been heaped on them and that they have been forced to carry. On the symbolism of Audre’s relationship with Afrekete, Smith states that “it seems fitting that the work closes with her account of a loving relationship with another Black woman, Afrekete,” since *Zami*’s purpose “is to connect women

who recognize and share differences, particularly other Black lesbians” (70). Audre’s erotic connection to Afrekete heals the wounds created by homophobic, racist discourses. Upon Afrekete’s departure, Audre realizes the growth she experienced during her relationship with Afrekete: “[W]e had come together, like elements erupting into an electric storm. ... Then we parted, passed, reformed, reshaping ourselves the better for the exchange” (253). The healing power of the erotic between women is noted in Lorde’s Epilogue. Lorde mentions some of the women who are crucial to her life: “*Ma-Liz, DeLois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda, and Genevieve; MawuLisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother to us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, who we must all become*” (255 emphasis in text). By listing MawuLisa, the Dahomey creator goddess and mother of Afrekete; Afrekete, her youngest daughter; her mother Linda; her aunt, Anni; and her first love, Genevieve, Lorde establishes a connection between these women. The power and influence of the erotic is illuminated through Audre’s connections to MawuLisa, Afrekete, Linda, Aunt Anni, and Genevieve. Anatol claims that “Audre is motivated to preserve an idealized connection to an idealized home, and, thus, by extension, to a firm sense of identity” (131). Audre’s connection to these women becomes a connection to home and her identities as an African-Caribbean lesbian.

By expanding upon the history Lorde references in *Zami*, her text serves as a critical analysis of a black lesbian’s experiences during the 1940s-50s. Considering the political and social climate of the McCarthy-Era, Audre’s forming critical consciousness is essential for utilizing the erotic to resist oppressive discourses. Lorde insists upon breaking down the barriers that separate women, which means resisting the forces that seek to divide women. For Audre, the erotic functions to bridge differences and to bind women in solidarity that embraces difference. In her essay, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” Lorde discusses how

examining her relationships with women empowers her to resist divisive discourses and fosters her political consciousness: "... [I]t was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living" (40). The erotic first bridges a divide between Audre and Linda despite the tensions that living in a white supremacist, xenophobic society creates for an immigrant family; it also connects Audre through an erotic connection to her mother's body to her feminocentric African-Caribbean roots. The erotic continues to work within Audre's intimate and sexual relationships with other lesbians, many from whom Audre is very different. Despite their differences, these women share erotic connections from which Audre learns and grows, even though many of the relationships do not last. Each relationship Audre shares with another woman facilitates the growth of her critical consciousness. By retrospectively telling her story, Lorde departs from oppressive ideologies to form an erotic black, lesbian discourse of resistance.

**CHAPTER II. “A POINT OF RESISTANCE”: EXPLORING THE DAMAGING
CONSEQUENCES AND POWERFUL ADVANTAGES OF DISCOURSE IN ALISON
BECHDEL’S *FUN HOME***

“If the cops searched me, could I pass the three-articles-of-women’s clothing rule? Would I have the guts to be one of those Eisenhower-Era butches?” In *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Alison Bechdel fictionalizes herself as “Alison,” the protagonist and narrator, and briefly historicizes how she would have been perceived in terms of 1950s discourses concerning sexuality and gender (108-9). Through the fictionalization of herself and her family, Bechdel notes how her closeted gay father, Bruce, is sexually suppressed by heteronormative discourses and has affairs with his underage students, destroying his relationship with his wife, Helen. Bruce internalizes these oppressive discourses, hiding his identity, and partaking in risky sexual encounters; his internalized homophobia eventually contributes to a probable suicide. Alison realizes that Bruce is suffering because of heteronormative discourses, while simultaneously discovering her own sexuality by embracing the erotic, as defined by Audre Lorde. Through lesbian feminist discourses, Alison fully embraces the creative power of the erotic by turning to writing and literature as a means of personal and political resistance.

In her graphic memoir, Bechdel explores her family history in terms of heterosexist discourses of gender and sexuality and how they affected the lives of her parents, Helen and Bruce, their relationship as a family, and her life as a lesbian. Bechdel’s fictionalized “Alison” reflects on how discourses drastically alter the lives of her parents in a negative way, and eventually, how counterhegemonic discourses foster a positive sense of identity and belonging for herself. Alison recognizes how heteronormative discourses of sexuality and gender presentation severely inhibit the lives of her parents, as well as her young life; through this

recognition, Alison uses these discourses as a Foucauldian “point of departure,” by rejecting oppressive ideologies and discovering an identification and point of personal power through an erotic reclamation of lesbian-feminist discourses of resistance (Foucault 101).⁶

The personal was political in the 1950s; the fictionalized Helen and Bruce recognize that those who did not adhere to normative cultural constructions of gender and sexuality faced repercussions. As David K. Johnson demonstrates, fueled by Cold War politics, the 1950s were rife with ethical anxieties; the government worked to present the nation as resilient, valiant, and moral (Johnson 37). Individuals who deviated from normative discourses concerning gender presentation and/or sexuality were forced either to deny these aspects of their identities or face the repercussions of their resistance (Johnson 149-50, 154). Many individuals, like the fictionalized Helen and Bruce, forcefully presented themselves in accordance with hetero-patriarchal standards of morality and normalcy; both men and women were expected to maintain heteronormative gender presentations. According to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, “... gender is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces ... the illusion of an inner depth” (317). The repetition of this gender presentation creates an illusion of naturalness or normalcy. Butler also states that gender performance is “compulsory in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence...” (315). Considering Butler’s theory in light of 1950s America, ostracism, punishment, and violence were real consequences for individuals who did not adhere to normative culturally constructed myths of gender and sexuality.

