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Guest/Topic: K Toyin Agbebiyi on *Zami* by Audre Lorde
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Page May:
You're listening to the Lit Review podcast, I'm one of your hosts, Page May, and today we're heading to Atlanta to Zoom-meet K Toyin Agbebiyi.

Page May: I first heard of K actually because of my former beloved, Twitter. Um, we broke up. It's a thing. But, K was one of the co-founders—

Monica Trinidad:
We miss you on there.

Page May:
[laughs] I don't miss it. But it's okay, it's okay. I miss y'all.

Page May:
K was one of the co-founders of this excellent, amazing abolitionist resource called "8 to Abolition" that went viral back in 2020. If you haven't seen it, I highly recommend checking that out.

Page May:
But K has done so many other amazing things. So K Toyin is a Black lesbian and disabled organizer, a writer, a macro social worker from Georgia. And the majority of K's work revolves around political education, writing, and organizing strategy in regards to ending the PIC—the Prison-Industrial Complex.

Page May:

And before being in Atlanta and organizing in Atlanta, they were organizing in NYC, and were a part of a bunch of things that we have talked about with other guests on this podcast, so the No New Jails Campaign, Inside Outside collective, and Survived and Punished New York. So K is good people. Dope person. Amazing.

Page May:
And also! This is a really exciting episode because this is somehow, for some reason, that I don't know, but it happened—this is the first Audre Lorde book that we've ever had on our podcast. And I am shocked because *[sigh]* of any book that had a single most permanent impact on me, it wasn't specifically this Audre Lorde book, to be fair, but the collection of her writings inspired my first tattoo. And, I just yeah - Shoutout to the Lorde. Um hopefully you get that reference.

Monica Trinidad:
Ha! I love that.

But um, what we're talking about today is K's love and learnings from Audre's biomythography. Which is *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. And if you don't know what a biomythography is, well, you're in luck. And it's different from a biomythology, I learned 5 minutes ago. Before I share my highlights I want to just welcome, introduce my co-host, Monica, how you doing?

Monica Trinidad:

Ay, I'm good, it's a very rainy and gloomy day today which is perfect for this conversation.

Page May:

Yes, excellent transition. Cause y'all get ready, get set—I think we say this everytime. Get yourself some hot tea, some hot cocoa, something comforting and warm, because this episode was, it was just hard. It hits on grief, and it hits on loss, and it hits on mistakes and failure, and regret, and all of those hard, messy things that happen to us inevitably, but we don't always talk about. And I know for me it really stirred up a lot of memories that I have been processing. And this conversation was a big part of it, and I think it sped it up a little bit cause it was digging deep into that vault.

Page May:

And if you aren't familiar with Audre Lorde, I think you'll learn a lot about her life from this. And something that I really appreciated that Toyin shared in this episode, is that this book isn't about Audre the Icon, who is perfect, right? Who is the baddest, best revolutionary—it's not that at all. And that part of what you see in this story is her messiness, and she had anger, and a temper. And it asks questions and maybe gives some insight into how do we grow? What are our responsibilities to learn from these things that happen to us, or that we do? And acknowledging that we all fuck up, right? And Audre included in that. I really appreciate books that are able to tell history without insisting on a perfect hero. And so I think that's a really cool part of this conversation. What did you think, Monica?

Monica Trinidad:

Yes, facing and embracing the messiness. We just talked about relationships y'all, and it was awkward, tender, and real. And I'm just gonna repeat what you said real quick for folks because I think it's a key question: What are our responsibilities to learn from these things that happen to us, or that we do? Because the reality I'm grappling with is that sometimes what we learn from relationships that end, and our growth that comes from those experiences, can also mean someone else's trauma, and we have to be real about that. This is the first time that we really got into grief and the teachings of relationships in this podcast which is wild to me in hindsight because those are two very huge parts of organizing. We can't organize without forming relationships and we don't organize without experiencing loss.

Monica Trinidad:

And I get that we have to compartmentalize sometimes or else it can all just be super devastating—too devastating! Because there's the grief of relationships that end and how we continue navigating community and moving the work forward, and then there's the grief that is constant in organizing which is the loss of life that comes from oppressive institutions like policing and prisons and war. So I just really appreciated that we got to reckon with some of those things in this episode with K through Audre's book and then we emphasized the role of grief in abolitionist organizing. We actually had K read their closing passage, but then the conversation just kept rolling and so we just let it happen.

Monica Trinidad:

Lastly, I want to lift up what you and K both said about seeing Audre Lorde beyond the Christmas card character and beyond her as just a poet with really good one-liners because the reality is she, like all of us, was a really complex human being. And she was also a Black disabled lesbian radical Communist, y'all. All of those pieces of her identity get left behind so often and I'm glad we were able to uplift that in this conversation. There's also this really tender part in the conversation at the end where we talked about what we would tell our younger selves about organizing and it was just really touching.

