"A Private Woe:" Towards a Race-Sensitive Definition of the Everyday

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> "American racism was a new and crushing reality that my parents had to deal with every day of their lives once they came to this country. They handled it as a private woe."
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> — Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (69)

Introduction

This paper tries to find a definition of the everyday which adequately reflects and accommodates black lives and experiences. Through a brief reading of Rita Felski's essay "The Invention of Everyday Life," which surveys the existing Western theories and definitions of the everyday while providing her own reading, the paper underlines the apparently salient features of the everyday, which prove contradictory to the black experience. Sections of Audre Lorde's biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, provide examples of everyday racist violence on black bodies, discussing how these instances of racist violence disturb black people's enjoyment of the everyday. The paper questions the possibility of black people enjoying and defining everyday life in the face of continuous racist violence. The paper looks at this question in light of Andrew Smith's book chapter on everyday racism titled "The Everyday Denial of Everydayness" and examines whether Smith's concepts of the everyday, particularly the ideas of "the everyday denial of everydayness" (Smith 53) and the "encounter" (Smith 56), answer the above question and offer a more race-sensitive definition of the everyday. Smith provides an adequate conversation between racist violence and the everyday and problematises the extant theoretical tradition of defining the everyday. However, he also underlines the impossibility of a black everyday. Departing from Smith's pessimism and taking inspiration from Matthew F. Delmont's *The Black Quotidian* and Afro-pessimist scholars like Christina Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman, the paper tries to find a definition of the black everyday which simultaneously takes into account the negativity of racist violence and a positive relation between mundaneness and black cultural tradition. Finally, the paper studies the genre of the biomythography, *Zami* and the black everyday, in relation to Felski's reading of the everyday as a "secular" concept and shows how the text and the black everyday troubles the everyday's relation to the secular.

Zami: A New Spelling of My Name is a biomythography narrating Lorde's relationships with women throughout her life. Biomythography is a genre that exceeds the limits of autobiography and encompasses myth, history, and psychology. Using Afrocentric myths and drawing on histories of black racist and gendered violence, Lorde narrates her everyday processes of self-definition as a black lesbian and a "woman-identified-woman." The text is replete with instances of the black everyday, each contributing to Lorde's developing consciousness of her own black femininity. As such, it provides a fertile ground for studying the possibilities of defining the black everyday and its relation to blackness. This paper thus concentrates on the everyday in two stages of Audre's life: her childhood and her adult relationship with Afrekete/Kitty.

Section 1: Reading Felski and Locating Questions of Racist Violence in the Everyday

Felski introduces the everyday as "*indisputably*: the essential, taken-for-granted *continuum* of *mundane* activities that frames our forays into more esoteric or exotic worlds" (Felski 77) (emphasis mine). From this definition, it can be inferred that any interruption in the narrative continuum of mundane activities is unanticipated, not taken-for-granted, and at least a little spectacular. For instance, if a person walking on the road to work falls into a puddle, ruining his clothes and gaining minor injuries in the process, the continuum is thrown off. The man's day becomes, at the very least, a bad day, *worse* (and hence a little extraordinary) than the everyday.

Taking into account Felski's preliminary definition of the everyday, it is pertinent to examine a passage from Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Here, Lorde describes an apparently everyday event: a young Audre walking on 125th Street between Lenox and Eighth Avenues shopping with her mother —

> As a very little girl, I remember shrinking from a particular sound, a hoarsely sharp, guttural rasp, because it often meant a nasty glob of grey spittle upon my coat or shoe an instant later. My mother wiped it off with the little pieces of newspaper she always carried in her purse … It was not until years later once in conversation I said to her: 'Have you noticed people don't spit into the wind so much the way they used to?' (Lorde 17)

Is the above anecdote indicative of a scene of everyday life, at least according to Felski's definition? There is a narrative suggestive of a continuum — it can be assumed that Audre puts on her coat and other clothing, takes her mother's hand, walks to the 125th Street with her, goes into the requisite shops, and so on and so forth. All the activities contributing to this continuum are certainly mundane and taken-for-granted — they are so ordinary that Audre does not mention them. When the anecdote takes place, Audre is in the middle of the continuum of mundane events. However, the question that arises is as follows: is the primary event of this anecdote, in which a passer-by spits on Audre's show, a mundane event? Clearly, what Audre faces here is racial assault — she even sets the stage for such an assault by stating that "Tensions on the [125th] street were high, as they always are in racially mixed zones of transition" (Lorde 17). The assault, even though it did not injure Audre, indicates the passer-by's anti-black desire to harm and possibly eliminate her black presence on the street. The act of spitting on her indicates not only her dehumanisation but also the potential of being seriously hurt by anti-black hostility. The potential stoppage of not only her continuum but also her 'being' makes this assault extraordinary as opposed to mundane. Further, the assault disturbs, if not outright disrupts, Audre's continuum of mundane activities. The anecdote, therefore, appears to be not an everyday incident at all, following Felski's definition. It is, rather, a spectacular event of assault.

