



**‘Aching, toxic and underpaid’: The labouring body, toxic  
workplaces, and waste in Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New  
Spelling of My Name* and Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re  
Briefly Gorgeous*.**

**Lily Constanti**

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**Supervisor: Vicky Sparrow**

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## **Introduction**

The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. This subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements, and yet without involving violence; it may be calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet remain of a physical order.<sup>1</sup>

Labour literature poses a significant challenge to the powerful machinery of capitalism. By constructing precarious, labouring bodies as contaminated, mechanised, and ultimately wasted by the state, authors radically scrutinise and expose exploitative systems of work.

Audre Lorde’s 1982 semi-autobiographical *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (henceforth, *Zami*) blends her personal experiences with social and historical contexts, and mythology.<sup>2</sup> *Zami* traces protagonist Audre’s childhood and adolescence in New York and Connecticut by following her relationship with her mother, Linda, a mixed-race Caribbean immigrant, alongside her queer development.<sup>3</sup> A self-proclaimed ‘Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, mother, warrior, poet’, Lorde reveals truths about the politics of identity as Audre navigates the often-hostile climate of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century US.

*Zami* bears thematic similarities to poet, Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (henceforth, *On Earth*).<sup>4</sup> Vuong’s semi-autobiographical work is written in the form of a redrafted letter to his illiterate mother, Rose, a refugee of the Vietnam War. The letter, destined to remain unread by its addressee, follows protagonist Little Dog’s queer coming-of-

<sup>1</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 17

<sup>2</sup> Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name: A Biomythography* (UK: Penguin, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Owing to *Zami*’s semi-autobiographical nature, I will distinguish between Lorde and her protagonist, by referring to the latter as Audre.

<sup>4</sup> Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (London: Penguin, 2019).

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age. We witness his complicated relationship with his working-class, single mother, as her battle for survival continues long after the war. Vuong explores the ways in which trauma manifests and is inherited; he tracks Little Dog's adolescence as a queer, Vietnamese-American in Connecticut in the late 90s and early 2000s.

Whilst united diversely in themes of multi-layered, intersectional identities and maternal relationships, the texts are striking in their brutal depiction of precarious labour. The poets' semi-autobiographies can be considered together to trace US labour histories from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup>, and the work outcomes of first- and second-generation immigrants. Considering the works in conjunction, I trace how the characters engage with precarious and dangerous waged labour, and how this impacts their reproduction of labour power. I centre the ways that labour is embodied in the texts, scrutinising and comparing how bodies are simultaneously consumed and contaminated by the materials of capitalism.

I begin by engaging with diverse definitions of labour, centring Silvia Federici's ideas about the 'invisible' and predominantly-unwaged reproduction of labour power, which is highly gendered and racialised.<sup>5</sup> I place this in dialogue with Michel Foucault's theory of bio-power and the systemic disciplining of the body, which I apply to labour, broadly conceived.<sup>6</sup> I link theoretical discussions to labour literature, considering the significance of the works' semi-autobiographical, precarious realist form within the history of labour in art.

I proceed with close readings and comparison of *Zami* and *On Earth*. I begin by examining the presence of toxic workplaces within the texts with reference to Audre's work at a crystal cutting factory, Keystone Electronics, and Rose's work at a nail salon. I trace their immediate and long-term physiological consequences and their impact on labour reproduction. I then analyse bodily experiences of abortion within the text, viewing abortion

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<sup>5</sup> Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

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through the lens of reproductive labour, in that it ensures worker-survival and their ability to remain in the workplace. Next, I highlight the persistence of hand imagery as a symbol for manual and reproductive labour. I underscore the writers’ use of hand imagery to indicate the bodily pain and health risks associated with labour, whilst suggesting they symbolise the potentiality for workplace comradeship.

I argue that both Lorde and Vuong’s works are the product of political labour. Reading them through this lens, I locate a self-conscious precarity through the employment of fragmented, semi-autobiographical forms. I read *Zami* and *On Earth* as examples of precarious realism, highlighting how through multi-layered forms, they expose the lived realities of destabilised labouring life under capitalism. Considering the two texts in conversation, we can identify a toxic and physiologically harmful history of labour in the US. I find that this workplace exploitation is overtly racialised and gendered in the texts, as toxic workplaces contaminate labour reproduction, which is similarly rendered physiologically dangerous. In tracing the textual treatment of non-white bodies in the workplace, I locate a simultaneous depletion and colonisation of the body by the processes of capitalism. Ultimately, Lorde and Vuong construct the symbolic discarding of precarious lives as mere by-products of the relentless machinery of capitalism. Yet, I find that in exposing brutal realities, Lorde and Vuong resist them, offering potential alternatives. Exploring the textual construction of non-white bodies allows us to perceive the potentiality for bodily connection and healing in response to a physiologically harmful workplace, signalling inter-worker connection and comradeship.

### **Labour and the Body – Theoretical Frameworks**

It is useful to consult broad definitions of labour, which can range from paid in formal economies, to unpaid or exchanged in informal or household settings.<sup>7</sup> Federici has defined

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<sup>7</sup> Shoba Arun and Wendy Olsen, ‘Modern slavery and exploitative work regimes: an intersectional approach’, *Development in Practice*, 33:2 (2023), p. 134.