⁶ Foucault notes that a point of resistance “must make an allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault 101).

By historicizing Bruce and Helen's experiences in the 1950s-1970s, leading up to Bruce's possible suicide in 1980, Bechdel examines issues her family was unable to consciously address. Heike Bauer notes how in "this complex family dynamic in which 'sexual identity' itself is a problem and emotions remain largely unspoken, books act as fragile conduits of feelings, shaping familial relationships even as they allow Alison to contextualize her life in relation to historical events and social norms" (266). Bauer also notes how Bechdel's "memoirs historicize her family and interrogate the queer entanglements of her own lesbian life with the lives of her parents who are trapped in a damaging, emotional void forged during the socially repressive and sexually persecutory Eisenhower era" (267). Just as Bauer suggests, Bechdel highlights how Alison is able to consult books in an attempt to understand the discourses that influenced her parents' decisions and, eventually, her own position in opposing hegemonic discourses.

While alternative ideas concerning sexuality and gender were circulating during the 1950s and early 1960s, Alison explains how the geographical location of Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, socially excluded Helen and Bruce from discourses of resistance. Referring to their seclusion, Alison notes, "But it's puzzling why my urbane father [...] remained in this provincial hamlet. And why my cultured mother, who had studied acting in New York City, would live there cheek by jowl with his [Bruce's] family is more puzzling still" (*FH* 31). According to Alison, Helen "made it clear that my brothers and I would not repeat their mistake" (31). Helen's insistence that her children do not end up in the same predicament highlights a general awareness that she has come to terms with her own discontent.

Bechdel highlights the early, passionate stage of Bruce and Helen's relationship; as their marriage progresses, Bechdel notes a transparent loss of intimacy and mounting discontent with

the consequences of their adherence to normative discourses (67-8). Bechdel compares her mother to Catharine in *Washington Square* by noting, “A plain, dull, but wealthy young woman falls in love with the smooth-talking fortune hunter, Morris Townsend” (FH 66). As her relationship with Bruce worsens, Helen also seems to lose passion for her creativity; acting and playing music become more of a means of emotional survival, rather than an extension of her pleasure. Comparing her mother to Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Alison states, “It’s a troubling play, of course. The willful Katherine’s spirit is broken by the mercenary, domineering Petruchio” (69). Clearly, Helen projects two very different roles—the domestic, self-sacrificing mother and wife and the artistically ambitious actress, musician, and scholar. When Alison asks Helen why she did not become an actress, she states, “Oh, I wanted to get married and have kids” (95). While a part of Helen may have wanted to marry, and have children, she could not have anticipated the martial struggles she would have with Bruce.

Bechdel reiterates how Bruce places blame and responsibility on Helen as the sole provider of emotional and physical support for the children. Bruce interprets small mishaps in their home as the result of Helen’s incompetence as a guardian, instead of the inevitability of children having accidents (231). Helen seems to internalize the blame Bruce places on her; in some cases, this abuse causes Helen to feel ambivalence towards Bruce and the children. In *Fun Home*, Alison finds similarities between Helen’s favorite poem, “Sunday Morning,” by Wallace Stevens, and her relationship with Bruce (82). In reference to this poem, Alison states, “... But sacrifice was a principle that she grasped instinctively. Perhaps she also liked the poem because its juxtaposition of catastrophe with a plush domestic interior is life with my father in a nutshell” (83). While Alison perceives Helen’s sacrificial behavior as instinctual, in fact, hegemonic discourses of femininity have conditioned her to perform this self-sacrifice as if it were

instinctual. A reader who is familiar with *Fun Home*, however, can make the connection as to why Bruce is not performing his role as a father and husband, and how his struggle in performing culturally constructed roles of heteronormative masculinity essentially heightened the degree to which Helen felt she should perform her feminine role.