However, a problem arises in such a reading once Felski's detailed reading of the everyday is taken into account. In the later parts of her essay, she defines three characteristics of the everyday, one of which is repetition. She states, "Everyday life … conveys the fact of repetition; it refers not to the singular or unique but to that which happens 'day after day' … For [Henri] Lefebvre, this cyclical structure of everyday life is its quintessential feature" (Felski 81). A second look at Lorde's anecdote suggests that the event of racist violence is essentially repetitive and, therefore, not quite unanticipated. Audre's mother *always* carries pieces of newspaper in her purse to wipe off the spit; her anticipatory gesture of carrying newspapers suggests the repetitive nature of the assault on her daughter. Audre also indicates the repetitive aspect of the assault in two cases — first, through her anticipatory action of "shrinking" from a "guttural rasp" (Lorde 17), and second, through her question to her mother: "Have you noticed people don't spit into the wind *so much the way they used to*" (Lorde 17)? The repetitive and anticipated nature of the racial assault problematises my earlier reading of the act of spitting as an extraordinary event as opposed to a mundane activity. Further, because Audre's mother anticipates the spitting, she minimises the disruptive effects of the act. She simply wipes off the offending spit, and the mother-and-child duo restart their continuum of mundane activities. Under such circumstances, it can be believed that the repetitive aspect of racial hostility makes it as much an everyday activity as, for instance, an activity like saying hello to a neighbour.

By this logic, is every instance of racist violence mundane unless it amounts to the victim's death or severe disability? Keeping aside the obvious discomfort of equating something as serious as racist violence to an everyday activity like buying groceries, this paper argues that racist violence that does not amount to the victim's death/severe disability (i.e., to the stoppage of the victim's being and ability to conduct everyday life) is not completely

mundane, due to its capability of causing disruption to the continuum. However, its repetition makes it possibly an everyday, mundane act. This results in a paradox — racist violence is disruptive, and racist violence is so repetitive that it is mundane. This paradoxical nature of racist violence encourages a rethinking of the definition of the everyday itself to make it more reflective of the experiences of black persons like Audre.

In her essay, Felski states that,

> Everyday life is … [a] democratic concept … Democratic because it recognizes the paramount shared reality of a mundane, material embeddedness in the world. Everyone, from the most famous to the most humble, eats, sleeps, yawns, defecates; no one escapes the reach of the quotidian. Everyday life, in other words, does not only describe the lives of ordinary people, but recognizes that every life contains an element of the ordinary. We are all ultimately anchored in the mundane. (Felski 79)

Does little Audre's life fit into Felski's concept of a democratic everyday life? To an extent, yes — she presumably eats, sleeps, yawns, and defecates like any other person regardless of their racial identity. All of these are mundane activities, and therefore, she is "anchored in the mundane" (Felski 79). However, Audre's reality as part of a racial minority begs another question — do these mundane activities remain mundane if they are scrutinised and, ultimately, denied their completion? For instance, in *Zami*, Audre visits Washington D.C. with her family, where they decide to eat ice cream at an ice cream and soda-fountain parlour. This activity of eating ice cream is certainly a mundane one and is representative of the larger mundanity she is embedded in. However, soon after they enter the ice-cream parlour, they are refused service because of existing Jim Crow laws:

> Two blocks away from our hotel, the family stopped for a dish of vanilla ice cream at a Breyer's ice cream and soda fountain … The waitress moved along the line of us closer to my father and spoke again. 'I said I kin give you to take out, but you can't eat here. Sorry.' … Even my two sisters copied my parents' pretense that nothing unusual and anti-american had occurred. (Lorde 79-80)