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the reproduction of labour power as the processes which sustain the worker and enable their continued labouring.<sup>8</sup> This predominantly unpaid work can involve self-reproduction or the reproduction of others' labour power, a phenomenon which has been historically feminised in the form of motherhood and housework.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, labour reproduction has been systemically undervalued, the labour aspect deemphasised as it is 'transformed into a natural attribute of [the] female physique', becoming a physiological and emotional 'labour of love' performed by a housewife.<sup>10</sup> This, Federici contends, is how capitalism has achieved free labour.

Federici emphasises the importance of distinguishing between waged work and the unwaged reproduction of labour, as it exposes the capitalist dependence on unpaid labour to produce profit.<sup>11</sup> Labour reproduction involves all unpaid processes which ensure the survival and vigour of the worker – whether this is the self or others – including domestic work, tending to physiological and emotional needs, and birthing and raising future workers.<sup>12</sup> As these examples illustrate, reproductive labour is not peripheral to waged labour, but, by nature, it vitally 'sustains it'.<sup>13</sup>

It is necessary to complicate the housewife Master Narrative which has dominated ideas about reproductive labour. Whilst Friedrich Engels has traced the birth of the 'housewife' alongside that of industrial capitalism, Angela Davis has argued that this narrative has been historically contested by poor women of colour, who are primarily wage earners and secondarily housewives.<sup>14</sup> This illustrates the importance of intersectional approaches to labour histories. As sociologists have reiterated, individuals subject to multiple forms of

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<sup>8</sup> Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> Joshua Chambers-Letson, 'The Queer of Color's Mother: Ryan Rivera, Audre Lorde, Martin Wong, Danh Võ,' *TDR: The Drama Review*, 62: 1 (2018), 46-59.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1973) in Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, (London: Penguin, 2019), pp. 168-71.

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discrimination face distinct challenges which do not equate to the sum of individual hardships. Therefore, terms such as ‘double disadvantage’ do not adequately capture the experience of intertwining forms of discrimination.<sup>15</sup> This can be applied to terms such as the ‘double shift’ or ‘double burden’, which can be misleading in understanding the combined demands of waged and reproductive labour. For example, the overrepresentation of migrant workers in ‘difficult, dangerous and dirty’ low-waged jobs places strain on workers’ bodies and, therefore, their ability to reproduce their own labour power.<sup>16</sup>

Molly Benitez has outlined the traditional distinction between labour – all the ‘physical or mental exertion’ which sustains workers – and work – ‘labouring you receive a wage for’.<sup>17</sup> This provokes the question of measuring what bodily ‘exertion’ directly contributes to a wage. This evokes Affective Labour, which Federici defines as labour which uses up ‘not only the physical energies but also the entire subjectivity of the worker’. One becomes ‘living labour’, as the body and self becomes one’s work.<sup>18</sup> Viewing the body as ‘the primary site of social experience’ and control, this essay examines the ways in which all forms of labour occupy and distort the body in *Zami* and *On Earth*.<sup>19</sup>

I consider labour theories in conversation with Foucault’s concepts of anatomo- and bio-politics.<sup>20</sup> Foucault has asserted that the growth of capitalism from the 17<sup>th</sup> century necessitated the growth of biopower, comprising anatomo- and bio-politics. ‘Anatomo-politics’ describes the ‘disciplining’ of the body ‘as a machine’: its ‘optimisation’ on an anatomical level and the ‘extortion of its forces’ to ensure its ‘usefulness’ and ‘integration into systems of efficient and economic controls’. ‘Bio-politics’ is the ‘disciplining’ of the ‘species body’, or in

<sup>15</sup> Stacey R. Fitzsimmons, Jen Baggs, and Mary Yoko Brannen, ‘Intersectional Arithmetic: How Gender, Race and Mother Tongue Combine to Impact Immigrants’ Work Outcomes.’ *Journal of world business: JWB* 55:1 (2020), 101013.

<sup>16</sup> Arun and Olsen, ‘Modern slavery’, p. 139.

<sup>17</sup> Molly Benitez, “‘Metabolize Hate or Die of It’: Lorde, Labor, and Affect Theory’, *Frontiers (Boulder)*, 44:2 (2023), 26-52.

<sup>18</sup> Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, pp. 59, 65, 70.

<sup>19</sup> John Fiske, *Power Plays, Power Works* (London: Verso, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 139.

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other words, the government of the biological processes of whole populations.<sup>21</sup> This 'disciplining' or regulation of living beings 'at every level of the social body' was necessary to the efficacy of economic systems.<sup>22</sup> The 'disciplines' of the formal workplace include the surveillance and monitoring of performance to track productivity, the physiological impact of labour and its effect on reproductive labour. Foucault's ideas inform understandings of the systemic and conscious draining and exploitation of living labour.