Page May:

Yeah! Yeah. I think that's the best intro we can make. You know, it's a lot, and it's necessary, and we're really grateful that we got to have this conversation and to share it all, so on that note, let's just get into it. Enjoy.

[INTRO STARTS]

[Sound of book pages turning, soft instrumental music]

Monica: You're listening to the Lit Review Podcast.

Page: We're your hosts, Page May and Monica Trinidad.

[Musical hip hop beat playing in background from "Chicago" by David Ellis]

Mariame Kaba voiceover: *"I think it's essential for people to learn together in order to be able to understand what we're up against."*

Protesters Chanting: *"CPD, shut it down! New Jim Crow, shut it down!" [chanting] "I said No Cop Academy, 95 mil for community!"*

Page voiceover: *"We must disrupt, we must disobey, we must agitate, we must escalate, we must break, we must create, we must abolish, we must transform -"*

Young person voiceover: *"I remember, she was shot by my house -"*

Mariame voiceover: *"In sharing our ideas, we're stronger."*

[Music Lyrics] "*Welcome to Chicago, this is home for most. This is the home of the wealthy, making cameos. This is the house of the heartless, the home of the cold. Man, my dog gets more acknowledgement than homeless folks. This is a house, a generation filled in Audy homes..." [Music Fades]*

[INTRO ENDS]

Monica Trinidad:
So today we're talking about Zami: A New Spelling of My Name, by the late poet, Audre Lorde, written in 1982. The book is written as a biomythography, meaning sort of a melding of biography, mythology and history. But yeah. K, we're so happy to finally have you on the show talking about this book with us.

K Agbebiyi:
Yeah. Thanks for having me.

Page May:

I am so thrilled. I don't know, K, I don't think we've ever met. Is that right?

K Agbebiyi:

Yeah. I don't think we have either.

Page May:

Yeah. I think I first became aware of you... did you do 8 to Abolition? Is that you?

K Agbebiyi:

Yes.

Page May:

Okay. That's what I thought. Okay. Excellent. Yes. Okay. So can you tell us more? Who are you, what do you do and why do you do what you do?

K Agbebiyi:

Okay, so I'm K or Toyin. I'm 27. I recently relocated to Atlanta, Georgia. I'm an organizer, writer and a macro social worker for my day job. And, like you mentioned, I co-created 8 to Abolition. And when I was in New York, I was active in Survived and Punished New York chapter and also the No New Jails campaign.

K Agbebiyi:

And right now I'm working on a book for the University of California Press and organizing with my friends on a campaign to free my friend Ashley Diamond. And the majority of my work revolves around abolition, survivor defense campaigns, and I guess ending the prison industrial complex. And, outside of that, I spend a lot of time with my dog.

Monica Trinidad:

So tell us a little bit about what led you to read this book. Do you remember where you were when you first read it? Why did you choose this to talk about today?

K Agbebiyi:

Yeah. I remember when I first purchased this book. It was at the Center For Fiction in Brooklyn, New York. And I was looking for another Audre Lorde book, actually, and they didn't have it, so the worker there encouraged me to pick up this book and, because it said it was a biomythography and I didn't know what that meant, I was always hesitant to read the book.

K Agbebiyi:

So I finally picked it up and then I went to this coffee shop called Green Grape Cafe, which is, sadly, closed, and I just read a little bit of it and I was hooked. So I guess I picked it up because I was trying to read more Audre Lorde. I feel like I started reading her really late and I felt behind. But then, during this period, I think it was 2019, I read a lot of her work back to back-to-back. That's kind of what inspired me to pick it up.

Page May:

Wonderful. Yeah. Audre Lorde was one of those. I don't know where my life will would be if someone hadn't handed me *Sister Outsider* at a very specific time in my life. And I did read *Zami*. I don't remember it very well. And I remember the genre as being really interesting. And so I guess, can we start with that? What is a biomythography?

Page May:

I teach reading and writing to middle school students and genre is this obnoxious thing that we put binaries on everything. And I think even in her genre, and in the way that Audre Lorde is shaping her narrative, it seems like she's really pushing the boundaries and breaking binaries. So can you tell us more about what the book is about and how she shapes it, and what this biomythography genre is?

K Agbebiyi:

Yeah. So from what I'm understanding, a biomythography is like a mix of autobiography with also some fictional elements. But when I heard that, I went into the book thinking that there would be maybe like magical realism or stuff like that. But I wouldn't say that's the case. It all reads as a regular autobiography, to the point where I'm like, I actually don't know what parts of the book are fictional, which, it was frustrating for me at first, but now it's kind of exciting because it gives me a lot of stuff that I can research to compare to what she writes in the book.

K Agbebiyi:

But basically the book is the story of her life. It starts off with her relationship with her mother, which is a really big theme in the book and is also a really big theme in my life, which is part of the reason that I chose this book for the podcast. But it goes into her, I guess I want to say maybe her early 20s, but don't quote me on that.

