Journal of the American Philosophical Association (2020) 463–482 © American Philosophical Association
DOI:10.1017/apa.2020.4

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

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.*

KEYWORDS: agency, Audre Lorde, black feminism, feminist ethics, sexual consent, sources of knowledge and justification

In a striking interview with fellow poet Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde describes how being asked for justification of what she intuitively feels to be true is experienced as an attack, 'a total wipeout of my modus, my way of perceiving and formulating' (Lorde 1984: 104). Rich bristles at this characterization, and the conversation continues:

> Adrienne: There are times when I simply cannot assume that I know what you know, unless you show me what you mean. . . . Help me to perceive what you perceive. That's what I'm trying to say to you.
>
> Audre: But documentation does not help one perceive. At best it only analyzes the perception. At worst, it provides a screen by which to avoid concentrating on the core revelation, [to avoid] following it down to how it feels. Again, knowledge and

This project benefited enormously from comments by Megan Craig, Kris Sealey, Hannah Bacon, Anne O'Byrne, Stephen Darwall, and two anonymous reviewers, as well as discussions with Eva Kittay, Andrea Warmack, Michèle Leaman, and Lori Gallegos de Castillo. Special thanks to Sara Haq for early encouragement. Thanks also to audiences at philoSOPHIA, Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, and Stony Brook University, as well as to the Stony Brook Philosophy Department and Graduate School for generous travel grants.

https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2020.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> understanding. They can function in concert, but they don't replace each other. . . . I don't know about you, Adrienne, but I have a difficult enough time making my perceptions verbal, tapping that deep place, forming that handle, and documentation at that point is often useless. Perceptions precede analysis just as visions precede action or accomplishments. (Lorde 1984: 104)

The conversation progresses with a conciliatory tone. Rich acknowledges that Lorde's poems are themselves a form of documentation and that her own demand for evidence is motivated in part by resistance, as a white woman, to Lorde's perceptions of the racist world they share—resistance to the changes to her life demanded by recognizing her own complicity.

Rich's feeling of resistance reflects a truth about Lorde's work: Lorde calls for her listener to respond, to make changes. Lorde writes about feeling, survival, solidarity, and global justice to pose a confrontation to others, so that her reflections and analyses may be taken up and put to use. Her first commitment is to aid those, like her, struggling against multiple forms of racialized, gendered, and sexualized oppression. But she also writes to demand something of those, like Rich, whose similarities to her (as women, as lesbians, or as poets) position them to become allies across differences of race; she demands that they not turn away from 'the cold winds of self-scrutiny' (Lorde 1984: 132).

What does it look like for philosophers to heed Lorde's call for self-scrutiny, not only by transforming the institutional and interpersonal politics that govern the discipline, but by taking seriously Lorde's insights, valuing the black feminist perspective that produces them, and allowing them to reshape philosophical positions and motivations? A close reading of Lorde's work reveals her challenge to theorists to produce writing and thought more adequate to the complexities of agency, selfhood, and relationality—especially as those aspects of life are shaped by oppression in its many dimensions. Yet, while her stature in social theory and cultural criticism continues to grow, scant attention has been paid to the implications of her work for ethics (with the exception of Ginzberg 1991). Theorists across disciplines have drawn on Lorde to explore racialized experience, identity, and resistance (among them, Ahmed 2004; Nash 2013; Keating 2013: 89–110), as well as solidarity and coalitional politics across difference (such as Ortega 2006; Havis 2014). Independently, Lorde has become a primary reference point for philosophical work on anger, especially in its political dimensions (see, for example, Meyers 2004: 145–55; Tessman 2005: 116–22; Srinivasan 2017; Ibrahimhakkioglu 2017; Cherry 2019). Feminist thinkers have also long valued Lorde's concept of the erotic, which is treated with increasing nuance in contemporary discussions (such as in Acampora 2007; Willey 2016: 125–39; Musser 2018), although further philosophical exploration would be beneficial. Outside these projects, however, it is still too often the case that Lorde is quoted without context or only included in lists of black and queer feminist thinkers. I believe rich philosophical insights have not yet been appreciated for lack of a more comprehensive, contextualized understanding of Lorde's thought.