Considering labour theories alongside Foucault's writings on the systemic regulation of bodies, I turn to literary portrayals of labouring life. I will place theoretical frameworks in dialogue with Joseph Entin's idea of 'precarious realism' in order to explore *Zami* and *On Earth's* construction of the precarious, labouring body.<sup>23</sup>

### Precarious Realism

Entin contends that writing precarious lives and labour requires a form of realism which is 'itself precarious, interrupted by and interwoven with other modes'. Precarious realist labour literature is united in its conscious deployment of aesthetic techniques which disturb realist representation, such as magical realism or surrealism.<sup>24</sup> This aligns with the semi-autobiographical nature of *Zami* and *On Earth*, which renders them formally multi-layered. The 'autobiographical' aspect of the works engages with the idea that the personal is political, yet the texts move beyond the self, existing under the umbrella of semi-autobiography.<sup>25</sup> As Bethany Jacobs outlines in her discussion of *Zami*, a semi-autobiographical nature should 'complicate scholarly readings' of texts, as she is not simply documenting truths about her own life. Instead, *Zami* operates at the intersection of biography, mythology, and social or political history in order to illustrate the inability to sever her life from political contexts and the social

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph B. Entin, *Living Labor: Fiction, Film, and Precarious Work* (Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2023).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Lorde labels *Zami* a 'biomythography', blending myth and biography: I argue that this falls under the broad umbrella of semi-autobiography.

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groups of which she is a part.<sup>26</sup> I apply this reading to *On Earth*, which similarly destabilises the notion of autobiographies when it comes to Othered individuals; when existing means day-to-day survival, the self only exists in a political context.

Lorde echoes this view of writing as an extension of the political self, noting that 'because I am woman, because I am Black, because I am lesbian', her existence is an act of survival meaning her writing constitutes political 'work'. She must preserve the communities she is part of in writing, or else 'our selves are wasted' and '[ground] into dust'.<sup>27</sup> This informs Molly Benitez and Kristina Popeil's readings of *Zami* as a contribution to labour theory and Lorde a labour theorist, which I build upon.<sup>28</sup> I argue that the semi-autobiography is simultaneously an example of Lorde's labour and a documentation of lived labour.

There is a conscious departure from realism in *Zami*, which is interspersed with italicised moments of myth.<sup>29</sup> As Karen Weekes argues, Othered writers demand Other forms, culminating in 'an identity-mosaic resonant with themes of Otherness and disenfranchisement'.<sup>30</sup> This evokes the fragmentation and instability which Entin deems necessary to capture precarious life and labour in art. 'Identity-mosaic' seems an appropriate description of *On Earth*, which follows Little Dog's stream-of-consciousness, rendering it structurally fragmented.<sup>31</sup> Neumann identifies precarity in the 'tentative' way that Little Dog 'circulat[es] the past', resulting in a lack of narrative anchoring.<sup>32</sup> Instead, the novel is comprised of the episodic memories of Little Dog, Rose, and her mother, Lan, historical events, and philosophical musings which culminate to form the 'mosaic' of contributors to Little

<sup>26</sup> Bethany Jacobs, 'Mothering Herself: Manifesto of the Erotic Mother in Audre Lorde's "Zami: A New Spelling of My Name"', *Melus*, 40:4 (2015), pp. 110-28.

<sup>27</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 18-9.

<sup>28</sup> Benitez, 'Lorde, Labor, and Affect Theory'; Kristina Popiel, 'Audre Lorde, Labor Theorist: Rethinking Integrity Within Late Capitalism', *Frontiers*, 44:2 (2023), pp. 1-25.

<sup>29</sup> Lorde, *Zami*.

<sup>30</sup> Karen Weekes, 'Othered Writers, Other Forms: Biomythography and Automythography', *Genre*, 39:2 (2006), p. 344.

<sup>31</sup> Vuong, *On Earth*.

<sup>32</sup> Birgit Neumann, "'Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all – but an orphan": The Mother Tongue and Translation in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*' *Anglia (Tübingen)*, 138:2 (2020), p. 279.



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Dog's sense of self.<sup>33</sup> Vuong opens *On Earth* with the request, 'let me begin again', illustrating the ways that Vuong's precarious realism transcends not only the self but also the text itself.<sup>34</sup> The 'conventional fixity of beginnings' is disrupted as the *rewritten* letter form points to the precarious and stunted nature of *On Earth*.<sup>35</sup>

The consideration of the texts as precarious realist depictions of precarious life informs my reading of constructions of the labouring body. Using Entin's model, I will highlight the precarity of bodies under exploitive capitalism, firstly considering the toxic workplace as an instrument of the bodily appropriation and depletion.

### The Toxic Workplace and The Body

There has been a historical overrepresentation of non-white workers in exploitative, precarious workplaces.<sup>36</sup> Lorde recalls the preponderance of Black and Puerto Rican workers in dangerous, hardware factories, as 'most local people would not work under such conditions'.<sup>37</sup> Vuong similarly explains that those undertaking physically-demanding work in the tobacco field where Little Dog worked were primarily comprised of 'undocumented migrants from Mexico and Central America'.<sup>38</sup> This points to a historical undervaluing of non-white bodies and livelihoods. This corresponds to Iris Marion Young and Danielle S. Allen's discussion of the embodiment of Othering. They argue that when communities are Othered, their members are 'imprisoned in their bodies' which are constructed as 'ugly, dirty, defiled, impure, contaminated, or sick'.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the relegation of Othered, racialised groups to toxic and physically dangerous labour may further contaminate and sicken their bodies. As Benitez asserts, within this system,

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<sup>33</sup> Vuong, *On Earth*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Neumann, "Our mother tongue", pp. 277-8.

<sup>36</sup> Arun and Olsen, 'Modern slavery', p. 139.

<sup>37</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, p. 145.

