

SAPPHIC CONCEPTIONS OF THE MUSE

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Abstract

From Dante to Gertrude Stein, some of the most prominent artists have found inspiration in another. This thesis explores what it is to be a muse and the role compulsory heterosexuality has in the conception of the passive muse in text as well as narrative cinema. Utilizing Audre Lorde's biomythography *Zami a New Spelling of my Name* and the film *Portrait of Lady on Fire*, I explore how these artists conceive of their muses. The difference between the passive muse conception and the various conceptions of these artists is necessary. Since the parameters of the passive muse conception do not account for women as content creators, much less lesbians as content creators, these artists cannot participate in seeing as the convection doe not encompass them. Moreover, in this text and film, the muses experience the antithetical process to that of the passive muse. Which is to say they go from being an object in many regards to a subject. These works rely heavily on overarching themes of solidarity and the artists' conception of their muses as extensions of themselves.

Etymology and History of the Muse

The concept of a woman as the source for inspiration in the creation of artistic work can be traced to the first century from Greece. The earliest depictions came from the region of Boeotia as noted by the geographer and traveler Pausanias in his *Description of Greece*. There, a tradition of three original muses persisted. Hesiod, a Greek poet from the 9th century and major source on mythology accounts for nine muses. Though the two differ in their conception of how many muses there are, they generally agree when it comes to the function and purpose of muses.

In the first century, the word muse was used to describe a divine woman who was a source of artistic inspiration. Around the Hellenistic era, names and attributes were ascribed to muses, though they differed slightly depending on whether Hesiod's or the Boeotian conceptions were used. The Roman scholar, Varro, posited that the three muses in the Boeotian conception consisted of one born of the movement of water, another by sound striking air, and the third embodied by the human voice, named Melete, Mneme, and Aoide respectively. However, the dominant conception of the Greek muses established a set of nine goddesses all of whom inspire in regards to creation in different fields such as poetry, comedy, even astronomy. Muses were said to be the daughters of Zeus and the personification of memory, Mnemosyne, and are the divine beings responsible for inspiring the production of creative work.

Creators in Ancient Greece were usually men. There were a handful of accomplished female creatives, but seeing as society was male-dominated, the contributions made and inspired explicitly by muses generally came from male

authorship. Despite differing understandings in the names, attributes, and numbers of muses, the conception was consistent: the muse as a divine female figure one invokes to inspire creativity.

It wasn't until around 1308, during the Renaissance era, that there was a distinct shift in understanding the muse. The famous Italian poet Dante found inspiration in a woman named Beatrice, who despite being married and only having met him about twice, was the subject of his lifelong love. In Dante's *Divine Comedy* he is guided by the poet Virgil through hell and purgatory. Once Dante arrives in Paradise, only Beatrice can escort him since Virgil is a pagan. Beatrice is included as a representation of divine beauty and grace. She is written as a literal angel who guides Dante through paradise. And though written as the embodiment of divinity, she was an actual woman. By no means am I claiming that Dante was the first individual to seek inspiration in the form of a corporeal woman, but he was writing during this period of a noteworthy shift in our understanding of the divinity of a muse, and this writing does serve as a promising exemplification of that shift. In writing about Beatrice in this manner, Dante demonstrates the shift in the understanding of what constitutes a muse. The muse has changed from a godly being that one invokes, into an unattainable ideal or a sexual object: a conception that aligns closer to that of our contemporary understanding of what it is to be a muse.

The Passive Muse and Compulsory Heterosexuality

When discussing the contemporary conventions of musehood, I have chosen to utilize the term "passive muse." Not only is the term reflective of a certain behavioral

passivity that is encouraged in women, but also the lack of creative agency within the role. Muses serve as inspiration but not as collaborators, nor with any promise of future mobility or ability to create themselves. As Mary Carruthers writes, “The myth of the muse is a myth which deals with the source and nature of imaginative energy. The muse traditionally is female and the poet male. He addresses her in terms of sexual rapture, desiring to be possessed in order to possess, to be ravished in order to be fruitful. The language of violent sexual encounter, of submission and dominance, describes a relationship both of possession and enslavement” (295). The passive muse inspires but does not produce herself, is an object of lust and attraction, and is a symbol of something that is beyond herself. All of these attributes are understood as the primary purpose of the passive muse, and as affirmed by Carruther’s understanding, is an exploitative position in many regards.