What is not democratic in Audre's everyday life here is anti-black scrutiny of their mundane activity of eating ice cream and the consequent denial of that mundane activity. The fact that their mundane activity (of eating) deserves scrutiny and is *deniable* makes it extraordinary and consequently challenges the everydayness of their narrative (if an activity is extraordinary, it is not everyday). However, once again, the everyday's feature of repetition comes into the picture and makes the family's extraordinary circumstance of being denied a right to eat ordinary in its repetitiveness and, consequently, it takes on a taken-for-granted quality. Audre states that the family behaves that nothing extraordinary has taken place: "Even my two sisters copied my parents' pretense that nothing unusual and anti-american had occurred" (Lorde 80). Accordingly, what takes place is a similar paradox — racial scrutiny (which can be read as a kind of violence) is disruptive, and racial scrutiny is so repetitive that it is mundane. Yet, this paradox changes how one looks at the terms mundane, ordinary and unremarkable — apparently mundane actions like eating and scrutinising are loaded with various meanings. The democratic nature of the everyday, which is dependent on the fact that everyone is embedded in mundanity, does not seem as democratic when the very definitions of mundanity undergo various slippages based on the demography of who is embedded in it. Accordingly, Felski's definition loses some of its "democratic" (79) and "indisputable" (77) aspects in the face of the black experience.

From the above reading of Felski's definition of the everyday in conversation with Lorde's *Zami*, this paper arrives at the following questions. If Felski's definition, and the definitions she derives her reading of the everyday from, is not adequately conversing with the black experience, what can be an acceptable definition of the everyday for black people? Further, is it possible to find such a definition for black people which does not exclude them

from ordinariness but which does not erase any consideration of racist violence, however unremarkable?

Section 2: Reading Smith and the Impossibility of a 'Black Everyday'

Scholars studying race, racism and black subjectivities have already contested established definitions of the everyday and have tried to define the everyday through the lens of the black experience. Andrew Smith, in his book chapter "The Everyday Denial of Everydayness," argues that existing race-neutral definitions of the everyday do not take into account "everyday racism" (54). He acknowledges that racist violence "involves mundane and unremarkable practices" (Smith 53), which, together, form an arguably mundane narrative continuum culminating in the creation of "racialized identities" (53) and their social life. Therefore, it can be read from Smith's arguments that the everyday for black people involves the regular inclusion of a set of "mundane and unremarkable practices" (53) which racialises them. However, he also acknowledges that because racism is violent, it is disruptive. So far, Smith's reading confirms my earlier reading that racist violence is paradoxically mundane and disruptive and that this paradox animates the black experience of the everyday. However, the similarities of our readings end here.

Smith states that "we can talk about a form of racism which is 'everyday' … because it involves the making of 'race' *out of* the everyday itself, so to speak: that is, through the attribution or denial of the qualities of ordinariness or familiarity or given-ness" (Smith 54). This sentence can be read in two ways: racialised bodies are produced from the everyday, and that those racialised bodies become external to the everyday. To further this point, Smith invokes Henri Lefebvre's reading of the everyday as being characterised by "ambivalence" and by "the prospect of both 'the given' and 'the unanticipated'" (Smith 54). Smith understands Lefebvre's polarities of "the given" and "the unanticipated" (54) as "a racialized border or a limit" (54). This statement can be read as a kind of narrative: the black person, initially situated as ordinary/mundane (and hence "the given" (Smith 54)) through her continuum of mundane activities, is racialised by mundane instances of racist violence and, consequently, forced across this racialised border and moved to the other side, that of the "unanticipated" (Smith 54). In this way, racist violence is not simply a disruption but a denial of the everyday nature of the black person's continuum of mundane activities. At this juncture, Smith introduces the idea of the "encounter" (56) — which can be read as the black person not just encountering racist violence but also encountering the "limit" of *being* ordinary/anticipated in mundane settings. In this "limit," this "racialized border," black subjects face a threat to their ordinary mode of being ("you do not belong here" (Smith 56)). Smith terms this situation as the "everyday denial of everydayness" (53).