Just as Helen internalizes patriarchal discourses that affected her perception of femininity and her role as a woman, Bruce also internalized heterosexist discourses that affected his perception of himself and his same-sex desires. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel contemplates her father's service in the military by illustrating a scene that shows Bruce reading Arthur Mizener's biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Far Side of Paradise*, on a bed in the military barracks; a fellow soldier approaches Bruce and playfully asks, "You got a playboy stuck in there?" (62). The heterosexist culture promoted by the military undoubtedly influenced the way in which Bruce viewed his own masculinity and sexuality; during this time, Bruce became preoccupied with F. Scott Fitzgerald. Emphasizing the idealization her father shared for F. Scott Fitzgerald and his work, Bechdel presents the reader with excerpts of letters her father wrote to her mother during his time in the military; she states, "Dad's letters to mom, which had not been particularly demonstrative up to this point, began to grow lush with Fitzgeraldesque sentiment" (63). Bechdel also states that "Gatsby's self-willed metamorphosis from farm boy to prince is in many ways identical to my father's" (63). Regarding the importance of texts in Bruce Bechdel's life, Bauer states, "... In relation to Bruce Bechdel's life, books, however important they may be in the displacement of his homosexual desires, ultimately fail to provide sustenance for his existence" (273). Alison suggests that her father's imitative preoccupation with Fitzgerald's life and writing style was, perhaps, a façade—an escapist heterosexual fantasy role he could play that helped him

deal with his own personal misgivings or a costume he could don that assisted in denying the homoerotic desires his own internalized homophobia could not accept.

Bruce's internalization of homophobic discourses at this point in his life explains his adopting a "Fitzgeraldesque" aesthetic as a way of imitating an acceptable mode of masculinity he feared he did not project (63). Queer theorist Judith Butler suggests that "... *gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequences of the imitation itself" (313 emphasis in original). Socially, Bruce's gender presentation seems natural; Butler notes that the "naturalistic effects of heterosexualized genders are produced through imitative strategies" (313). Referring to Bruce's heterosexual, masculine gender presentation, Alison recognizes Bruce's imitative strategies: "Such a suspension of the imaginary in the real was, after all, my father's stock in trade" (65). Bruce's desire to project this 1950s, hetero-masculine aesthetic allows him to distance himself, publicly and personally, from the consequences of homophobic discourses.

Not only did normative discourses require men to present themselves as heterosexual and stereotypically masculine, as James Burkhardt Gilbert suggests, many historians in the 1950s thought masculinity was in crisis (62). Noting popular publications like *Look* magazine, Gilbert states that *Look* "was only one of several periodicals preoccupied with male crisis in the 1950s[...]. The editors, in announcing their series on the 'Decline of the American Male,' had no difficulty finding illustrations in the best current informed opinion to support their point" (73). Gilbert also references historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and his 1958 writings in *Look*; "Schlesinger's article was titled 'The Crisis of American Masculinity,'" and expressed concern "about the ambiguity of the contemporary male role; it had, apparently, 'lost its rugged clarity of outline'" (62). Gilbert continues by stating, "The historian made no bones about it: gender

confusion led to heightened worries about homosexuality if not its actual increase” (62). Same-sex desire was perceived as an affront to 1950s ideals of masculinity; transgression from normative gender roles was viewed as a sign of sexual deviancy. Referring to the significance placed on normative discourses of gender and sexuality, Gilbert stresses that “the disruption of a single strand in this weave could weaken everything along the lines and threaten the stability of the whole fabric” (77). Essentially, the idea that any deviation from gender and sexual normativity had the power to “weaken everything” is consistent with Cold War politics and the general ideology of the 1950s-early 1960s.

Heterosexist discourses produce Bruce’s shame about his sexuality, which is both embodied and concealed through the presentation of their home; this dichotomy is also seen in his temperament. Bechdel emphasizes the “tyrannical power” Bruce projected over their family; “his bursts of kindness were as incandescent as his tantrums were dark” (97, 21). Bruce seems to enact, almost neurotically, this stereotypically masculine role as a guise—one to supplement the chaos of his personal life. In reference to her father’s obsessiveness with the interior, and exterior, design of their home, Alison states, “His shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany. In fact, the meticulous, period interiors were expressly designed to conceal it” (20). Dualities heavily weigh on many aspects of Bruce’s identity, destroying his own acceptance of himself and complicating his relationships with others.

As a young man coming of age in the 1950s, immersed in discourses that suppress and oppress his sexuality, Bruce’s attempts at performing heterosexual masculinity are a form of survival. The CBS television documentary, “The Homosexuals,” aired on CBS in 1967; the documentary explores the public’s “growing concern” with gay men and their “visibility” (“The

Homosexuals”). According to a CBS poll, viewers considered “homosexuality more harmful than adultery, abortion, and prostitution” (“The Homosexuals”). The discourses presented in “The Homosexuals” are representative of the discourses that influenced the way Bruce viewed his same-sex desires, the way Helen viewed Bruce’s desires, and the way both Bruce and Helen viewed Alison’s lesbianism. Considering this documentary aired on the evening news, a television special that affected countless individuals, it is apparent that same-sex attraction of gay men was being targeted and punished.

