



Commentary

Black Sapphic Love Lessons: An Exploration of Audre Lorde's Theory of the Erotic

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Abstract

Black sapphic love teaches radical lessons through the complex triple consciousness of living as a Black, queer, and American. Black queer people inevitably deal with trauma from homophobia and racism- this can move them to seek an authentic concept of self in order to exist within a white, cisgender, straight society. There are various Black women writers who explore queerified love lessons, including bell hooks, Cheryl Clarke, -and the writer of focus- Audre Lorde. Lorde's writings on the erotic teaches how to unleash our deepest potential that can lead us towards internal transformation and even paths toward liberation. Through her work in "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" and other essays, Lorde illustrates the deep internal sapphic power within the Black LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords

LGBTQ+, sapphic, erotic, Audre Lorde

Introduction:

What is the Erotic?

Audre Lorde was a poet, survivor of breast cancer, writer, lesbian, and mother. Born in New York 1934 to Grenadian and Barbadian parents, Lorde published her first book of poetry at the age of thirty-seven. Throughout her life, she continued to publish both poetry and essays, exploring the Black lesbian experience. She was part of the Combahee River Collective, and co-founded the publishing house, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press in 1980 with Barbara Smith. She had a variety of love in her life that she continually wrote about, including self-love, romantic love, and motherly love. Inversely, she dealt with emotional pain from racism and homophobia to physical pain from her battle with cancer. She was unafraid to write openly about the state of the world and her body.

Through her writing, she explored intersectional theories by combining the creativity of a poet with the analysis of a researcher. One of her arguably most profound theories is the erotic, first mentioned in her 1984 essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” adrienne maree brown uses this text as the foundation for her book, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (2019). Lorde defines the erotic as “... 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” (Lorde, 1984, p. 54). This definition exemplifies her fluctuation between theory and poetry. The erotic could be understood as a gut feeling or reaction, a consciousness, intuition, or a higher spiritual power. This is reaffirmed when she wrote, “... ‘it feels right to me’ acknowledges the strength of the erotic...” (Lorde, 1984, p. 56). The feeling of the erotic is inherently and deeply understood in the body. And, it is only through systems of oppression that people learn to doubt their erotic.

Lorde further explained the erotic as “... an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of the 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” (Lorde, 1984, p. 55). This elaboration gives us two important notes: First, her mention of women. Lorde, though radical in numerous ways, is, of course, a product of her time. Though she generalized this theory to women, others have argued that

it is applicable to the general population (brown, *Pleasure Activism*, p.27). Second, Lorde gives us outlets to exercise the erotic such as dancing as a vessel for reclaiming pieces of ourselves and our culture.

Lorde further specified two ways the erotic can be utilized- within oneself and one's community. Understanding our own internal capacity for joy empowers us to be our best selves, while sharing joy on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or psychic level brings us in connection with community (Lorde, 1984, p. 56). Though the erotic is not joy itself, the function of it is to bring out the joy within the self and community. Joy and love are the foundational purposes of the erotic, illustrating that our inner life force is connecting us towards these exact notions.

For Black LGBTQ+ people, centering ourselves often feels in contradiction with what society expects of us. The capitalistic system feeds on continuous underpaid labor of marginalized people. The more exploited work that exists, the better the system operates. Decentralizing capitalistic intent and desires, and re-centralizing internal harmony, peace, and joy, allows the erotic to be thoroughly felt, operationalized, and slowly breaks down this oppressive system.

Additionally, community is necessary for working to liberate those around us as well as ourselves. The sharing of love with another person, can enhance the power to fight oppressive systems through a framework of joy. However, to successfully harness community power, it is important to understand who is safe to bring into the community because those who commit abuse can perpetuate violence. Identifying the difference between harm and abuse allows for discrepancy between those who can be in community. adrienne marie brown identified abuse as intentional and continuous, while harm is unintentional, a singular event, and the harm doer is willing to be held accountable (brown, 2020). Though it is important to note, both harm and abuse cause pain and damage to individuals or groups. Understanding who is safe to bring into the community is vital, allowing us to find liberation through a restorative justice framework. The erotic's power can lead to this liberation; however, the systematic denial of Black LGBTQ+ joy must be understood to overcome embedded oppression.

Systematic Distrust of the Erotic

The erotic can be a powerful source of liberation; however, Lorde continually noted how capitalism denies the erotic and, in turn, the potential for a fulfilled life. She

explained, “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” (Lorde, 1984, p.55). Shifting work into a space for passion would lead to more fulfillment, intentionality, and community care- the epitome of liberation.

Further, people are taught to ignore their erotic. Lorde identified patriarchy as an oppressive tool for denying the erotic. Society teaches us to move out of fear, scarcity, and crisis (brown, 2019, *Pleasure Activism* p. 48). The sexual violence, state violence, and colonial violence we exist in causes our bodies to live in a state of survival. This survival mode corrupts the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual internal elements. Through the combination of racism and homophobia on an institutional and interpersonal level, Black LGBTQ+ people are systematically and historically denied our erotic desires. However, when given the tools to access the erotic, it has the power to liberate individuals and communities through love, sex, and empowerment.

