

## Audre Lorde's Erotic as Epistemic and Political Practice

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### Abstract

Audre Lorde's account of the erotic is one of her most widely celebrated contributions to political theory and feminist activism, but her explanation of the term in her brief essay "Uses of the Erotic" is famously oblique and ambiguous. This article develops a detailed, textually grounded interpretation of Lorde's erotic, based on an analysis of how Lorde's essay brings together commitments expressed across her work. I describe four integral elements of Lorde's erotic: feeling, knowledge, power, and concerted action. The erotic is a way of *feeling* in the work a person does, which makes possible new *knowledge* about the self and the social environment—particularly to counteract epistemic oppression imposed by an unjust society. The erotic is a source of *power* by providing vision and energy for actions integrating a person's multiple commitments and political interests. It facilitates *concerted action and coalition* by enhancing a person's appreciation of their interests and values, while fostering embodied, personal connections that build trust on the basis of shared vulnerability. Thus, the erotic helps build coalitions where genuine differences of perspective and experience can be examined, in resistance against an oppressive society's epistemic distortions.

Keywords: Audre Lorde, Black feminism, erotic, feminist politics, epistemic resistance, political agency, coalition, feeling, pornography, gender essentialism



The idea of the erotic in the work of Black feminist poet Audre Lorde has been an enduring balm and point of inspiration, especially for lesbians, Black women, queer people of color, and those reclaiming their lives from sexual and other traumas both personal and intergenerational. Feminists across fields and movements have built on Lorde's erotic as a model for integrating sexuality, spirituality, and politics—an expansion and deepening of the view that the personal is political. As with many other Black feminist insights, however, the political force and efficacy of Lorde's account have receded as the erotic has been adopted and celebrated by popular culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the increasing visibility of Lorde's words on social media, in lifestyle

marketing, and in the sometimes-apolitical sex and body positivity movements have decontextualized and deracinated her words, obscuring their political power.<sup>1</sup>

Simultaneous with the diffusion of Lorde's influence into the mainstream, her presence has grown in incisive, critical Black queer and feminist scholarly production across disciplines, as well as in work focused on indigenous resurgence, transnational feminism, and resisting sexual oppression. In recent years, Lorde's erotic has been adopted as a generative theoretical framing for larger projects on agency and sensuality for Black women (Musser 2018; Tinsley 2010), on identity, freedom, and artistic production in the queer Caribbean (Allen 2011; Sheller 2012; Gill 2018), and on the aesthetics of Black sexual imagination (Horton-Stallings 2015), and it has been adapted beyond the diaspora to examine compulsory sexuality and heteronormativity (Przybylo 2019) and queer feminist science studies (Willey 2016).<sup>2</sup>

One reason Lorde's erotic travels so widely is because its most authoritative statement, Lorde's celebrated 1978 essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," is stunning and empowering in its insight but at the same time brief and tantalizingly ambiguous. Written in a poetic, spoken prose style—one of Lorde's first public attempts at prose after a decade publishing as a poet—the piece defines the erotic in numerous ways, associating it with joy, intimacy, passion, creativity, hard work, knowledge, power, and spirituality. As a theory and a manifesto, Lorde's erotic invites sustained, close philosophical reading, with much to be gained from examining and clarifying Lorde's words.

This essay articulates the multiple layers of Lorde's erotic in detail, drawing out her motivating values and political commitments by reading her words closely and attending to themes that reverberate across her work. Yet, recognizing that the resonance of Lorde's text depends in part on its poetic ambiguity, I avoid distilling her writing too far or stripping it of metaphor and imagery. My aim is both to think alongside serious readers of Lorde to deepen our engagement with her, and to make it less likely that new or casual scholarly readers will misconstrue Lorde's words. The latter hazard is especially important for readers who do not

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<sup>1</sup> See Olson (2012) for a meticulous reconstruction of the earlier reception of Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic," including how the venues in which her words were reproduced obscured her Black lesbian identity and her anti-capitalist critique.

<sup>2</sup> Lyndon Gill (2014) traces the revival of Lorde's thought in Black queer studies to earlier work articulating what Rinaldo Walcott described as the new "black queer diaspora studies" (Walcott 2007; see Johnson and Henderson 2005).

share Lorde's experience—as Black, as a lesbian, as someone who must work to keep her vision and sense of self alive in a hostile society. Lorde tells a television interviewer, “I write for and to any human being who can be touched, reached, by my work, by my words” (Will 1976). I hope the analysis of the erotic developed here can provide something valuable for those readers moved by Lorde's work, who ponder her words and seek to use them to illuminate our current ways of living and political potential for change.

Setting out from a selection of Lorde's statements in “Uses of the Erotic,” I identify and examine in detail four essential facets of the erotic in Lorde's thought:

1. The erotic is about *feeling*.
2. The erotic is a source of *knowledge*.
3. The erotic is a source of *power* in the face of oppression.
4. The erotic can catalyze *concerted political action and coalition* across differences.

Across sections one through four, I show how each facet is present as a layer in Lorde's account, and each enables us, her readers, to do particular things with her work. But if we do not recognize all the layers working together—if we stop at feeling or stop at knowledge without moving onward to power and action—then we fail to grasp the full political import of Lorde's erotic, limiting the uses to which it can be turned. Scholars and activists seeking to use Lorde's work—whether to examine the world, to make sense of experience, or to support political change—must attend to every facet. Otherwise, they risk distorting Lorde's words and missing her insights into how the erotic can be a resource for both knowledge and power to transform one's life and one's society from a position of marginalization. With this holistic view of Lorde's erotic in place, I address in section five two problems that have troubled Lorde's readers: her controversial positions on pornography and sadomasochism and the shadow of gender essentialism that hangs over her claims about women's power and wisdom.

### **1. The Erotic Is about Feeling.**

“Uses of the Erotic” is a brief and explosive piece of writing, a flash of insight exhilarating and at times disorienting. LaMonda Horton-Stallings describes it as a “beautiful and delicious essay” that “induces paralysis with the enormity of its expectations and goals and inspires awe with its discursive touch” (2015, 9). The essay opens with a reevaluation of values, elevating feelings, the spiritual, and the sensual as an integrated source of knowledge and power for

women to reclaim and use. Lorde presents to the reader a buffet of goods attributed to the erotic: the erotic is “a considered source of power and information within our lives” (Lorde 1984, 53), “an internal sense of satisfaction” (54), and “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” (54). The erotic consists of “those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared,” which in turn forms the bridge connecting “the spiritual and the political” (56). The erotic, Lorde asserts, is “the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” (56), and it promises to help “our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within” (58).

The core of my interpretation of the erotic is the first formulation named above, a “considered source of power and information,” but I present the variety of Lorde’s descriptions in rapid succession to show the breathless pace of the essay and its poetic and open-ended language. Lorde’s erotic has taken on such a varied life among her readers in part because it remains open to interpretation, inviting people in disparate positions to adopt the erotic as a lens for making sense of experience. This has fueled nuanced reinterpretations of creativity, intimacy, and coalition in a variety of contexts. However, the many formulations of the erotic in the text also make it possible to quote selectively, decontextualize, and hide behind Lorde’s words. Without care, readers collapse Lorde’s insights into limited claims about sexual connectedness, about infusing politics with desire, or about pursuing the transcendent joy of sexual pleasure.