<sup>38</sup> Vuong, *On Earth*, p. 89.

<sup>39</sup> Tris Marion Young and Danielle S. Allen. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 122 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 123.

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non-white workers’ lives are ‘not worth the value of the products they produce, their bodies just another raw material of capitalism.’<sup>40</sup>

This phenomenon is illustrated by Audre’s work at Keystone Electronics, where the crystals used for radio and radar technology are ‘ground, refined, and classified’.<sup>41</sup> The factory is an immediate and brutal attack on the senses: it is perpetually uncomfortable, inescapably ‘noisy, ugly, sticky, stinking, and dangerous’.<sup>42</sup> Lorde’s emotive blend of auditory, visual, tactile and olfactory imagery conjures an all-encompassing bodily pollution that Audre experiences daily, the multisensory listing suggesting a comprehensive ingestion of toxins. Lorde’s description echoes Young and Allen’s comments about Othered bodies, illustrating how the workplace further ‘contaminate[s]’ and others the body.<sup>43</sup> Unable to obtain a job elsewhere owing to racial prejudice, Audre is forced to engage in this literal ‘dirty work’.<sup>44</sup>

Alongside this daily sensory assault, Audre is subject to a gradual, deadly exposure to toxic substances, which she speculates is the reason that unlike other workplaces, Keystone Electronics ‘hired Black women and didn’t [immediately] fire them’.<sup>45</sup> Initially Lorde depicts the toxic workplace as generally ‘stinking’, but she eventually names the chemicals to which she was exposed and the sinister impact of their ingestion. Audre was continually exposed to ‘X-rays’, and the ‘sickly fumes of carbon tetrachloride’ permeated the air, long exposure to which Lorde eventually learned ‘destroys the liver and causes cancer of the kidneys’.<sup>46</sup> Lorde’s repeats and foregrounds the fact that ‘nobody mentioned’ the harmful impact of radiation and toxic chemicals, suggesting that their risk was known, but concealed. Therefore, Lorde positions ‘Black women’ as not only neglected by the power structures of the workplace, but actively harmed by them.

<sup>40</sup> Benitez, ‘Lorde, Labor, and Affect Theory’, p. 43.

<sup>41</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, p. 145.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Young and Allen, *Politics of Difference*, p. 123.

<sup>44</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, p. 145.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

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Furthermore, Lorde details the dangerous process by which the factory workers could obtain a meagre 'weekly bonus'.<sup>47</sup> 'A small X-ray beam' is used to measure the charge of each crystal; by 'cutting corners... and not flipping the hood' which shielded the workers from the beam, Audre saved time and maximised the number of crystals she could process.<sup>48</sup> This tiny weekly bonus had a sinister price, as workers were exposed long-term to x-ray radiation. That this practice was rewarded with a 'bonus' which could ensure the survival of underpaid workers (and the maintenance of their jobs) signals the sacrificing of their health for the sake of increasing profit margins.<sup>49</sup>

Lorde details the ways in which performance was monitored:

'We sat at our machines in a circle, facing outward, our backs to each other to discourage talking. There were six commercial X-ray machines and a desk in the middle for Rose, our forewoman. We were never long away from her watchful eye.'<sup>50</sup>

There is a consistent potential of surveillance by the forewoman – as the workers were 'facing outward' and ignorant to whether Rose's 'watchful eye' was upon them – alongside the severance of inter-worker communication. Lorde constructs a spatial arrangement that resembles a panoptical system of observation, first used in prisons to ensure that each prisoner, unable to see the supervisor's gaze, felt constantly scrutinised and is thus, 'totally seen'.<sup>51</sup> This illustrates Foucault's concept of disciplining bodies within a workplace context, as short-term efficiency and performance was regulated and maximised.<sup>52</sup> Yet, workers' bodies were slowly poisoned by the carcinogenic conditions of the factory and the demands of

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 146-7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>51</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 84-5.

<sup>52</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 139.

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meeting and surpassing targets. Therefore, the authoritative ‘watchful eye’ scrutinises workers’ performance whilst consciously disregarding the poisoning of their bodies. Lorde’s experiences at Keystone Electronics can be connected to her real-life death at 58 after battling both breast and liver cancer.<sup>53</sup>

*Zami* details not only bodies contaminated by the workplace, but a bodily fusion with the working environment and the materials of capitalism. Alongside the widely-used technique of failing to lower the protective hood to increase productivity, Audre adopts another scheme to obtain high processes. As productivity was measured using the remaining number of unprocessed crystals, Audre would ‘slip crystals into [her] socks’ when she visited the bathroom. Lorde details how she ‘chewed them up with [her] strong teeth and flushed the little shards of rock down the commode’ to diminish her pile of unread crystals.<sup>54</sup> Popeil reads this image as the ‘physical transubstantiation’ of the materials of capitalism by the labourer, whose ‘body (and spirit) is wasted in the process’. Audre’s body becomes symbolic toxic waste, despite the unprofitable nature of her efforts: ‘no “new” value is created’.<sup>55</sup> Audre’s scheme is methodical and deftly enacted: she maximises her speed and efficiency by employing her body as a tool of work. This evokes the image of Audre’s body as just another machine to whereby the crystals are ‘ground’ and ‘refined’.

