In “Reclaiming Sodom,” a piece that originally appeared in the short-lived zine *Queer Fuckers Monthly*, published under the auspices of Queer Nation Utah between 1990 and 1992, Rocky O’Donovan opens by expressing his envy of lesbians “because of one simple but vital factor of their existence; they have Lesbos—actual space which they can dream of and re-create and hope toward.” He proposes for “all of us Queer Boys” the project that names his essay: “I want to reclaim Sodom… — and really, it is ours whether we want it or not,” a site of holocaust perpetrated by the “power-hungry, White, jealous, heterosexual, bourgeois, able-bodied, male god” whose actions are not confined to the biblical record. O’Donovan frames his call to reclaim Sodom in a number of ways, including a consideration of the possibility that the story in Genesis might not be condemning homosexual but discrimination against strangers: this sin of inhospitality, he notes, is repeated when queers are condemned by the Mormon church that is one object of O’Donovan’s polemic. In noting that the fire that destroyed Sodom was holocaustal, O’Donovan gestures to a link between discrimination against gays and anti-Semitism. Calling himself a “Sodomite-American,” he affiliates with ethnic minorities that also use such hyphenated identities to claim a place in a nation.

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1 I cite from the reprinting of Rocky O’Donovan in Goldberg (ed.), *Reclaiming Sodom*, 247–8 (New York: Routledge, 1994). The piece came to title the anthology after Routledge balked on the title I had been commissioned to do, *The Sodomy Reader*. 
that would exclude them and have done so, African-Americans most notably.

These alignments sit with and yet athwart O’Donovan’s envy of lesbians. Where does Lot’s wife figure? O’Donovan turns her into “a phallic pillar of salt, as a reminder of the power of the Almighty Penis.” Lot’s wife is joined thereby to gay men as the object of a male power both misogynistic and homophobic. Lesbians who “have” Lesbos appear to be unrelated to Lot’s wife, as if they existed on some other planet than Queer Boys do, or were immune to the Judaeo-Christian legacy that leaves them — leaves us — with only Sodom as our home, Heimat.

O’Donovan issues a moving call to accept our excoriation and to make a home there; gestures of affiliation are simply that, its envy of the home lesbians can claim a piece of wit even if it does point to a place and time — in antiquity — when home was not a holocaust for faggots. Nonetheless, a comparison of the texts that remain under the names of Homer and Sappho puts a damper on O’Donovan’s dream identification. All Lesbians are not lesbians, of course, and vice versa; lesbians don’t necessarily imagine themselves in diaspora from Lesbos.

The connection O’Donovan envies is refused quite pointedly by Michelle Cliff in “Caliban’s Daughter: The Tempest and the Teapot,” a 1991 essay related to the project that titles her first book, Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise (1980). Cliff owns herself as black despite being taught to pass as white in her native Jamaica. The essay in which she names herself Caliban’s daughter focuses on her sexuality, asking “what does it mean to love another woman — psychically and physically — in the Caribbean landscape?” Her answer: “One must first discard the word lesbian, then its location on an island off the coast of Turkey, in a Parisian restaurant, on an English country estate, in a postfeminist bar in Greenwich Village, in a music video” (48).

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Cliff removes “lesbian” from her vocabulary as she searches for terms of self-identification. This entails disidentification with the miseducation of a colonial upbringing that insisted she think of herself as British and not know her past — slavery, Africa, the precislant Caribbean. She seeks ways of writing “beyond a dissertation on intellectual game-playing in the Italian Renaissance” that she produced at the Warburg Institute “negotiated through six Western languages” (38). Her route requires the realization of her speechlessness about the identity she was taught not to know. Cliff opens paths in western texts to the voiceless and the unvoiced in them, leading her to identify with Victor, the wild boy; Bertha, the madwoman in the attic; Heathcliff, a former slave. Caribbean authors and artists like Aimé Césaire, Jean Rhys, Dionne Brand, and Ana Mendiata are invoked. Although she calls herself Caliban’s daughter, this is a way to her grandmother Sycorax (Caliban has no named father), and through her to a masculinity not male as well as to a primordial attachment to place. “Ruination” names this, the Jamaican English for land that has been left uncultivated, allowed to return to its decolonized state; it houses the ruin of the nation and the island upon which the native can stand, “the granddaughter of Sycorax, precislant female, landscape, I(s) land: I land” (40). This “I” is not singular — a self, a place — nor is it articulated in the language that would suppress it or that could name it only in denigration. “What does it mean when the Jamaican tomboy says, ‘I am Heathcliff?’ Or finds herself drawn to Bertha when she is told to identify with Jane?” (44).