This documentary is a sobering example of the discourses perpetuated by sexologists, like Dr. Charles Socarides and Dr. Irving Bieber, concerning the mental health of gay men. In *Homosexuality*, Socarides presents his conclusions on the development of same-sex desire in men. Socarides begins by stating, “In homosexuality the component instinct which seems to be approved has undergone excessive transformation and disguise to be gratified in the perverse act” (104). Socarides continues by suggesting that “[t]he defensive aspects of homosexuality and the warding off guilt-laden fantasies are as crucial to the role of object relations as are family constellations and the specific opportunities to make adequate identifications”; essentially, Socarides seems to be stating that Freud’s analysis of sexuality is applicable, but must be built upon by his own case studies of same-sex desire and sexual practice (105). Socarides conducted case studies on gay men who sought help for their desires; the homophobic discourses he perpetuated drove these men to seek treatment for their sexualities. Socarides essentially categorized the psychological distress of his clients as symptomatic of their realization of their diseased mental condition, rather than an effect of living in a homophobic society.

Similarly, Irving Bieber notes the “‘classical’ homosexual triangular interaction with his parents,” which consists of a mother who “is CBI [Close-Bonding Intimate] and is dominant and

minimizing toward a husband who is a detached father. [...] From our statistical analysis, the chances appear to be high that any son exposed to this parental combination will become homosexual or develop severe homosexual problems” (172). Bieber concludes by noting the summary of his results; he states, “Of the 106 homosexuals who undertook psychoanalysis, either as exclusively homosexual or bisexual, 29 (27 per cent) became exclusively heterosexual” (301). Bieber also states he, and the team of psychologists he practiced with, “... assume that heterosexuality is the *biologic* norm and that unless interfered with all individuals are heterosexual. Homosexuals do not bypass heterosexual development phases and all remain potentially heterosexual” (319). Through psychological discourses, Bieber and Socarides perpetuated the idea that same-sex desire was an affliction that could be cured and that heterosexuality is the only “natural” or “normal” sexual orientation.

The institutionalization of homophobic discourses—specifically those that associated same-sex desire with mental illness, predation, and criminality—undoubtedly affected the way Bruce perceived himself and contributed to the family’s fear that he would be exposed in the community. “The Homosexuals” documentary is representative of the pervasiveness of these discourses—permeating governmental, psychiatric, religious, and legal institutions. Not only did these discourses construct a public consciousness of same-sex relationships, but as Foucault states, “through the various discourses, legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied; sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness from childhood to old age, a norm of sexual development was defined ...” (36). Not only is Bruce exposed to this psychological discourse on the supposed depravity of same-sex relationships, his choice of lovers leads him to court, which requires he seek therapy of the type Bieber and Socarides advocated, which was the dominant practice in the 1950s-70s.

As Alison reflects upon the diary she kept as a child, she notes her entry on Bruce's visit to a psychiatrist; she writes, "Dad's gonna go to a psychiatrist! He says it's because he does dumb dangerous things and because he's bad and wants to be good ... or something" (153). When Alison asks Bruce why, he replies with "I'm bad. Not good like you" (153). Bruce's decision to seek sexual relationships with his underage high school students seems to be a consequence of the fear perpetuated by these homophobic discourses. Bruce's sexual repression and fear of desiring a serious, public relationship with an older man is representative of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls "homosexual panic" (89). Sedgwick notes how "so-called 'homosexual panic' is the most private, psychologized form in which many twentieth-century western men experience their vulnerability to the social pressure of homophobic blackmail" (89). The homophobic discourses perpetuated by psychiatrists, like Socarides and Bieber, as highlighted in "The Homosexuals," contributed to the internalized hate and desperation felt by men like Bruce.

The homophobic discourses perpetuated by psychoanalysts and the media, among other sources, had devastating consequences for gay and lesbian individuals. During the Red Scare, the federal government proposed the idea that gay and lesbian employees were a security risk and their sexuality was a basis for termination—a series of persecutions that David K. Johnson terms "The Lavender Scare" (2). Historian Lillian Faderman notes how the federal purging of gay and lesbian employees from the State Department also led to the purging of employees on the state level and campaigns against deviation from gender or sexual norms (49). Faderman also notes how rapidly discourses concerning the depravity of gay and lesbian individuals spread from the initial Lavender Scare in Washington D.C., to the Midwest, to the South (Faderman 49; Johnson 2). As a public school teacher and well-known local mortician in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, Bruce's sexual relationships with his teenage students placed him in a dangerous position.

Bruce's life was excruciatingly confining, a constant suppression of his sexuality in public and private. For gay and lesbian individuals, the private was made public; therefore, Bruce's affairs with young men were likely a consequence of the violently heterosexist system that left Bruce seeking a temporary, private, and easily concealed outlet for his same-sex desires. However, Bruce's relationships with his students are sexual misconduct and the temporary nature of Bruce's risky relationships cannot provide him with a healthy, safe relationship with another man. An innuendo that one may have been attracted to someone of the same-sex could have easily led to the destruction of that person's mental, physical, social, and familial structure; *Fun Home* demonstrates that Bruce was, undoubtedly, aware of the social repercussions of his desires and remained deeply closeted.