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This article is a meditation on the agency that Lorde describes as supporting her considered actions and on how philosophical approaches to ethics might learn from it, especially how it might change analyses of the ethics of intimate encounters. In sections one through four, I examine Lorde's descriptions of how she uses the knowledge that comes from feeling deeply to pursue survival. I identify five figures in her account that articulate how she develops and practices agency in opposition to intersecting forces of disempowerment: self-preservation, knowing by feeling deeply, poetry, the erotic, and not looking the other way from her experience. In the final section, I explore how attending to the validity of Lorde's oppositional agency might disrupt common assumptions in moral theory. I focus on how an engagement with Lorde's thought challenges the notion that sexual consent is the basic determinant of responsibility to a partner in a sexual encounter. Reading two vignettes from Lorde's semi-autobiographical writing, I argue that her encounters ought to be contextualized within her oppositional agency, and that this indicates that responsibility to a sexual partner can demand more than soliciting and respecting a partner's consent.

I. The Agency to Pursue Self-Preservation

Lorde articulates her selfhood according to dynamic identity markers—black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet, cancer survivor—that each require active sustenance in a society invested in denying her value and undermining her agency. She writes, 'I am constantly defining my selves, for I am, as we all are, made up of so many different parts. But when those selves war within me, I am immobilized, and when they move in harmony, or allowance, I am enriched, made strong' (2009: 156). Lorde uses the term *self-preservation* to refer to the project of developing and integrating these facets of self in the absence of hermeneutical resources or empowering conventions to support the human relationships she seeks. Self-preservation includes fostering integrity, learning to balance among the inner tensions of her multiplicitous identity, and resisting societal forces that threaten to impose on her a 'narrow individuation of self' tethered to one mode of living (for example, as black or as a lesbian) at the expense of the others (1982: 226). Specifically, Lorde seeks to resist the pitfalls of internalized racism, misogyny, and homophobia that block the personal and communal relationships of mutual support that she (like other black and queer women) needs to survive. The task of self-preservation demands active practices of making sense of her life, developing her own terms to define her life projects, and creating relationships that go against the impoverished models made available by her society.

While not reducible to subsistence, self-preservation can be a matter of life and death because, Lorde tells us, the suppression or subjugation of aspects of the self can have catastrophic effects. She describes in her writing how the women in her past who did not survive were those who were forced to neglect or deny life to a part of themselves. In her novel-memoir *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), she reflects, 'many of us wound up dead or demented, and many of us were distorted by the many fronts we had to fight upon' (225). In three terse, heartbreaking sentences, she tells the story of Muff, another black lesbian in the

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predominantly white, 1950s New York gay scene: 'She sat on the same seat in the same dark corner of the Pony Stable Bar drinking the same gin year after year. One day she slipped off onto the floor and died of a stroke right there between the stools. We found out later her real name was Josephine' (178). In Lorde's telling, this is Muff's whole story: a life cornered into stagnation within a tragically narrow expression of selfhood, with nobody close enough to learn the aspects of that self—including her other names, where she came from—whose expression might have brought other possibilities.

The term *self-preservation* for Lorde does not connote the persistence of a static identity, but an active unfolding of particular aspects of her selfhood in her relationships and life activities. It is a dynamic process of self-making in response to external constraints; to survive, she writes, 'for Black/Poet/Women is synonymous with grow' (Lorde 2009: 158). In a social environment that denies her status as a person or an agent, Lorde cannot flourish merely by maintaining her standing. To fashion a fulfilling life for herself requires actively bending her surroundings into a shape that can support her multiple identities—'seeking a now that can breed futures' (Lorde 1978: 31). Self-preservation also requires finding her own epistemic resources for self-understanding, as I discuss in the next section. These challenges of fostering agency and a dynamic sense of selfhood in a hostile society are core concerns of decolonial and black feminist thought. As Frantz Fanon (2008) and others have argued, racialization and other forms of oppression obstruct the capacities to perceive, to know, and to intend that are the building blocks of agency.

Because the different faces of her identity must be able to grow and change, Lorde cannot achieve self-preservation simply by orienting her actions toward safety or securing herself against possibilities of upheaval and pain in her life. To pursue security instead of self-preservation, according to Lorde, is to dedicate oneself to a doomed project of insulating against the world, numbing oneself to the feelings that inexorably arise in a life where a person and her loved ones cannot avoid struggle. While such security is a means of subsistence, it allows an oppressive society to dictate one's definitions and expressions of self, foreclosing the development of a mature agency of self-making. It also cuts off feelings that, as we shall see, may be indispensable for the development of knowledge and resistance.