K Agbebiyi:

But it just talks about the first couple of jobs that she had, how she came to work at a library. And also what is really impactful for me about the book is just it talks about her sexuality and her relationship to that and what it meant to be a black lesbian at that time.

K Agbebiyi:

And when I read this book, it was just like the perfect timing for me, because, I don't know, it was just right on time. It really helped me realize more about my gender and my sexuality. And also just, it was affirming to know that the things that I was struggling with weren't new. Other people had gone through them before, so that was really helpful.

K Agbebiyi:

I identify as first generation because my dad's a Nigerian immigrant. And I guess, before this book, I didn't really connect with Audre about feeling like first-gen. I don't know why I'm acting like I know her, I'm connecting with her. But the book allowed me to relate to her in that way, too, which is really helpful.

K Agbebiyi:

And then a couple years later, I started collecting first edition copies of books, especially Black feminist texts. And that's been really grounding and exciting for me. And so I was able to collect a first edition version of Zami, and having that in my home makes me feel really confident, just because I'm able to have a piece of Black lesbian history.

K Agbebiyi:

And so that's part of the reason why I wanted to talk about the book today because I'm like, "Oh, I have this cool collector's item." But also I think that if someone wanted to sum me up in a book, I would point them to this book. So yeah, it's my favorite. And not just because I'm like, "Oh, this is the most entertaining." But it's one of the first times that I've opened a book and been like, "I'm not alone. The thoughts that I'm having, they make sense to other people, even if those people are long gone." So I think that's why I wanted to talk about it today.

Page May:

I'm curious. Can you tell us more about what, was her life like? And I understand that this is one of those books where you don't actually know what's fact versus fiction, but I also like the ways that, I don't know, it reminds me of another of my favorite book called *The Things They Carried,* where it's just like, what is a true story? Is it because of the facts or is it because of the way, the reality of that connection that you feel? That is true right? and that's the truth that's trying to be told here.

Page May:

So, I guess, can you tell us more about what we learn about Audre in this book? Her life? her relationships? and if anything that seems unique to that time, but I'm really curious about the similarities that you see, because it's, what, the '50s? So a lot has changed, but a lot has stayed the same.

K Agbebiyi:

Yeah. And honestly, reading the book, I feel like nothing has changed.

Page May:

Fair point. Yeah. I do not disagree.

K Agbebiyi:

Audre just has a lot of, drama is not the right word, I guess, unresolved conflict with the woman in her life that she's dating. And, as I'm getting closer to 30, I feel like I'm coming out of this phase. But from 19 to 25, I felt like I was dating a lot of people, usually women. And, through that period, I was able to collect a lot of stories, but also learn more about myself and learn more about what I want in romantic relationships.

K Agbebiyi:

And I feel like Audre does that in this book because she has to deal with falling in love with people who don't treat her with respect. And she also has to deal with the love of her life dying, which is so traumatic, especially back then where it's not like she can just hop on Tinder and go find someone else.

K Agbebiyi:

The love that she was experiencing back then, I imagine it felt really rare and really, I guess, if I was living back then, I would feel a lot of tension around my romantic relationships, a lot of stress around making them work, just because what we were doing was so secretive and so forbidden.

K Agbebiyi:

I think that's something that I can relate to a lot in the book. And then also her relationship with her mom, just this idea that you have to behave a certain way to feel willing of a parent's love and support. That was a common theme that was instilled in me throughout my childhood, and I'm just working through now, especially in therapy.

K Agbebiyi:

And, so reading that Audre felt that way was really helpful. And then there's also a disabled organizer named TL Lewis. And TL was speaking on, I want to say a panel. No, no. It was like a disability justice training that Mariame [Kaba] had actually put together. And TL was explaining that a lot of Black people, we have people in our family who are disabled and they wouldn't necessarily identify as disabled, but when you actually talk to them, they're disabled in the sense that it's like, "Oh, this person always walks with a limp," or "This person is diabetic," etcetera.

K Agbebiyi:

And that's kind of how I feel about Audre because, at the time I was... Well, I guess I should have mentioned this in my intro, but I'm disabled. And, at the time of picking up this book, I was really just entering into what disability justice meant to me. And I don't even think I identified as disabled at the time, but when Audre talks about her childhood and how... I believe she was held back in school. And also she dealt with a lot of vision problems that impacted her academic trajectory.

K Agbebiyi:

I was able to be like, "Oh, she was disabled, too." And I feel like that's something that a lot of people don't talk about. And then also a lot of people don't talk about the fact that she was a Communist and was organizing around that. I feel like Audre has kind of become, just like sometimes she can feel like a Christmas card character now, a lot of the times, when people talk about her.

K Agbebiyi:

But to me, one of the most important parts about identifying as a Black lesbian feminist is being a Communist. And it was just affirming to read her political views in this book and read them so plainly.

Page May:

Can you expand on that point that you're making about the connections you see between sexuality and Communism? I really want to hear your thoughts.

