

CHAPTER ELEVEN: ZAMI

As a keeper of African diasporic faith traditions, I acknowledge my spiritual accompaniment. I am conscious of the spiritual accompaniment of my participants. However, I had not considered the metaphysical accompaniment of living people whom we hold in our hearts. Paradoxically, the accompaniment that was verbally acknowledged in the form of classmates and family members in participant narratives was less visible to me than the spiritual accompaniment that was rarely named directly by participants. Throughout the project, they brought their friends with them into the interview space. They embodied their community members. The interview became a liminal space, a space that transcends temporal and spatial planes.

In consideration of this concept of spiritual and psychical accompaniment, I must acknowledge that this study has a seventh participant, bringing it to completion. Her name is Venus. I know of her from numerous sources, and I felt compelled to acknowledge the centrality of her experience, and the effects that it had on her peers who participated in this study. As a departure from traditional narrative methods, I opted to include the experience of this young woman to surface the intersectional experiences of young Black women in NYCIS, the “pushout” experience of one young Black woman in NYCIS, and the lasting secondary trauma that her friends experienced.

I decided that I would tell the young woman’s story by combining multiple narratives to form a composite narrative and composite participant. This participant is named Zami, which means ‘friend’ in Kreyòl Ayisyen, Louisiana Creole, and other French-lexicon based languages in the Eastern Caribbean, such as Patois of Trinidad, Dominica, and Saint Lucia, as examples. Spelled invariably as *zami* or *zanmi*, the word has multiple senses and bears an important lineage

in the Black Feminist Thought tradition. In 1982, the renowned Caribbean American poet, scholar, and activist Audre Lorde published *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, a “biomythography” that integrates biography, myth, and history. Lorde uses the word ‘zami’ in the sense of women who are friends and lovers, similar to the word *mati* used in Suriname (Wekker, 2006). Hence, in being rooted in BAD languages and signifying a range of intimate relationships among women, zami is an appropriate name for a composite character who illuminates the intertwining themes of Black girlhood, kinship, and broad-ranging intimacy in this study.

In the transcript that follows, the composite character, Zami, narrates the story of her close friend, Venus. The school is Pushout Prep, an allusion to the alarming percentage of Black girls who are “pushed out” of K-12 schools (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2018) and pushed onto the school to prison pipeline. I present the transcript without analysis and invite readers to consider how her story relates to the themes explored in the six preceding participant descriptions. While reading the account, and afterwards, consider the following inquiries:

1. How do ideologies of race, gender, and class impact Venus, Zami, other students, and administrators in the narrative?
2. What were the various harms enacted against Venus and her peers? What needs to be repaired?
3. In what ways did the youth resist these harms and exhibit agency?
4. Does this account relate to anything that you have experienced personally or professionally? Whom do you most identify with in this narrative?

Zami: Um, I had personally witnessed one of my close friends be kicked out of high school because someone accused her of changing, like the wallpaper on the back of like a professor's laptop to something that wasn't okay. [Umhm] And they had no physical evidence besides the fact that someone else had blamed her, and they kicked her out.

Kahdeidra: Yeah. Can you talk more about that? Do you, do you think that that had, um, that discrimination played a role in that, any kind of discrimination?

Zami: I always say a thousand percent, yes. But I've talked to the Head of the Upper School. He's always like, no. The Dean is always like, no, she made her own decisions. And these are both faculty of color, mind you...I don't believe that. Um, I think that's an act of Whi—there's the work of White supremacy. And I also say this because my friend, Venus, we are the same sign. Um, and I don't know, I've always been drawn to the people that are misunderstood. Even, you know, even if sometimes it was, you know, difficult for me, it was always the people who are misunderstood. And Venus, to say the least, like she's a revolutionary. I don't know if it's always in the right way. But she, she...she doesn't allow people to say anything to her that she doesn't want to hear. She doesn't listen. If she doesn't like you, she'll make it clear. She's not one to conform. She's not a conformist, you know, in that sense to White supr—you know, to this-this White institution. She's not a conformist. Um, but, if teachers said anything to her, she'd ignore them. She-just really, you couldn't have any control over her at all, basically. Um, and I feel like with that, teachers allowed themselves to basically take their faith out of her. Like they, they just—they just throw her to the side like she wasn't a human being, just because she didn't wanna follow your rules, you know? And she kept getting in trouble with her advisor.