This recalls Foucault’s ‘anatomy-politics’ of the body ‘as a machine’, highlighting the micro-regulation and policing of workers’ bodies.<sup>56</sup> Lorde’s biographer, Alexis De Veaux outlines the grave consequences of this anatomy-political disciplining, questioning how many of those crystal shards Lorde accidentally swallowed and:

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<sup>53</sup> Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 365.

<sup>54</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, p. 170.

<sup>55</sup> Popiel, ‘Lorde, Labor Theorist’, p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 139.

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'how long do carbon tetrachloride and low doses of radiation linger,  
undetected and parasitic, in the human body, before the cells of the body  
turn upon themselves, cancerous and outraged?'<sup>57</sup>

De Veaux's description positions workplace toxins as a symbolic parasite, depleting the body's resources before transforming them: Lorde's own 'cells' 'turn upon themselves', resembling the 'parasitic' toxins. The cost of Audre's perceived efficiency as a worker is the ingestion of the toxic materials of capitalism, resulting in her fusion with them and the ultimate contamination of her body. Lorde creates a symbolic ingestion and embodiment of the toxic workplace.

This echoes *On Earth*, as chemical 'disabling infrastructures' permeate the text, from the chemical weapons used in the Vietnam war to the 'inhalation toxicants' in the nail salon where Rose works.<sup>58</sup> Historically dominated by Vietnamese immigrant women, the nail industry embodies the 'material and ideological limits of the American Dream'.<sup>59</sup> To Little Dog, Rose's workplace signals the impossibility of progression and the gradual fusion of the workplace and domestic, labour reproduction, rendering them indistinguishable. The salon is 'more than a place of work', but a 'place where our children are raised', often due to the single-motherhood of the technicians, like Rose.<sup>60</sup> Vuong constructs the child's view of a young Little Dog, who remembers the salon as a 'kitchen' where:

'in the back rooms, our women squat on the floor over huge woks that pop  
and sizzle over electric burners, cauldrons of phở simmer and steam up

<sup>57</sup> De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, p. 41.

<sup>58</sup> Rachel Lee, 'Affective Chemistries of Care: Slow Activism and the Limits of the Molecular in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous*', *Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 13:2 (2022), p. 193.

<sup>59</sup> Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Women and Men: Labour, Laws, and Love*, (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), p. 77.; Jennifer Cho, 'We Were Born from Beauty': Dis/Inheriting Genealogies of Refugee and Queer Shame in Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*', *Melus*, 47:1 (2022), p. 136.

<sup>60</sup> Vuong, *On Earth*, p. 79.

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the cramped spaces with aromas of cloves, cinnamon, ginger, mint, and cardamom mixing with formaldehyde, toluene, acetone, Pine-Sol, and bleach’.<sup>61</sup>

Vuong’s description evokes a childlike awe associated with traditional Vietnamese cuisine, the preparation of which connotes magic or witchcraft. An inviting concoction of spices overcome ‘cramped spaces’. Food preparation is almost mystical, hidden ‘in the back rooms’ and reserved for ‘our women’, the collective personal pronoun evoking shared cultural memories of Vietnam. However, the workers’ dislocation is signalled by the brutal interruption of gentle, sibilant sounds by carcinogenic chemicals, as the scene becomes abruptly clinical and sensorily discordant. American capitalism symbolically poisons the culture and bodies of immigrant workers. Rachel Lee identifies a ‘slow violence’ towards non-white workers echoing that in *Zami*, as harmful chemicals – the raw materials of capitalism - are taken into the bodies of workers through their lungs and stomachs. This fusion of waged labour and labour reproduction in a toxic environment result in the ‘underreproduction of the children of technicians’, who suffer health consequences owing to the unavoidable ingestion of harmful substances.<sup>62</sup>

As domestic settings seep into the workplace, the workplace is similarly taken home through the vehicle of workers’ bodies. When Rose returns home after the workday, Little Dog watches as ‘the chemicals from the nail salon rose from your skin’. Little Dog becomes accustomed to performing a necessary, ritual of care for his mother in order to reproduce her labour power and allow her to work another day. Daily, he ‘scraped and rescraped’ her back ‘releasing the bad winds from your body’ in an attempt to detoxify her.<sup>63</sup> Rose’s toxic workplace stays with her long beyond her working hours until she resembles it, similarly housing harmful chemicals which must be continually ‘releas[ed]’ into her home or place of reproductive labour.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>62</sup> Lee, ‘Affective Chemistries of Care’, p. 201.

<sup>63</sup> Vuong, *On Earth*, pp. 84-5.

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This echoes De Veaux's description of Lorde's physiological transformation, as her own cells become toxic. Like Audre's, Rose's body becomes a symbolic vessel for toxicity, allowing the toxic workplace to infiltrate her domestic space, blurring the boundaries of work and home.

This, Vuong concludes, is 'what it means to be awake in American bones', 'aching, toxic, and underpaid'.<sup>64</sup> The contamination of labourer's bodies by toxic materials transforms workers themselves into something 'toxic', with the ability to further toxify their home environments and even their children. The sobering reality of the disregard for workers' bodies is illustrated by the death of Vuong's mother from breast cancer in 2019 after 25 years in the nail salon.<sup>65</sup> The discussion of toxicity in the texts reveals the ways that capitalism occupies and depletes the resources of Othered bodies. Workers are slowly contaminated by raw materials until they begin to resemble them, confirming their fate as a wasted by-product of American capitalism.