Lorde makes clear, however, that her account of the erotic is not focused only on sexual intimacy or pleasure, but on a quality of feeling that can emerge from any creative undertaking: “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” (54). Across interviews, speeches, poetry, and prose, Lorde identifies *feeling* as the first building block of her philosophy and the animating source of knowledge and agency in her life (see Ward 2020). Mutual sexual connection is only the most obvious site where people can become empowered by intense feeling, and Lorde encourages her readers to examine where else in their lives such intensity of feeling can be found—such as in creative work, spirituality, and political collaboration. Quoting Lorde, Jennifer Nash writes that “the erotic is a practice of self, a way of feeling in one’s body, a kind of self-actualization that recognizes the ‘lifeforce of women,’ and a practice that is articulated in a host of sites, in ‘our language, our history, our dancing, our work, our lives’” (Nash 2014, 54; quoting Lorde 1984, 55). As I will discuss in the

next two sections, integrating the erotic across these many areas of life provides a vision and source of energy for pursuing meaningful and politically liberatory actions and projects.

Some of the most unequivocal statements in “Uses of the Erotic” associate the erotic with deep feelings of joy, which, Lorde claims, can become a guide for living and for identifying changes that must be demanded of one’s society. She writes,

the erotic connection functions [in] 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. (1984, 56–57)

By valorizing joy in this way, Lorde takes a political position with respect not only to the value of women’s lives but to the specifically Black and queer joy denied value in the dominant moral imaginary. Further, within her communities of activism and resistance, underlining the validity and power of Black joy in particular is a political corrective to what Lindsey Stewart diagnoses as a neo-abolitionist politics of representation: the view that performances of Black trauma or suffering are necessary to win wider support for civil rights (see Stewart 2021).

But if our reading of the erotic stops at joy, as we often see in references to Lorde’s erotic in popular culture, the erotic can become merely a path to pursue affirmation of self: trying to find happiness, to pursue feeling good even when doing so is not to feel what is real. Recall that the erotic is valuable as a “source of power and information,” not primarily as a balm. When Lorde emphasizes joy in the erotic, she does so to call on people to examine joy more closely, to identify the causes and relationships that create and sustain that joy. Moreover, Lorde identifies the erotic also as invaluable for sensitizing oneself to what is unjust, intolerable, or missing from a life—to the information made available by negative feelings like pain, justified fear, and anger (see Cherry 2021).

The feelings that become visible through the erotic are specifically those that accompany the *work* a person does—“the erotic in all our endeavors”—that is, what arises as a person pours their labor into activities, life projects, and relationships (Lorde 1984, 55). Attending to the deep feelings that accompany our labor is subversive in a system “which defines the good in terms of profit,” a system whose “principal horror . . . is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment” (55). On Lorde’s analysis, “such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities” (55; see work discussion in Kim and Schalk 2021, 333–35). (Elsewhere

Lorde elaborates on how living toward bare necessity alone cannot ground survival in its richer sense, as the survival of the one she is and is becoming [see Ward 2022].) In another famous speech, Lorde defines freedom as this creative activity: “a freedom which allows the *I* to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative”—that is, in order to envision a future and try to shape the present to make it possible (“The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in Lorde 1984, 111).

## **2. The Erotic Is a Source of Knowledge.**

Across interviews, poems, and her semi-autobiographical prose, Lorde describes her feelings as a source of insight into who she is and into the structure of the racist and misogynistic society in which she lives. For her, as for anyone living in a distorted epistemic environment, the resources publicly available for making sense of her life—dominant interpretations of the world provided in school, in public media, in advertising, and elsewhere—were shot through with misogyny, anti-Blackness, and heteronormativity. Therefore, Lorde realized she could not look to those sources to help her discern who she is, what she should value, and how she should live. At the same time, in her childhood, her parents and her community of (mostly white) friends also failed to provide satisfactory explanations of the forces shaping her life. She felt anger and pain in the face of racist exclusions, and she saw pain and fear in her parents’ faces, yet everyone refused to talk about it.<sup>3</sup>

Further, the epistemic resources available to her through communities of Black and women’s rights activists also failed her—their interpretive frameworks both failed to help her explain the world around her, and they failed to acknowledge her as a knower. She describes a process of “underlining and rejection at the same time” that characterized how the communities she tried to become a part of held her at arm’s length (“An Interview,” in Lorde 1984, 91). For example, the heteronormative Harlem Writers’ Guild suppressed her interpretations as a lesbian even as it encouraged her to write poetry as an African American, telling her, “you’re not doing what you’re supposed to do . . . You are a bright and shining light. You’re off on a lot of wrong turns—women, the Village, white people, all of this, but you’re young yet. You’ll find your way” (Lorde 1984, 91). This status as outsider-within, or “sister outsider,” was replicated in her

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<sup>3</sup> In “Outside,” she writes: “Between the canyons of their mighty silences / mother bright and father brown / I seek my own shapes now” (Lorde 2000, 280).

own family of origin, in her mostly white US lesbian feminist community, and in the LGBT movement, with the same two-faced reception—underlining and rejection—which communicated a qualified sense of valuing her while rejecting her interpretations and denying access to more usable resources to make sense of her experience. Thus, Lorde’s experience of marginalization as a knower arises from the multidimensional, systemic character of her oppression, which manifests both top-down within a hostile dominant culture and laterally across local communities.<sup>4</sup> This motivated her to turn inward and examine her feelings as a source of missing information about her self and the social world that shaped her life.

For anyone continually misrecognized and misdefined in their society, feelings of joy, fear, pain, and anger each tell something about the self—who I am, what I value, where I am vulnerable—and about how the social world facilitates or stymies survival. This is not to say that the knowledge from feeling is unmediated or infallible: feelings must be examined and interpreted, and they can also bear ideological distortions—internalized anti-Blackness, misogyny, ableism, etc.—due to the social context in which they arise. However, Lorde’s analysis of the erotic as a source of knowledge and, as I will discuss shortly, power, shows how subjective, personal experience can provide resources for resistance against systemic oppression, without collapsing critique of that oppression into totally particular, subjective terms. Though Lorde’s feelings are subjective, they resonate with the experiences of others, and they arise from how her life is shaped by objective social conditions that produce and reproduce oppression. Thus, Lorde’s epistemology, including the erotic, is a powerful contribution to the task of theorizing oppression and resistance, grappling with what Kristie Dotson has identified as the “multistability” of oppression: the tension between its experiential unity in the lives of Black women and its multiple causality in interlocking forms of structural oppression (Dotson 2014).

The challenge Lorde faces is to interpret those feelings, which she describes as a chaos of emotion that often threatens to engulf her (see Lorde 1984, 83; Lorde 2004, 91). She must figure out how to raise feeling to knowledge: to feel deeply, to attend to the information feeling conveys, and to transform feeling into a form that can be examined and shared with others. By encouraging her not to “look the other way” from feelings, the erotic teaches her to acknowledge and value her feelings rather than suppressing, fleeing, or misnaming them (Lorde 1984, 59).