Zami: And also it's a thing—you know I'm gonna get to, you know, the moment before things got difficult, but nobody liked her. Nobody. The White kids did not like her at all. The administration did not like her at all. Nobody liked her. It's just us, the Black people. And especially, you know, I always tried to just like be there for her. Cause I was just like, I know that people treat you weird, and I know that you deserve love no matter how you act, whether you're "mean" [Umhm] you deserve love and that's it. And I've always, I've even said it to the administration. I was just like, well, the first thing that you did wrong was, one, blame her for this. But, two, you took your faith out of her. And so how could you expect her to follow anything? To have faith in herself, to believe in this community in, at all, when everybody so blatantly doesn't like her and they make it so clear. And so I'ma get to where—I'm gonna to tell you how it's so clear, too. So, this is already the basis of that. Like everybody doesn't like her because she doesn't, she doesn't abide by rules, which I love. That's

where the respect comes in. I have a lot of respect for her. And...basically I think in our junior year, maybe, cause I think she was taken out by...I think—they kind of make it seem like she took herself out, kind of the thing cause she'd have to repeat something kind of thing. Um, and there was a laptop in the teacher's room. It was a teacher's laptop. I love that man, but ummn. There's a teacher's laptop in a room. I think the only couple of people—It was Venus and, was Venus even in there? It was a bunch of White people, a bunch of White people, White boys, specifically, whose humor is very much like, you know, they'll like, they'd make jokes about like the Soviet Union and things like that. Just like weird stuff, very like European, like weird, weird people.

Zami: Um, and I think Venus maybe came in the room later. There's a period when nobody was in there but those boys, those White boys. And they put, I don't know if it was a swastika or, no, what...I think it was maybe the Soviet Union sign. I don't know. Right? Is that the hammer? Is that—what, what is that?

Kahdeidra: Um...yeah, I believe so.

Zami: Yeah. I think it was, I think it was the hammer or whatever, whatever. [Umhm] Everybody blamed Venus. Everybody blamed her, every sin—every single one, whoever was in that room minus these three White boys, every single White person blamed her. And all of us were like, that's hilarious. Like that-that, I was like, it's really funny that you could even say that. And I mean, I don't know how vulgar I can be, but like I straight up simply was like, that's not Venus's humor.

Zami: It's not. She would never. That's not a joke she would make. Venus did anything, she'd maybe put like a penis on the screen and we all laugh at it. That's the type of person she is. And then on top of that, Venus didn't even know what the sign was. She didn't even know the symbol. And I-I knew before she like even had a chance to say that, I know she didn't know the symbol. I knew she didn't know what it was. I was like, "You don't even know what this is, do you?" She's like, no. She doesn't know. I'm like, "This is not your humor." And the thing is, if they had ever gotten to know her, [Umhm] if they had known anything about her, they would know, "Why would Venus be putting the Soviet Union?" when you have a kid, a European kid, whose families are literally like from Europe, he's rich, talks about Europe all the time. Like he's lived there, his whole life. His friends all talk about it, like they've lived there, too. And you think a Black girl, from Spanish Harlem, who don't even have time with all y'all is going to put the Soviet Union flag up on a White teacher's computer? So everybody blames her, all the White people blamed her. All the White students, they interviewed everybody, they said it was her. And

I think at one point the teacher thought it was her, too. And I kept going to bat for her. I was like, and I think the Dean also wanted to go to bat for her, as well. I don't think she believed it because I was like, that's not Venus's humor. [Umhm] Most of us don't even know what that is. I only learned about that because of like middle school.

Zami:

Um, so that was the start of it, where they blamed her like that and tried to get her in trouble because it was a serious offense. Like the Soviet Union, like it was very, very serious. I think it was also something about communism. [Umhm] Yeah. Yeah. And I was just like, this, this is serious. And they like, they were seriously trying to get her in trouble. Like, like legitimately, like there's gonna be a huge problem. And we were all just like, we like went to the Dean. I think all the Black girls, we all got together. We were like, we-we cornered her in the hallway and we were like, this isn't her, you know, she didn't do this. And we just kept trying to support her, but I don't remember what really happened. I think they dropped it completely. Like they didn't try to investigate to find the person who actually did it. They just—Well, it's not Venus, so therefore it's nobody kind of thing, you know? Um, and so just by then, I was just like, her confidence is not there...you know, like Venus really like...she—she wanted to be like, she wanted to be a doctor. The girl is smart, like she's a genius. Like, I feel like, I dunno, I'm like fan girling, but I, you know, I love, I love my Black people. And like, she's—she's brilliant. She's brilliant. [Umhm] One of the most, like, brilliant people I've met. And, basically like, what happened was I think an English teacher said that Venus owed her some assignments or something. Like said that you—you're behind on a lot of these assignments, but I guess I never communicated Venus that that was the case, kind of thing. [Umhm] So it was just this miscommunication, whatever. So she had to do summer school, and we all didn't really know like that she was doing summer school, and we didn't know what was going on.