In her work, *The Self-representing Muse: Autobiographical Productions of Women in Artistic Partnerships*, Ashley Lawson elaborates on the passive muse’s ‘participation,’ writing that, “tradition has long cast the muse in a supporting role in the narrative of artistic creation. It is her job—and the muse is always a “she”—to simply be—be lovely, yet passive; be inspirational, yet silent. If the muse holds up her end of the bargain, her image is “captured” by the male artist, transmuted into art, and molded to fit his objectives. According to this model, the woman who plays the muse inspires but does not collaborate in the creation of the final product” (Lawson 7). The limitations of the passive muse convention do not account for women as creative agents much less lesbians as creative agents, and this is largely attributed to compulsory heterosexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality is the theory that heterosexuality is assumed and enforced by

a patriarchal and heteronormative society. Understanding compulsory heterosexuality requires a distinction be made between it and heteronormativity, the latter assumes heterosexuality while the former assumes as well as it enforces. In her work *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, which coined the term, Adrienne Rich outlines the many historical instances of this enforcement as the means by which male power is manifested and maintained: “the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives. The chastity belt; child marriage; erasure of lesbian existence (except as exotic and perverse) in art, literature, film; idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage-these are some fairly obvious forms of compulsion, the first two exemplifying physical force, the second two control of consciousness” (Rich 639). There are, both throughout history and contemporarily, rewards for heterosexuality and punishments for other sexuality in numerous institutions: educational, religious, legal, social, and so on. Gender, gender roles, and gender expression are subject to similar repercussions. The passive muse inspires only male writers and in doing so participates in compulsory heterosexuality. To understand the passive muse it is important so as to understand compulsory heterosexuality, and in many ways, understanding compulsory heterosexuality is important to fully understand the convention of the passive muse. It’s circular.

In undertaking an exploration of compulsory heterosexuality in conjunction with an analysis of Audre Lorde’s *Zami a New Spelling of my Name*, it is essential to discuss race. In María Lugones’s *Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender Systems*, she writes, “We cannot understand this gender system without understanding what Anibal

Quijano calls ‘the coloniality of power.’ The reason to historicize gender formation is that without this history, we keep on centering our analysis on the patriarchy; that is, on a binary, hierarchical, oppressive gender formation that rests on male supremacy without any clear understanding of the mechanisms by which heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classification are impossible to understand apart from each other” (Lugones 187). Lugones argues that compulsory heterosexuality and racial classification don’t merely intersect but that they are mutually constitutive. Racial classification relies on a gender binary and heterosexuality, the gender binary relies on heterosexuality, heterosexuality relies on the gender binary, and heterosexuality relies on racial classification. Any sort of deviation from social norms brings about accusations of savagery, pathology, and deviance, as established regarding lesbianism and compulsory heterosexuality. However, black women experience two types of systematic oppression, racism, and compulsory heterosexuality, that have a similar origin and allow a society where not only homophobia but also racism and colorism can flourish.

Compulsory Heterosexuality and Muses in *Zami a New Spelling of my Name*

Those who have sexual preferences that are not heterosexual potentially spend more time investigating and interrogating thoughts and feelings surrounding their sexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality creates the need for work in order to understand oneself and one’s sexuality should one have such preferences; such work that is demonstrated in Audre Lorde’s *Zami a New Spelling of my Name*. Audre is the central figure in her story, and when discussing her role as a character, I refer to her as such.

When discussing her as an author, I refer to her by her last name, Lorde. In the process of coming of age, she struggles to accept compulsory heterosexuality until ultimately claiming lesbian identity and a female muse.