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of hermeneutical injustice in Lorde’s thought, see Khader (2022).

This is the first, enabling condition of interpreting the information feelings convey. She raises her feelings to the level of knowledge by the work of self-scrutiny: following feelings to their causes, examining their meaning in the wider context of her life, developing interpretations, and letting that information guide her actions (see Ward 2020).<sup>5</sup> In Lorde's thought, this praxis is closely aligned with poetry, which she describes as the work of turning a feeling into an image that can be scrutinized and shared. She tells an interviewer, "you begin to make connections. It's the seeing through that enables you to begin making the images that connect with an experience different from yours. The magic that occurs with poetry is the ability to see through emotion" (Lorde 2004, 32).

The erotic is an orientation toward feelings that enables them to be examined, producing knowledge about self and the world. About self, feeling deeply can provide a "knowledge of my capacity for joy," and a critical attention to the various aspects of life that facilitate or block that joy (Lorde 1984, 57). About the world, the erotic gives information about what produces pain, anger, or fear, and how the world might be reorganized to "make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible" (Lorde 1984, 55). Thus, the erotic enriches both the *reflective*, interpretive side of knowledge production—where one develops an analysis of one's unjust sociohistorical context—and it contributes to the *projective* aspect of political knowledge production: the work of developing a vision toward which political action should aim.

The erotic is dangerous to the status quo because it reveals the causal origins of feelings, including the conditions needed for joy. Thus, it provides independent sources of evidence about the circumstances of one's life, breaking the power of dominant, distorted narratives and norms. To build knowledge from one's feelings means developing interpretations of one's values and identity and one's situation in the world that escape the economy of racist and sexist images, stereotypes, and models for relationship, collaboration, and decision-making. The epistemic distortions that perpetuate oppressive social arrangements can be thereby subverted, opening the possibility of reorganizing one's actions and projects to resist and transform that status quo. This can create a positive feedback loop, in which feeling deeply and valorizing those feelings

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<sup>5</sup> This engagement with feeling guides some therapeutic approaches to recovery from intimate trauma. See, for example, discussions throughout adrienne maree brown's *Pleasure Activism* (2019), where Lorde's erotic is a starting point for reclaiming pleasure, love, and sexuality after trauma.



empowers one to feel even more, to overcome fears and make sense out of buried pains and confusions, to scrutinize yet other areas of one's life: "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" (Lorde 1984, 58).

### **3. The Erotic Is a Source of Power in the Face of Oppression.**

Across Lorde's thought, knowledge has a purpose beyond the epistemic truth value of propositions made by an individual knower. Consistent with the tradition of Black feminist epistemology writ large, Lorde's conception of knowledge is always intertwined with moral value and political power—the value of supporting survival in a wide sense, and the power to push back against a society's corrupt justifications for its violence and exploitation (see Collins 2000 [1990]; see discussion in Dotson 2015). To build knowledge that can serve these ends, a marginalized person must counter the dominant society's obstruction, distortion, and cooptation of their epistemic resources. The erotic facilitates an interpretive knowledge—knowledge about one's life and the world—that escapes the dominant economy of racist, sexist, and heteronormative images and norms that distort interpretations of the world. This knowledge can compel a person—as it does Lorde—to seek new models for relationship, for political action, and for living according to one's values.

Change in an oppressive social environment cannot come about simply by learning to see the world differently, reorganizing priorities, and making different choices. Some source of fuel is needed to enable and sustain vision and activism and to charge political actions with the power to have impact in their demands for transformation. In a conference presentation of an early version of "Uses of the Erotic," Lorde prefaces her remarks with a clear statement of this need:

In order to know our enemy we have to expose ourselves to some really energy-sapping things. And to do that we need all the strength we can get. We need each one of us to deal from a place where we are most powerful. (Lorde 1979)

Yet, for too many—and especially for Lorde as a Black lesbian mother—the task of merely staying alive "in the mouth of the dragon," of navigating the toxicity of a hostile and exploitative social environment, demands a huge amount of energy—intellectual, emotional, and physical ("Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in Lorde 1984, 42). Beyond the energy

needed for persistence or merely staying alive, some additional source of power is required to fuel resistance of the forms Lorde has in mind—both direct contestation of oppressive norms and indirect resistance, as building a dynamic and fulfilling life for oneself at the margins of hegemonic power.<sup>6</sup> The energy of feeling deeply—the power of the erotic—plays this role in Lorde’s thought.

The erotic is called a “source of power” because it enables a person to resist the constraints unjustly imposed by a society—both those constraints imposed materially in the theft of energy through exploitative or alienating work, and constraints operating on an epistemic level, through the denial, devaluation, and crowding out of one’s interpretive resources for making sense of the world.<sup>7</sup> Feeling deeply and recognizing the information feeling conveys provides the impetus for actions, through which a person can demand space for the life that, through facing joy and pain, a person sees that they (and their community) should be able to live. The empowering effect of the erotic is to enhance agency through three stages: knowledge, imagination, and fuel for action. These are interdependent and not wholly separable, but they can also be understood progressively: without raising feelings to knowledge, there can be no well-informed visions for the future, and the work of imaginative visioning itself contributes both the necessary impetus and content to the actions, projects, and relationships that a person pursues. Here, Lorde’s account shares the Marxist trajectory of other socialist feminists of her time: (a) the epistemic work of cutting through ideology, (b) the exploration and visioning of other ways of living—in Lorde’s account, organizing life to pursue deeper joy or wider possibility, and finally (c) political action, work toward transforming society that follows from this visioning. I will examine this in detail.

First, as I have discussed in section two, paying attention to the erotic counteracts the effects of societal epistemic distortions on a person’s capacities for reflective knowledge and judgment. Valorizing feelings as an alternative basis for knowledge subverts dominant moral vernaculars—that is, everyday frameworks for assessing right and wrong—that make the continuing exploitation of women and others appear justified.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the erotic empowers one to resist those distortions by loosening the grip of desires and feelings that impair agency. By

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of life at the “margins of power” is from Ortner (2006).

<sup>7</sup> On these varieties of hermeneutical injustice see Falbo (2022).

<sup>8</sup> On “moral vernaculars” see Hauser (2008) and Khader (2019).

identifying deep feelings, scrutinizing them, and recognizing their sources and meanings within life more broadly, cravings “which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered” (57). This is what Lorde means by the task to “grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves”—internalized oppression, racism, distrust of other women, self-deprecation. Such growth is necessary to expand one’s agency over one’s life, to cease being “limited by external and alien forms” and conforming “to the needs of a structure [of profit] that is not based on human need” (58). Lorde writes, “in touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or . . . resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (58).