K Agbebiyi:

Yeah. I think a lot of times, especially with social media, a lot of times people will identify as Black feminists and, through using that term, what they mean is that typically they're Black women who believe in feminist ideals, but when it comes to actually really practicing it, they might not actually have a commitment to ending capitalism or practicing internationalist politics.

K Agbebiyi:

So for me, one of the things that drew me to Black feminism, especially Black feminism that's been theorized by lesbians, is just learning about those aspects, learning about what it means to be a communist and how that shows up in our practice, even if we might not explicitly name it like that.

K Agbebiyi:

And so when Audre is talking about the Rosenberg's trial and how, because those were two communist organizers who were, I believe both of them were put to death by the US government. When she talks about that impact on her, that was really touching for me. But she also talks about the fact that it was difficult organizing as a communist lesbian at that time because, being a lesbian or being gay was thought of as frivolous. And so just seeing the ways that she brings her gender and her sexuality into her communist politics, I think was really enlightening for me, especially organizing in New York.

Monica Trinidad:
Can you talk a little bit about how class shows up in this book with Audre?

K Agbebiyi:
Yeah. Audre, I think she/I would identify her as growing up with a poor background. And the job she has to take, from what I remember, she was working at some kind of plant where they were building parts and things like that, which was really hard on her body. And also class impacts the way that she's able to find separation from her family.

K Agbebiyi:
Because eventually she does move out, but she ends up living in living conditions that are not actually the best for her. And it's not until later in the book where it seems like Audre is actually comfortable financially. Class also shows up with it impacts the way that she's able to finish school and pay for school.

K Agbebiyi:
And also just when she talks about things like her appearance and dating and then also, I think it shows up with the people that she dates. I mean, I know it was a different time, but also in the book, Audre does date a lot of white people in this book. And I imagine that that, the class differences, showed up a lot in her romantic relationships. And yeah, sorry for the dog in the background.

K Agbebiyi:
I didn't realize how many white women she dated and I'm like, at that time... Okay. He is annoying me. Racial differences show up a lot in my own romantic relationship. My partner is Indian. And I can only imagine what it was like dating white women back then, especially with the racial aspect, but also class.

Page May:
I was letting my cat in. I remember being really surprised as I was reading this, about the predominance of white people and white partners. And also, we were sort of touching on this earlier, just like the consistency of messiness in our lives. And it's both comforting and also a

little frustrating. Just that, yeah, this has been going on for a long time. A lot of dating in the community and the movement space, and it being hard.

Page May:

And I think there's a particular irony with abolitionists and how messy our personal relationships get, our interpersonal relationships can be. And so I guess I'm wondering, can you talk more about, did you learn anything? Were there lessons that you could apply about the ways that Audre navigates these relationships so that maybe one day we can figure this out?

K Agbebiyi:

Audre taught me a lot of what I don't want to do. It's interesting. There's this woman that I really look up to and I can really relate to. And then also her life was really messy. And I was reading the other day, apparently she had a large temper problem, which I don't think is usually conducive to navigating conflict.

K Agbebiyi:

One thing that I did think about when reading this book was just how would this have worked had she been on social media. Would she be posting Facebook statuses about all this stuff that was happening? Would she be in people's DMs arguing with them? And I feel like she would be, unfortunately.

K Agbebiyi:

So I wouldn't say that I would navigate conflict the same way she did, but it was helpful because I think, when you first start organizing and you get into your first big organizing conflict, or blow up, you might... Well, I personally, I was like, "This has only happened to me," or "No one has ever felt this way before," or "How do I keep going even though this awful thing has happened?"

K Agbebiyi:

And then after a couple of years I'm like, "Oh, great. This actually happens every year and a half." So like, and you gain tools. And so watching Audre gain tools very slowly throughout the book was just like another reminder that like, you can have conflict with people that you care about, but you still should, and you still can, remain committed to your organizing goals.

Monica Trinidad:

I'm still thinking about just how small our dating circles are, and it's because we want to date people that hold our values, and we want to date people that are, you know, on the same path of justice as we are. That means that the pool is very small. If you could see my hands right now, I'm doing a very small little circle.

Monica Trinidad:

So yeah, it just makes me think about that. And then also, I absolutely agree, K, that Audre would be on Twitter and would be tweeting very passive or very poetic tweets where you're trying to deconstruct them and be like, "What does she mean by that? Who is she talking about?" I could totally see that happening.

Page May:

A lot of subtexts. A lot of subtweets.

Monica Trinidad:

Yes. Subtweeting. That's the word. I was trying to think of what it was. Yeah. Lots of subtweeting. Has this book influenced the ways that you, not just organize, but the ways that you live your daily life?

K Agbebiyi:

Yeah, I think so. Growing up, I would always be really devastated by breakups and my mom would tell me that it's important in relationships to not give all of yourself so that you're not that upset when things end, but I actually don't live my life that way. And I think I'm better for it. And I feel like part of the reason why I continue to engage that way is because of the way that Audre loves in this book.

