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The Uses of the Erotic

The Erotic as Power

AUDRE LORDE

Audre Lorde died in November, 1992. Audre Lorde was author of more than a dozen books of poetry and prose, recipient of national and international awards, and a founding member of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press. Her most recent poetry includes Undersongs: Chosen Poems Old and New Revised (1992) and Our Dead Behind Us (1986); in Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982) she writes her own bio-mythography, and her recent essays and speeches can be found in A Burst of Light (1988) and Sister Outsider (1984), which includes the chapter reprinted here. Anti-ascetic in her demands that desire be made conscious and sensuality affirmed, Lorde responds in this 1978 essay to Second Wave Feminists' debates over whether or not pornography creates and maintains sexual oppression. By disentangling women's eroticism from its cultural misuse and calling

for a realization of the erotic as the most self-responsible source of women's power, Lorde, locating that power in women's acknowledgment of desire, blurs the boundaries between the erotic, on the one hand, and political, creative, and everyday activities, on the other. And in issuing her call to all women, regardless of their sexual identity, Lorde erases erotic differences between straight, bisexual, and lesbian desire in order to promote such desire as a creative force for revolutionary change.

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy

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the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives

SEXUALITIES AND COMMUNICATION

for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.

We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within Western society. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence.

It is a short step from there to the false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong. But that strength is illusory, for it is fashioned within the context of male models of power.

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibility of it within themselves. So women are maintained at a distant/inferior position to be psychically milked, much the same way ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide a life-giving substance for their masters.

But the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough.

The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our

strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.

It is never easy to demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work. To encourage excellence is to go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of our society is to encourage excellence. But giving in to the fear of feeling and working to capacity is a luxury only the unintentional can afford, and the unintentional are those who do not wish to guide their own destinies.

This internal requirement toward excellence which we learn from the erotic must not be misconstrued as demanding the impossible from ourselves nor from others. Such a demand incapacitates everyone in the process. For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors brings us closest to that fullness.

The aim of each thing which we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible. Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision—a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered.

Of course, women so empowered are dangerous. So we are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex. And the lack of concern for the erotic root and satisfactions of our work is felt in our disaffection from so much of what we do. For instance, how often do we truly love our work even at its most difficult?

The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic

the erotic can attach to narratives, that, when asked a question, break into tantra and reveal a depth of emotion still relevant to a certain perspective

power, used and unused

even Lorde sees it within men

cultural guilt and shame re: the erotic serves to oppress

semiotic knowledge

erotic desire as a creative force for revolutionary change

Female and spiritual

nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough (dukkha)

in honor and self-respect shift from passive to active; responsibility and pushing your limits = Freedom

this must be qualified otherwise unreal expectations lead to narcissism

the erotic demand

the erotic vs the pornographic feeling vs sensation

anti-asceticism and the affirmation of desire

the break-down of love
through reciprocal lowering
of intimacy, through distance
mis-originated: cf.
dependent origination
↳ take responsibility
↳ unconditional love
↳ energy balance / personal
boundaries

what of compassion and warmth?
↳ does the erotic give these?
↳ selfish, sensation-based hedonism vs.
egoless joy, compassion, love, and
warmth

erotic
collaborative activity
activity (vs. the unintentional)
feeling (vs. sensation) (vs. pornography)
demand/scrutiny
empowerment
lens
the impossible
responsibility/excellence (cf. demand)
self-connection
self-knowledge/trusting your knowing
the yes within ourselves

sharing vs. using
escaping suffering
looking away

and emotional components of that need—the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment. Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or oblivion for ourselves and those we love. But this is tantamount to blinding a painter and then telling her to improve her work, and to enjoy the act of painting. It is not only next to impossible, it is also profoundly cruel.

As women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and through them.

The very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros*, the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.

There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Because of these attempts, it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical. "What do you mean, a poetic revolutionary, a meditating runner?" In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. For the ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is one not of self-discipline but of self-abnegation.

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an

incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.

Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, "It feels right to me," acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. And understanding is a handmaiden which can only wait upon, or clarify, that knowledge, deeply born. The erotic is the nurture, or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge.

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.

Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.

That self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible and does not have to be called marriage, nor god, nor an afterlife.

This is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all. For once we begin

sensual in Buddhism and Lorda (vs.)
sensual appreciation,
even desire, is
not need

trusting your own
judgment for your
own ends

nascent, germ, revelation
that will
unfurl itself

first way
collaborative
experience in
activity as bridge

second way
tantalize depth
of feeling

erotic as
enamored
kernel, germ
vivifying

self-connection
(cf. Bergson)

acceptance
& modification

realization of
dharma

living outside vs. going beyond

separating spiritual from political
erotic from spiritual

within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within.

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.

And yes, there is a hierarchy. There is a difference between painting a back fence and writing a poem, but only one of quantity. And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love.

This brings me to the last consideration of the erotic. To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a Kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse.

In order to be utilized, our erotic feelings must be recognized. The need for sharing deep feeling is a human need. But within the European-American tradition, this need is satisfied by certain proscribed erotic comings-together. These occasions are almost always characterized by a simultaneous looking away, a pretense of calling them something else, whether a religion, a fit, mob violence, or even

escaping
suffering
the numbness-
dissociation

sharing vs. using
(looking away)

erotic
comings-together

erotic as love

eroticism
pornography

Vajrayana
swallowing
suffering
repeatedly

erotic constructs an energy continuum
between the overtly sexual and other non-sexual
activities of sharing energy

misnaming of
the need and the deed
↓
the abuse of feeling
↓
similarities and
differences

playing doctor. And this mislabeled of the need and the deed give rise to that distortion which results in pornography and obscenity—the abuse of feeling.

When we look away from the importance of the erotic in the development and sustenance of our power, or when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in the satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences. To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd.

The erotic cannot be felt secondhand. As a Black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. This deep participation has

often been the forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before.

But this erotic charge is not easily shared by women who continue to operate under an exclusively European-American male tradition. I know it was not available to me when I was trying to adapt my consciousness to this mode of living and sensation.

Only now, I find more and more women-identified women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic's electrical charge without having to look away, and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange. Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama.

For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.

shift of characters
in the same weary
drama

virya

is the erotic labeled as erotic because
of sex's universal characteristic/accessibility?
→ are there other universal events which
embody the erotic which one can reference
to make sense of and draw on/unfold
this energy?

Discussion Questions

1. How does Lorde describe the erotic? How does her understanding of the erotic as power challenge traditional conceptions of both of those terms? How does Lorde distinguish eroticism from pornography?
2. Lorde's paper was addressed specifically to women. Do you believe that there are significant differences in how groups of people experience the erotic in their lives? Are we all equally capable of discovering and using this form of power in our lives? Why or why not?
3. This chapter closes the foundational section of the reader. Why do you think that the editors chose to place it here?