Through her exploration into Bruce's past, Alison better understands the impact of heterosexist discourses on her father and how those discourses influenced his decisions. Concerning *Fun Home*'s significance, Ann Cvetkovich states, "*Fun Home* dares to claim historical significance and public space not only for a lesbian coming-out story but also for one that is tied to what some might see as shameful sexual histories" (112). As Alison grows to discover her own sexuality, as a lesbian, she explores her history and comes to some conclusions as to why Bruce sought relationships with teenage boys. Cvetkovich suggests that Bruce's story is "'unspeakable' in its own way, a reminder that 'the love that dare not speak its name' is an applicable term even in the era after Stonewall, since men who desire other men but who are married and living in small towns, or men who desire young boys, rarely talk about their sexual desires ..." (113). While Stonewall did allow a sense of freedom for some members of the LGBTQ community, men like Bruce with deeply internalized homophobic tendencies, stuck in marriages and small-towns, probably felt little to no change in society's virulent homophobia.

Cvetkovich specifically analyzes photos of Alison in a man's suit and Bruce in a woman's swim suit, stating: "... Father and daughter mirror each other as gender-crossing homosexuals[;] they are intertwined in a way that doesn't allow early distinctions between perverse and normal sexuality, obsession and art, or preliberation closeted queers and out and proud gays and lesbians" (119). Essentially, by placing their images, and histories, side-by-side, Bechdel allows the reader to see how their histories meet and separate. While both Bruce and Alison are obviously surrounded by heterosexist discourses, Alison embraces masculinity from a young age and consistently asserts her desire to project a masculine appearance.

Young Alison is elated the first time she sees a butch lesbian; the woman's masculine gender presentation highlights a significant moment in which Alison finds a "hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance," within the normative discourses of gender and sexuality that have constrained her childhood (Foucault 101). Building from Bruce's attempts to feminize Alison, when he notices her preoccupation with the masculine presenting lesbian, he asks, "Is that what you want to look like?" (*FH* 118). Sensing the disdain in her father's tone, Alison quickly responds with a "no;" however, she notes, "...the vision of the truck-driving bulldyke sustained me through the years ... as perhaps it haunted my father" (119). Tension between Bruce and Alison was consistently prevalent throughout Alison's childhood. Applying Butler to this particular scene, Dalmaso states, "For Bruce, it is a disturbing reminder of his own depressed non-normative feelings, while for Alison, it is conveyed as the realization of the possibilities entailed in a female masculine embodiment even though this realization is also repressed at the time and only later is fully embraced..." (562). Once able to see a woman with a masculine gender presentation, Alison recognizes herself and is able to validate her own experiences. This incident happens at a very young age; however, the panels depicting Alison's resistance to

Bruce's attempts at feminizing her, highlight how her resistance is fueled by the validation of seeing the truck-driving bulldyke. Considering that Bruce could not visibly project the sense of comfort Alison possessed, he may have viewed her non-normative gender presentation as a reflection upon himself and their family. As a closeted gay man in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, the fear that Alison's gender presentation could cast suspicion upon the family was likely one of the reasons Bruce forced stereotypical femininity upon Alison.

The instant in which Alison sees a masculine presenting lesbian, she recognizes herself—the sheer significance of this moment highlights Alison's prior unawareness of alternative gender performances. Alison, as a child, is seen rejecting the feminine wallpaper her father puts in her room—"but I hate pink! I hate flowers!" she states (*FH* 7). At one point, a captivated, adolescent Alison is shown in front of a television depicting a stereotypically masculine cowboy; she notes, "Indeed, I had become a connoisseur of masculinity at an early age" (95). When young Alison is forced to wear feminine clothing or accessories, Bechdel presents her as distressed and embarrassed, with a general feeling of unnaturalness (96-9).

Alison's departure from stereotypical, heteronormative discourses of femininity is met with Bruce's subtle projections of femininity. Referring to this, Alison states, "Not only were we inverts. We were inversions of one another [; ...] between us lay a slender demilitarized zone—our shared reverence for masculine beauty. But I wanted the muscles and tweed like my father wanted the velvet and pearls—subjectively, for myself" (98-9). Alison seems to be reversing the discourse of inversion to describe her gender presentation and Bruce's gender presentation in relation to each other; by reversing the discourse of inversion, Alison better understands her relationship to Bruce. Dalmasco notes the inversion narrative in *Fun Home*, by stating, "The two characters may be seen as 'inversions' of each other[. ...] Bruce, is presented as a figure that

lacks masculinity, whereas the same trait is abundant in his daughter” (559). Young Alison also notes, “I measured my father against grimy deer hunters at the gas station uptown, with their yellow workbooks and shorn-sheep haircuts. And where he fell short, I stepped in” (96). Neither Bruce nor Alison could wholly fulfill the expectations of gender presentation they had for each other.