Second, the erotic inspires imaginative visions of how relations can be transformed—that is, how one can oppose the structures that produce fear, anger, and pain, while pursuing relationships and forms of creative work that promote joy and possibility. Linking this work of visioning to building knowledge from feeling, Lorde tells an interviewer that “we must key into those feelings and begin to extrapolate from them, examine them for new ways of understanding our experiences. This is how new visions begin, how we begin to posit a future nourished by the past” (Lorde 2004, 91). In doing this, the erotic changes the relationship a person has to their work—a potentially revolutionary shift in a capitalist society. Work “becomes a conscious decision” writes Lorde, and she continues, “of course, women so empowered are dangerous” (Lorde 1984, 55). Demanding deep satisfaction in work as a woman is dangerous, whether in employment, family caregiving, or other forms of labor in the home, because women’s alienated labor of all kinds is crucial to sustaining the status quo. A relationship to work transformed in this way is also radical for any Black person in the US, and differently radical for a Black woman.<sup>9</sup>

Third, and finally, the erotic motivates actions necessary to bring those visions to actuality. Feeling deeply and recognizing both joy and pain across many areas of life changes how a person acts and the life projects they pursue. Regarding the erotic attention to joy, Lorde writes, “we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of” (57). This “erotic demand”—that a person align their actions and their life projects with the information in their feelings—is how the power

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<sup>9</sup> For discussion of labor exploitation of US Black women after the legal abolition of slavery, see Collins (2000 [1990], 45–67).

of the erotic comes into force in the world: “in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, [we allow] that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us . . . Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within” (Lorde 58).

On Lorde’s account, this arc of erotic empowerment—from epistemic resistance, to imagination, to empowered action—is animated by the *integration* of many facets of her life: spiritual, sexual, creative, loving, and fighting, across all her identities as a Black feminist, lesbian, poet, and mother.<sup>10</sup> She writes, “my fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves” (Lorde 1984, 120–21). The effect of this integration is to reveal how her feelings and the values of her various undertakings fit together, particularly how they enable her to pursue her projects and relationships across her various identities: “erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their *relative meaning within our lives*” (57, emphasis mine). The erotic as a source of power thus motivates an honest reckoning with the many feelings wrapped up in each of her facets of identity, enabling “acts against oppression [to] become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within” (58).

### ***Lorde’s Theory of Oppression and the Repression of the Erotic***

In “Uses of the Erotic” and elsewhere, Lorde develops an analysis of oppression grounded in her lived situation as a Black woman, a lesbian, a mother, and a poet. She examines how capitalism and a sexist and racist social order alternately sap and entrap the creative energy of women.<sup>11</sup> I have discussed the epistemic distortions imposed by this oppressive society, which limit possibilities for understanding oneself and one’s experience and for envisioning alternative

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<sup>10</sup> For discussion see Ward (2022). Lorde’s identities do not remain static but continue to evolve and shift in meaning over the course of her life. Around the publication date of “Uses of the Erotic,” she begins to identify as a cancer survivor as well, and later in life her identity as a diasporic Caribbean woman becomes increasingly salient. See Lorde (1990) and “Is Your Hair Still Political?” in Lorde (2009), 224–27.

<sup>11</sup> Terms like “creative energy” and “lifeforce” in Lorde’s thought are not vague new age signifiers but should be read in the tradition of critical theory, as roughly pointing to labor power and its animating, creative impetus (cf. Marcuse 1966 [1955]).

ways of living and structuring society. Accompanying this epistemic dimension of oppression is the material, structural oppression of women: control over women's labor and the question of whose interests and ends that labor serves. To sustain status quo power relations, on Lorde's account, an oppressive society must neutralize the threat posed by the erotic as a source of information and power. This is achieved in three ways: (1) devaluing, (2) distorting, and (3) exploiting the erotic.

First, a society invested in the status quo seeks to *devalue* the erotic by denying its broader significance, "separating the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex" (55). Everyday cultural understandings of women's eroticism demand that it be pursued behind closed doors, in normative monogamous relationships, which should be the only site of sexual desire, pleasure, and familial intimacy. With the erotic partitioned off in women's sexuality, it can be regulated through laws and social norms that keep it oriented toward heterosexual relationships of dependence. This feeds the energy of the erotic continually back into reproductive labor in the home, and it prevents the sharing of deep feeling and intimacy among women. In dominant discourses, norms, and justifications, the erotic beyond the bedroom is treated as a delusion and a threat—to women's fidelity in their relationships, to their adequacy as mothers and responsible domestic partners, and to their mental health.<sup>12</sup>

As a corollary to this compartmentalization of the erotic, Lorde argues, strength is mis-defined as the suppression of feeling: value, prestige, and epistemic authority are attributed to objective, intellectual argumentation, to instrumental rationality and the manipulation of humans and the more-than-human environment, and to impersonal measures of wealth, profit, and development. This compartmentalization has a pernicious effect on the possibility of developing knowledge from feelings:

The way you get people to testify against themselves is . . . to build it in so people learn to distrust everything in themselves that has not been sanctioned, to reject what is most creative in themselves to begin with, so you don't even need to stamp it out. ("An Interview," in Lorde 1984, 102)

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<sup>12</sup> Note that Lorde's account of the social regulation of women's sexuality may be historically outdated, as the internet and social media have dramatically shifted norms around the performance of women's sexuality. Lorde would perhaps diagnose the same devaluing of the erotic today in the way social media rewards femme content creators more for their sexiness and self-styling than for the creative or political work they pursue.

Second, where the erotic is not devalued, compartmentalized, and hidden from view, an oppressive society *distorts* it by associating the erotic with superficial expression, what Lorde calls “the pornographic.” The erotic becomes “misnamed” and “used against women,” made into “the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation” (Lorde 1984, 54). Rather than enhancing the relationship one has with one’s feelings and powers of creativity, the erotic becomes flattened into only the relative power one has through one’s sexual appeal to men. (I discuss in section five the aptness of Lorde’s critique of the pornographic.) This power can be useful, but, according to Lorde, it cannot fuel the pursuit of a wide range of possibilities for oneself and one’s relationships—or a vision for social transformation.

Third, Lorde describes how oppressive systems *exploit* the erotic by making women exercise it in service of men and of the depersonalized good of profit (which, in contemporary global capitalism, aligns with the benefit of wealthy men). She argues that, although women are devalued as knowers in dominant discourses and policies, “the male world”—perhaps better described in Lorde’s context as the world of white male capitalist power—actually values women’s erotic energy and labor highly (53). The exploitation and appropriation of women’s energy is necessary for sustaining existing power imbalances, as evidenced by the expectation that women ought to expend their emotional resources and attune their feelings to the service of men in positions of relative power over them—their employers, their religious leaders, their husbands or other male relatives, the male customers they serve, and so forth. Women doing domestic labor are valued for actually caring about their employers’ families. Professional women are promised fulfillment if they only work harder to excel, and they are encouraged to buy products to make them feel young, sexy, and confident. Women in health and service industries are paid to use their feelings to connect more closely with patients, clients, and customers, to make people feel at home and cared for. Women’s emotional labor, intellectual acuity, and creative vision are often turned toward solving crises that an exploitative society has produced—whether building community in an inhumane workplace, creating a stable and stimulating home environment for children who lack access to safe and educational public spaces, or holding together a family during war. In these uses, the erotic is recognized as a valuable creative energy for labor, even by those who endorse, enforce, and benefit most from a capitalist, Eurocentric status quo—“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” (54).

