

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, trivial, the psychotic, and plasticized sensation . For this reason, we have turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information , confusing it with 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 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 and 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 or from others . Such a demand incites everyone to feel 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 bring us closest to that fullness . The aim of each

## THE USES OF THE EROTIC THE EROTIC AS POWER (1984) AUDRE LORDE

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 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 nonrational 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 possibilities 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

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 through them.

As women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessary for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and act of painting. It is not only next to impossible, it is also profoundly cruel.

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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 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 treasury 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.

Of course, women so empowered are dangerous. So are greatfully and from which I rise up empowered.

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 able 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.

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.

Beyond the superficial, the considered phrase, "It feels right to me," acknowledges the strength of the erotic into our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and act of painting. It is not only next to impossible, it is also profoundly cruel.

What do you mean, a poetic revolutionary, a meditating political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical. Because of these attempts, it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. There are frequent attempts to equate pornography and pornography?" In the same way, we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the sensual - those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and truest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings.

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 the 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 black 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

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 to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, 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. Our 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. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.

Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underriding of my capacity for joy, in the way my body stretches to music and opens into its response, harkening 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, or examining an idea.

During World War II, we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it.

I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.

We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our deepest cravings keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our own oppression as women.

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from 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