

BROKEN RULES, BROKEN SILENCES: AUDRE LORDE AND THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

Carolyn Ford

Audre Lorde refuses to be invisible. She knows she lives “in the mouth of a racist, sexist, suicidal dragon”—American society—that wants nothing more than to swallow her whole, that her very existence, to some, is an unwanted blemish on the pale face of America (“Man Child” 74). She knows that her Blackness, her queerness, and her womanhood push her aside to make room for the white male elite, and that her safest option is to keep quiet and stay out of the way. Yet, above all, Lorde knows that she is powerful. Despite efforts to render her voiceless, Lorde finds her strength through taking ownership of the very facets of herself that make her vulnerable. By owning her Black, queer, and female self, and reclaiming her identities as means for empowerment rather than as tools for oppression, Lorde redefines what it means to be powerful. She outright refuses to be silenced by external conceptions of the characteristics that define her. *Sister Outsider*, a collection of her essays and speeches, is a call to—or, more appropriately, a demand for—action against the white heteropatriarchy that claims its success from the destruction of the different. Lorde identifies herself as an “outsider,” yet reclaims this identity as the very source of her power against her oppressors. Her essays become physical forces for change through the very language she uses to define herself.

Lorde’s quest for empowerment begins with language itself—specifically, the language of identity. While she admits that existing in a passive state, silenced by her oppressors, is the least dangerous way to live, Lorde also admits that eventually “the weight of that silence will choke [her]” (“Transformation” 44). As she recollects her life-threatening surgery to remove a benign tumor, Lorde confesses that her silences, or times when she failed to make herself known out of both powerlessness and fear, haunted her (“Transformation” 40-41). Confronting her own mortality allows Lorde to realize that her fear is ultimately meaningless. Whether she speaks or remains silent,

“the machine will try to grind [her] into dust anyway” (“Transformation” 42). It is only through speech that the machine of white heteropatriarchy, a machine programmed to weaken Lorde and others like her, may be confronted. The imposed silence that Lorde seeks to escape is a type of invisibility, in which her true self is hidden behind what the white heteropatriarchy expects a queer Black woman to be.

In response, Lorde establishes the necessity of using the language of identity to break that silence despite the visibility that such language brings. Lorde asserts, “that visibility . . . makes us most vulnerable” and “is the source of our greatest strength” (“Transformation” 42). Lorde’s Blackness, a central element of her selfhood, brings her both pride and fear. Her capitalization of the term—and her de-capitalization of both “white” and “american”—visually brings attention to the word in her essays, demanding recognition from the reader. She insists that her readers recognize her conception of Blackness, a conception filled with pride and community, rather than the conception of blackness that is used to demean her. The choice of Black over black is an overt manifestation of her desire to be visible, forcing her Blackness to be visible. Such visibility is empowering, but the same language that Lorde embraces pushes her further into the margins of society. Despite the fear and danger associated with self-identification, Lorde insists that we must “[reclaim] . . . that language” of our own identities so that they may be transformed from degrading into empowering (“Transformation” 43). This tension within the language of identity is at the heart of Lorde’s work.

A powerful speechwriter and public speaker, Lorde finds empowerment through her ability to demand recognition with her voice, breaking the silence so often imposed upon her. The language that Lorde seeks to reclaim is not simply oppressive—language also has the ability to empower. While Lorde searches for the power her own identity may bring, writer Lester Olson asserts the necessity of language through which identity, and thus power, may be assumed. In “Liabilities of Language: Audre Lorde Reclaiming Difference,” Olson discusses the importance of language in the quest for reclaiming identity. The English language, rooted in histories of colonialism and conquest, is unappreciated as a tool of oppression, especially in the

United States. Certain words and connotations of words are “embedded in the nature of the English language itself” and inherently connected to racism, sexism, and homophobia (Olson 465). Due to these connotations, Lorde’s outsiders “have been socialized to respect fear more than [their] own needs for language and definition,” instead complying with the imposed norms of the white heteropatriarchy (“Transformation” 44). Further, Olson contends that “language contributes to a homogenization of experiences,” thus minimizing the existences of the most vulnerable of people (466). In other words, language can erase experiences that transcend the narratives perpetuated by the white heteropatriarchy. At the same time, however, language can be a catalyst for reclaiming identities. The reclamation of language “enacts a process of self-definition” during which people can “[situate] [themselves] within the norms to dismantle them” (Olson 465-466). Lorde reclaims the very language that isolates her from her oppressors. By taking Black, queer, and female as her own, Lorde accepts and embraces herself as the very identities that invalidate her, transforming her marginalization and undermining any attempts to use such language against her. In a society defined by its own elite, Lorde finds her strength through the dismantling of the linguistic structure that oppresses her.

