



Feeling, Knowledge, Self-Preservation: Audre Lorde's Oppositional Agency and Some Implications for Ethics

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Abstract

Throughout her work, Audre Lorde maintains that her self-preservation in the face of oppression depends on acting from the recognition and valorization of her feelings as a deep source of knowledge. This claim, taken as a portrayal of agency, poses challenges to standard positions in ethics, epistemology, and moral psychology. This article examines the oppositional agency articulated by Lorde's thought, locating feeling, poetry, and the power she calls 'the erotic' within her avowed project of self-preservation. It then explores the implications of taking seriously Lorde's account, particularly for theorists examining ethics and epistemology under nonideal social conditions. For situations of sexual intimacy, for example, Lorde's account unsettles prevailing assumptions about the role of consent in responsibility between sexual partners. I argue that obligations to solicit consent and respect refusal are not sufficient to acknowledge the value of agency in intimate encounters when agency is oppositional in the way Lorde describes.

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