

# A Reunion Thirty-Five Years Later

On the revised translation of Audre Lorde's autobiography: *Zami. A new spelling of my name*

By Karen Nölle

Translated from the German by Steven Corcoran

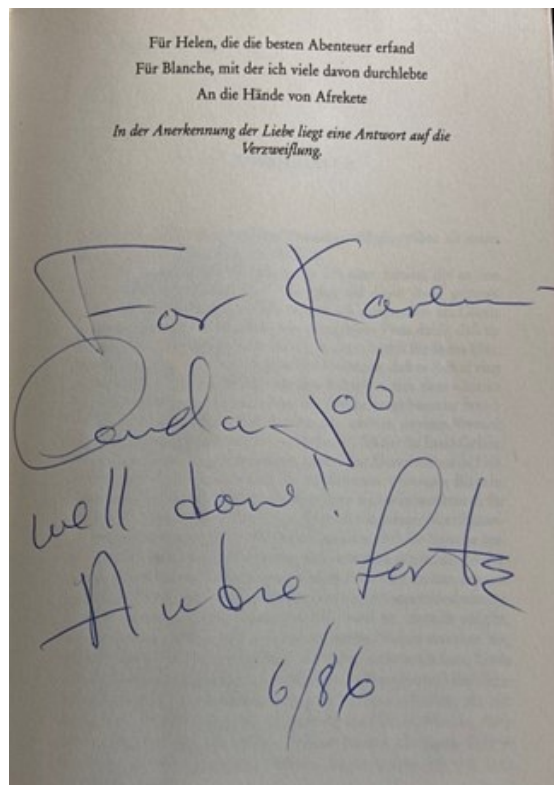
I received a request to revise my translation of *Zami* for a new edition in the summer of 2021. It was to be published by Hanser, the publisher which had just published Audre Lorde's book of essays *Sister Outsider* in the German translation by Eva Bonné and Marion Kraft. I hesitated briefly. Perhaps, I thought, a younger person ought to translate it from scratch, a translator more at home in recent discussions about gender- and race-sensitive translation than I was? Or did I want to take another crack at it?

My translation was already far behind me. *Zami*, which was my second translation, had been published in German in 1986. Prior to this, I had translated only half a book, *Telling Tales* by Sara Maitland, a volume of stories that turn patriarchal narratives on their head<sup>1</sup>, I had liked Sara Maitland not only for her way of rethinking narratives. I had taken it upon myself to translate her book because I wanted to move into the profession. I thought it advantageous that I knew the author personally and that my academic work bore on similar issues to hers. This way I hoped I could follow closely what she was portraying in her writing and thereby avoid the danger of flattening or conventionalising her texts through lack of knowledge and empathy. Indeed, this is not something I would want to do to any author. It was a stroke of luck to have this book as my first translation; and my co-translator and I were held to have aptly translated the new female gaze into German. This opened doors for me, one such being the translation of *Zami*. (When I leafed through it again a few years ago, however, all I saw were the awkward phrases in the German. I had avoided any glibness that fell short in terms of content, but had settled for longwindedness, or complication, instead, and was now embarrassed by it).

When Orlanda Verlag had offered me the translation in 1985, I gladly accepted. During my time in academia, I had given seminars and lectures on US History and Society, Women's Studies and Black Women Writers; I loved intersectional thinking, knew poems and essays by Audre Lorde and was curious to see how I would measure up to one of her prose works. The question of whether I, as a white woman, was the right person to translate the work did not arise. It was different when Orlanda wanted to commission Margarete Längsfeld to translate Lorde's poetry. She described this in an article in German titled 'Mit afrodeutscher Stimme' ['In an Afro-German Voice']<sup>2</sup>. After it was initially agreed that Margarete's translation would be proofread by an Afro-German, the author and the translator got to know and like each other, and the questions that Margarete put to the text and her reading of a poem convinced Audre Lorde of her ability: 'After that evening, there was no more talk of the texts and poems

I translated having to be proofread by an African-German', she writes. 'The author agreed with the choice of translator'. Much like today, in the eighties the drive to open up and the impulse to narrow went hand in hand. The themes were already the same.