Lorde presents her account of the erotic as a rejection and reclamation of this power in the face of these three mechanisms of oppression. For this reason, Lorde’s account of the erotic is not for everyone; she primarily describes the possibilities for power and feeling for people whose society suppresses their knowledge while exploiting their capacities for creativity and action. This is not to say that the erotic is only accessible to women, to queer people of color, to racialized people, or to any other group. Lorde indicates that the erotic is not entirely hidden from those who benefit from oppression of others or align themselves with existing power structures. But, accepting the values encouraged by a world of profit and domination, those people “value this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but . . . fear this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves”; people benefitting from an oppressive society have much more to lose from honest scrutiny of their lives (Lorde 1984, 54). She leaves open to future examination what the erotic might be and do for people in these dominant, privileged positions in their societies. The “self-connection” she describes as following from the erotic, for example, has a different meaning for those in positions of social privilege, whose interpretations and feelings are often given *too much* authority rather than too little (57). Under the right social conditions and in the right relationships and contexts of community accountability, feeling deeply may be useful as a tool that helps men, white people, and privileged others resist complicity with racism, sexism, and exploitation of labor. However, that resistance can only become real if those feelings are interrogated and exposed to the “cold winds of self-scrutiny” Lorde describes throughout her work (Lorde 1984, 132).

#### **4. The Erotic Can Catalyze Concerted Action and Political Coalition across Differences.**

My discussion of the erotic so far has progressed from feelings to knowledge to power. Taken separately, each aspect is inadequate to explain the role of the erotic in political agency, because each can be misread, contrary to Lorde’s political commitments, as only a personal, individualistic resource. Against that reading, I have noted that the knowledge provided by deep feeling is not merely subjective or personal, because feelings such as joy and pain have causes that often stem from objective social conditions that similarly affect others. In *The Cancer*

*Journals* (1980), Lorde examines how the pain shared by those suffering from breast cancer is exacerbated by the silences imposed on women, who are encouraged to hide the scars of their treatment and ignore what their feelings might reveal about pollution and environmental toxicity, the medical-industrial complex, and sexist assumptions about the purpose of a woman's body. For Lorde, the work of scrutinizing feelings has an unavoidably communal dimension, and recognizing and naming one's feelings is each time a step toward solidarity and connection with others who share those feelings in silence.<sup>13</sup>

On Lorde's account, attending to the erotic—the power and information of feelings—facilitates coalition-building and concerted action in at least two ways. First, the epistemic effects of the erotic help each person understand who they are and identify what they need from a movement, enabling people in coalition to set political aims that address rather than deny significant differences amongst themselves. Second, with the shared, embodied experience of creating and feeling together—sexually, artistically, or through the work of activism—the erotic fosters personal connections and counteracts some of the disintegrative effects of oppression. I will discuss each of these avenues of erotic coalition-building in turn.

### ***Setting Political Ends Informed by Identity***

Across her work, Lorde is concerned with the role played by difference within any community of mutual care, support, and political visioning. She argues that no movement can successfully achieve social transformation if it demands that its members suppress their genuine differences for the sake of ostensibly shared interests. On her analysis, this sacrificial demand is usually made in the name of political expediency, but it ends up endorsing and reproducing the dominant society's oppressive social hierarchies. Such failures of coalition—whether the heteronormative respectability politics in the Black freedom movement or the silencing of racism concerns in the women's movement—corrode a movement's potential to succeed in transforming the status quo. Instead of an obstacle to overcome, difference should be a

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<sup>13</sup> Lorde theorizes this work of public meaning-making in her account of poetry, which requires a deeper examination that goes beyond the scope of this article. See "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in Lorde (1984), as well as Lorde's seminars, "Black Women in Poetry" and "The Poet as Outsider," in Lorde (2020).



“springboard for creative change,” a motivating force for activists to continue to envision better, more mutually liberating possibilities for society (Lorde 1984, 115).

In her social analysis, developed especially in the essay “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” Lorde traces the sacrificial demand with respect to difference back to the pressure every resistant community receives from the dominant society. Because of ideological distortions imposed by capitalism, sexism, racism, and other unjust value systems, she argues that “we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion” (Lorde 1984, 115). She argues that political solidarity is in fact not obstructed by “very real differences between us [such as] race, age, and sex”; rather, it is obstructed by “our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them” (115). Thus, Lorde’s analysis identifies two registers on which difference appears within political movements: actual or “real” differences, integral to a person’s perspective, experience, political interests, and sense of identity, and distorted images of difference, which are ideological constructions imposed by an oppressive society.<sup>14</sup> Successful coalitional work requires debunking imposed distortions and revalorizing and examining the significance of the real differences: “extract[ing] these distortions from our living at the same time as we recognize, reclaim, and define those differences upon which they are imposed” (Lorde 1984, 115).

One great promise Lorde sees in the erotic is its potential to cut through the distorted images of difference and the discourses of justification that prop up the sacrificial logic regarding difference within political groups. I discussed in section three how the erotic facilitates an integrative understanding of one’s feelings and sense of self, which in turn is a source of personal power. By clarifying the “relative meanings” of one’s feelings, experiences, relationships, and sense of selfhood, feeling deeply and scrutinizing those feelings helps a person determine what aspects of self they are unwilling to give up—that is, what must be fought for

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<sup>14</sup> Jack Turner (2020) articulates four meanings of difference in Lorde’s thought: “(1) difference as pretext for division and domination, (2) difference as differentiation in group experience and perspective, (3) difference as site of personal and political growth, (4) difference as marker of individuality” (566). For my purposes, the crucial division is between the first, what I call imposed distortions of difference, and the latter three, which I group together under Lorde’s demarcation of “real differences” (Lorde 1984, 115, 118, 169).

alongside and within any other struggle. This is Lorde's motivation for so often naming the many aspects of her identity when she begins to speak; she identifies the commitments that she must honor, as a public reminder to herself and to others that "there are no more single issues" (Lorde 2004, 88; see discussion in Musser 2016, 351–54). As Amber Musser (2016) describes, Lorde's particular position as a Black lesbian affords her more than simply the understanding of how multiple forms of marginalization work simultaneously, which I have discussed in earlier sections on feeling and knowledge. Her subject position also enables the political vision or imaginative capacity to expand the expectations of what an activist community should be capable of. This motivates her to deepen her political critiques of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy, looking beyond overt inequalities and coercion to recognize how those systems of domination fracture community to prevent change (Musser 2016, 353).