This paper reads this assertion by Smith as pessimistic because, according to him, the black person cannot be 'black' and 'ordinary' at the same time because of the racist violence that structures her in everyday life. In the narrative of traversing "the given" — "unanticipated" binary, the black person effectively reaches a spectacular encounter — a situation where she can no longer call her everyday life everyday. For a black person, the definition of an everyday, *including* her, becomes structurally impossible. This paper is aware of Smith's warning:

> to say that everyday racism entails the everyday denial of everydayness, then, should not be read as suggesting that those who are subject to racism do not have 'everyday lives' or that they are excluded from the politics of the everyday. (Smith 57)

This paper agrees with him, that black people do initiate and go through a "continuum of mundane activities" (Felski 77). However, the encounter, or even the potential of an encounter, pre-empts the narrative completion of the continuum of mundane activities. Smith suggests a possible mode in which a black person can react to this impossibility of the black everyday. The black person turns their everyday life into a politicised, spectacular battleground against racist violence. Smith suggests that black people's initiation and performance of the mundane as a political act is aimed at "the defence of a space that allows those who are racialized to

reclaim given-ness or ordinariness, and all of the unremarkable qualities of the everyday" (Smith 57). He refers to bell hooks, positing her idea of a "'political commitment' to the labour which makes possible a liveable life" (Smith 57). The question this paper asks here is: does a mundane activity not become spectacular when a black person performs it with political commitment? Do black people perform mundane activities keeping in mind the politics of their performance? Do they necessarily perform their mundane tasks with the aim of revolution? If they do, do they remain mundane?

This paper posits that mundane activity does not remain mundane if it is performed with conscious political commitment. Consider, for instance, the Civil Rights Movement, where black people protested Jim Crow segregation in buses and restaurants. They initiated an everyday situation — a continuum of mundane activities involving taking buses, sitting down, going to work (like Rosa Parks), and sitting down to eat in a restaurant. However, because of their everyday racialisation (through mundane activities like segregating 'coloured' seats), they encounter a limit in everydayness — they are denied their everydayness through the denial of acts like sitting down on a bus seat or at a restaurant table. Their modes of defending their ordinariness, like persisting in sitting down at the bus or restaurant seat reserved for 'whites', are apparently mundane, but their political commitment behind the acts made them spectacular historical events. Further, making a mundane activity political further refuses black people their right to be ordinary — they have to be heroic protagonists even when embedded in apparently mundane settings. This reduces the black experience to a binary of either black triumph or black tragedy.

In *Zami*, Audre moves across the given-unanticipated binary when she moves along the continuum of mundane activities and encounters the passer-by who spits on her. The exact moment of encounter is indicated by the unpleasant sound that breaks into her perception — "I remember shrinking from a particular sound, a hoarsely sharp, guttural rasp" (Lorde 17) — and at that exact moment she is racialised — signifiers connoting her skin colour, her ethnicity, in short, her 'blackness' are placed on her at the very moment of the encounter. The "guttural rasp" (Lorde 17) indicates the limit of the givenness of her mundane activities and her presence on 125th Street, and from then on, she not only experiences the hitherto unanticipated hostility of the people on the street but also experiences herself becoming different and unanticipated. In Smith's words, she faces "the terrifying attribution of difference" (Smith 56). The "guttural rasp" also indicates Audre's impossibility of completing the continuum of mundane activities without the intrusion of the "terrifying attribution of difference" (Smith 56), without encountering the limit of the everyday.

So far, Lorde's anecdote conforms to Smith's narrative about the impossibility of the everyday for racialised beings. Accordingly, the next step in Smith's schema is the conversion of Audre's everyday from the impossible to the possible through political commitment from her or her mother. Here, *Zami* departs from Smith's narrative. Audre's mother, Linda, reacts to the racist violence against her daughter through a series of denials. She first denies that the assault was racist — "if she couldn't stop white people from spitting on her children because they were Black, she would insist it was something else" (Lorde 17). By stating that the assault was "something else," Linda denies Audre's mundane racialisation by the passer-by and, through that, denies the limit of everydayness. Her denial of her daughter's racialisation is a complete inverse of hooks' and Smith's calls for political commitment — instead of embracing 'blackness' as an identity and defending it, Linda runs away from the signifier 'black' altogether. She refuses to acknowledge any external, anti-black threats to Audre's everydayness and being. She also denies that the assault was an assault after all — she considers it a careless accident. Lorde states that, "she fussed about low-class people who had no better sense nor manners than to spit into the wind no matter where they went, impressing upon me that this humiliation was totally random" (Lorde 17). By denying the assault, Linda denies the presence of a disruptive encounter altogether.