K Agbebiyi:

Like, when she falls for someone, she falls hard and she's not afraid to admit that. And I think that that is something that I strive to carry into my romantic relationships, especially after abuse. So I think that's the main way that the book shows up in my life. Just not being afraid to be hurt or be devastated, because, like I said, the love of her life dies. And just honoring each relationship for what it is and what it taught you, even if you weren't necessarily your best self within it, I think is something that can be learned from the book.

Monica Trinidad:

Oh, I feel like I'm holding that.

Page May:

[crosstalk 00:26:01] I’m in therapy right now.

Monica Trinidad:

I know.

Page May:

I'm like, "Let me filter. I don't need to say everything that's going through my head right now."

Monica Trinidad:
And how about the ways that you organize and strategize?

K Agbebiyi:
Audre brings all of herself to her organizing, even if she might be in predominantly white environments. And Atlanta, I would say the racial makeup for some of the abolitionist groups feels very different than it does in Brooklyn where I was organizing previously. So I think this book helps me remember to bring all of who I am to my analysis.

K Agbebiyi:
Especially because I feel like a lot of times, nowadays, identity politics are crapped on and thought of as the enemy of progress. But I think that Black feminists, especially like Audre Lorde and others really, I guess, show the value of identity politics, especially when they're used correctly. So I think that that's something else that I bring into my organizing that has been informed by this book.

Page May:
Yeah. I feel like something just shifted in my brain. It's this reframe of there's a consistency throughout time of conflict and messiness and all that, but also of the persistence of love and the persistence of struggle and of connection. But that is a choice. And I think that I've seen, even in myself, moments of how easy it can be to choose bitterness, or to believe that things that are good will always stay that way.

Page May:
And Audre died fairly young, no? Of cancer. And I think that's significant, knowing that. The larger question I have is, if everyone read this, if all of the folks who are out here identifying as Black feminists read this, how might it change or push us for our next steps and for the action that we're taking in the current political moment?

K Agbebiyi:
Hmm. I think that maybe the importance of romantic love, it's not important for everyone, but I feel like a lot of times Black women, or people perceived as Black women, are taught to not hold out for romantic love because it's not a given. And then, when we are given it, maybe we're taught to accept the bare minimum. And I don't think that that is conducive to showing up as your best self within organizing spaces. Just like entering a space with the preconceived notion that you're not worthy of love or respect. I don't think that that can actually help us further our campaign goals.

K Agbebiyi:

So if every self-identified Black feminist were to read this book, I think maybe, I mean, I can't predict the future, but maybe it would help them realize that they're worthy of love and they're worthy of spending time cultivating these types of friendships, too. And I think that could be helpful, overall.

Monica Trinidad:

So Audre Lorde was a poet, and this book is not a book of poems, but is still poetic in a lot of the ways that she talks through or gives us imagery. But, however, it's unlike a lot of her other writing. What do you feel is the role of poetry in our movements and in our organizing work?

K Agbebiyi:

That's the thing, when y'all said Audre Lorde's a poet, I literally forgot.

K Agbebiyi:

Because I read so much of her prose and so little of her poetry, but also I think it's important because your question even reminds me that there's not really a binary between the two. It's not like Audre or any other poet, it's like, "Okay, I'm not writing poetry now so the sentences I write now, they're going to be really choppy and they're not going to actually have meaning behind them."

K Agbebiyi:

So I think that poetry, along with other forms of art, allow us to imagine different worlds. And I don't know if Jackie Wang said this, but it's in Jackie Wang's book, *Carceral Capitalism*. And basically, I think they're saying that ‘poets are the timekeepers of the movement’. So they're tracking what's happening and they have like a pulse on what we're going through and they're able to communicate it in different ways.

K Agbebiyi:

So that's what I think of when I think of poetry and organizing. It's just like poets are there, they're leading things, but they're also helping us remember, which I think is important for the people who come after us.

Monica Trinidad:

A lot of what Page and I have also experienced in the past is that we celebrate even smaller wins. Even when we lose, we turn those into smaller wins, but there's something about the ways that Audre talks about not just her success, right, whether it's in relationship or whether it's in her academic life, but she's also talking about a lot of her pain and a lot of her suffering and a lot of... when she went on to write the Cancer Journals when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Monica Trinidad:

So I'm thinking a lot about the ways that poetry can... Humanize is not the right word, but I think it allows space for us to talk about grief in our work and to talk about suffering and pain and how those are just as important to talk about, and to name as our triumphs and our successes in our work. I thought that that was a really beautiful and important piece of, not just this book, but of Audre Lorde's work, in general.

K Agbebiyi:

Mhm. She's not afraid to be sad and show people that she's sad. When I think about this book, I'm not like, "This is a happy-go-lucky book." It's actually-

Monica Trinidad:

Right —it's not! It's not. It's not.