One answer to the first question: it is to identify with Cathy and, at the same time, as the black male protagonist, therefore to refuse the western, colonial dichotomy of absolute dual gender differentiation. Cliff answers her second question when, thinking of Bertha, she recalls “the notion of the lesbian as monster, marauder; the man / woman in the closet” (48). Cliff’s refusal of “lesbian” is not so much the denial of such associations (they are reclaimed) as it is a rejection of “lesbian” as “a heavy-handed emblem of western decadence, the seduction of the tropics by Europe, the colonization of the dark woman by the white one” (48). Refusing Lesbos as home or origin allows her sexuality to be something other than a western, colonial
invention. Gesturing in the direction of a Caribbean island far more tolerant than others, Cliff momentarily entertains the possibility of substituting “Trinidadian” for “lesbian”: “Trinidadians would not approve, especially if the suggestion came from a Jamaican” (48). Such renaming would be another appropriation; one locale cannot be substituted for another without ignoring the various histories of each place, of each inhabitant, singular only insofar as their identities are multiple. Cliff describes herself as “of Afro-Caribbean — Indian (Arawak and Carib), African, European — experience and heritage, and western experience and education” (40). These divisions are encapsulated in the name of the heroine of her first two novels, Clare Savage, “savage” in ancestry (misnaming the inheritance Cliff would trace to Sycorax or the historical Maroon leader Nanny), while her given, proper name looks no further than her skin for a bleaching that needs to be replaced by what has been effaced, the rapes of body and mind that produce the colonial subject.

Cliff’s rejection of “lesbian” is anything but a repudiation of her sexuality. Without providing a name for it, she celebrates herself as a native of the islands “where to image oneself in another woman, to connect psychically and physically with another female, can be an act of empowerment, a step toward describing oneself in a new language (or, perhaps, an old language), being selfish (in my girlhood the thing I was never supposed to be)” (48).

*    *    *

Cliff’s first book has an epigraph from the initial appearance of Audre Lorde’s “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”; her next collection of prose and poetry, The Land of Look Behind (1985), is dedicated to Lorde, who, in turn, acknowledges Cliff in her “biomythography” Zami: A New Spelling of My Name.³ Lorde’s renaming derives from the vocabulary of Carriacou, the Caribbean island

where her mother was born. “Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers,” she defines it in the epilogue (255), “Madivine. Friendling. Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty” (14), she puts it early, extending its legendary reach. Even Lorde’s proper name is a respelling. It was in a library that the four-year-old first spoke; read to, she announced, “I want to read” (23); soon after, when she learned to make block letters she dropped the Y from audrey: “I did not like the tail of the Y hanging down.” Lorde’s mother wanted her to write audrey: “No deviation was allowed from her interpretations of correct” (24). Undeviating compliance was Lorde’s mother’s strategy for survival, a way not to be noticed by the white world, always assumed to be hostile. In her mother’s arsenal of strength there was also the reverse strategy, of not noticing, not minding, blotting out threats to black existence. Lorde comes to embody both of these conflicting maternal stances; she refuses her propriety but nonetheless derives her new name from her mother’s native language. So, too, taking Audre as her name, she does not depart from the alphabet that precedes her, though she pointedly refuses an appendage that would hang down from her textual embodiment. Likewise, scarcely a man figures in her biomythography of maternal inheritance.

“Zami” is not only a word used on Carriacou or Grenada for relations between women. It derives from French “les amies,” eliding the “s” into the “z”-sound made in elision; through it a deviant, back-to-front mode of being singular plural is enunciated. Other Caribbean terms for female same-sex bonding cross other boundaries; “sodomite” or “man royal” are Jamaican locutions that masculinize, although not used for the male–male relations of battymen. “Mati” covers both male–male and female–female alliances in some locales. In Zami, Lorde never actually calls herself by the name that titles the book. In it, she exists before the word, in the way in which she says her friends