By defining her own identity, Lorde also shifts the existing patterns of language use around her, devaluing the means through which language can oppress. In a reflection on her son Jonathan’s impending adolescence, Lorde demonstrates the universality of self-identity by destructing norms. She recognizes that Jonathan, the son of lesbian parents, must “make [his] own definitions of self as [man],” which is “both power and vulnerability” (“Man Child” 73). Jonathan isolates himself by defining man as something other than the hyper-masculine, aggressive traits that are imposed on him and other men, but he also finds strength in establishing the definition of man as sensitive, quiet, and reflective of his own traits. Such vulnerability, Lorde frets, is dangerous in the face of a patriarchy that retaliates in response to men like Jonathan, but knowledge of that vulnerability “is necessary as the first step in the reassessment of power as something other than might, age, privilege, or the lack of fear” (“Man Child” 76). Lorde’s account of her “man child” is representative of the way she, and all of

us, can reclaim and redefine our identities to take power through language. By challenging established definitions of manhood, Jonathan both establishes control over his identity and performs what social work professor M. Alex Wagaman might call an act of resistance. Wagaman writes that self-definition outside of conventional social labels resists categories that “[serve] to uphold the status quo” and allow the perpetuation of oppression (217). In Jonathan’s case, his claim to a pacifistic manhood “[contests] the confines of society as it currently exists,” depreciating the societal value placed on destructive masculinity and redefining the entire concept of what it means to be masculine (Wagaman 207). Jonathan’s experience echoes Lorde’s own pursuit for self-definition. Instead of rejecting the labels of Black, queer, or woman for their prejudiced connotations, Lorde redefines these labels and celebrates them.

In her reclamation of her own identities, Lorde works toward the larger goal of redefining power. By establishing herself as authoritative, while also embracing the parts of herself deemed weak and inept, Lorde aims to shift the paradigm of how power is conceptualized. Power, Lorde declares, does not belong to those who were conferred it due to race, gender, or class; it belongs to those who take it. And Lorde certainly takes power, especially through her language. The most defining feature of Lorde’s work, the heartbeats and pulses of her essays, are her verbs. In her writing, things are always doing other things. Ideas are “birthed” (“Man Child 36), identities are “carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives” (“Man Child” 37), silence “immobilizes” and “choke[s]” (“Transformation” 44). Through such active language, Lorde conveys the brutal reality of living an invisible existence, and the exhausting but necessary acquisition of visibility. Abstract concepts jump from the page into tangible reality. The reader does not simply observe, but feels and experiences racism, sexism, and homophobia. Lorde does not describe her experiences of oppression; she makes the reader feel what it’s like to be oppressed. In drawn-out syntax that exhausts the reader with her own endurance through that oppression, that silence, that invisibility, Lorde leaves reminders—short, bullet-like sentences of four to five words—that compel her readers and herself to keep going. That is not to say Lorde dismisses the systematic oppression rooted in American society—

there are, she admits, battles that words cannot win. Nevertheless, she redefines power as something sourced from within rather than given based on immutable prerequisites. By “[bearing] the intimacy” of visibility through reclaimed identities and “[flourishing] within it,” Lorde demands that her readers “use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living,” equating resistance to societal expectation as a form of power (“Poetry” 36).

While reclamation of identity is a source of individual power over societal presumptions, Lorde cites unification of those oppressed by the white heteropatriarchy as the most necessary element in dismantling the system of oppression. The shedding of imposed identity and the adoption of self-definition forges the connection required to unify the marginalized. For Lorde, this manifests in the overwhelming whiteness of feminism and the distinct dividing line between women of color and white women. Lorde calls upon self-definition as the unifying force that must transcend the fear of difference instilled and maintained by the white heteropatriarchy. She insists that her fellow feminists “not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own” (“Transformation” 43). Instead, Lorde validates all women as part of the collective feminist identity rather than wallowing in the divisions established by the society that seek to undermine her success. In this way, the recognition of heterogeneity is a source of power:

Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters. (“Master’s Tools” 111)

By acknowledging the validity of all women and rejecting the fear and silence expected of her as a Black queer woman, Lorde unearths the power hidden behind the segregation of the feminist movement and her own silence.