In claiming a lesbian identity, Audre claims a muse who is not passive, a different kind of muse. To be a lesbian creating a work of art inspired by another woman completely shifts the relationship dynamic between the author and the inspiration, but also the author and the work. Carruthers writes, “In the myth of the Lesbian poets, the muse remains female. This completely changes the relationship of the poet to her poetry. Because the muse is female, she is not Other but familiar, maternal and sororal, a well-known face in the poet's This content downloaded from the immediate community. Their relationship is not one of possession but of communal bonding. This myth seeks to re-create and remember wholeness” (Carruthers 295-296). In having a relationship based on solidarity, reciprocation, and community, it would be mutually exclusive to be both a lesbian artist and still have a passive muse.

Audre comes of age immersed in a web of people who shape her: friends, lovers, family-who affect who she becomes. Before critically engaging with her own desires and identity, she was immersed in the social script reflective of compulsory heterosexuality. During the summer after moving out of her parent's home, Audre engages in a drab relationship with a young man named Peter and writes, “Peter and I saw each other a lot, and slept together because it was expected. Sex seemed pretty dismal and frightening and a little demeaning, but Peter said I’d get used to it, and Jean said I’d get used to it, and I wondered why it wasn’t possible to just love each other and be warm and close and let the grunting go” (104-105). It’s evident seeing as Audre regards this relationship as the

product of expectations that it, and by extension, heterosexual coupling, is not reflective of her desires or self. However, when she makes love with a woman for the first time, there is a complete shift in how that experience resonates with Audre. "Loving Ginger that night was like coming home to a joy I was meant for, and I only wondered, silently, how I had not always known it would be so...The sweetness of her body meeting and filling my mouth, my hands, wherever I touched, felt right and completing, 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 Lorde). This quotation, riddled with tactile descriptions of elation and pleasure, is a stark contrast to the detached, matter-of-fact style in which Lorde discloses her affairs with Peter. Moreover, Lorde writes regarding said sex with Ginger, "So this was what I was afraid of not doing properly. How ridiculous and far away those fears seemed now, as if loving was some task outside of myself, rather than simply reaching out and letting my own desire guide me" (140). There is a certain social script that people are more or less expected to follow, which was mentioned discussing compulsory heterosexuality. When Audre recounts her sexual exploits with Ginger compared to Peter, she realizes that her first experiences with sex with men were because it was expected. With Ginger, having sex was more rooted in pleasure and satisfaction of the self as opposed to satisfaction of expectations. Audre initially engages with the social script, which is unsurprising in that it being a social script indicates that these are behavioral patterns that are socially enforced over long periods of time: "the normal." And she has to engage with what is normal before

recognizing that it doesn't work for her and shifting attitudes and practices towards what does later.¹

Throughout her relationship with Ginger, Audre deviates from the social script that demands heterosexuality. However, she does not deviate from the social script that says whiteness is more desirable than blackness. Later in the story, she realizes that in the same sense that there was something lacking with Peter (because she was with him out of convention), there is something lacking in her relationship with with Ginger and other white women, because she is with them out of another convention: the convention that lesbians are white and/or that to be white is to be desirable. She realizes this through seeing, recognizing, and having relationships with Black women, embodied most of all through Afrekete. Afrekete is the African-derived name of a Black mother and/or goddess that Audre claims as her muse at the culmination of the novel. She writes, “Ma-Liz, DeLois, Louise Briscoe, Aunt Anni, Linda, and Genevive; MawuLisa, thunder, sky, sun, the great mother of us all; and Afrekete, her youngest daughter, the mischievous linguist, trickster, best-beloved, whom we must all become” (Lorde 255). Her use of pullarality in this phrase and the way in which she describes Afrekete as some form of extension of herself interestingly gives the sense of not only a wholistic understanding of herself, but also claims Afrekete as a part of that self. In that sense, she is her own muse. Afrekete is an important figure in that by claiming her, Audre is celebrating the aspects of herself (her queerness, her blackness) that she felt she could not celebrate prior because

¹ Because compulsory heterosexuality has had its hand in the creation of the conventions of the passive muse, these conventions bear similarities to that social script. In the sense that engaging with these conventions is more or less an expectation, however, seeing as the social script does not account for lesbian content creation (And in the broader sense, lesbian existence) it is integral that lesbian artists veer away from this script as it does not adequately account for their existence much less their experience.

of how rigid these conventions are.