In *Zami*, Lorde explicitly dramatizes her commitment to self-preservation over security. She describes lying curled up in bed the night before her eighteenth birthday, enduring waves of excruciating pain as a coiled Foley catheter—that 'cruel benefactor'—hardens in her uterus. Waiting for her body to expel the unwanted fetus inside her, she identifies her action as 'a kind of shift from safety towards self-preservation. It was a choice of pains. That's what living was all about. I clung to that and tried to feel only proud. I had not given in' (1982: 111). Lorde pursues a form of self-making in such situations that entails choosing among pains while simultaneously working to generate new possibilities. To make life livable—to establish 'real resistance to the deaths we are expected to live'—is the only substantive mode of survival available to a person pervasively denied value and agency by default structures of her society (Lorde 1984: 38).

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II. Lorde's Epistemic Foundations for Agency

Across her work, Lorde expresses repeatedly that the knowledge she gains from feeling is the key to aligning her actions toward self-preservation (for example, 1984: 37; 2009: 149). She elaborates on this frame for agency in her theoretical discussions of poetry, the erotic, and the imperative to face feelings such as anger and fear (see 'Poetry is Not a Luxury', 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power', 'The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism', and 'Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger', collected in Lorde 1984; see also 'Turning the Beat Around: Lesbian Parenting 1986', and 'My Words Will Be There', collected in Lorde 2009).

Feeling Deeply as a Source of Knowledge

Patricia Hill Collins writes, 'Black women's empowerment involves rejecting the dimensions of knowledge that perpetuate objectification, commodification, and exploitation' in favor of 'those dimensions of our individual, group, and formal educational ways of knowing that foster our humanity' (2000: 308). Because prevalent values and dominant sources of knowledge at best accommodate—and at worst actively perpetuate—justifications for devaluing lives like hers, Lorde cannot develop possibilities for self-preservation through simply gaining fluency in master discourses. There are inevitably moments where societal hostilities puncture the privileges afforded by dominant modes of knowing—for example, an encounter with the police, an attempt to report sexual assault, or an everyday experience of racist exclusion from public space (see Williams 1991; see also Dotson 2012: 26–28; and Dotson and Gilbert 2014). Thus, Lorde must look elsewhere to find reliable epistemic resources—both informational and hermeneutical (see Fricker 2015: 76; cited in Davis 2018)—for understanding the realities of her life.

For Lorde, feeling deeply is the source of information necessary for pursuing her project of self-preservation. Dedicated to reading and learning from a young age, Lorde discovered there were aspects of her experience—necessities imposed on her as she navigated a racist environment—that pointed toward truths about the world for which she found no evidence or explanation in the formal educational resources of books or school. She felt on a daily basis the effects of invisible forces shaping her possibilities, but the logic of those forces remained shrouded in mystery.

Communal modes of articulating this knowledge also eluded her, as she was isolated from black peers, and her parents stubbornly avoided discussion of the oppressive forces affecting their lives. As she matured and sought to make sense of her situation, it became clearer to her that the conventional wisdom shared by her white peers and their parents fell short of explaining what she began to know, through living, to be true. With the failure of formal and communal explanations, Lorde turned inward to focus on her individual perception of the truths that governed her survival—truths both about herself and about the world. She found that feeling was the dimension of her experience that attested to those truths, and she learned to pay attention to feeling as a way of perceiving what remained implicit in her racist and sexist surroundings.

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Poetry to Produce Knowledge and Understanding

Both in *Zami* and in the interview with Rich, Lorde describes her organic experience of thought as 'bubbling up' from a chaos of feeling, as lacking organization or structure to enable it to be crafted into something resembling analytic understanding. She says of her early adulthood,

> [thinking was a process] I had come to suspect because I had seen so many errors committed in its name, and I had come not to respect it. On the other hand, I was also afraid of it because there were inescapable conclusions or convictions I had come to about my own life, my own feelings, that defied thought. And I wasn't going to let them go. . . . But I couldn't analyze or understand them because they didn't make the kind of sense I had been taught to expect through understanding. There were things I knew and couldn't say. And I couldn't understand them. (1984: 87–88)

She found herself confused and alienated, not only lacking the intellectual understanding required to conform in school, but also lacking recognition that the knowledge she needed for self-preservation could be found in the insights provided by her feelings. (Notice Lorde's distinction between knowledge and understanding: knowledge is perception and awareness of reality that one recognizes and valorizes as reasons for acting, while understanding is the intellectual mode of examining, analyzing, and explaining such knowledge.) Frustrated with the resources for understanding available to her, she learned to produce poetic images that would enable her felt perceptions to develop into something that could be used and shared to motivate action.