K Agbebiyi:

There's some parts sprinkled in, she talks about the importance of love and sex and sexuality and friendship but, overall, I would say it's a pretty sad book. But, it’s still, I don't know—I love sad books. If someone's like, "This book is going to make you cry," then I'm so excited. And I'm not like that with any other form of media, but with books, for some reason.

K Agbebiyi:

But I think someone going into this book, they shouldn't be expecting a really happy story about Audre Lorde being a Black lesbian. They should go in prepared, knowing that she's going to talk about a lot of her failures and a lot of the things that didn't work out. But I think that's what makes the book so beautiful.

Page May:

And I'm so grateful for the authors that we have that do that work. I think it reminds me a little bit of... They're very different books, but Assata's autobiography. For me, one of the most important things about that book was seeing that she used to do things that were messed up. And that she wasn't always revolutionary and radical, and seeing those parts of it as well.

Page May:

Because a lot of times the stories and books that we have about a movement, I don't know why I put that in air quotes, but a movement... I really don't know. But, yeah, they're the lion's story, and trying to reframe it as a lion's story, but it still is like, we've also made mistakes and we heard our... Yeah, it's just I think I really appreciate and I think that is a contribution of Black feminism, is showing the wholeness of our stories, and that it's not always happy and it's not always that we win, and that no one in it gets to be perfect, or claim that.

Page May:

And how much more powerful would we be if we could acknowledge that? Because I know so many people who don't want to engage because they feel like they aren't this enough, or they aren't that enough, or they can't give X, Y and Z. So I just shout out to Audre, and for you for bringing this up.

Page May:

Shout out to the genre of books that make you cry. It is important. But yeah, I think a lot lately since I went back into teaching, about why stories matter, and the questioning fiction versus nonfiction. And I just think what you shared about this has really helped deepen my thinking around that and why it's important to tell stories that help us feel and connect with ourselves, even when they're windows into other people's worlds, and how much they can reveal about our own selves and our own time. And how much truth they can bring to our lives, even when we don't know what's actually fact or fiction in this story.

Page May:

Thank you, K, for being with us, for rescheduling with us, I think, five times, six times. I don't know. And today finally getting to connect. It was a real pleasure just getting to talk to you and hear a little bit about you and the work that you're doing and the things that you're thinking about. I really appreciate it. So thank you. And anytime you want to close us out, we'll be here.

K Agbebiyi:

I'm warning you, it is really sad.

Page May:

Perfect. Episode that makes you cry.

K Agbebiyi:

I mean, it's four paragraphs. Is that too long or-

Monica Trinidad:

That's fine.

K Agbebiyi:

Okay. So this is after Audre's lover dies. “A few months after Jenny's death, I walked down Broadway late one Saturday afternoon. I had just had another argument with my mother and I was going to the A&P to get milk. I dawdled along the avenue, looking into shop windows, not wanting to return to the tensions and misunderstandings waiting for me at home. I paused in front of Stultz Jewelers, admiring their new display.”

K Agbebiyi:

"In particular, I marked a pair of hanging earrings of black opals, set into work of silver. 'Jenny will love these,' I thought, 'I must remember to tell her.' And then it hit me again that Jenny was dead and that meant that she would never be there ever again. It meant that I could not ever tell her anything more. It meant that, whether I loved her or was angry at her or wanted her to see a new pair of earrings, none of that mattered or would ever matter to her again. I could share nothing at all with her anymore because she was gone.”

K Agbebiyi:

"And even after all the past weeks of secret warning, Jenny's death became real to me in a different way. I turned away from the jewelry store window, and right then and there in the middle of Broadway and 151st street on a Saturday afternoon, at the beginning of the summer of my 16th year, I decided that I would never love anybody else again for the rest of my life.”

K Agbebiyi:

"Jenny had been the first person in my life I was conscious of loving and she had died. Loving hurt too much. My mother had turned into a demon intent on destroying me. You loved people and you came to depend on their being there, but people died or changed or went away and it hurt too much. The only way to avoid that pain was to not love anyone and to not let anyone get too close or too important. The secret to not being hurt like this again, I decided, was never depending on anyone, never needing, never loving."

K Agbebiyi:

I'm honestly thinking of past me, because past me would be like, "She's right. You really shouldn't love anyone so you can avoid being hurt." Now I'm like, "I think she's completely wrong." It's so relatable. It's so devastating. And you should love again. I think that later she goes on to share that, just share how she does love again. And then, I guess, something I didn't talk about in the interview, is Jenny died when Audre was 16.

K Agbebiyi:

She never really moved on from it. And something that happens to me is, when traumatic or messed up things happen in my life. I'm like, "Oh, it was four months ago. Move on. Oh, it was four years ago. Move on." And Audre reminds me there's no time limit for how long something impacts you, and there's no time limit for grieving, especially because I lost my grandma in June and it still feels so fresh.

K Agbebiyi:

And even then, I'm still telling myself that I should be moving on really quickly, even though I loved her. So that's something that Zami just teaches me, that there are things in your life that might feel big or small or they might happen when you're two or when you're 52, and they'll always impact you. That's okay and you shouldn't feel shame about that. So the fact that she dedicated so much of the book to someone who died so early in her life, I think really reinforced that for me.