This conception is important because it differs so drastically from the conception of the passive muse. Audre's muse is not unfamiliar nor does she lack nuance; Audre's muse is a part of herself. Therefore, there are elements of solidarity, familiarity and oneness in this conception that are the inverse of the understanding of the muse as some foreign being that can never be fully understood.

Interlude: Muses and the Biographic Genre

Audre Lorde's novel *Zami a New Spelling of my Name* is a biomythography and as such it is a blend of art, fact, narrative, poetry, philosophy, and more. Lorde doesn't merely seek to recount narrative or create art; she does both and more. *Zami a New Spelling of my Name* takes us through Audre's girlhood, maturation, and self-actualization as well as providing subtle insight into her conception of musehood. Lorde's conception of the muse in her work is reminiscent of a variety of others, namely: Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of my Mother*, and Jenn Shapland's *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers*. This thesis is not nearly long enough to get into extensive detail on these works, but they are an excellent means to discuss the relationship between muses and the lesbian creation of art particularly in the biographic genre. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* reads like a love letter to the Parisian art scene in the early 20th century. The novel recounts the bohemian lifestyle of Toklas, Stein, and the variety of artists they've housed. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is written from the perspective of Alice B Toklas by

Gertrude Stein. *Autobiography of my Mother* follows the life of Xuela Claudette Richardson who struggles in her relationships and surroundings without a mother and is written from Xuela's perspective by Kincaid. *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* explores the life of Carson McCullers and in the process examines questions of identity, queerness, and memory.

All of these works utilize an autobiographical format while subverting expectations of the genre by utilizing a muse. Conventionally, an autobiography follows the story of the author who wrote it, with the author being the protagonist of the story meaning there is normally no muse. Many of these works do that, but they also subvert the genre by having another figure that is physically distinct from them, but equally as vital to the work: the muse.

Zami, a New Spelling of My Name plays with the genre by using myth, biography and autobiography, not merely to recount the past, state fact, or create art, but to do all of that and more. Lorde is the author of the book and outside the realm of the text, Afrekete is her muse, but she is also a character (Audre) much like her muse is. Within the story she occupies a similar position to Afrekete by being a character, but also by literally claiming her as an extension of herself. She has a muse, and in many ways it is distinct from her, but while that remains the case, she is also a part of her at the same time. Stein assuming Toklas's voice, Kincaid assuming her mother's², and Shapland assuming McCullers's voice are all reminiscent of Lorde's connection to Afrekete. In the same sense that Lorde claims Afrekete as a part of her, these authors claim the voices of their muse as their own, and much like Lorde it's to similar effect: the examination of their own life and identity. They see themselves in their counterparts. By no means are they

² Kincaid's characters are not explicitly lesbian/queer though they are non-heterosexual

utilizing their muses as mere means to have that examination, but rather, there is an element of recognition that comes with these dynamics.

The other work this thesis explores in great detail, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* also utilizes a muse, and in doing so, subverts the convention of the passive muse. Much like in Lorde's work, the position of muse differs vastly from the passivity expected of the muse. In the case of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, generic conventions are played with in a visual sense in terms of reciprocation of looking. Looking plays a huge role in the film by virtue of it being a film and therefore being based on a series of interrelated looks. The act of looking is central to the analysis of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* so as to analyze the relationship between looking and objectifying as it relates to the muse.

Narrative Cinema, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and the Lesbian Muse

In 2019 the film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* was released and very quickly became a must-see in the world of queer cinema. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is a period drama set in Brittany, France. The work is an excellent means of investigating audience and gaze as well the ways that they relate to compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian musehood.