Lorde writes, 'it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt' (Lorde 1984: 36). Through poetry, Lorde examines and valorizes as knowledge what she feels deeply, enabling her to express, act on, and share that knowledge with others. Prior to finding her poetic voice, she explains, 'all I had was the sense that I had to hold on to these feelings and that I had to air them in some way' (1984: 88). By learning to express herself poetically, she clarifies this confused lifeline of feeling and molds it into something that can be more properly described as knowledge: 'When I wrote something that finally had it, I would say it aloud and it would come alive, become real. It would start repeating itself and I'd know, that's struck, that's true. Like a bell. Something struck true. And there the words would be' (88). She discovered poetry as a bridge between the chaotic depths of feeling and the world in which action and communication must take place (for discussion, see Hull 1990: 169–72).

Thus, feeling, knowing, and understanding are the three major figures in Lorde's practical epistemology. Feeling is the core element—not emotions or sensations, per se, but a chaotic wellspring of perception, something inside whose often-obscure presence presses on her consciousness. According to Lorde, this deep feeling at times presents itself as confusion, but it can also give rise to a knowledge of who

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she is, of what society demands of her, and of what she should be unwilling to give up. This knowledge, when it can be achieved, serves as ground for her actions, and she attributes to it her successes at surviving and preserving her multifaceted identity. Such knowing arises prior to the analytic modes of thought—for example, logical reasoning, prose writing—that build an understanding that enables an idea to be manipulated and discussed.

Epistemologists may be skeptical of this account of poetry and felt knowledge (but see Shotwell 2011: 24–28). Lorde departs from the view that knowledge is developed as a product of honing the understanding: according to Lorde's interpretation of her experience, it is not the case that she reflects rationally on her feelings to gain an analytic understanding that can confer epistemic validity (that is, to *justify* her true beliefs). Instead, her account shows the development of a kind of knowledge that grows directly from the feelings partially hidden in her experience. This knowledge to Lorde is something deeper than and prior to understanding: it is 'that dark and true depth which understanding serves, waits upon, and makes accessible through language to ourselves and others' (1984: 68). If epistemologically heterodox, this theme is familiar in aesthetic discussions of poetry. In the words of Stanley Cavell: 'There is a natural problem of *making* such experiences [of inner self] known . . . because one hasn't forms of words at one's command to release those feelings, and hasn't anyone else whose interest in helping to find the words one trusts. (Someone would have to *have* these feelings to know what I feel.) Here is a source of our gratitude to poetry' (2002: 245, emphasis original). For Lorde, a deep feeling valorized through poetry as conscious knowledge can align actions toward self-preservation, aided by but not dependent on understanding.

Although her account is controversial, taking seriously Lorde's analysis of her experience can productively trouble assumptions about the status and origins of knowledge with respect to action. By locating knowledge in her deep feelings, Lorde attests that knowing is a value-laden practice in the context of her life—a recurring theme in black feminist thought (Collins 2000: 284–85). The value of her claims to knowledge emanates from a more personal source than the formal validity or truth value of her propositional beliefs; it comes from how what she feels to be true can serve her self-preservation. In other words, publicly validated modes of analysis and understanding are only valuable to her insofar as they expand possibilities for survival, which they only do when directed by her deeper sense of what is true and what is right. She makes this position more or less explicit in her conversation with Adrienne Rich: 'Rationality is not unnecessary. It serves the chaos of knowledge. It serves feeling. It serves to get from this place to that place. But if you don't honor those places, then the road is meaningless. . . . I don't see feel/think as a dichotomy. I see them as a choice of ways and combinations' (1984: 100–1).

When deep feeling is valorized as a source of knowledge, Lorde claims, understanding becomes an aid to a greater vision of self-preservation, which for her is by necessity a vision of future possibilities that depart from present realities: 'the possible shapes of what has not been before exist only in that back place, where we keep those unnamed, untamed longings for something different and

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beyond what is now called possible, and to which our understanding can only build roads' (1984: 101; see discussion in Keeling 2019: xi–xvi). However, for such longings to become reality, the chaotic wellspring of feeling must become clarified and raised to a form that enables it to motivate one's pursuit of actions and relationships.

