

Unraveling the Self through Language

by [Maria Silva](#)

In her 1984 essay “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde argues that poetry is an essential tool for helping us understand ourselves. Poetry, she writes, allows us to “scrutinize our lives” and to verbally express “those ideas which are – until the poem – nameless and formless” (36). Lorde’s claims about poetry’s power chimes with Susanne K. Langer’s larger description of language in her 1953 essay “Language and Thought.” For Langer, language is essential to human existence and to being human. Langer argues that our species’ ability to “distill” our experience into words – or, as she puts it, represent “*ideas* of things . . . by playing with symbols” – is our “outstanding characteristic” (2). We need words to understand and frame the world. But at the same time, we are ourselves framed and trapped by language we didn’t write. How can we make sense of ourselves, if we ourselves are not our sole authors?

For Lorde, the answer lies in writing poetry. At first, it’s hard to understand how language, which she views as a historical tool of oppression, could offer a solution. Lorde is writing as a “non-european” woman, alienated from personal feelings that are the “hidden sources of our power” by a received “european mode” of self-expression (37). Lorde contrasts the ‘white fathers’ who say “I think, therefore I am” to the “Black mother,” who says “I feel, therefore I can be free,” somewhere within all of “us” (38). She writes that white fathers pressured ‘us’ to adopt their lexicon and in doing so “distorted” the definition of poetry (37). Here, Lorde speaks specifically to women of color imprisoned within an alien Eurocentric ideology, forced into a white male-dominated society. Langer reinforces language’s capacity for oppression. While language’s first use is “conception” – that is, to “formulate and hold ideas in our own minds – she writes that it has also been used for social control (2). Conception is a power too often given only to the few, who weaponize language to create and reify social order, forcing submission to an unequal social structure. As Lorde puts it, when “the white fathers told us” that “living in the european mode” is “precious,” they did so not to conceive of but shape the world in their favor (37).

But for Lorde, while oppressive language is a symptom of the disease that is indoctrination and subsequently institutionalized discrimination, language is also part of the cure. Lorde claims that by putting our personal feelings and experiences words, we can conceive of “the most radical and daring of ideas,” advancing necessary societal change and urge readers to question confining frameworks (37). When Lorde asserts

that for women “poetry is not a luxury,” she insists that the only cure for oppressive language, which is the hallmark of an oppressive regime, is such liberating language (37). When we dismantle the narratives that imprison us and question their validity, we can begin to challenge oppressive social structures and achieve concrete institutional change. Poetry is not the only form this liberation and truth-telling can take.

In his 1953 essay “Stranger in the Village,” James Baldwin examines his experiences in rural Switzerland to expose how white people have imposed an unwanted identity on Black people through language. As he walks through a small Swiss village, children who have likely never seen Black skin before shout “*Neger! Neger!*” (43). The first time he hears their cries, he subdues his shock and reacts in a way that “tr[ies] to be pleasant – it being a great part of the American Negro’s education . . . that he must make people ‘like’ him” (43). This moment exemplifies a key point of Baldwin’s essay: Black men have learned to act in ways that make them palatable within the social orders in which they live. They retain, or rather are forced to retain, the symbols of white folk. Baldwin later directly addresses this role as a Black man within the predominantly white society of America: “I, without a thought of conquest, find myself among a people whose culture controls me, has even, in a sense, created me” (44). But this ‘createdness’ goes beyond social standards, and extends to language itself.

Reflecting on the power of language, Baldwin notes that there is a “dreadful abyss . . . between the children who shout *Neger!* today and those who shouted *Nigger!* yesterday” (45). The “American experience” in particular has charged that word with a history based upon the disenfranchisement and exploitation of an entire population (45). This word, which was long used to dehumanize Black Americans, continues to symbolize centuries of hatred to the African American population. And yet, the Swiss children may never understand the torment this word can cause. A difference in context can completely change the meaning of a word: symbols vary between different social orders.

But through language we can create contexts of our own. Once we are able to put something – a feeling, an action, an object – into words, we claim a certain power over it. As Lorde proposes, by deconstructing controlling narratives, we effectively use our own language to wrest back control back from those who sought to define us. Baldwin famously writes that “people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them,” exposing the problem (43). Langer writes that even though humans cannot escape our need for language, our vocabulary will continue to “grow with our need for expression” (3). Lorde writes that while every Black woman has a history that is intertwined with the white fathers who have saddled her with a European consciousness, the “noneuropean consciousness” within every Black woman allows her to unleash her inner poet and challenge the white fathers (37). All of these writers teach us that though we can never separate ourselves from our history, we can question it and

recontextualize ourselves within it by creating our own forms and expressions of language.

Visual art also holds this liberatory power and potential. In his 2017 TED Talk “Can Art Amend History,” visual artist Titus Kaphar shows how Black people have been viewed and overlooked in art. To Kaphar, “painting is a visual language where everything in the painting is meaningful, is important, is coded” (08:15–08:28). Kaphar demonstrates his point with Frans Hals’ painting *Family Group in a Landscape*. The white family of four jumps off the canvas, their elite social status unmistakable in their clothing and jewelry. Barely visible to the eye and hidden behind the white family, there is one Black figure whose skin blends into the dark background. Due to this intentional composition, we can’t see him unless we’re actively looking for him. Kaphar tells us that we must “shift [our] gaze just slightly, just momentarily” to question the social structures in which we live (10:09–10:17). To highlight this neglected Black figure, Kaphar paints over the white figures with paint infused with linseed oil, which becomes transparent over time. Crucially, he does not erase the white figures: “we can’t erase this history. It’s real. We have to know it” (10:35–10:41). Rather, through this temporary erasure, Kaphar amends the history of this painting and the history of Black people in art. He tells us “this is where we were, but this is where we are right now” in the hope that through recognizing our past and present, we can grasp at our future (11:57–12:04). We can’t regain control of the future without looking back. History, no matter how painful, reminds us of how far we’ve come and the work that has yet to be done.

Language both visual and spoken is, and has always been, a form of control. Language in its myriad expressions has been the vessel for many evils. Inequalities have been codified in the language of legal documents, words have been charged with brutal histories, and the lack of representation, as well as the misrepresentation of marginalized communities, has exacerbated discrimination. In continuing to subdue our emotions and morphing them to the language of the oppressor, we will never break free of the narratives that imprison us. Before we’re too far gone, we must recontextualize ourselves within dominant narratives through language, harnessing and reclaiming the oppressors’ own tool. Lorde offers us this redemptive idea: “the quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives” (36). Language is our light.

Works Cited

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