It can be argued that Linda's denial of the encounter, racialisation, and the impossibility of the everyday is mere fantasy, equivalent to the proverbial ostrich with its head in the sand and that it does not undo the impossibility of Audre's everyday. However, Linda's refusal to consider the spitting as racist violence is indicative of a different way in which black people can look at the everyday itself. Instead of looking at the racist encounter as a limit, Linda looks at it as part of the anticipated continuum of mundane activities itself, indicated by her act of carrying the newspaper pieces. She dismantles the idea of a spectacular rupture in the everyday and swings back to the moment before it. What she performs is a form of recalibration to the 'given' aspect of the everyday *despite* the presence of racism. This recalibration refuses anti-black society any spectacular reaction to the encounter. While Smith argues that anti-black society performs the "everyday denial of everydayness" (Smith 53), Linda denies it by refusing to accept that Audre is different from anti-black people on the street. She refuses to allow signifiers connoting difference and extraordinariness to accrue and stick to Audre's person. This refusal can be read in radical terms — Linda completely refuses to allow Audre to be anything except *ordinary*. This paper is not suggesting that a pacifist adaptation to racist violence is a *more* radical strategy than a political defense of blackness and its traditions. What it is suggesting is that Linda's act of denying the effects of racist violence (racialisation, limiting the everyday, the attribution of difference, etc.) on Audre is also a viable black strategy of preserving the everyday, and it should not be dismissed as mere assimilationist behaviour.

Through its reading of *Zami*, this paper has attempted to show certain lacunae in Smith's concept of the everyday. While Smith certainly reads race in discourses of the everyday, in his reading, black persons are structurally situated outside the limits of the everyday. His reading of the everyday as impossible to define in terms of the black experience without focusing solely on violence and denial ignores the agency of black people to choose and live ordinary lives *despite* racism. Further, his reading is not completely democratic either — he side-lines black people who do not choose a political commitment to defend themselves and blackness in spectacular ways. In a sense, he is trying to dismantle anti-black society's denial of black everydayness by denying black people the choice to remain absolutely ordinary. In Smith's definition, black people are essentialised solely as fighting, protesting, and political beings, and 'blackness' is solely connected to racist violence. If Felski's definition takes up one extreme of the spectrum, which is of complete erasure of racist violence in defining the everyday, Smith's definition takes up the other extreme of the spectrum, which is to solely understand black people's everyday through racist violence. In the following section, this paper attempts to find a definition of the everyday that negotiates with these two extremes and is respectful of black people's experience of racist violence while also the various ways they remain ordinary *and* black at the same time. Here, the word 'black' is intended to signify Afrocentric cultural traditions, choices, and positive identity markers.

Section 3: Re-reading 'Blackness' and Defining a 'Black Everyday'

Scholars of black studies have recently begun to read the black experience in terms of ordinariness and the everyday. Matthew F. Delmont, in the introduction to his archive *Black Quotidian*, destabilises the binary between black triumph and black tragedy and locates black history in the mundane. He states, "By emphasizing that black history can be mundane, not only triumphant or tragic, *Black Quotidian* offers a thematically diverse foundation from which to research and teach African-American history" (Delmont Web). Notable Afro-pessimist[1] scholars like Christina Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman present the black ordinary and the black everyday as existing in spite of anti-black violence and working to position blackness as a thriving, complex ontological category underlined by beauty and care. Saidiya Hartman, in her book *Scenes of Subjection*, champions the liberatory power of the black everyday without resorting to making the everyday a site of vocal, public, and political commitment. She states that

> Everyday practices ... illuminate inchoate and utopian expressions of freedom that are not and perhaps cannot be actualized elsewhere. The desires and longings that exceed the frame of civil rights and political emancipation find expression in quotidian acts labeled “fanciful” “exorbitant,” and “excessive” primarily because they express an understanding or imagination of freedom quite at odds with bourgeois expectations. (13)

Christina Sharpe, in her text *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, introduces a liberatory practice called “wake work,” which is the work of “[imagining] new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property” (*In The Wake* 18). As a part of wake work, Sharpe presents the ordinary moments, actions and conversations in black life as radically liberationist practices in her book *Ordinary Notes* without making them acts of “sheer resistance” (Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes* 266). For her, the black ordinary is composed of the continuous, everyday *insistence* on black people’s capability of living liveable lives despite racist violence. Sharpe posits the ordinary as creating subtle modes of escape and possibilities. The black ordinary is animated by beauty, which Sharpe defines as “Attentiveness … to a kind of aesthetic that escaped violence whenever possible” (Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes* 85). For Sharpe, the insistent articulation of beauty by black people is an everyday practice which she calls “*beautyeveryday*” (Sharpe, *Ordinary Notes* 343).