In practice, Lorde's feelings-based knowledge of her many selves counteracts the distorted, externally imposed images of those identities, equipping her better to identify sites of shared interest and to recognize and refuse political coalitions that reproduce unjust hierarchies. Repeating a theme common across several of her well-known essays, Lorde writes that "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*" (Lorde 1984, 59, emphasis mine; compare to "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" and "Age, Race, Class and Sex," in Lorde 1984). Guided by her complex commitments, she can only participate in the women's movement as long as she continues to fight white women's racism, for example, and participation in a homophobic socialist movement is for her not a path to political agency; her commitments and her interests are fundamentally shaped by her race and her sexuality. Similarly, as a mother of a son, she cannot countenance lesbian separatism, which demands that she give up that relationship as her son becomes a man (see "Man Child," in Lorde 1984).

So, the erotic helps a person set ends for coalitional action by knowing which sacrifices to reject, and it motivates one to seek new ways to reconcile tensions and contradictions between the multiple political commitments each person inhabits. The increased attention to the information of feeling insulates a person against the pernicious discourses that circulate within these movements to justify and excuse failures of coalition. Lorde has a feeling of who she is, in what directions she is becoming, and what is meaningful to her, which alerts her to the

inadequacy of arguments for excluding or limiting her participation. She knows through feeling that such arguments will not serve her, because any movement that adopts those values as a principle for political action will not provide her a place in the world the movement is trying to create. Survival for Lorde and for others with similarly multiplicitous identities—survival without compromise on core commitments—demands the pursuit of a coalitional politics in which all aspects of one’s identities have a place.

### ***Forging Personal Connections across Differences***

The second effect of the erotic for coalitional politics is to help people come together in ways that break down destructive orientations toward one another’s differences and facilitate new possibilities for concerted action. In her discussion of oppression, Lorde writes that “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 for change” (Lorde 1984, 53). These “sources of power in the culture of the oppressed” include not only the epistemic resources Lorde retrieves from the erotic, but also culturally specific resources, which vary among communities, for coming together across difference for creative, deeply felt, pleasurable undertakings.

Lorde originally wrote “Uses of the Erotic” to articulate some of those resources within the women’s movement and among lesbians in particular, grappling with differences of race. Lorde writes, “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” (Lorde 1984, 59).<sup>15</sup> Joy in particular—the deep, physical sensation of joy that comes from integrating one’s sense of self within one’s work—takes on a different meaning when it is shared.<sup>16</sup> In shared creative pursuits, Lorde asserts, joy “forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for

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<sup>15</sup> See discussion of “feeling, knowledge, and understanding” in Ward (2020, 468–471). Musser describes the “creation of an affective community” as the “most central component of the erotic” (2014, 147).

<sup>16</sup> Gill helpfully reminds Lorde’s readers to recognize multiple faces of pleasure in the erotic, not only physical, bodily pleasure, but “pleasure in coming to know what we know about ourselves and our world (epistemological pleasure) and pleasure in teaching what we have learned and learning from those who find pleasure in teaching us (pedagogical pleasure)” (2014, 189).

understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (Lorde 1984, 56).

The crux of coalition is this double task: forming a “basis for understanding” real differences while lessening the threat of that difference—i.e., resisting the power of the distorted view of differences propagated by an unjust society. Once those distortions are weakened, real differences can be scrutinized and thematized in open discussion, and they can ultimately be integrated into the content of political striving. Lorde’s investment in the erotic reveals a conviction that a sensual, feelings-based awareness of one’s connectedness in movement alongside others can create this new knowledge and understanding of one’s interests and one’s vulnerabilities, and it can open potential alliances that would otherwise be obscured. In this way, the self-criticism that has been a hallmark of the feminist movement for generations can be turned toward newly appreciated exclusions, and the hard work of feminist self-scrutiny about racism, classism, and other failures of coalition can move forward. Thus, Lorde’s account of the erotic provides an impetus for feminist politics to go beyond homogenizing ideals of sisterhood and shared oppression of women under patriarchy.

For the wider community of women, Lorde seems to suggest that lesbianism is itself a resource for assigning new meanings to differences, particularly differences of race and/or class. A new array of coalitions and political actions are possible when people become “women-identified women,” which she defines as “those who sought their own destinies and attempted to execute them in the absence of male support” (Lorde 1984, 49).<sup>17</sup> SaraEllen Strongman’s valuable archival research examines the special role of sexual intimacy among women in Lorde’s political praxis, where the erotic in its sexual dimension serves as “a tool that can enable the reconciliation of the similarities and divergences in black and white women’s experiences and politics” (Strongman 2018, 43). When Lorde does political work alongside white women, they are often women with whom she has had erotic, sexual relationships. Strongman highlights evidence from Lorde’s journals and letters that Lorde saw sexual intimacy as an essential step to

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<sup>17</sup> Lorde is clearly influenced by the early lesbian feminist manifesto, “The Woman-Identified Woman” (Radicalesbians 1970).

build trust and overcome both the misconstrual of racial differences by white women and the fracturing personal effects of racism and its pervasive threat she felt as a Black woman.<sup>18</sup>

Strongman argues that the trust-building effect of erotic connection in coalition-building—sexual or otherwise—is grounded in the sharing of vulnerability, which forms the basis for understanding different vulnerabilities that may not be shared. Rather than striving to overcome difference, this sharing makes it possible to thematize and grapple with differences within a coalitional partnership, and, crucially, to respond more flexibly and responsibly when differences lead to misunderstanding, disagreement, and conflict about differing needs going unrecognized and unmet. Honesty and open examination of one’s life are the cardinal virtues of this mode of connection for Lorde; in personal correspondence and journals, Lorde “writes frequently about desiring ‘openness’ and intimacy in her friendships with other women—both black and white—created by mutual vulnerability, and she laments the difficulty of achieving such relationships” (Strongman 2018, 49).

Lorde is forthright about the pitfalls that accompany the uses of the erotic to forge coalitional connections. To address the problem where the erotic collapses into the use of another, rather than a genuinely mutual collaboration, she emphasizes the importance that we “not look the other way from our experience” lest “we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us” (Lorde 1984, 58). She expands this: “when we look away from ourselves . . . 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” (59). Not looking the other way from feelings includes scrutiny of one’s own experience and a receptive consideration of what others express, while not minimizing the significance of those feelings by misnaming or compartmentalizing them. It also includes exposing one’s own behaviors to scrutiny, genuinely assessing the distortions in one’s own perceptions and the impact of one’s actions on others.<sup>19</sup> Whether or not readers accept Lorde’s overtly sexual

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<sup>18</sup> Lorde addresses this theme in personal correspondence with Adrienne Rich: “as a Black woman, dealing emotionally on any but the most superficially prescribed and defended levels, with white women who I do not know intimately, means for me to be constantly vulnerable to racial instances of varying degrees, the possibilities of racial incidents which may or may not be so. It’s like low-level radiation.” (Lorde personal communication, November 1979, quoted in Strongman 2018, 53)

<sup>19</sup> While Lorde made scrutiny of her own actions and interpretations central to her praxis, she was also described by some as pushy and overly persistent when pursuing romantic partners not

approach to forging connections across differences, her commitment to self-scrutiny and open discussion of the meanings of feeling resonates for building coalitions that might dispel distortions of difference while acknowledging real differences of perspective, experience, and political interests.