### Abortion as Labour Reproduction

Themes of bodies and waste continue with Lorde and Vuong's depictions of abortion. There is a historical relationship between abortion, labour and racism which is rooted in the self-administered abortions during slavery by Black women. Owing to the status of slaves as commodities, abortion signalled both a refusal to subject unborn children to a life of forcible labour, and a radical refusal to reproduce labour power.<sup>66</sup> Alongside a history of sterilisation abuse towards predominantly Black, poor women of colour, there exists a history of the forced ending of certain pregnancies, whether directly, or indirectly owing to circumstances. This contextualises tensions in the Birth Control Movement which often centred the demands of white, middle-class women. Thus, the movement often failed to provide a voice for poor women who supported the legalisation of abortion, 'while deploring the social conditions that

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 80-1.

<sup>65</sup> Tonya Mosley, 'Poet Ocean Vuong sifts through the aftershock of grief in "Time Is a Mother"', *NPR* (2022) <https://www.npr.org> [accessed 12/4/24].

<sup>66</sup> Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, p. 154.

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prohibited them from bearing more children’.<sup>67</sup> Thus, ‘pro-choice’ can be complicated when abortion is inescapable, owing to the lived realities of poverty and a commitment to waged labour.

In the light of this context, I consider abortion through the lens of reproductive theory, viewing gestation as the most literal form of labour reproduction. Therefore, abortion can be considered the refusal to undertake additional labour.<sup>68</sup> However, abortion may be directly tied to the survival of the waged labourer, the preservation of their job and their immediate or eventual continuation of work which is precarious and physically demanding.<sup>69</sup> Particularly in contexts where abortion is inaccessible legally and dangerous, we can consider it an example of the self-reproduction of labour power. Abortion may ensure the physical efficiency of the worker. Part of the body is wasted to ensure its continued labour, foreshadowing the discarding of the worker’s entire body when it is no longer useful.

This phenomenon is illustrated in *Zami* when Audre has a ‘homemade abortion’, which cost ‘a week and a half’s pay’, in order to keep her job and ensure her survival.<sup>70</sup> Lorde describes the process, which involved the insertion of a coil into the uterus: this ‘ruptured the bloody lining’ and ‘eventually expelled the implanted fetus’.<sup>71</sup> Audre personifies the coil as a ‘cruel benefactor’ who will ‘wash away [her] worries in blood’.<sup>72</sup> The anxiety-inducing reality of pregnancy in the context of poverty is clear, and the process of abortion is a symbolic aid.

Audre’s recovery is agony: ‘doubled over in pain’, she witnesses ‘clots of blood’ or ‘huge red blobs’ ‘fall out of [her] body into the toilet’. She sees ‘one greyish mucous shape disappear in the bowl’ and wonders ‘if that was the embryo’.<sup>73</sup> There is a semantic field of waste and an almost-casual disposal of bodily materials. Lorde repeatedly references blood

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154-5.

<sup>68</sup> Bryson, Janna, ‘Refusing and Redressing Gestational Labour: A Social Reproduction Account of Abortion, Social Politics: International Studies’, *Gender, State & Society*, 30:3 (2023), p. 780.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 787-8.

<sup>70</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, p. 125.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.



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being 'expelled' down the toilet and the indeterminate nature of the 'blobs' and 'greyish mucous shape' points to a certain detachment from the body. Despite Audre's profuse bleeding and severe discomfort, she still attempts an afternoon of work to earn an extra ten dollars, highlighting the reproductive nature of her abortion.<sup>74</sup>

This parallels Vuong's description of Rose's inescapable abortion at 17, owing to the food scarcity of the Vietnam War. Rose recalls to Little Dog that people were forced to stretch rice with sawdust and that 'you were lucky if you had rats to eat'.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, Rose's continued pregnancy was a threat to her survival, and she recalls being given a bottle of pills 'to release it – him, I mean'.<sup>76</sup> Eventually, Rose was forced to go to hospital where, as Little Dog describes:

'With only Novocain injected between your thighs, the nurses went in with a long metal instrument, and just "scraped my baby out of me, like seeds from a papaya." [...] It was that image, its practical mundanity, the preparation of fruit I have seen you do a thousand times, the spoon gliding along the papaya's flesh-orange core, a slush of black seeds plopping into the steel sink, that made it unbearable.'<sup>77</sup>

Mother and son share the narration of the painful procedure, which is centred around the stark simile likening it to the scraping of seeds from a papaya. As in *Zami*, abortion is conceptualised using a semantic field of indeterminate waste. Rose must 'release it' in a metaphorical 'slush of black seeds plopping into the steel sink'. This separation of edible and inedible parts – the papaya flesh and its seeds – points to the breaking up of the worker's body into its useful parts and waste, which is discarded. Yet, this image foreshadows the ultimate consumption of the worker's useful elements too.