Page May:

I've stepped away from organizing recently and I'm sort of recalibrating. And a lot of it is because of just how this—it breaks your heart. And some of that is just being a human. It's just like, people die, and they die tragically, and people abuse you, and people will break your heart, and life will break your heart, and I don’t—that we are learning.

Page May:

And that's the work of Abolition is learning how to be in community. Even though no one's saying that, through Abolition, we'll become perfect people who don't hurt each other ever. That's not what we're doing. But it does acknowledge that we really need to rebuild and create new skills for how we respond to these things.

Page May:

And so, okay, what is the question though? I’m thinking about—but, there's a Rumi line from a poem about each wound is where... It re-frames death and losses, having these wounds that light can shine through? And you can grow a lot from loss and grief, but it can also be really devastating. So I guess what I'm getting at is what would you tell yourself when you were entering, organizing? What do you wish maybe you had known or could say to yourself about the reality of heartbreak?

Page May:

You're saying these things, and the importance of healing and staying. I don't know. I don't want to put words in your mouth. But how do those things all go together? What do you wish you could say to younger K?

K Agbebiyi:

Yeah. Someone asked me this question on Thursday, actually. And again, this sounds depressing. I just want to preface all this, that I'm a Cancer.

K Agbebiyi:

That's why you might see me reaching towards the emotional things. But I would just tell younger me that I think that, when I first came to organizing, I thought you would never feel alone because you were always with a group, you were always working on stuff together. And because I had spent so much of my life feeling isolated because of my political beliefs, I thought when I found organizing, that was it, that was the end of feeling alone.

K Agbebiyi:

But I would just tell my younger self that you will still continue to feel isolated. There'll be days where you feel so connected to your comrades, your group, the work that you're doing, but that empty or that lonely feeling that you're feeling inside, organizing can't fix that, and it's not up to organizing to fix that.

K Agbebiyi:

And I think, knowing that, and working through that is how you can show up as a better friend, lover, and organizer. I think sometimes the conflict that we find in organizing is people trying to fix that lonely feeling and going about it in unhealthy ways or unproductive ways. And so just reminding younger me that you can't find all your self worth or your self love or all your healing through organizing. And that doesn't mean that it's not important. That's just not the purpose that it serves, in my opinion.

Monica Trinidad:

Yeah. Page, what would you tell younger Page about organizing?

Page May:

I don't know. I wish I would've started journaling sooner. I would've journaled. I don't know. I think a lot of things that are really important to me wouldn't have happened without a level of being naive and overly optimistic. Because I can be a... In the words of, oh, no, this is Octavia Butler, but ‘I'm a pessimist if I'm not careful’. So I think exactly what you're saying, K.

Page May:

It took me a while to recognize that that's a lot of what happens, is people are coming, looking for…Because they want the world to be better and also because in our lives to be better, and we live really isolated, alienated, lives with a constant cloud of social media, adding a level of, "Well, what's wrong with you? Why are you sad and lonely when your life could look like this?"

Page May:

And I think I would've gotten off the social media a lot sooner, or not been as into it. But, I don't know. I don't know what I would've told myself because I love so much of what has happened, but I'm also really sad. I don't know what I want to share here so that's part of the awkwardness, too. Anyways, what would you tell yourself, Monica?

Monica Trinidad:

Oh gosh. I knew I shouldn't have asked you because I knew you were going to ask me, too. I've been thinking about—as someone who has also not been organizing this year, I'm thinking a lot about grief, particularly that the grief never ends. That when we run these campaigns and when we do this organizing work to end policing, that there is still death, there is still loss. There is still—That doesn't go away, ever.

Monica Trinidad:

We don't get past this loss. We learn how to live with it and we learn how to move through it and move with it and grow around it. I wish I had known that sooner. And I'm glad that I know that now and I'm glad that people are talking about grief a lot more. I'm thinking a lot about this article that I've read several times this year, I just pulled it up, actually, by Malkia Devich-Cyril. The article is called "Grief Belongs in Social Movements. Can We Embrace It?"

Monica Trinidad:

It was published through In These Times, and one of the things that Malkia is talking about is how to be Black and Iindigenous or a Person of Color or any oppressed class in America is to know traumatic loss. And that's just it. It is to know that. And one of the last lines of the articles that I sit with a lot is "To have a movement that breathes, you must build a movement with the capacity to grieve."

Monica Trinidad:

So, bringing it back to Audre's book, I love this book because she doesn't resist grief. She doesn't resist that sadness. She moves through it and she shares it with us and she says, "This happened and it has shaped me in this way." I really love that and I hope for more of that in our spaces and in our movements.

Page May:

Beautiful. Yeah. I don't know.

Monica Trinidad:

We went there.