I also met Audre at a reading, read a passage from my translation alongside her and received a kind, spirited dedication in my copy. *Zami* became an important book on the feminist scene and the new publication has been much awaited. What is new now, however, is that *Zami* is being published in hard cover and by a major trade publisher. The book was part of a certain scene in Germany and, like so many books by feminist authors, did not receive much attention from the broader public. How lasting the belated and suddenly awakened interest in the book is going to be, I regard with a certain scepticism.



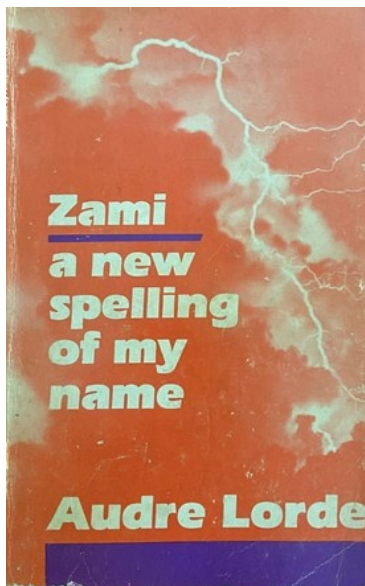
Now to the translation. If you want to learn more about the author and her reception in Germany, see Dagmar Schultz's film *Audre Lorde, The Berlin Years—1984 to 1992*,<sup>3</sup> the [TOLEDO TALKS contribution by Marion Kraft](#), as well as Eva Bonn  on her translation of *Sister Outsider* and the [recording of her event on this topic at the LCB](#).

I based my decision to revise my old translation on two things. I had been curious to examine line by line how I judged this very early translation of mine. Given the vehement debate in 2021 about who gets to translate whom, I also wanted to see if I harboured greater prejudice against the text than I had thought in 1985, when the thought of whether I had to be lesbian or black to translate *Zami* had never crossed my mind. An added attraction was that I had intervened slightly in the text once before in 2012. At that time, Unrast Verlag had published *Zami* and offered me only a minimal fee for taking over the translation, so I had only allowed myself the time to read it through thoroughly and to touch up phrases here and there. Now I could take another good look.

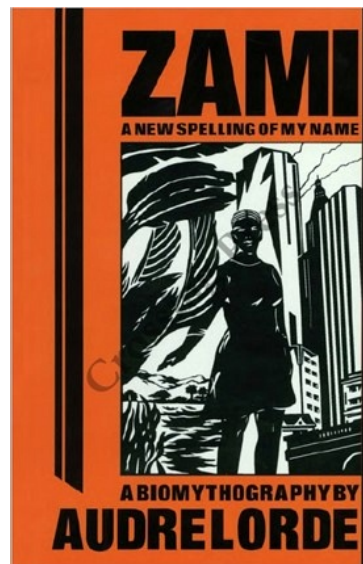
The translation was not an easy one for me. How useful a computer would have been

back then – the Internet! At that time, I was still writing with a typewriter; I covered some passages with up to five layers of correction tape and completely rewrote several pages many times. The work with my editor, Susanne Stern, was also intensive.

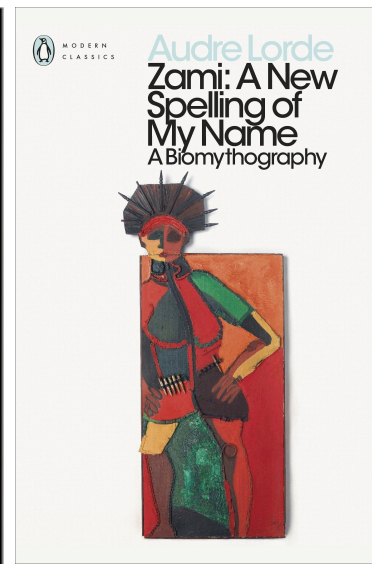
One of the things I struggled with was a sense of the intended impact of the whole, which guided my choices for tone, style pitch, narrative stance and more. In *Zami*, Lorde deliberately explodes established genres and invents her own, which she sometimes calls ‘auto-biomythography’. I wanted to do justice to this ‘novelty’, but what did it mean to do so? Most English-language editions add the term ‘biomythography’ as a subtitle. Only the earliest edition, from which I was translating at the time, simply says *Zami: A new spelling of my name* on the cover. The blurb on the back cover states: ‘In *Zami* ... Audre Lorde creates a new form, biomythography, combining elements of history, biography and myth’.