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>75</sup> Vuong, *On Earth*, p. 133.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

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Rose’s abortion was likely excruciating without adequate anaesthetic and Little Dog thus finds the ‘practical mundanity’ of her simile choice ‘unbearable’. Rose further remembers seeing the embryo, ‘my baby’, ‘a brownish blur on its way to the bin’.<sup>78</sup> This recalls the ‘greyish mucous shape’ detected by Audre. The imprecision denoted by ‘brownish’ and ‘greyish’ suggests a literal and symbolic detachment from the body, which is altered in the name of labour. Anything which has the potential to interrupt the efficiency of the labourer’s body is destined to be discarded as waste.

### **Hand Imagery and Embodied Labour**

This discussion of the diverse forms of reproductive labour brings me to the exploration of hands as a symbol of manual waged labour, its impact of reproductive labour and the inheritance of workplace trauma. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the linguistic origin of ‘hand’ to denote ‘a person, with allusion to the hand as an instrument of agency’ in Old English.<sup>79</sup> Later, from 1551, ‘hand’ was used to describe ‘a person employed in any manual or unskilled work, a labourer or workman’.<sup>80</sup> Through synecdoche, workers metaphorically become their productive bodily parts, as the whole self is depersonalised. Hands have also been historically associated with reproductive care work, such as raising children or nurturing the sick. Therefore, I examine the presence of hands in *Zami* and *On Earth* as a symbol of the relationship between precarious waged labour and reproductive work. Hand imagery denotes the bodily degeneration associated with dangerous labour, and its symbolic inheritance by workers’ children. However, the communicative and nurturing potential of hands points to a possibility of connection between workers.

Lorde recalls her naïve, childhood belief that her family ‘must be rich’, despite the reality of their financial difficulties, through Audre’s perception of her mother’s hands.<sup>81</sup> Unable

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>79</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, (Oxford University Press, 2024) <https://www.oed.com/> [accessed 6/4/24].

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, p. 18.

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to afford winter gloves, her mother's 'beautiful long hands' would become 'covered with ugly red splotches and welts'.<sup>82</sup> Audre watches her mother 'rubbing her hands gingerly under cold water, and wringing them in pain'.<sup>83</sup> However, Audre's mother withholds the knowledge of their financial troubles, insisting 'she hated to wear gloves'.<sup>84</sup> Lorde's use of informal, childlike language evokes Audre's childlike perspective: she is repulsed by the 'ugly red splotches' which have rendered her mother's 'beautiful' hands 'ugly'. This simplistic antithesis suggests the childlike language of extremes. The physiologically degenerative and contaminating impact of waged and reproductive labour is invoked by the raised scars which have invaded Linda's hands.

Little Dog similarly recalls a childhood of detesting his mother's hands, which, to him, symbolise overwork and the exploitation of her labour.<sup>85</sup> Labour is further depicted as a bodily transformative and degenerative force. Vuong's narrator states 'what I know of work, I know equally of loss', 'and what I know of both I know of your hands'.<sup>86</sup> In Little Dog's experience, work means loss. A loss of the self as shown by the degeneration of the body. Little Dog regrets having 'never felt' the 'once supple contours' of Rose's hands, which were:

'already callused and blistered long before I was born, then ruined further from three decades in factories and nail salons. Your hands are hideous—and I hate everything that made them that way. I hate how they are the wreck and reckoning of a dream.'<sup>87</sup>

The image of Rose's hands in her lap 'like two partially scaled fish' haunts Little Dog. Paralleling Audre's childlike vocabulary, Little Dog perceives Rose's hands as 'hideous',

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Vuong, *On Earth*, p. 79.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

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exhibiting a simplistic, child's 'hat[red]'. Rose's hands were once 'supple' and soft, signifying the tender care and affection which Little Dog could never experience. Now, they are hardened and rough, 'callused' and unable to provide gentle care, yet simultaneously vulnerable and painfully raw as a 'scaled fish'. Rose's hands are both tarnished and stripped by their consistent labouring. Vuong points to their degeneration: they are a 'wreck', 'ruined' by Rose's persistent struggle. This description evokes the destroyed landscape of Vietnam after the war and Rose's embodiment of this trauma. As Vuong asserts elsewhere, 'the war was still inside you' many years after it.<sup>88</sup> Through this lens, war is likened to work.

There is a cruel irony to Rose's job as a manicurist. As she soothes and beautifies the hands of others, hers degenerate, withered by the harmful chemicals of beautification. Rose's honing of her technique extends beyond the working day, as Little Dog recalls seeing her practice on mannequin hands. He remembers 'disembodied hands, their fingers lustered with candy colours'.<sup>89</sup> The scene is almost disturbing, verging on horror, as apparently-severed hands 'sprouted along the kitchen counters'. Rose's seemingly inescapable waged labour continually invades her domestic space.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, these 'disembodied hands' are all 'pink and beige, the only shades they came in'.<sup>91</sup> The beautified hand of the customer is approximated to whiteness, whereas the worker's hands are 'hideous' and racialised as Other.

This racialised Othering of hands symbolise the inheritance of precarious labouring lifestyles by second-generation immigrants. In *Zami*, Audre's hands become the physical manifestation of her dangerous, prolonged exposure to radiation. The workers collectively neglect to flip the lid which protects their fingers from x-rays in order to increase production. For those who had been there for years, 'the tips of their fingers were permanently darkened' and after Audre's short time at the factory', she noticed 'dark marks on [her] fingers also, that only gradually faded'.<sup>92</sup> There is a degeneration at the workers' bodily extremities, their

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, p. 168.