Audre Lorde also stated that the erotic is ancestral. This means we each have an erotic lineage to which we can connect and from which we can learn. I think of my mother, my great Aunt Polly, and my great grandmother, Savannah. Their pain and power were passed down through generations as cultural lessons and survival adaptations. This gave me freedom and flexibility they did not have access to. But even deeper than blood, Black LGBTQ+ people have access to historical, ancestral queer chosen family, and chosen ancestors. Much of this history was intentionally destroyed. However, there are remnants for Black LGBTQ+ people to explore.

LGBTQ+ Black people have always existed throughout history. In some ancient African communities, LGBTQ+ people were considered gatekeepers (Some, 1997). Due to the fluidity of their gender and sexuality, they were perceived as having access to other dimensions. They were often the mediators for both genders and kept the peace within their communities (Some, 1997). There are other numerous examples of Black LGBTQ+ precolonial legacies. These histories can be empowering; yet, for some, they can feel too distant. The power of an erotic lineage is that it can be crafted to match everyone’s needs, whether that is family, history, or spirituality.

Systems of oppression operate best when people are disconnected from themselves and their communities. This numbing allows us not to question daily oppression and ensures that we succumb to the deeply embedded systems that exist.

White supremacy has shifted from the trans-Atlantic slave trade and Jim Crow to the prison industrial complex (Alexander, 2010). Over time, these systems try to hide; yet, their roots deepen within our communities, often becoming less recognizable, but always harmful. Acknowledging the erotic forces us to question the common suffering felt on a personal and community level. The erotic raises our standards by allowing us to imagine a new reality grounded in pleasure.

How to Turn Theory into Reality

Once the erotic is understood and felt internally, learning how to utilize it to create change is vital. However, this step can be difficult because it requires people to utilize their intuition as a compass that directs them towards paths of liberation. Lorde's explanation of these concepts is ingenious; however, applying them can be complex. Lorde noted:

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 (1984, p. 55).

She suggested that the recognition of the erotic can lead to shifts in awareness. It becomes noticeable and eventually undeniable. Once able to access a deeper source of power, realizing that power is coming from your own being, leads to self-liberation. Intentionality around joy and pleasure will allow us to fight the daily oppression meant to keep communities subdued and disconnected.

The idea that once the erotic is felt, we can no longer be satisfied with self-negation, is a difficult aspect of this theory. The everyday travesties of life that Lorde wrote about can wear down communities and individuals. Black LGBTQ+ people and more broadly, LGBTQ+ people of color, have statistically less health outcomes, life expectancies, and lower incomes (Williams Institute, 2021). These realities can make it difficult to hold on to the erotic.

Something that must be noted is that internal homeostasis is required for us to recognize and utilize the erotic. Enough nutrition, sleep, and mental peace are all necessary to process the erotic; however, the empowered erotic leads to holistic

wellbeing. Consequently, which comes first: the erotic or the egg? I argue that an “*and*” instead of an “*or*” mentality is needed. The erotic must be explored, simultaneously, while trying to access holistic wellbeing. It can feel overwhelming to seek internal liberation, let alone external liberation for our community. But, if liberation is rooted in pleasure, then our human nature must be acceptable. It is fine to take everything a day at a time; letting your best be enough; and allowing for mistakes.

In Lorde’s other essay, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” she explained, “But primarily for us all, it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding. Because in this way alone we can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth” (1984, p. 43). I argue that finding and processing the erotic can be a difficult task, especially for folks who suffer from depression or other mental health conditions. However, as Lorde mentioned, surviving by taking part in the process of creating is essential and leads to growth. Lorde is asking the best of us, offering tenderness on the journey.

Additionally, adrienne maree brown offers Somatics to understand the internal erotic. Somatics is a practicable theory to create transformation through body sensory and other exercises (brown, 2019). Meditations and all forms of internal awareness are also useful for understanding the erotic. Once the erotic can continually be recognized, shifting it into action can create waves of change.

Conclusion:

The Erotic in Practice

The erotic, once understood and found, can be implemented in a variety of ways. Lorde wrote, “And there is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into the sunlight against the body of a woman I love” (Lorde, 1984, p. 58). Through dancing, sex, writing, being in nature, etc., the erotic can be expounded. bell hooks wrote that love is an action, not just a feeling, which truly embodies the theme of this text (2000).

Exploring pleasure through a non-capitalistic lens allows for joy to be centered in the pursuit of liberation. The liberation of self and of our communities will not happen overnight. And, this journey can often feel overwhelming and distant.

However, it is through the everyday practice of resilience that the system is destroyed. The revolution will need a backbone in self-care, and after-care, in order to succeed. The erotic offers a space for Black LGBTQ+ people to operate through abundance in a world that views our power as finite.

Audre Lorde gave us an incredible gift through this essay, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” adrienne maree brown and various others have explored the limitless potential of this concept and found immense power. Lorde’s sapphic lessons in loving is a map that can lead Black LGBTQ+ people towards liberation. Liberation in this context is more of a path than a destination. From the history of Black LGBTQ+ ancestry, the erotic can be traced towards our future. Black LGBTQ+ people should prioritize joy. If the society we live chooses not to see us, we will empower each other; liberate each other and, most of all, love each other. Lorde gave us the instructions; now, the community must walk a path cemented in the erotic.

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