*Zami: A new spelling of my name*, Persephone Press, Watertown, Mass. 1982.



Crossing Press from 1983, with the addition of *A Biomythography*



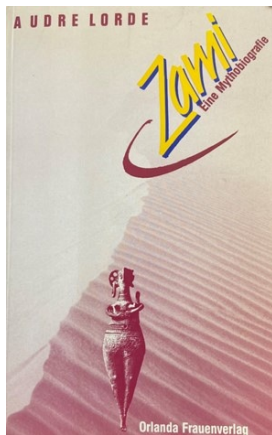
*Zami* in Penguin Modern Classics

The text is a mosaic of elements, freely combined: novelistic, lyrical and historical or socio-political passages in essayistic style merge into one another or are offset by blank lines. A variety of many different things are in italics—the prologue is in italics, the epilogue is normal, a passage with guiding questions before the prologue is in italics, the first answers to them are normal. Unbiased attention was required to unlock the associative structure and give the text both adequate density and sufficient air. During this revision, I was again preoccupied with the question of whether ‘myth’ simply refers to the passages that invoke the female traditions of the Grenadines, their sensuality and other forms of women’s community, or rather to the establishment of a new myth of femininity. Are the selection and content of the autobiographical episodes determined by the desire to create something of a mythic quality? And thus something more than a mere individual life story? This likelihood has impelled me to stick closely to the wording wherever there is a hint of doubt rather than follow my own sense of style or smooth out passages. For it seems clear to me that the text contains exactly

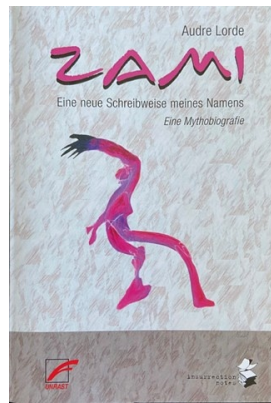
what Audre Lorde intended. *Zami* is more than just a book of memories about growing up and self-realisation under adverse conditions.

The German-language editions describe the work's genre differently. It is sometimes called a mythobiography, sometimes not. Why biomytho- has become mythobio- in German escapes me. And I don't know how much the naming of a genre on the cover influences reading, but I would guess that reading expectations are influenced by it as much as by the cover design.

In 1993, a paperback edition was published in the *Frau und Gesellschaft* series by S. Fischer Verlag, one with which I am not familiar, or have actually ever had a copy of, so I don't know whether the term biomytho- or mythobiography appears anywhere on it. Its title is *Zami: Ein Leben Unter Frauen* (*Zami: A life among women*).



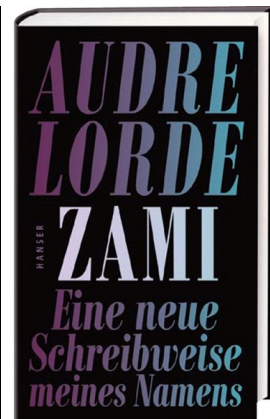
Zami. Eine Mythobiographie. Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1986.



Zami. Eine neue Schreibweise meines Namens. Eine Mythobiografie. Reihe Insurrection Notes. Unrast Verlag 2012.



S. Fischer Taschenbuch, without picture



Zami. Eine neue Schreibweise meines Namens. Carl Hanser Verlag 2022. Advertised as a memoir in the blurb and on the back cover.