## 5. Two Problems in Lorde's Erotic

The two primary critiques of Lorde's descriptions of the erotic focus on her strident position against pornography (which she calls the "opposite" of the erotic) and her assertion that the erotic exists as an essentially *female* fount of knowledge and power. Both these views have become unpopular (or at least intensely contested) in feminist theory writ large, and they are wholly untenable in queer studies. Rather than simply dismiss Lorde's positions on these questions as a product of her time, however, recent close readings of Lorde's erotic have encouraged taking seriously Lorde's words while contextualizing her commitments historically within the US feminist movement that made up her primary audience (see Gill 2014; Strongman 2018). Building on this approach, I argue that the multilayered account of the erotic developed above can also illuminate these concerns, both to clarify Lorde's legacy and to sharpen what work and thought Lorde's erotic makes possible.

### *The Problem of Pornography and Sadomasochism*

Lorde developed the essay that would become "Uses of the Erotic" as a conference presentation in 1978, and her audiences were primarily women invested in debates about who owns women's sexuality—debates that often focused on the effects of pornography and sadomasochism practices in a misogynistic, hierarchical society.<sup>20</sup> Unlike many of her

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interested in her advances—including younger women who looked up to her as a mentor. Her passion for advancing those women's literary work sometimes intertwined with her pursuit of sexual connections in ways that raise clear concerns about her use of power and her respect for other women's agency (see de Veaux 2004, 181–84). This points to another potential pitfall of the erotic, and it indicates how building knowledge from feelings is not enough when we need to scrutinize and critique those power relations that benefit or privilege us.

<sup>20</sup> Lorde's second presentation of the essay was at Feminist Perspectives on Pornography, a conference in San Francisco in November 1978. For discussion of affinities between Black feminism and antipornography feminism of the 1970s and 1980s, see Nash (2008) and Strongman (2018).

contemporaries (such as Robin Morgan or Catharine MacKinnon), Lorde's critique of pornography is not grounded in causal claims about the structure and effects of sexist ideology. Rather, her critique of "the pornographic" is a rejection of anything that suppresses feeling while trading on sensation (and sensationalism) alone.<sup>21</sup> Her concern is with how feelings can be accessed as a source of knowledge and how we take up the orientation of self-scrutiny in relation to our feelings.

In a 1990 interview, she gives as an example of the pornographic "when Jesse Helms reads safe sex pamphlets on the Senate floor and calls them obscene" (Lorde 2004, 197). In doing so, according to Lorde, Helms suppresses the felt meanings of sexuality in a person's life—in this case, the connection between sexuality and survival—in favor of the merely surface-level spectacle.<sup>22</sup> This position against the pornographic is a principled position based on her assessment of the conditions needed to raise deep feelings to knowledge. It should be no surprise that Lorde was pessimistic about the conditions for erotic empowerment available in the booming porn industry of the 1970s, in which feminist and queer creative visions were marginalized and silenced. She fails to anticipate that feminist porn might be possible, that porn might not always be built on sensation (and spectacle) without feeling.<sup>23</sup> However, it bears noting that Lorde appreciated the danger of legal restrictions on pornography, which she cautions would close avenues for lesbians and others to explore the feelings present in their erotic lives.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Musser reads a persistent tension between feeling and sensation in Lorde's erotic, where "feelings can be shared, while sensation (and pleasure without emotion) is individuating . . . a turn away from others; [a focus on sensation alone] advocates a mode of antisociality" (2016, 353).

<sup>22</sup> She develops her critique in the poem "jesshelms": "But you prefer to do it / on the senate floor / . . . / safe-sex dripping from your tongue / into avid senatorial ears" (Lorde 2000, 445).

<sup>23</sup> Lorde also fails to recognize that fugitive spaces for erotic engagement with feeling and self-knowledge might be present in some porn of her own time, and that her own account of the erotic might enable those spaces to flourish. For discussions of Black women's agency and pleasure practices in the context of pornography and hypersexualization, see Miller-Young (2014), Nash (2014), and Cruz (2016). Thank you to Andrea Warmack for highlighting this point.

<sup>24</sup> Her appreciation of this risk arises from her perspective as an artist, poet, and educator. In seminars, she taught the work of Allen Ginsberg and Lenore Kandel, who both faced censorship under earlier US anti-obscenity laws (see Lorde 2020, 75–82), just as Lorde's poetry was targeted for its homoeroticism in the US Senate in 1990.

This pattern—philosophical critique accompanied by political wariness—is replicated in her discussion of sadomasochism, another divisive feminist (and especially lesbian feminist) issue of the time. Although she levels a forceful critique of the eroticization of hierarchy present in sadomasochism, she repeatedly notes that the most important thing is to scrutinize our lives: “*I speak not about condemnation but about recognizing what is happening and questioning what it means*” (“Sadomasochism: Not about Condemnation,” in Lorde 2009, 52, emphasis original).<sup>25</sup> Again and again Lorde draws her interlocutors’ attention to the danger of focusing on sexual practices and failing to scrutinize other areas in need of solidarity: “Is this whole question of s/m sex in the lesbian community perhaps being used to draw attention and energies away from other more pressing and immediately life-threatening issues facing us as women in this racist, conservative, and repressive period?” (Lorde 2009, 56, quoted in Strongman 2018). Even if the content of her argument against sadomasochism feels reductive today, her political acuity about the dangers of such critiques was prescient.

### ***The Problem of Essentialism***

Lorde recognized and sought to mitigate the risks to solidarity posed by her positions against pornography and sadomasochism. It is less clear, however, that she perceived the political and philosophical limitations of describing the erotic as “lying in a deeply female and spiritual plane” and as “an assertion of the life force of women” (Lorde 1984, 53, 55). Reading Lorde today, this archetypal language seems to signal an essentialist view of women, calling to mind the zeitgeist of 1970s cultural feminism: the valorization of so-called women’s wisdom, of a natural inner well of knowledge that, handed down through generations, has been obscured by patriarchy and the form of rationality it imposes. Some contemporary feminist and queer theorists have rejected Lorde’s account on these grounds (see, e.g., Holland 2012, 41–64), while others have sought to recuperate her, but only at the cost of reading her anachronistically—and against the grain of her own words—as a poststructuralist critic of identity and selfhood.

It is indeed the case that the context and first audience of “Uses of the Erotic” was the US women’s movement of the 1970s, which was then only beginning to show a healthy suspicion of

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<sup>25</sup> For discussion of racial politics within 1970s feminist debates about sadomasochism, including Lorde’s position, see Strongman (2018).



culturally essentializing claims.<sup>26</sup> However, while the erotic as knowledge source has some similarities to the trope of “women’s wisdom,” Lorde and other women of color feminists of the time were among the most strident critics of essentialism in the movement. As Linda Alcoff notes in her influential survey of 1980s feminist theory, Lorde and other women of color feminists “resist the universalizing tendency of cultural feminism and highlight the differences between women, and between men, in a way that undercuts arguments for the existence of an overarching gendered essence” (1988, 413n19). Emphasizing the multiplicity of their own identities, they reject other feminists’ implicitly white, middle-class assumptions about women’s experiences and interests, and they align themselves politically with the project of building complex coalitions rather than achieving a unified sisterhood (see, e.g., “Letter to Mary Daly,” in Lorde 1984; hooks 1981).<sup>27</sup>

The “deeply female and spiritual plane” Lorde invokes in “Uses of the Erotic” is her name for a part of herself that has been obscured and devalued, and her words intentionally invite others to examine where in their own lives the erotic is suppressed. For her, being in a body that menstruates—and a body capable of birthing—is an important component of the power she feels for doing her work, as well as a key dimension of the exploitation to which she is subjected by systems of patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy.<sup>28</sup> Here, the physical, biological female body is not the focus of Lorde’s claim so much as one important site of creativity, power, and struggle in her life, which might be a commonality she holds with others whose bodies have similar capabilities and vulnerabilities.