In the larger context of the American political climate, the abstract concepts of identity and power become physically evident, manifesting in violence across the country over race and gender power dynamics. Lorde's desire to dismantle these dynamics through reclamation of language is echoed in political sentiments over a decade after her death, but the goal has changed with time. It is within this context that power must be acknowledged as something more than an abstract concept, and it is nothing without its exhibition and materialization. In the past few years, with the resurgence of white nationalist movements and the birth of the "Alt-Right" ideology in the United States, the question of what it means to be an American has emerged as a pressing political, and often moral, dilemma. Power manifests in violent white supremacist rallies, accusing tweets, and the forceful silencing of the opposition through intimidation and abuse. While violent patrons of the white nationalist movement are afforded media coverage and outlets for their ideology, marked by divisive language, women and minorities are increasingly threatened by the influence that such movements have on their ability to exist freely in the United States. Playwright Antoinette Nwandu writes in her article "Reading Audre Lorde's 'Sister Outsider' After Charlottesville" that Lorde's work can and should be used as a tool to validate the identities of marginalized Americans, shifting narrow conceptions of what it means to be an American. Nwandu's essay, written in response to a violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, repurposes Lorde's work by suggesting that "outsiders" within the United States, or those threatened under white supremacist ideology, "must take full possession of [their] demographic specificity" and reclaim their own identities in order to redefine the collective American identity by validating those silenced by the white heteropatriarchy (Nwandu).

Nwandu's ambition, while perhaps idealistic, is not without its precedents. Under Nwandu's framework of American political conditions, Lorde champions the reclamation of identity and its accompanying language in order to elevate and validate differences as part of the American existence, placing power within those differences. Lorde reimagines the power that identities hold, giving strength to the silenced outsider. This idea seems almost unimaginable today, where hostility is often the common political denominator. But the

validation and celebration of differences in the the United States is best accomplished through language. The simultaneously destructive and empowering abilities of language that Lorde so deeply engages with are alarmingly relevant in a country where 280 characters can mean war or peace. Language, Lorde warns us, is violent and active, and it is through this dynamic force that change takes place. Words, when pushed into the world, have the power to destroy careers, to unseat politicians, to permanently change and dismantle entire empires.

Time magazine's 2017 Person of the Year award embodies just that—the ability of language to fight back against silence and oppression. Aptly named the “Silence Breakers,” the women chosen for *Time*'s prestigious award represent themselves as well as all of the other women and men involved in the disclosure of systemic sexual abuse within several industries. Their words, propagated through articles, exposés, interviews, tweets, and open letters, devastated the careers of once-powerful men, creating what is now known as the #MeToo movement and forever breaking the silence previously endured by sexual abuse victims. The single catalyst for that change, the impetus for setting it in motion, is language. By adopting the label of ‘victim’ while embodying the strength and power rarely associated with victimhood, the women and men at the heart of the accusations reclaim the power exhibited by the abusers, using language to topple the abusive, patriarchal tower as it stands. They, like Audre Lorde, refuse to be silenced, refuse to be invisible. The abuse and oppression of the white heteropatriarchy perpetuate a system of isolation, but through language, “divide and conquer must become define and empower” (“Master’s Tools” 112). With the power to reclaim, to redefine, to destroy, to shift the confines of society as they currently exist, the choice to use language is our own. This power, though seemingly so, is not limitless. The reclamation of Black will not erase centuries of systematic oppression, and no number of exposés will heal the scars of sexual abuse. As Lorde suggests, language alone may not be enough to dismantle the oppressive societal structures upon which white heteropatriarchy proudly rests, but the visibility that such language provides is, in itself, a victory.

WORKS CITED

- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984.
- . “Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist’s Response.” Pp. 72-80.
- . “Poetry Is Not a Luxury.” Pp. 36-39.
- . “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” Pp. 110-113.
- . “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action.” Pp. 40-44.
- Nwandu, Antoinette. “Reading Audre Lorde’s ‘Sister Outsider’ After Charlottesville.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 30 Oct. 2017, www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/reading-audre-lordes-sister-outsider-after-charlottesville/#!.
- Olson, Lester C. “Liabilities of Language: Audre Lorde Reclaiming Difference.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 84, no. 4, 1 Nov. 1998, pp. 448-470.
- Wagaman, M. Alex. “Self-Definition as Resistance: Understanding Identities among LGBTQ Emerging Adults.” *Journal of LGBT Youth*, vol. 13, no. 3, Feb. 2016, pp. 207-230.