As Alison matures, she continues to project a masculine gender presentation, departing from the heteronormative discourses that constrain her parents; as a result, Bruce and Alison’s confrontations over her gender presentation intensify. Jack Halberstam suggests, “... tomboyism is tolerated as long as the child remains prepubescent; as soon as puberty begins, however, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl [. . .] [I]t is in the context of female adolescence that the tomboy instincts of millions of girls are remodeled into compliant forms of femininity” (6). Some panels highlight smaller incidents in which young Alison rejects stereotypical femininity, but Alison’s subtle rejections of femininity become more deliberate when Bruce counters them by pushing her to be more feminine. In one panel, Bruce is shown forcefully placing a barrette in young Alison’s hair; in the next panel, “five years later,” a pubescent Alison is shown standing, full of dread, in front of a dress—which she describes as the “least girly dress in the store” (98). In these panels, the reader is shown Bruce’s insistence that Alison’s embrace of femininity become more intense. Halberstam states, “That any girls do emerge at the end of adolescence as masculine women is quite amazing. The growing visibility and indeed respectability of lesbian communities to some degree facilitate the emergence of masculine young women” (6). As Halberstam suggests, the visibility and respectability of lesbian communities is, essentially, what helps Alison embrace her masculinity when she goes to college and immerses herself in lesbian, feminist literature.

As Alison goes to college and begins to question her sexuality, she also begins to discover a sense of empowerment by studying lesbian, feminist discourses of resistance. One panel shows Alison in a library, looking through books; she states, “My realization at nineteen that I was a lesbian came about in a manner consistent with my bookish upbringing” A panel shows Alison masturbating as she reads *Delta of Venus* by Anais Nin, with the caption, “my researches were stimulating but solitary” (76). Alison’s realization about her sexuality came to her through the written word, a form of communication that has provided her with comfort, desire, knowledge, and an artistic outlet since her childhood.

Not only has Alison’s erotic relationship with writing and literature sustained her, it has also allowed her to reclaim truths about herself, her relationship to her family, and her history as a lesbian. When defining the erotic, Lorde states, “When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (341). The erotic consists of many sources of sexual, political, social, and creative power in women’s lives. For lesbians, the political and sexual aspects of the erotic have faced silencing and erasure in a heterosexist society.

Alison finds power in the erotic—she finds power through her own words and through the words of others that inform her identity as a lesbian-feminist. Alison’s Foucauldian “point of departure” is validated when she goes to college and immerses herself in discourses that oppose normative constructions of gender and sexuality (Foucault 101). The lesbian, feminist discourses Alison embraces as a young woman help her discover her sexuality and find a community of other lesbian feminists who validate her experiences. Foucault states that “... discourse can be ... a starting point for an opposing strategy” (101). Her understanding of her sexuality and gender

presentation, along with her understanding of her relationship to her parents, are assisted through the development of discourses that serve as a starting point of resistance to heterosexism. Foucault also notes that “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (101). Alison uses lesbian-feminist discourses as a source of power that “thwarts” the heteronormative discourses that haunted her childhood and the lives of her parents.

Alison is fully embracing her sexuality amidst a sea of literature that assisted her realization about her sexuality. A few of the feminist texts, representing the discourses of resistance that Alison is exposed to, appear in panels with Alison as she is making love to her partner Joan. Some of those texts are Adrienne Rich’s *Dream of A Common Language*, Olga Broumas’ *Beginning with O*, Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love’s *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*, and *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* by Mary Daly and Emily Culpepper (79-80). Concerning Alison’s ability to find comfort among such discourse, Cvetkovich states, “Alison’s references to histories of sexual liberation and sexual community suggest that her life might be significantly different from her father’s not only for personal reasons but also for historical ones...” (123). In locating sources produced by lesbian feminists, who validate Alison’s experiences as a lesbian, Cvetkovich also notes how Bruce “does not have access to the social world that might allow him to assume a more overtly gay identity” (123). Through oppositional discourses of sexuality, Alison finds the sense of belonging and comfort that escaped her parents.

Alison, hence, realizes she is a lesbian by reading about same-sex desire. This recognition is validated once she discovers the stories of others who have also departed from heteronormative discourses, creating their own discourses of resistance. After reading *Word is*

Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives, she notes, “This book referred to other books, which I sought out in the library [. . .] I found a four-foot trove in the stacks which I quickly ravished” (Bechdel 75). Bauer notes how “Alison’s ‘lesbian’ reading . . . reflects the fact that books can play an important role in lesbian and queer life both in the formulation of a sense of self and in terms of shaping a collective identity. . .” (273). The panel that shows Alison masturbating to *Delta of Venus* highlights how the erotic is combined in its literal sense and theoretical sense (76). Not only is Alison embodying the erotic through her love of literature, the literature also serves as a source of sexual pleasure through which Alison can fully embrace her sexuality.