Following the scholarship outlined above, this paper tries to define the black everyday. It understands the black everyday as a repetitive continuum of mundane activities by black people who face potential disturbance by external violence motivated by racism but who insistently re-calibrate themselves by escaping from the triumphant-or-tragic binary and reconnecting to the signifier ‘mundane’. It qualifies this definition by stating that this escape itself is not a spectacular political act but is rather one of the many mundane events that form part of the continuum of the everyday. Through recalibration, black people perfunctorily disconnect the term ‘blackness’ from meanings relating to death, violence, or heroism while performing their continuum of mundane activities and connecting it to signifiers connoting the beauty inherent in their unique cultural traditions and choices.

Even before facing the disturbance caused by racist violence, black people perform mundane activities in unique ways that posit them as different from people of other races and ethnicities (sometimes even different from other black communities). This paper understands that this self-attribution of difference often causes them to attract racist violence and scrutiny and the consequent association of ‘blackness’ to certain negative connotations related to colour, backwardness, savagery and non-humanity. For instance, Ju Yon Kim, in his book *The Racial Mundane*, states that "most racial stereotypes … implicate the mundane, which enlivens their flattened portraits with the small details of how people walk, speak, eat, or hold their bodies. Furthermore ... projects of assimilation ... have long been preoccupied with how to change the tendencies of those deemed racial others” (Kim 10). What some black people do is continue to perform the culturally different mundane activities they were performing before the racist disturbance and disconnect ‘blackness’ and the mundane activities from the negative connotations and associations forced on them. Through their re-performance of mundane activities, they defend their right to be ordinary and keep up the repetitive aspects of their everyday lives. Their re-performance of their mundane activities is their chosen method of quietly but firmly insisting on the existence, liveability and beauty of their lives. Further, whenever blacks perform mundane activities, they generate beautiful things, moments and expressions. Drawing from Sharpe, this paper argues that black people collect these things, moments, and expressions of beauty, as well as fashion personal archives of beauty. These archives represent the unique cultural traditions of black people, and they refer to them during future instances of escaping racist violence.

In *Zami*, both Audre and Linda collect beautiful images and sensations from past and fabled mundane activities conducted in Carriacou, their place of origin. One of these images is of a Christmas present sent to the family from Carriacou: “cinnamon, nutmeg, mace, the

delectable little squares of guava jelly … all set on a bed of wild bay laurel leaves" (Lorde 12). The present is an agglomeration of several mundane activities conducted by Audre's relatives, and Lorde invests these mundane activities with beauty and love through adjectives like "magic" and "loving" (12). Audre collects from the tea tin and its associated mundane activities visions of Carriacou's beautiful landscape, the vibrant songs of the people, and the love the women had for each other. Through these strings of associations, both Audre and Linda create a personal archive of beauty: "It was *our* own, *my truly private paradise* (emphases mine) of blugoe and breadfruit hanging from the trees, of nutmeg and lime and sapadilla, of tonka beans and red and yellow Paradise Plums" (Lorde 13). Further, Lorde invests this personal archive with associations with freedom: "a sweet place … which they had not managed to capture yet on paper, nor to throttle and bind up between the pages of a school-book" (13).

In the event of facing racist violence while conducting their continuum of mundane activities, both Linda and Audre draw signifiers from their personal archive of beauty, connect their "blackness" to them, and re-calibrate the continuum. When Linda faces racial persecution, like when she was fired from her position as scullery-maid because of her race, she draws signifiers like "Paradise Plums" (Lorde 8), "tropical fruits" (8) and "fried bananas" (8) from her archive of beauty. She incorporates these signifiers in her mundane activities repetitively, and Lorde lists these attempts:

> Little secret sparks of [home] were kept alive for years by my mother's search for tropical fruits 'under the bridge', and her burning of kerosene lamps, by her treadle machine and her fried bananas and her love of fish and the sea. (Lorde 8)

When Lorde calls these mundane activities "little sparks [of home]" (8), she is indicating how Linda is re-introducing the beauty of her past mundane life to her present everydayness, and using this sense of beauty to escape from racist signifiers. She also encourages Audre to escape from anti-blackness by referring to these "sparks" of mundane beauty, and Audre "spun visions of sapadilla and mango as a net over my Harlem tenement cot in the snoring darkness rank with nightmare sweat" (Lorde 11). Further, by deliberately incorporating tangible evidence of Carriacou in her mundane life (fruits, fish, Paradise Plums etc.), Linda is insistently demonstrating her humanity and history as a Grenadian woman without resorting to public, political resistance.