III. Motivating Action through the Power of the Erotic

Because Lorde's agency meets constant friction from her social context, she requires significant energy to fuel the work of grappling with feeling, expressing feeling in poetry, and acting on the knowledge thereby distilled. In perhaps her most widely read essay, 'Uses of the Erotic', Lorde describes the erotic as the power that provides energy for self-preservation—energy to integrate pursuits around 'making our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible' (1984: 55). Not necessarily sexual, the erotic becomes available when a person allows herself to feel deeply, and it makes possible the affirmation of those deep feelings—through poetry in Lorde's case, as described above—as a knowledge that she can then find ways of bringing to action. Describing the erotic in terms of feeling, knowledge, and understanding, Lorde writes obliquely: '[feeling] is the first and most powerful guiding light toward any understanding. And understanding is a handmaiden which can only wait upon, or clarify, that knowledge, deeply born. The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge' (1984: 56). By nurturing her felt knowledge, the erotic enables her to 'live from within outward', mobilizing her perceptions to give purpose to her actions of resistance and to illuminate their impact (1984: 58).

Lorde's description of the erotic contests the distinction between sex and other creative, intimate encounters, but she does not suggest that all intimate activities are inherently erotic. The erotic is not just a matter of what we do, but a qualitative way of doing these things: 'a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing' (1984: 54). This suggests, contra some interpretations (for example, Ferguson 2012; Acampora 2007), that Lorde's project is not a call for sexuality or desire to permeate all areas of life. Feeling is more central than desire for the erotic power to drive Lorde's agency. Lorde describes how the kind of deep feeling that activates the erotic can take place in the private engagement of a person with her work—'dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea'—or in a shared undertaking. Essential to the erotic is opening oneself to what is felt in such practices, which enables valorizing those feelings as knowledge that can then organize one's actions.

By focusing on the erotic as a power, my interpretation differs slightly from that proffered by Alexis Shotwell in *Knowing Otherwise* (2011). Shotwell describes the erotic as an 'affective feeling-scape with political content' (25), itself a source of implicit knowledge. She takes poetry's function to be linking the erotic to 'more traditional ways of knowing'—that is, to what Lorde calls understanding (27). I have described above, however, how the source of knowledge for Lorde is feeling itself, and the function of poetry is to bring deep feeling to the surface, where it can be recognized as knowledge and enjoy the potential for understanding.

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Contra Shotwell, I read Lorde's erotic as the power that accompanies feeling deeply, that can motivate both the poetic work of self-recognition and other actions that move out from it. (In this, my reading is more closely aligned with AnaLouise Keating's [2013] analysis.) Ultimately, however, the ambiguities between the functions of poetry and the erotic in Lorde's descriptions are productive and probably intentional; they highlight how power and perception are inseparable in the movement toward self-preservation through expression and action.

'Uses of the Erotic' has given rise to a number of competing interpretations, in part because Lorde uses metaphor and imagery to describe the erotic without defining it. In her words, the erotic is a 'source of power and information', 'a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane', a 'measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings', and an 'internal sense of satisfaction' (1984: 54–55). These varied formulations have led some (such as Nussbaum 1995) to interpret the erotic statically as a description of desire or a prescription of how sex ought to be shaped, overlooking its context as a key term within Lorde's praxis of everyday self-preservation. Further, Lorde's valorization of deep feelings has raised concerns from both rationalists and poststructuralists that the erotic presupposes an ostensibly authentic core of self. This contributes to a sense among critics that the notion of the erotic is perhaps tragically optimistic: how can one know whether such feelings necessarily point one toward good rather than harmful actions? (See, for example, Hall 1998.) And what of the exclusions that may be authorized by the characterization of the erotic as lying 'in a deeply female and spiritual plane'? The apparent problem of gender essentialism has led some feminists and queer theorists to criticize Lorde as an exemplar of 'cultural feminism', that is, the movement to (re)valorize the feminine or womanly traits devalued by patriarchy.

These questions raised by Lorde's descriptions of the erotic demand serious consideration. While I do not explore these challenges in detail here, I hope this essay draws attention to some resources internal to Lorde's thought that can support future work in this area. Lorde's commitment to the truth of deep feelings cannot be properly understood when decontextualized from her praxis of oppositional agency and from the teleology of self-preservation that orients her life. Those worried about the problem of the authenticity of feelings should also consider Lorde's nuanced writings about the political and social dimensions of negative feelings and the work required to convert them into fuel for self-preservation, as discussed in the next section. For those concerned about gender essentialism, there might also be resources, as some have suggested, in Lorde's notion of the self as continuously undergoing change across every dimension of identity (see Alcoff 1988: 412; Ginzberg 1992).