Thus, feminists and queer theorists are justified in pushing back against Lorde’s description of the erotic in reference to a deep, female energy, but their critiques do not demand dismissal of

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<sup>26</sup> Diana Fuss suggests that the particularly acute precarity faced by lesbians may have influenced lesbian feminist theory of the time to gravitate toward essence-based strategies for identity politics. In contrast with straight women or gay men, Fuss argues, lesbians “simply may have more to lose by failing to subscribe to an essentialist philosophy” (1989, 98–99).

<sup>27</sup> Musser (2016) emphasizes how celebrations of Lorde in feminist and queer studies often overstate the universality of Lorde’s words, overlooking how her identity as a Black, lesbian mother is integral to her thought.

<sup>28</sup> In her fictionalized memoir, Lorde describes her first menstruation experience as feeling within herself “a tiding ocean of blood beginning to be made real and available to me for strength and information” (1982, 78, quoted in Holland 1995). See also Lorde’s description of reclaiming her agency and selfhood through having an abortion (1982, 111; see discussion in Holland 1995, 220–21, and Ward 2020, 466).

the broader commitments and insights underpinning her account. The erotic is fundamentally about feeling, and Lorde's assessment that oppression suppresses feeling as a source of knowledge and power—particularly for women, for queer people, and for racialized people—rings true whether or not the erotic lies within a specifically “female plane.”<sup>29</sup> (Lorde also acknowledges in her account that the erotic includes certain possibilities for living and feeling for men—even when men are privileged and invested with power by their social environment.) If a person feels deeply and scrutinizes what is felt, they can examine what matters to them and what might facilitate the survival of their communities and relationships, defying normative discourses that assign value to some lives and devalue others. Couched in these more general epistemic and political terms, Lorde's account is not only less troubling for contemporary feminist and queer thought, but it looks like a promising resource for theorizing trans oppression, in which one's sense of self and one's felt knowledge are often under attack by transphobic narratives and practices, medicalizing discourses, and other distorting pressures. Trans resistance can entail a person navigating their relationship with the erotic, while attending to feelings that reveal how their multifaceted identity is constrained by institutions and oppressive norms (Cf. Malatino 2022).

What Lorde takes to be universal is that all women—which we might expand to include all people targeted by gender-based oppression—have work they need to be doing if they want to carve out space for freedom and survival in a world dominated by normative male power and by capitalism. And doing this work requires reclaiming one's labor from that system and cultivating one's epistemic capacities for developing visions for the world. Every person in an oppressive society has unexamined areas of their lives charged with information and power, and each person has their own vulnerabilities to the hegemonic systems—both to be targeted by those systems and to be seduced into complicity with them.

So, Lorde does not simply repeat a worn out appeal to deep archetypal knowledge; the information conveyed by the erotic is political, about work and power. The knowledge and power of the erotic, then, is not timeless; it is situated in a particular contextual now, as

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<sup>29</sup> Gill (2014; 2018) makes a similar move toward expansiveness in his analysis of the erotic, with an eye toward applying the term to queer Caribbean agency and identity production. Although I agree with his broader reading of the erotic, Gill is, in my view, too swift in his claim that Lorde's invocation of the feminine can be dismissed as an artifact of the audience she is addressing. See discussion in Musser (2016).

information within an oppressive social and cultural context in which a person must make a place for survival. The value of erotic knowledge is its possible role in transforming an unlivable contemporary situation, and that knowledge must accordingly be tuned specifically to the conditions of one's life. Thus, while the erotic is a source of deep, ostensibly inner knowledge on Lorde's account, it does not end at tapping into the supposed purity of a women's wisdom in an otherwise impure world; it is tuned instead toward a practice of understanding the world and one's place in it and transforming that order—of “making a now that can breed futures” (Lorde 2000, 255).

## **6. In Summary**

Setting out from Lorde's formulation of the erotic as “a considered source of power and information within our lives” (Lorde 1984, 53), I have examined Lorde's erotic along the dimensions of feeling, knowledge, and power, ultimately arriving at its role in coalitional politics. I have described the core of the erotic as a way of feeling deeply in the work a person does, not solely about sexuality or desire but also about acknowledging joy, fear, pain, and anger. As a source of knowledge, the erotic guides a person to draw on feelings for information about self and world, bypassing both the epistemically marginalizing dominant society and the simultaneous “underlining and rejection” suffered as an outsider within established marginalized communities. This facilitates both reflective knowledge about one's life and projective political imagination that is dangerous to the status quo.

This knowledge is one of three elements I identified that makes the erotic a source of power. The erotic enhances agency by providing resistant knowledge, by directing imagination, and by motivating actions toward integrating one's values and commitments across one's many aspects of self. Thus, the power of the erotic operates in direct opposition to oppressive social arrangements that, as I have described, devalue, distort, and exploit the erotic. I have argued that this orientation of the erotic against oppression means it is not a resource equally accessible or revolutionary in all people.

Finally, I have described how the erotic facilitates coalition-building and concerted action in two ways: helping to set ends by showing what commitments should not be given up and fostering embodied, personal connections that build trust on the basis of shared vulnerability—

including through sexual intimacy. Both these coalitional effects of the erotic help valorize real differences while combatting distorted views of difference that undermine coalition.

Turning toward the limitations of Lorde's erotic in the final section, I argued that Lorde's critiques of sadomasochism and the pornographic should be read according to her commitment to aligning sensation with feeling and her political assessment of how women can best interpret their feelings. Regarding the concern that Lorde essentializes womanhood and so-called women's ways of knowing, I highlighted the anti-essentialist commitments of her woman of color feminism, as well as how the erotic, according to Lorde, cannot be examined in isolation from the specific sites of creativity and feeling in a person's life.

My hope is that this engagement with Lorde's erotic spotlights the richness and sophistication of the gift Lorde gives with her brief essay, which has imprinted her signature on so many lives and movements. I also hope it, like Lorde's work, "leaves space for choice and difference, laughter and critique" (Holland 1995, 225). Most importantly, I hope it facilitates new, well-informed uses of the erotic that build on Lorde's political and personal commitments and visions for change—especially the vision for complex coalitions across difference, which bring the possibility of replacing the "old power" of oppression and hierarchy with "another whole structure that touches every aspect of our existence" (Lorde 1984, 102–3).

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