A heterosexist society mistakes lesbian eroticism as pornographic. While the erotic can be a sexually satisfying experience, Lorde claims that the vast power of the erotic to empower women’s creative working together for social change is one of the reasons why “the erotic is so feared” and “relegated to the bedroom” (314). Embracing sexual as well as political aspects of the erotic can be a liberatory experience for lesbians in an overwhelmingly heterosexist society. Bechdel highlights specific examples in Alison’s life where sexually erotic moments are acts of resistance that fuel her political activities. Bechdel constructs these erotic moments as rejections of a heterosexist gaze—thus creating a liberatory experience for Alison, the character. Alison’s first erotic experience happens with Joan, a queer campus activist she meets during her first semester at college. The first grouping of panels showing erotic moments between Alison and Joan illuminate how interwoven literature, politics, and sex are in Alison’s own experience with the erotic. Alison confirms this interweaving by stating, “In the harsh light of my dawning feminism, everything looked different. This entwined political and sexual awakening was a welcome distraction” (81). These panels feature Alison and Joan in bed, post-sex, reading theory, as well as literature and the dictionary. Reading the dictionary becomes a sexually erotic

experience, as Alison lies on Joan's back, nibbling her ear, while Joan reads from the dictionary: "I had lost my bearings. The dictionary had become erotic. Os-. Mouth. Oral, Oscillate, Osculate, Orifice ... Oh" (80). By intertwining the literary and political aspects of the erotic with the sexually erotic, Alison creates a place for herself to embrace her sexuality, as well as a place to cope with the damaging effect of the hegemonic, heterosexist discourses that plagued her life at home.

Panels that feature erotic moments between Alison and Joan avoid stereotypical, heterosexist representations of lesbian eroticism. Judith Roof notes how lesbian sex is typically represented in a heteronormative society, by highlighting that "lesbian sexuality [...] becomes a deviance, a difference, that which is not homogeneous, a bad substitute for heterosexuality" (24). Alison and Joan's sexualities are not shown as deviant or different; they have created their own haven for the erotic. Roof notes the stereotypical ways lesbian sexualities are portrayed as elements in heterosexual male pornography. Lesbian sex is typically portrayed as being foreplay for a heterosexual encounter—as an incomplete and unsatisfying sexual act that needs a resolution (Roof 23-4). Typically, "as an element of a larger narrative, lesbian sexuality is quickly made a part of a heterosexual system" that then erases or silences lesbian eroticism (23). Bechdel constructs scenes of lesbian sexual pleasure to celebrate Alison and Joan's sexualities, not to position them as foreplay for some heterosexual act.

Alison and Joan's bedroom becomes a place of sexual pleasure and intellectual fulfillment. One panel shows Alison lying between Joan's thighs, but the focus of the panel is not necessarily the two women making love. On one side of the bed is a stack of books and a shirt on the wall with "Lesbian Terrorist" on the front of it, and on the other side of the bed is a sign that reads "Keep Your God Off My Body" (214). Bechdel notes that the materials were from "a

recent one-woman protest against some visiting Christians” (214). In this sense, Alison and Joan are experiencing more than just sexual pleasure. Lesbian-feminist discourse surrounds them, both literally and metaphorically, empowering them to pursue both their sexual and political passions.

If anything, the sexually erotic moments between Alison and Joan can be described through a lesbian-feminist gaze. Alison notes how her own perspective begins to change once she began to embrace lesbian-feminist discourses of resistance: “In the harsh light of my dawning feminism, everything looked different” (81). Alison’s declaration of change highlights her conscious decision to welcome the erotic, both physically and figuratively. Once one consciously embraces the erotic, Lorde asserts, “Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives” (341). Alison’s progression towards the erotic provokes her to examine her political, artistic, and sexual existence, through a lesbian-feminist gaze.

In *Fun Home*, Bechdel, as an author, provides an erotic experience for the reader—one akin to the protagonist Alison’s experiences with LGBTQ+ literature. While Alison is reclaiming her history, and creating a discourse of resistance, Bechdel, as the author, is also simultaneously assisting the creation of a discourse of resistance through her embodiment of the erotic in writing a memoir. According to Iser, the work of literature—as opposed to the literary text—is comprised of two poles, the artistic and the aesthetic. The “artistic pole,” according to Iser, is the text itself—the words on the page; the “aesthetic pole” is the reader’s experience of the text, which “actualizes” or “realizes” the potentialities of the text. The literary work, to Iser, is the dynamic interaction of the reader with the text: “[T]he work is more than the text, for the text

only takes on life when it is realized” (76). By embodying the erotic in her graphic memoir, Bechdel creates the space needed for the reader to experience the erotic. In the memoir, literature facilitates Alison’s coming-out process and affords the point of resistance necessary to challenge heterosexist discourses. For Bechdel’s readers, *Fun Home* takes on that same life, inviting the reader to participate in the erotics of reading.

Fun Home also serves as a form of the erotic for readers searching for the same knowledge and comfort as the characters. Raymond Williams notes the cultural significance of counterhegemonic literature: “The most interesting and difficult part of any cultural analysis, in complex societies, is that which seeks to grasp the hegemonic in its active and formative but also its transformative process” (113). Just as Alison finds a place to “thwart” heterosexist discourses in her own life, Bechdel uses Alison’s experience to construct a work of literature that also “thwarts” hegemonic, heterosexist discourses (Foucault 101). Bechdel’s graphic memoir follows the experience of a young lesbian searching for the transformative processes in her own culture that Williams describes. Once Alison is able to “grasp” heteronormative, hegemonic discourses as they are acting upon her life, she is able to “thwart” those discourses and find her place in counterhegemonic lesbian feminist discourses of resistance (Williams 113; Foucault 101).