For the purposes of this article, however, a methodological commitment persuades me to look beyond the controversies surrounding Lorde's erotic. To consider sincerely Lorde's wider account of oppositional knowledge developed from feeling requires that her interpretive insights about her life be granted provisional testimonial authority. I suggest taking Lorde at her word that the power she calls the erotic is central to her own survival and self-preservation; my philosopher's task is to understand more clearly how that fits into her overall agential praxis.

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IV. Coalitional Politics and Not Looking the Other Way from Feeling

In the context of an inhospitable social and epistemic environment, the erotic mode of relating to feelings facilitates the 'ability to posit, to vision' new possibilities for survival and self-preservation (2009: 165). Lorde writes, 'Once we recognize we can feel deeply, we can love deeply, we can feel joy, then we will demand that all parts of our lives produce that kind of joy. And when they do not, we will ask, "Why don't they?" And it is the asking that will lead us inevitably toward change' (2009: 163).

The enormous popular impact of 'Uses of the Erotic' among feminists—especially in the 1980s and 1990s—has largely resulted from this focus on women's access to joy that has been suppressed by dominant, patriarchal value systems. However, on Lorde's account, the power of the erotic extends beyond valorizing the knowledge that comes from positive feelings; negative feelings are also important resources for informing and directing action. In *The Cancer Journals* (1980), Lorde writes how the imperative to feel joy can be used to suppress actual feelings of pain, thereby obscuring the knowledge of feeling and closing avenues for action (Ahmed 2010: 83; for discussion of agency in *Cancer Journals*, see Musser 2014: 118–50).

Lorde articulates how oppression operates not only by imposing limits on her from outside, but by injecting hostility that works from within through her feelings and beliefs. She writes, 'it is easier to deal with the external manifestations of racism and sexism than it is to deal with the results of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another' (Lorde 1984: 147). She experiences societal responses to her race, gender, and sexuality that vacillate between utter indifference and naked animosity, generating feelings of fear, pain, and anger. Lorde asserts that those feelings can either be turned into strength and power or become terrible weaknesses. She describes pain as 'an experience that must be recognized, named, and then used in some way in order for the experience to change, to be transformed into something else, strength or knowledge or action' (1984: 171). Anger is similarly 'loaded with information and energy' as a source of knowledge (127), but Lorde cautions how living with her anger has required 'learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste' (124). When unrecognized and unacknowledged, such feelings become corrosive to her capabilities of survival and change; they threaten the project of self-preservation, bringing bodily and mental deterioration and the dissolution of relationships that could foster solidarity and empowerment (see especially 'Eye to Eye', in Lorde 1984). Lorde describes how accessing the erotic in deep feelings—both of joy and of pain—depends on the courage *not to look the other way* from feelings that arise in our actions (1984: 58–59). This is the form of attentiveness required to use the knowledge provided by such feelings, while avoiding being engulfed or hollowed out by them.

While I have so far emphasized Lorde's description of her personal sources of knowledge and action, self-preservation also vitally depends on communal resistance to group-based oppression, which requires fostering solidarity and establishing coalitions among the oppressed. Lorde uses the figure of *not looking*

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the other way to express opening to possibilities for such collaboration. In *Zami*, Lorde describes arriving as a young woman in Mexico City: 'I started to break my life-long habit of looking down at my feet as I walked along the street. There was always so much to see, and so many interesting and open faces to read, that I practiced holding my head up as I walked, and the sun felt hot and good on my face' (156). Not averting her gaze, she can see herself reflected in the 'brown faces of every hue meeting mine'—a mode of self-recognition reinforced in the literary narrative by the sensation of warm sunlight (156). This theme persists in her writing on black women's solidarity, where she focuses on why black women literally and figuratively look the other way from one another rather than engage with the pain, fear, and other feelings that arise in their encounters (1984: 145–75).

Feelings play a central role in Lorde's coalitional politics. She tells us, 'the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference' (1984: 56). The ability to grapple with deep feelings and externalize them thus enables the kind of 'complex communication' that María Lugones (2006) identifies as a foundation for collaboration among people for whom oppression takes different forms (thanks to Kris Sealey for encouraging this connection). Lorde writes, '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' (1984: 59).