Linda takes the help of her familiar mundane activities and their associations with home, love, and beauty to resume her everyday continuum after the racist attack on Audre. Lorde describes Linda's resumption of the everyday as follows:

> (R)eading the *Daily News* by a kerosene lamp, and waiting for my father. She always said it was because the kerosene lamp reminded her of 'home' … Sometimes I'd go to sleep with the soft chunk-a-ta-chink of her foot-pedal powered Singer Sewing Machine, stitching up sheets and pillow-cases from unbleached muslin gotten on sale 'under the bridge'. (Lorde 18-19)

Linda's resumption of the everyday after reaching home is a textbook example of the black everyday as defined in this section. It indicates Linda's brief, unostentatious instance of liberation from the racist passerby's attribution of anti-black, negative connotations on her and Audre through his act of spitting (possibly associating her with rubbish or refuse). It also demonstrates Linda's recalibration of the day to familiar, everyday rhythms. Activities like burning kerosene lamps and using a sewing machine signal a familiar, established temporality in the Lorde household. Lorde indicates that the burning of the lamp and the use of the sewing machine routinely signalled the end of her day and the time for her to go to sleep. By completing the whole continuum, culminating in maintaining the routine features of Audre's bedtime, Linda demonstrates the failure of the anti-black passer-by to set a limit to her everyday life and make it impossible. Further, by keeping the kerosene lamp lit, Linda once again invests the day with a "little spark" (Lorde 8) of Carriacou's beauty. At the end of the

day, she connects herself and her blackness to her Grenadian traditions and to positive signifiers of love, beauty, home and family inspired by Carriacou.

Section 4: The Troubling of the "Secular" in the Black Everyday

In "The Invention of Everyday Life," Felski states that the everyday is "secular." By "secular," she means that the everyday "conveys the sense of a world leached of transcendence; the everyday is everyday because it is no longer connected to the miraculous, the magical, or the sacred" (Felski 79). This paper isolates two terms from this definition: "transcendence" and "sacred" to read the secular in the black everyday. The *OED* defines the word "transcend" as "to pass or extend beyond or above (a non-physical limit); to go beyond the limits of (something immaterial); to exceed" (*OED* Web). From Felski, it can be gathered that the everyday indicates a sense of stasis and confinement, while transcendence is movement and excess. However, this paper argues that the black everyday is not "leached" of transcendence and is instead closely entwined with it.

The paper has already demonstrated how the black person faces "a racialized border or a limit" (Smith 54) in her experience of the everyday, which is the limit beyond which she ceases to be ordinary and faces "the terrifying attribution of difference" (Smith 56). However, the paper eventually argues that a black person goes beyond this limit: she re-calibrates the mundane continuum of everyday activities disrupted by racist violence and once again connects herself to signifiers connoting ordinariness. The narrative of a black person going through the black everyday is necessarily transcendental because she is *exceeding* her role as a spectacle of black triumph or black tragedy and *going beyond* the limits of racialisation to become ordinary.

Further, this paper states that black people disconnect themselves from anti-black violence and connect their blackness to signifiers connoting the beauty of their unique cultural traditions and choices. Sharpe's reading of "beauty" in the ordinary, which briefly informs the above assertion, includes a transcendental element. First, her definition of beauty involves a sense of "escape" from violence, indicating a black movement away from anti-black limits. She also quotes Hartman, who states that beauty is "a transfiguration of the given" (Sharpe 79). A black sense of beauty is definitely transfigurative — it converts black people from a "given" of anti-black devaluation to a beautiful, unique cultural identity. The presence of transcendence in the black everyday problematises Felski's assertion that the everyday is secular. In this respect, Linda and Audre both transcend the racialised "limits" of being ordinary when the former resumes her mundane continuum of everyday activities by wiping off the spit from Audre's person by refusing to acknowledge the ability of anti-black violence to disrupt their lives and by re-introducing beautiful elements from Carriacou into the day's events.