Alongside other lesbian-feminist literature, *Fun Home* serves as an embodiment of the erotic and a form of resistance literature. According to Lorde, when lesbians celebrate the sexual aspects of the erotic through activism or art, it is usually a mindful decision with political implications. In terms of embracing the erotic, Lorde states, “The celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors ... becomes a conscious decision” (340). By consciously creating a work of literature that embraces the erotic, Bechdel represents the lesbian-feminist activist community that facilitates Alison’s own coming-out in the memoir. Bechdel is consciously embracing

counterhegemonic discourses concerning gender and sexuality and facilitating a point of resistance for her characters, for herself as an author, and for the reader.

Alison is not only immersed in lesbian-feminist literature, she has also found a community in which same-sex desire is embraced and discussed, not hidden. In one panel, Alison is shown at a gay dance; she overhears a conversation between two women, and one says, “Feminism is the theory. Lesbianism in the practice” (80). Alison also never hints that her identification, as a butch lesbian, is shunned by this community. Concerning the lesbian-feminist movement that initially shunned butch-femme roles, Faderman states “that the community became increasingly moderate in its demeanor” (272). Faderman also notes, “As more women in the 1980s dared to join the visible lesbian community and to demand a place within the definition of the lesbian, the extent of the diversity became clearer. Paradoxically, the community’s shift toward moderation actually encouraged that diversity” (285). Alison comes out in a lesbian-feminist community that embraces her sexuality and butch gender presentation. Her experience is strikingly different from Bruce’s experience. At one point, Alison reflects on how different her life may have been had she been born in the 1950s. Alison historicizes herself as a butch lesbian, in contrast to the history Bruce lived; she questions, “Would I have had the guts to be one of those Eisenhower-Era Butches? Or would I have married and sought succor from my high school students?” (Bechdel 108). Referring to Alison and Bruce’s shared history, Bauer states, “History’s intimate presence is a key question in Alison’s attempt to understand her father’s life and its ramifications for her own existence” (270). To comprehend why her father sexually desired his high school students, Alison tries to imagine herself in a society that abuses gay males and lesbians, without a supportive community. Without either excusing or judging her father’s choices, Alison nevertheless creates empathy for him and insight into the social forces that shaped him.

Historicizing Alison's texts amid the discourses from the 1950s-1980s concerning stereotypical, heterosexist masculinity and femininity as well as same-sex desire and gender performance highlights how individuals were forced to cope with those culturally constructed codes. Bechdel highlights how discourses concerning femininity and motherhood mentally and physically exhausted Helen, essentially forcing her to stay in a loveless marriage. Bruce is shown to have internalized heterosexist discourses concerning same-sex desire and gender presentation, leaving him isolated and vulnerable to reckless impulses for coping with his internalized homophobia; ultimately, Bruce's experiences, and eventual death, register the devastating consequences of the systemic heterosexism perpetuated by dominant discourses of sex and gender. Alison's story, however, highlights the necessity for discourses that resist heterosexist norms and the importance of embracing the erotic as a means of literary, political, and sexual liberation. Her sexuality and gender presentation are validated by the lesbian-feminist authors whose work she "ravished" and by a community that embraces resisting discourses and works to make a place within a heterosexist society for women-loving women.

CONCLUSION

Audre Lorde's *Zami* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* share themes of resistance and lesbian eroticism as both Audre and Alison utilize the erotic as a source of personal and political power. Their protagonist-narrators, Audre and Alison, respectively, seek to resist the oppressive discourses that silenced their parents. Both protagonists embrace difference from a young age and both find power within intimate and sexual relationships with other women. By embracing the erotic, Audre and Alison come to an understanding of their identities as women who love women in a heterosexist society that seeks to suppress their love.

While Lorde and Bechdel share some similarities in terms of how they employ the power of the erotic, their texts differ in that Lorde's offers an intersectional analysis of her identities as a black, African-Caribbean, lesbian who invokes her Carriacouan feminocentric heritage, while Bechdel's offers the perspective of a white, middle-class, butch-identified lesbian who finds resistance through texts written by other white feminists. In her essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Lorde states,

Those of us who stand outside the circle of society's definition of acceptable women: those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor—who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. (Lorde 112 emphasis in text)

While Lorde's and Bechdel's texts have fundamental differences, both authors demonstrate how their protagonists navigate standing outside of society's definition of acceptable women—women who love other women. Audre finds common cause through intimate, erotic connections

with women, while Alison finds common cause with other communities of lesbian-feminist activists. For Lorde and Bechdel, the erotic serves to create power and solidarity among women by cultivating critical consciousness, which allows women to embrace their differences, perceive injustices around them, and take-action, as Freire urges, to transform and humanize the world.

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