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fingertips, as if they are gradually wasting away or decomposing. That this deterioration is signalled by 'darkened' fingers exposes the racialisation of toxified bodies in dangerous working conditions.

Similarly, by the end of Little Dog's very first day working at the tobacco farm, his hands 'were so thick and black with sap, dirt, pebbles, and splinters', resembling 'the bottom of a pan of burned rice'.<sup>93</sup> Through this simile, Little Dog's hands, like Audre's, are shown to be darkened by dangerous, manual labour. Vuong's tactile listing constructs Little Dog's hands as dense and painful. Additionally, he recalls feeling his 'fingers sticky and raw over the handlebars' on his bike ride home.<sup>94</sup> Little Dog's hands are completely engulfed and physically restrained by the demands of labour. Like his mother's, they are paradoxically both hardened and raw.

Despite the physical strain of work of the tobacco farm, Little Dog finds that 'the work somehow sutured a fracture inside [him]'.<sup>95</sup> He speaks fondly of:

'a work of unbreakable links and collaboration. [...] A work of myriad communications, I learned to speak to the men not with my tongue, which was useless there, but with smiles, hand gestures, even silences, hesitations. I made out people, verbs, abstractions, ideas with my fingers, my arms, and by drawing in the dirt.'<sup>96</sup>

Despite the physicality of the work, inter-worker connection is shown to be spiritually healing through medical metaphors of healing the body. These 'unbreakable links and collaboration' signal interconnectedness among workers. This interdependence is forged by bodily communication, which is used to overcome the language barriers between Little Dog and other

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<sup>93</sup> Vuong, *On Earth*, p. 90.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90-1.

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migrant workers. His tongue is ‘useless’, but through ‘hand gestures’, his ‘fingers’, ‘arms’, and ‘drawing in the dirt’, Little Dog bonds with his fellow workers, building a sense of community and comradeship. No longer signalling depersonalisation, the foregrounding of hands here highlights the humanity of workers through their literal and symbolic communication. While work is positioned as a source of bodily harm and ‘fracture’, it also has the potential to ‘suture’ wounds.

This echoes Lorde’s depiction of queer communities of mutual care, which is conceptualised using the body and bodily exchange. In a resolutionary epilogue, Lorde states that ‘every woman [she has] ever loved has left her print upon [her]’.<sup>97</sup> This metaphorical fingerprint symbolises the physical embodiment of the emotional and nurturing labour which Lorde has both enacted and received. Referencing her apartment on Seventh Street in New York, Lorde reflects:

‘The casing of this place had been my home for seven years, the amount of time it takes for the human body to completely renew itself, cell by living cell. And in those years my life had become increasingly a bridge and field of women. *Zami* [...] *Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers.*’<sup>98</sup>

While labour can be a toxicant, slowly deteriorating the body, the ‘work’ of communities of care signifies a physical regeneration. While De Veaux describes bodily self-betrayal as cells ‘turn upon themselves’, Lorde positions queer communities of mutual care as a radical challenge to the parasitic workplace.<sup>99</sup> ‘Cell by living cell’, the ‘human body’ is symbolically healed and detoxified by a radical, queer network. The humanity of these communities stands in stark contrast to the precarious workplace, as signalled by Lorde’s fingerprint imagery. As Foucault

<sup>97</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, p. 303.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, p. 41.

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argues, while capitalist systems attempt to regulate bodies, rendering them uniform and machine-like, fingerprint imagery symbolises the persistence of distinctive worker subjectivities.

### Conclusion

Overall, Lorde and Vuong explore labouring bodies under exploitative capitalism. Non-white workers are both immediately confronted by and slowly contaminated by the poisonous materials of precarious labour. This slow colonisation of bodies eventually renders them toxicants, as they begin to resemble that which has contaminated them. Toxic workplaces seep into the spaces where labour is reproduced. This phenomenon is often fatal, the body ultimately wasted as a capitalist by-product. The presence of abortion in *Zami* and *On Earth* can be considered through the lens of labour reproduction, as it enables the survival and continued waged labour of the worker in contexts of extreme poverty. Labour reproduction is thus associated with the discarding of useless bodily parts, yet this foreshadows the ultimate disposal of the worker's entire body. The tensions between waged labour and labour reproduction can be traced using Lorde and Vuong's use of hand imagery. Hands signal the bodily degenerative impact of waged labour, experiences which are inherited by workers' children. However, hands may symbolise a glimpse of potential for inter-worker connection and comradeship through symbolic bodily healing.

I have considered *Zami* and *On Earth* in conversation to underscore the diverse consequences of American capitalist exploitation from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. Discussing the texts in dialogue exposes a perpetually toxic and physiologically harmful history of labour, a history which is racialised and gendered. In self-consciously employing precarious realism through semi-autobiography, the writers foreground the brutal realities of the precarious labour. Lorde and Vuong construct precarious bodies 'aching' under the strain of brutal labour, rendered 'toxic' by the harmful materials of capitalism and, ultimately, 'underpaid' for these extreme physiological pursuits. Yet, in exposing US state exploitation, they challenge

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both the systemic neglect of and active harming of Othered bodies, centring the state's complicity. Labourer's bodies are constructed as capitalist by-products, a phenomenon powerfully opposed by their fight for survival and healing in the face of sustained brutality.



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