Actress Adele Haenel, who plays the protagonist Heloise, said this on a press tour: "I think the concept of the muse is an invention, in a way, to make women passive in art history. It's a way to say 'oh, men were active and women were just there glowing in the room.' It's bullshit. This is why I say the whole concept of the muse, which has been destroyed and renewed by the movie, makes me nervous because it embodies the male domination. Now, I would say it's because you don't have the same role in an artistic project; it's that you cannot collaborate." The passive muse conception is one that does

stop merely apply to literature but is also present in a variety of other artistic mediums, including film.

Laura Mulvey, in her work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, takes a psychoanalytical approach to cinema, noting how its many conventions are built on patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality. Her work provides the theoretical tools to investigate these concepts in the last work. She writes utilizing, “psychoanalysis to discover where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have molded him. It takes as starting point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle” (14).

Mulvey argues that in film the audience is functionally an extension of the male protagonist. That, “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so they can be said connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 19). In the same way that the work surrounding the production of art is split into active male/passive female, the act of looking at the art once it is produced is similarly split. Men are the ones who do the gazing seeing as the spectator is meant to identify with the male protagonist. Not only is it the role of the passive muse to remain detached from the creative process, but it is her role to be gazed upon once it is complete

Portrait of a Lady on Fire

Portrait of a Lady on Fire follows the relationship between Marianne and Heloise. Marianne is an artist who has been commissioned to work on Heloise's portrait. Heloise has recently left the convent since her engaged sister committed suicide, leaving Heloise her fate to be wed. Portraits are a tradition in the family for married women, or at the very least, of great importance to Heloise's mother. The portrait is to be sent to Heloise's future husband as a part of contracting the marriage, which is in part, why Heloise is resistant to being painted. Portraits are a tradition in the family, which is why when Marianne meets with Heloise's mother, the one who has commissioned the portrait, the mother recounts hers. "The portrait arrived before I did. When I first entered this room, I found myself facing my image hanging on the wall. She was waiting for me." It's clear that there is some tension between Heloise and her mother though it is not made apparent. But the established pattern of resistance that Heloise has demonstrated regarding the portrait and the heightened concern her mother shows given her sister's recent death shows that though Heloise does not want this for her future and her mother is likely aware, she must go through with it anyway. Much like the marriage itself, Heloise is incredibly resistant to being painted. The last painter commissioned had given up in frustration at her unwillingness to pose, and there had been others prior. Therefore, Marianne attempts to memorize various features of Heloise's so as to paint her portrait from memory, all the while, Heloise is under the impression she is merely a companion for walks.

Heloise does not realize that Marianne is a painter until the first draft of the portrait is finished. Upon first looking at it, she asks, "Is that me? Is that how you see

me?” To which Marianne replies, “It’s not only me...there are rules, conventions, ideas.” Heloise then laments that “the fact that it isn’t close to [her] she understands, but [she] finds it sad that it isn’t close to [Marianne].” Heloise critiques Marianne’s painting for a lack of closeness; there is no life in the painting. Marianne, partly given that this painting was done utilizing memory alone, composed the painting in accordance with what she had been taught within the discipline. The trouble with this is that operating within conventions can be particularly restrictive, and there is no amount of schooling or training in art that can teach an artist how to convey that special something about a subject that makes them fascinating enough, inspiring enough to capture. That is not something determined by brush strokes. This concept is affirmed throughout the film. As Marianne falls in love with Heloise, her technique progresses and she relies less on artistic convention and instead relies on her grasp of Heloise’s persona. Marianne destroys the first draft of the painting claiming she was displeased with it. With all of the cards on the table, Heloise agrees to pose for Marianne.