4 For more details, see Goldberg, Tempest in the Caribbean, 53–79, as well as Makeda Silvera, “Man Royals and Sodomites: Some Thoughts on the Invisibility of Afro-Caribbean Lesbians,” in Goldberg (ed.), Reclaiming Sodom, 95–105.
“were the hippies of the gay-girl circuit, before the word was coined,” “trying to define ourselves as woman-identified women before we knew the word existed” (225). In these cases, “Black lesbian...defined...as doubly nothing” might broach a divide by way of double negation: “gay-girls were the only Black and white women who were talking to each other in this country in the 1950s, outside of the empty rhetoric of patriotism and political movements” (225). As much as for Cliff, ruin-nation is Lorde’s position (she marks it by never capitalizing the name of any country). Political women in the 1950s opposed McCarthyism, but ignored racism and deplored lesbianism as “bourgeois and reactionary” (149). “Gay-girls,” the locution for group self-naming most frequent in the book, is rejected by one of Lorde’s white lovers who prefers “lesbian” (162), while Lorde winces when another says of lesbians “we’re all niggers” (203). The few black gay-girls in the Greenwich Village bar scene “preferred the word ‘dyke’ and it seemed much more in charge of their lives to be dykes rather than gay-girls” (206).

In the opening pages of Zami that come even before the prologue that follows, Lorde seeks to name the source of her power, and lands on an “image of women flaming like torches” who “stand like dykes between me and the chaos” (3). “Dykes” is thus a chosen term, at last, at first, but precisely because it also is a pun, a bulwark outside oneself and against the chaos and yet the name of the group one joins to become a bulwark. “It is the image of women, kind and cruel, that lead me home” (3). “Kind and cruel” does not divide one group of women from another; so, too, Lorde’s narrative charts her literal move away from her mother’s house, built in defense against the world, to her return home: “Once home was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew out of my mother’s mouth” (256). “Zami” was not the only singular plural word uttered. Every divided, doubled word—every slap she administered—was also an education in a new mode of being, speaking, and writing.

Lorde comes to recognize that every place of belonging also is a place of threat. She can be with other gay-girls in the Bagatelle, although its doors are usually shut for much black clientele. The black lesbians in that scene would not recognize each other in Harlem, where race solidarity precludes sexual deviants.
Lorde’s chosen gang of friends, “The Branded,” include her on the unspoken agreement that her race never be mentioned. Lorde can comply: “I had no words for racism” (81), including lacking that word to describe her acceptance in that group of white outlaws. The young woman who prided herself on her knowledge is taken short when her first lover mentions Crispus Attucks, and Lorde realizes how her education (like Cliff’s) has been a miseducation. Zami charts a pedagogic course marked by Lorde’s affirmation of her sexuality, charting her affairs with women, black and white, fat and thin, bodily relations that take her beyond herself to the place of maternal enunciation:

At home, my mother said, “Remember to be sisters in the presence of strangers.” She meant white people…. At St. Catherine’s, they said, “Be sisters in the presence of strangers,” and they meant non-catholics. In high school, the girls said, “Be sisters in the presence of strangers;” and they meant men. My friends said, “Be sisters in the presence of strangers,” and they meant the squares.

But in high school, my real sisters were strangers; my teachers were racists; and my friends were that color I was never supposed to trust. (81)

Sisters (of various kinds) as strangers (of various kinds): Lorde named a collection of her writing that explores such non/belonging, *Sister Outsider.* In Zami “different” is the word for this:

*Being women together was not enough. We were different.*
*Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different.*
*Being Black together was not enough. We were different.*
*Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different.* (226)

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Such insights have led Lorde to be hailed as an early theorist of intersectionality, but these differences are situational and mobile; they do not intersect so much as they pass by the very notion of a self where they might be imagined to cross: “Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self.... We came to realize that our place was the very house of difference” (226). “To attempt a new language” (234), “a new spelling of my own name” (239), is the project.

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I first read Zami some time in the late 1980s. I was spending the semester in Durham, NC, and occasionally sitting in on a graduate seminar that Eve Sedgwick and Michael Moon were teaching. I was in class the day Eve taught Zami. I still have tucked into my copy of the book the two poems of Lorde’s Eve had xeroxed to open class discussion, “Coal” and “Ballad from Childhood,” as well as my page of notes from the class. I’ve never been a good note-taker; my page lists topics broached, but fails to convey what I recall, a luminous presentation (I urged Eve to write it up; she demurred). Glancing now at those notes again, I see that the pages above have been my attempt, as has been the case with much of my writing since I first met and read Eve in the early- to mid-80s, of trying to find words for hers. She asked of Zami whether identity is a function of where and to whom one speaks; if categories of race, gender, and sexuality don’t “interrupt” one another; how one becomes the “sujet supposé savoir” when knowledge is a scene of radical disjunctions and doubleness, culminating in the figure of the potent mother who kills (251), and how to survive that.

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