Zami:

She messaged me the night before, like, "Hey," before everything's due, really. And I didn't know, like, "Hey, can you help me with like all these things?" And I was like, I don't know if I can even help you do all this, you know, whatever, whatever. Um, and then later on we found out that like, she was not coming back, basically. She didn't pass the summer school course. And that English teacher also never liked her. And we all knew that she never liked her, ever. Um, and I just felt like it wasn't like necessarily like foul play, but it was just like the confidence and the way that you treat this student has a lot to do with how they feel about themselves and respect themselves. And after all of that, like her life, like literally it didn't fall apart, but like she—she was kicked out of Access.

Zami:

And to me that was like the wildest thing ever, because she had to go to

like a whole new, random public school, doing all this work within Access Awarded and within middle school and within this high school, and because she was kicked out of the high school, she was also kicked out of Access Awarded. [Hmm]

Zami:

Like she was, you know, she lost all these opportunities, and like, here's this doctor, this girl who's worked so hard to like, you know, get what she wants to be. And then these White people—well, she even worked hard to get into these White institutions. Like you just, you—you—you took all your faith out of her. You made it seem like she was alone. You made it seem like she was a problem, an issue. [Umm] Then you wonder why, like, why didn't she have faith in herself, or why she doesn't like everybody, and why she's so angry. Cause you treated her like trash. Like you couldn't, you forced her that way. And then after, like she was gone, it was kind of like, nobody even really cared. Like they didn't make it such a big deal or anything. And I talked to the Head of Upper School, and I was like, this isn't fair. And we, we kept debating about it cause I'd always bring it up, and I'd be like, "I don't care what you say. That's not true. Cause going to put all the blame on her and you can't do that. You say Venus had all these choices. No, you didn't give her any." Um, and so that, that was that. But then, the contrast is like the same White boy that was harassing everybody, he had to take medical leave. Even after people came forth and confessed and showed receipts. And the teacher had known about everything, and he was fired, this little White boy got to take medical leave. He took medical leave, and then he came back and he continued the same offenses, but he didn't get kicked out. He chose to leave, and he transferred to [a selective NYC public high school], and he got to go to places, like he got to go to [a private university in the Northeast ranked in the top 60-70 colleges by U.S. News and World Report]. He got to go there!

Zami:

Venus couldn't even apply for some of the—like most of the places that she wanted to go to, cause all these places had already kicked her out, and you know, done whatever, and I was just like, look at that! [Umhm] Look at that! Kids doing drugs in the bathroom, you interview them. They say, no, they didn't do it, and that's it. That's all you have to say. But you kick out this Black girl who you basically forced out, but then everyone else, their records are clean? Like that, and it's, you know, put the blame on all the students, what they do. But no, it's very clear in your community what you prioritize. And that's money and that's it. And it always has been, and we know that, so remember this story, Venus's story, and like how—She's great, you know, she's doing great, and she—she's figured everything out, but it was a very devastating time like. I don't know about, you know, for her, of course, but I—I was very like, hurt by it. I was very hurt by it. I was just like, Pushout Prep, this is one of the worst things you've ever done, you know? So...

Kahdeidra: Umm. [4 second pause] Thank you for sharing that. I know it's not, um... It's traumatizing to talk about. Yeah.

Zami: I'm glad she's like, doing well, you know, and like, I have the utmost faith in her. Like she's a very determined person. And again, I always, you know, talk about these stories from a state of privilege because I know people don't look at me that way. You know, they look at me differently. They make me feel, I mean—You know, White people view Black people in very different ways obviously, but I feel like I was able to be slightly more humanized than some of my other friends. And so, I like to be very cautious and aware of that.

(Later in the interview)

Kahdeidra: Hmmn. Okay. And what types of experiences made you feel bad or ashamed to have attended your school?

Zami: Um, I think definitely after they kicked out one of my close friends I kinda felt like ashamed to be going to this school cause I was like, wow, like this school is really messed up.