In summary, the erotic power of feeling deeply is the condition of possibility for an oppositional, felt knowledge to emerge to guide action—both personal and communal—as a corrective to the inadequate epistemic resources dominant in society. A person's access to the erotic is constrained through oppression, which prevents recognizing the value of feelings, thereby limiting political capacity to enact change. The imperative not to look the other way from feelings—and from the similarities and differences they make visible—is required if the erotic is to open oppositional modes for relationship and shared action.

V. Oppositional Agency and Responsibility to an Intimate Partner

Lorde's conception of living according to a deeply felt knowledge is controversial for moral psychology from the European tradition. Her unorthodox epistemology threatens the authority of principle-based moral reasoning, and her teleology of living toward self-preservation centers a defiantly interested value over any appeal to impartiality or universal good. However, insofar as moral theory is invested in the value of agency and autonomy, Lorde's oppositional agency poses a challenge that cannot be ignored. If agency has the shape described above for Lorde and, perhaps, for others in similarly marginalized subject positions, then ethical prescriptions and moral intuitions based on the value of agency as such must be revised in response.

The remainder of this article considers some implications of Lorde's oppositional agency for sexual ethics, an area in which moral intuitions and ethical prescriptions have struggled to grasp the nonideal character of social reality (Alcoff 2018). After

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briefly describing how agency and consent have become focal points of popular and theoretical discussions of right and wrong in sexual encounters, I will present two examples from Lorde's work that can perhaps show how her oppositional agency calls for a shift in moral intuitions that might enrich standard, consent-based notions of responsibility to a sexual partner.

Recent years have seen a mainstream rise in feminist-informed moral intuitions and ethico-legal prescriptions about sexual intimacy, motivated by a basic presupposition that women ought to have agency over whether and how they participate in sexual encounters. This is a departure from the nature-based claims that previously guided formal adjudication of right and wrong in sex, which were buttressed by religious discourses, notions of male property or guardianship rights, and sexist claims couched in the terms of sociology, psychology, and biology (Freedman 2013). Feminist theorists and activists have demanded that the commitment to agency be enshrined in consent-based legal and social standards for sexual intimacy, even as they reflexively critique those standards for failing to reflect and protect people's actual agency within sexual encounters—especially when agency is undermined by oppression across social markers of gender identity, sexual orientation, class, race, citizenship or immigration status, and incarceration (see Alcoff 2018).

Today, some version of the commitment to the value of sexual agency drives virtually all popular feminist political movements against sexual violation, and sexual consent has emerged as a common lever for political change across many societies. However, the specific features of an appropriate norm of sexual consent remain controversial—and not only to critics from the right. Ethical and legal theorists have for twenty-five years debated the definition, nature, and conditions of moral validity of consent (see Archard 2018), while feminist critical theorists have pointed to the potentially inadequate phenomenological and political assumptions that the norm of consent may entail (see, for example, Alcoff 2018).

As these philosophical debates continue, popular feminist discourses have reached a relative consensus around three consent-based obligations: to seek a partner's agreement to any sexual behavior, to respect a partner's refusal (or incapacity to agree), and to make it possible for a partner at any time to withdraw from or end an encounter. These obligations, discernible in most popular feminist discussions of sexual consent on blogs, social media, and in general-audience publications, are responsive to important aspects of sexual agency for women and others, and they are probably necessary if not sufficient as a framework for sexual ethics.

Working largely independently of popular feminist moral intuitions, most formal ethicists have come to share an adjacent position we can call the standard philosophical view of sexual consent: a sexual activity is morally permissible only when both people (who are competent, conscious, and reasonably well informed) act intentionally (that is, on purpose) and volitionally (that is, without coercion) in a way discernable to one another as consenting to that activity (for example, Wertheimer 2003). Ensuing debate among ethicists about consent typically cash out the appropriate parameters of coercion, sufficient information, and other limitations on the moral validity of consent.

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The standard philosophical view is founded on several interconnected assumptions about the nature of consent, with two of particular interest to those concerned with the question of women's sexual agency. It assumes that (1) consent is *permissive*, that is, consent's central moral effect is to lift another's obligation by making a normally prohibited act permissible; and (2) the moral power of consent is dependent on *social norms* governing communication, that is, the moral force of an expression of consent requires that it align significantly with preexisting conventions for indicating permission and for interpreting what is to be permitted (see Dougherty 2015; McGregor 2013; Owens 2011; Pallikkathayil 2020; but cf. Alexander 2014 for a statement of the 'mental account' of consent that retains the first assumption but rejects the second). These assumptions are of particular concern to feminists for several reasons. First, they focus on local expressions of autonomy rather than on how larger contextual factors might be ethically relevant to sexual encounters, including how a person's choice to give permission in the present might take place within a life context in which agency is curtailed (Alcoff 2018; West 1995). They also leave unexamined the interpersonal effects of power and unjust social structures on how sexual acts are proposed and by whom (Anderson 2005: 108–9; Kukla 2018: 75–76). Finally, they do not address the possibility that some prevailing social norms surrounding sex might undermine women's agency (for example, Langton 1993).