As regards tone, that the Internet now exists has been helpful. In 1986, I had been unable to experience Lorde's distinctive performance style until after the translation. It was useful this time around to have her way of intoning her texts in my ear, to be able to hear the sometimes almost sung quality, the drawn-out vowels, the pauses made to heighten seriousness or humour, to hear her quiet, forceful voice, with its joy of performing. It is unlikely that anyone will recite the text in German in this way, but I have now arranged it for being spoken wherever possible.

In written form, Lorde uses italics (see above) and plays with the capitalisation of nouns and adjectives as a means of emphasis. The new German edition goes along with this. In consultation with the editors, *Black* is always capitalised, where *white* is lower-case - but not italicised as it is in the German translation of *Sister Outsider*, since Lorde doesn't do it herself in *Zami* either and the italicisations she uses serve other purposes. She makes clear her rejection of the US's claim to dominance by writing 'america', 'american', and 'the white house' in lowercase, words that are otherwise

capitalised and thus appear more prominent in English. This, too, was adopted for the new edition, although the usual rules of capitalization in German make it less noticeable and the effect is reduced since the adjective 'american' would be lowercase anyway. Wherever the word 'race' occurred, I replaced the old formulations with new ones. From time to time, my editors Emily Modick and Lena Stöneberg and I opted to dust off the word choice. Where *Lesbe* or *Lesben*, is used to translate lesbians, or gay women, the old translation had *lesbische Frauen* (lesbian women), which was considered the politically correct form in the 1980s. The changing times have seen limes, which were relatively rare in Germany and known to me at the time of the first translation as *Limonen*, become more common and widely referred to as *Limetten*; and Pampelmuse, the obvious word for pomelos in the 1980s, has been changed to grapefruit. Working together with the two editors, I sometimes felt like a bridge between their youthful perspective and Audre Lorde, who was born in 1934, and it was fun to negotiate how much or how little we should 're-do'.

Working on the text also afforded the pleasure of encountering the me of yesteryear. It was to be hoped that after 35 years I would have a greater vocabulary and more syntactical possibilities at my disposal. But I was not embarrassed by the beginner; I liked her. I found her to be very honest, very concerned about being faithful, and I liked the effort she made not only to grasp exactly what was to be translated, but also to keep control over her own formulations by always measuring them against her feel for language. This was most obvious to me in the many regionalisms. The first German edition of *Zami* was clearly translated by a woman from Hamburg, that is, into the language I was familiar with at the time. Hopefully there are no more traces of that now. But I recognise in it a quality that is still important to me today. What I put down must be filled by my voice.

The new edition of *Zami* was recently published by **Hanser Verlag**.

## Endnoten

- 1 The German translation is *Die Träume der Päpstin Johanna*, translated together with Heike Schwarzbauer, published in 1985 by Nikolai und Medea, a small feminist publishing house.
- 2 Margarete Längsfeld, 'Mit afrodeutscher Stimme', *Der Übersetzer* 1987, 23rd year, nos. 7/8, pp. 1-2. The article can be found in the journal's archive: [zsue.de/heft/der-uebersetzer-07-08-1987/](https://zsue.de/heft/der-uebersetzer-07-08-1987/) (*Der Übersetzer* is the earlier name of the journal *Übersetzen*.)
- 3 [www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com/](http://www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com/) and »Audre Lorde in Berlin eine Online Reise«. For biographical information, see also Joey Horsely's entry on fembio.

#Audre Lorde, #Neuübersetzung





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**Karen Nölle** has been translating from English for many years – almost exclusively fiction, and almost always by women authors, preferably such as Alice Munro, Janet Frame, Eudora Welty, Annie Dillard or Ursula K. Le Guin. She is also an author, a freelance editor, and an experienced leader of seminars on textual work. In the winter semester of 2022/23, she will be visiting professor for the poetics of translation at the Peter Szondi Institute of the FU Berlin.

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