Zami demonstrates the transcendental elements of the everyday not only through Linda's crossing of the racialised "limit" to ordinariness through invocations of her paradisiacal natal home but also through the genre of the text — the biomythography. In an interview with Marion Kraft, Lorde defined biomythography as a genre which is "not only autobiography … [but] also partakes of myths and history and a lot of other ways we use knowledge" (Kraft 148). By the end of *Zami*, Lorde layers several instances of the black everyday ("the journeywoman pieces of [herself]") to become "Zami" — "a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (303). This itself is a set of transcendental acts because, in every instance of the black everyday, Lorde transcends from the "given" of anti-black devaluation and black heteronormativity to become a woman-identified woman.

The intertwining of "myth" with autobiography in biomythography lends a sacred aspect to this process of transcendence. The defining "myth" in Zami is "the myth of MawuLisa and her youngest daughter Afrekete" (Kraft 148-149). *Zami* is comprised of Audre's everyday interactions with several women in the course of her life — mother, sisters, neighbours, lovers and so on — and it culminates in her emotional and sexual relations with a personification of the goddess Afrekete (also called Kitty in the text). Lorde juxtaposes her sacred relationship

with the goddess with instances of the black everyday. For instance, she first presents Afrekete in goddess form (she uses italics to indicate Afrekete's divinity):

> *And I remember Afrekete, who came out of a dream to me always being hard and real as the fire hairs along the under-edge of my navel. She brought me live things from the bush, and from her farm set out in cocoyams and cassava…* (italics in original) (Lorde 296)

Lorde immediately brings in the black everyday in this portrayal of the goddess by pointing out that Afrekete has procured the "live things from the bush" (Lorde 296) from "the West Indian markets along Lenox Avenue in the 140s" (296). Lorde does not nullify hers or Afrekete's ordinariness as black women by embedding the ordinary in the sacred. She insists upon their ordinariness further by stating that the ordinary markets "under the bridge" (296) were the most authentic connections to blackness and to their homes. However, through her interactions with Afrekete, Lorde highlights the sacredness inherent in the black ordinary. By introducing the goddess-figure as one of her lovers, Lorde marks a peak in her process of everyday transcendence to becoming a "Zami." This peak, by being sacred, also introduces elements of the supernatural (and hence the "magical" and the "miraculous") to the black everyday. The biomythography as a genre, therefore, troubles Felski's reading of the everyday as secular, i.e., being "no longer connected to the miraculous, the magical, or the sacred" (79).

Conclusion

This paper illustrates the exclusion of racial considerations in Western definitions of the everyday by reading Rita Felski's essay "The Invention of Everyday Life" in conjunction with Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. While reading the inherent pessimism often involved in reading the everyday in conjunction with racist violence, it points out how scholars like Andrew Smith posit the black everyday as structurally impossible because of the "everyday denial of everydayness" (Smith 53). Placing these two traditions of reading the 'black everyday' as two extremes — one erasing racism in the everyday and one making racism the sole determiner of everyday experience — this paper argues that both these definitions amount to the same detrimental effect, which is the inability of black beings and black scholars to adequately define the everyday while taking 'blackness' into account. It problematises Smith's politicisation of black mundane experience, stating that it makes black identity fall into one of two poles — black heroism or black victimhood. Then, the paper does a possible reading of the term 'blackness' beyond the heroism-victimhood binary and beyond epidermal readings, i.e., connecting the term 'blackness' solely to skin colour. Rather, it reads 'blackness' as a composite of various cultural traditions and as an indicator of cultural identity, and this idea of 'blackness' animates the mundane activities of black people. The above discussion attempts to open conversations between studies of the everyday and race studies and understand the black everyday experience as not necessarily a fraught, unhappy, and side-lined experience. It also problematises Felski's assertion that the everyday is "secular." At the same time, this paper attempts to democratise the everyday. The "residue" of human experience, as Lefebvre called everyday life (Felski 79), is not so much a residue for black people but a series of opportunities to establish and demonstrate their humanity and being to a society which consistently denies humanity and being to them.

Note

[1] In the previous section, this paper uses the adjective "pessimistic" to describe Smith's understanding of the impossibility of the everyday. However, it understands that "pessimism" is a loaded term in the context of black studies, particularly in its iterations in the philosophical tradition of "Afro-pessimism." Afro-pessimism asserts that

"affirmation of blackness proves to be impossible without simultaneously affirming the violence that structures black subjectivity itself" (*Afro-pessimism* 10). To an extent, Smith's chapter appears to follow this assertion because it states that a black everyday cannot possibly exist because of the tradition of violence structuring and defining the very category of "blackness." However, Afro-pessimists like Sharpe and Hartman do discuss the liberatory possibilities of the black everyday.

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