

Lorde and brooks: poetry and its radical emotion

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Audre Lorde's 1985 essay *Poetry is Not a Luxury* makes several arguments about the purpose and power of poetry, particularly for marginalized groups like women and people of color. Her explanation of how poetry serves us—as a tool to turn radical emotions into rational and liberating ideas—is mirrored in Gwendolyn Brooks' 1967 poem *Boy Breaking Glass*. Brooks' poem about oppression within the African American community is heavily riddled with intense emotion, emotion that the poet focuses in the images and themes of the poem to reveal a rational idea about equality. In this way, Brooks' poem shows that poetry can “ give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless” (Lorde).

Both Brooks and Lorde view emotion, and the poetry that comes out of it, as a way of resisting oppressive norms. Throughout her essay, Lorde speaks about “ the white fathers” who try to suppress the emotions of black women. When black women become more in touch with their “ ancient, black, non-European view of living . . . [they] learn more and more to cherish [their] own feelings” (Lorde). Lorde explains that emotion and poetry “ forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (Lorde). Lorde's argument that poetry can formulate ideas that spark resistance and change is exemplified in *Boy Breaking Glass*, where Gwendolyn Brooks sympathizes with a boy committing an act of vandalism, and even goes as far as to call the vandalism a work of art. Brooks' focuses her anger about being systematically oppressed into the language of her poetry and the result is several radical and envelope-pushing ideas about race.

One of the ideas that comes to fruition in the poem is a justification of black anger. The first few lines of the poem, “ whose broken window is a cry of art” clearly marks a comparison between angry, purposeful, destruction, and art (Brooks, 1). This act of vandalism represents a furious shout from the African American community as if to say Look at Us! We Matter! We Deserve Equality!, a defiant and radical expression from the point of view of the “ white fathers” who control society and set the standards for intellectual expression (Lorde). The poem goes on to call this act of destruction a “(success, that winks aware/ as elegance, as a treasonable faith)” (Brooks 2-3). In these two lines, Brooks argues that although this vandalism may be “ treasonable” or forbidden by white society, it is still successful, and “ elegant” (Brooks 2-3). That is to say, just because white people may not believe that black anger is justified, doesn’t mean that it isn’t. Just because white people may disapprove of the Civil Rights Movement, doesn’t mean that it isn’t important. Her sympathy toward this destructive boy, and her confidence in calling his vandalism a “ cry of art” signifies how emotions “ become sanctuaries, and fortresses, and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas” (Brooks 1, Lorde). Poetry allows Brooks to communicate her own rational—but still revolutionary—ideas, as opposed to listening to the western ideas of white society. Brooks “ feels therefore [she] can be free,” and breaks from the chains of western thinking (Lorde). As Lorde says, “ poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary awareness and demand” (Lorde). With poetry, Brooks and Lorde are able to contribute to ground breaking and equality bearing movements.

Brooks' sympathy for the boy and her justification of black anger continues in the final two stanzas. In the seventh stanza, the boy is angry that his name has been thrown away, a dehumanizing act touched on in the title of the poem as well as the first sentence, where the subject of the poem is only referred to as "boy" and "whose" and denied a name or any identifying features (Brooks 1). She justifies his anger, and makes the reader sympathetic for him by making the final stanza a list of the privileges that the boy lives without, like "congress, lobster, love, luau, the Regency Room, the Statue of Liberty" (Brooks 22-23). Brooks portrays the boy as a victim, showing his struggle as a result of living without privileges that white people are commonly afforded. Making the readers view the boy as an underprivileged child, instead of an unjustifiably angry criminal, upturns western modes of thinking so as to escape the "structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization" in which "our feelings were not meant to survive" (Lorde). Once again, Lorde and Brooks move away from the ideals set up by the "white fathers" and move toward a more "ancient, black, non-European view of living" by using their poetry to turn their emotions and feelings into ideas (Lorde).

Another instance in which Brooks topples the traditional western canon using poetry is in her references to colonialism. Brooks uses the normally oppressive theme of colonialism—using images like "pepper," "salt," and "cargoes"—and turns it into an empowering theme with the intentional reversal of the order of the words pepper and salt (Brooks, 9-10). Whereas you would normally refer to the two seasonings as "salt and pepper," Brooks uses "pepper," a black seasoning, before "salt," a white seasoning,

attacking the common association of whiteness as the default race, while blackness remains “ racially other.” Also, she pairs “ pepper” with light and “ Salt” with night, challenging the common association of whiteness with light and purity and drawing from an “ ancient, black, non-European way of living” (Lorde). Lorde would argue that Brooks wouldn’t have come to these defiant and radical themes and images if it weren’t for the poem itself, for Lorde believes that “ we can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to discipline (transpose) them into a language that matches those feelings so that they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it” (Lorde).

Lorde’s 1985 essay about how poetry is not simply a luxury to women of color argues that emotions and poetry make up the “ skeleton architecture” of the lives of oppressed groups like women and people of color (Lorde). Poetry translates emotions into ideas that can be used as weapons against resistance. Lorde’s ideas are mirrored in Gwendolyn Brooks’ earlier 1967 poem *Boy Breaking Glass* in which Brooks focuses her emotion to create ideas that subvert the traditional western narrative of anti-blackness and colonialism. Where revolutionary or change-making language “ does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it” (Lorde).