Page May:

We went there, yeah. Ahhh! Today is going to be a weird day, I’m in my feelings. Now I need to go and lesson plan. Oh my God.

Monica Trinidad:

But, K, can you say a little bit about what your thoughts are on the role of…what is the role of mythology in our movements, in our histories and in our future organizing work?

K Agbebiyi:

Yeah. I mean, I think that mythology, which is the world's hardest word to pronounce-

K Agbebiyi:

... I think that's so essential in organizing, but especially with abolitionist organizing, because none of us have been alive without the threat of policing. We haven't been alive to experience that at all. I mean, that's through with all organizing, but I think it's very, very unique with abolitionist work because of just how ingrained and normalized the prison industrial complex is in our everyday lives.

K Agbebiyi:

And also just how upset people get when you're like, "Hey, maybe we shouldn't have this." So if we didn't have the ability to be creative or come up with a new history for us, or a new future for us, I think that it would be very, very, very hard to organize, especially under these conditions.

K Agbebiyi:

So I think that's the power of mythology, is just... I guess also it's something that Zami teaches me. Earlier, when I was saying that this book, it's hard to figure out what's fact or fiction. I think that maybe that's something that I want to break down more in the future, but I think that's something that we could use.

K Agbebiyi:

Just how she talked about the past and I'm like, I'm not sure. Did that actually happen or did she kind of add on to that? I think that's something that we can use when we're also envisioning the future, but I think that's something I need to come back to, to think about more.

Monica Trinidad:

I'm thinking about how mythology... Someone has said, and I believe it's Emory Douglas, but I actually don't know, so I don't want to say that he said this. But I've read somewhere that visual art and posters and propaganda, such as Emory Douglas's work through the Black Panther Party, for the covers of the newspapers, created this visual mythology of power for people who felt powerless at many moments in their lives, throughout their lives.

Monica Trinidad:

So it's making me think about, again, the role of art and poetry in creating a visual mythology of power for Black people and Indigenous people and People of Color. But also how it provides this net of safety, and but also connection to the possibilities of liberation if we keep working towards it, if we keep working every day towards it. So yeah, I think a lot about the role of mythology and it's something I also want to explore a little bit more, too.

Page May:

Yeah. The question of what I would tell my younger self, I think that's another part. It's just like I used to, when traumatic things were happening, I would just say, "I've just got to push it down," and I would visualize pushing it into my right foot, and my leg started to go numb. And then recently, with acupuncture, it's just this really intense trigger point that releases. I have a lot of pain there. Anyways.

Page May:

So there's all these things and I wish I'd... For me, a big thing, history has been so helpful in my organizing, because of the understanding how we got where we got. But just the mythology of it, and the stories that have helped to inspire people who, their whole world was slavery. And being able to imagine beyond that, and the hope that it takes to be willing to fight back when you're in the middle of a land you don't know.

Page May:

I cannot comprehend just what it takes to be willing to take on slavery. I know there's a lot of parallels with Abolition. But I think that mythology is really important. And I think it's not a coincidence that so many young people are drawn to books of mythology. And that's a big part of our life as we're discovering the world as young people, that those are stories that we're really drawn to. And then this thing happens where adults tell you that that's make-believe, and all these things that start to happen.

Page May:

And I think that's very Western, too, as well. Is just like we live in a society that wants us to treat those as unimportant stories and just Marvel Universe. But it's significant to me that so many children love those stories and find themselves in those stories. And I think we need more of that, for sure.

Monica Trinidad:
I love where this conversation went and I'm so thankful for it and I can't wait to re-listen to it. So thank you, K, so much for joining us today.

K Agbebiyi:
Thank you. And this conversation was very helpful. It was great meeting you, Page, but Monica and I used to work together when I was like a lot younger.

K Agbebiyi:
Yeah. I was an undergrad. So it's just really nice to reconnect with you throughout the years and catch up with you. That's been really, really great.

Pag May:
Oh! I did not know that!

Monica Trinidad:
Yeah. I feel like we ebbed and flowed throughout life, both in person and then online and now here we are, and I love the path we're on.

K Agbebiyi:
Yeah. We'll see you in three years or something.

Monica Trinidad:
Right, exactly. Yes. Thank you, I. It was nice talking to you.

K Agbebiyi:
Thank you.

[OUTRO]

Thanks for listening to another episode of the Lit Review, a podcast where we interview people we love and respect about a book that has shaped their organizing work. We are your co-hosts, Monica Trinidad and Page May, two Chicago-based abolitionists, cultural workers, and cat mamas who love nerding out on books and creating spark notes for our movements. Production this season is by Benji Russelburg, intro music is by David Ellis with production by Ari Mejia, and social media support from Alycia Kamil. If you like this episode, give it a shoutout on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook, and if you like our podcast, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts to help widen our reach. Financial support for the production of this podcast season is thanks to the Field Foundation of Illinois, and our amazing Patreon subscribers. Learn more about becoming a patron at Patreon.com/thelitreview. Keep reading!