All the while, Heloise is resistant to being made into an object. The destruction of the first draft is a reflection of that resistance to objectification. Over the course of the film, Heloise goes from being an object to a subject- which is a complete reversal of the passive muse who goes from a subject to an object. She also displays a certain agency when it comes to her portrayal that is also not done within the passive muse dynamic, and all the while becomes lovers with Marianne. During one of their sessions, Marianne literally steps into Heloise’s perspective of things. Marianne’s intimate knowledge of Heloise is equitably reciprocated. When they gaze at each other, they don’t just look but see each other. Marianne studies not only Heloise’s looks and gestures, but her life, and

the meaning behind those looks and gestures. Heloise gazes back at her artist and sees her life as well. She sees agency in Marianne, who conversely sees anger and fire in Heloise.

Marianne even becomes the subject of a work of art herself, assuming the same position Heloise is put in, during the self-portrait scene. The scene begins with her sketching a smaller, palm-sized, portrait of Heloise, not for display but for herself. Heloise points out that over time, Marianne will think of her, the girl in the portrait, as opposed to the real her, and that she does not have anything to remember Marianne by. So, Marianne agrees to sketch herself in Marianne's book on page 28. The scene is incredibly intimate. The two women are naked beneath sheets and the complex series of looks present: their eyes on each other, Marianne's at herself in the mirror draped over Heloise's pelvis, their eyes on these sketches, are more wholesome than they are diminishing. There is a completeness present, much like the other works have demonstrated, when these two assume the position of the other and when the muse serves as more than mere inspiration.

Years later, at a gallery Marianne attends, she sees a portrait of Heloise and her daughter. Heloise's daughter being present is an indication that Heloise has succumbed to her fate of getting married with little power of say in the matter; however, also present in the painting in the book containing Marianne's self-portrait, flagged at page 28. Despite time and separation, Heloise, as indicated by the inclusion of the page, is still in love with Marianne, or in the very least, forever changed by knowing her. Even with ultimately no power in her future, there was an opportunity with Marianne for her to experience not only agency and influence, and therefore, a sense of power. But also respect and reciprocation. The very parameters of the active artist/ passive muse conception are

inherently unequal in terms of contribution and role. To engage in a relationship like theirs that is steeped in reciprocity is vastly different. The dynamic between Heloise and Marianne is similar to the ones present in the previous works because they recreate wholeness and show a resistance to objectification. These relationships differ fundamentally from the passive muse model. These women *know* each other, beyond physically. They have an incredibly intimate understanding of one another, and on all levels, they are equals.

Conclusion

The muses in these stories are represented in such ways that they immensely differ from the passive muse conception. In the case of *Zami, a New Spelling of my Name*, and other works mentioned in the interlude, the muse functions as an extension of the artist. This differs from the conception because by claiming one's muse as part of themselves, both the artist and muse become equals which is contrary to the hierarchical and exploitative nature of the passive muse conception. In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the muse is granted a certain subjectivity that is not encompassed in the passive conception that demands the muse to be an object for display.

It is essential that these contrary representations of the muse, passive and active, are contrary. Since the parameters of the passive muse conception do not account for women as content creators, much less lesbians as content creators, these artists cannot participate in seeing as the conception does not encompass them. Rather, these women create linguistic and rhetorical opportunities to celebrate their muses as lovers, agents, and equals. As a woman who is an avid reader and writer, this thesis has resonated with

me in a variety of ways. I see the passive muse in the female characters I read on and watch in film, and understand the social forces responsible for not only its origin but its continuity. I've wondered on many occasions what it is about women that make us such compelling subjects to make into works of art, and if being made into a work of art is really a celebration of what makes us compelling at all. Over the course of writing this thesis and seeing myself in these characters, I've come to realize the role that gender plays not only in the various happenings in our lives but in how we view artistic creation. Tons of artists, many of whom are lesbians, recognize and experience the exploitative nature of being a muse, and seek to create work that utilizes a muse without that exploitation. To be a muse is not to be inherently passive. These artists use these linguistic and visual modes to enforce that idea, and in the process of doing so don't make another woman passive. It has brought me hope regarding the treatment of women in the artistic world.

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