My intuition is that Lorde's thought can productively challenge the assumptions of the standard view and that it can do so in a way that steers philosophical consideration of sexual consent back toward the core feminist commitment to the importance of women's agency. Without attempting to give a watertight argument for this position, I hope to show that an appreciation of Lorde's feeling-based agency in her first-person accounts of sexual encounters can facilitate some novel insights in this direction. I proceed by relating two situations in which Lorde describes acting on a considered intention to have sex. In each case, her positive expression of that intention is taken up differently by her partner, leading to divergent outcomes.

First, while discussing failures of black solidarity toward her as a lesbian, Lorde offers an anecdote:

> Like when your Black brother calls you a ball-buster and tricks you up into his apartment and tries to do it to you against the kitchen cabinets just, he says, to take you down a peg or two, when all the time you'd only gone up there to begin with fully intending to get a little in the first place (because all the girls I knew who were possibilities were too damn complicating, and I was plain and simply horny as hell). I finally got out of being raped although not mauled by leaving behind a ring and a batch of lies and it was the first time in my life since I'd left my parents' house that I was in a physical situation which I couldn't handle physically—in other words, the bastard was stronger than I was. (1982: 181–82)

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Here, Audre (the character) tries to act on something she feels, perhaps not so deeply: she just wants to 'get a little'. However, as Amber Musser observes, Lorde's sexuality requires that she always 'negotiate the terrain of her own desires while grappling with the contradictions within her subject position' (2014: 57). While a woman's desire for casual sex with a man is usually culturally legible and supported by cultural norms in Lorde's society, for Lorde to act on that desire while pursuing the self-preservation I have explained in section one requires a degree of subversion of prevailing conventions for heterosexual encounters. The man in this encounter, however, denies her agency to make such a solicitation while retaining self-preservation. The man sees Lorde, a women-oriented woman seeking to 'get a little' on her own terms, as an affront: she is someone in need of being brought 'down a peg or two'. Instead of simply accepting or turning down her come-on, he refuses to acknowledge the validity of her agency. He asserts a violent frame for their encounter that ensures that they cannot have sex in a way that accommodates the agency of both. Lorde suggests—both here and elsewhere—that such sexual violence against lesbians and other 'women-identified women' in the black community is a result of misogynistic, homophobic conventions of heterosexuality, as well as internalized racist expectations of black women's subservience (see 'Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving', in Lorde 1984).

To understand the failure of responsibility that here leads to violation, I suggest we should resist localizing the wrong in the moment where he does not respect her refusal—that is, the moment the encounter becomes coercion and therefore nonconsensual. Rather, I propose that the origin of the violation is in the failure to hear or accommodate Audre's positive agency to author her actions; it is a failure in his response to her initial solicitation. More than acting locally against her consent, the man rejects her agential possibility for consensual engagement. He fails to hear and respond to her expression of interest as a valid moral address, as pointing toward Audre's agency and toward the value of her self-preservation. This failure suggests that sexual ethics ought to consider more than whether an expression indicates a yes or a no according to its fit with prevailing conventions. Responsibility to a partner also entails responding to the qualitative features of a 'yes'—not only whether it is *really* a yes (that is, whether it is volitional, intentional, and informed), but what agency it expresses and what quality of intimacy it pursues.

A person skeptical of using Lorde's feelings-based epistemology for ethics might argue that this man also acts from feelings—perhaps feelings of fear, repulsion, or shame—and that we cannot claim validity for Audre's feelings as the basis of her agency without also valorizing his own. However, the valorization of feeling as a source of knowledge need not be morally relativistic in this way. Some feelings are invested in the destruction of other people, and the actions that such feelings inspire can be condemned uncontroversially for the harms they cause to oneself and to others. According to Lorde, such feelings are usually also of minimal value as sources of knowledge toward self-preservation. (She discusses how hate, for example, provides no vision for survival; see Lorde 1984: 152.) The insight posed by Lorde's account instead suggests that a certain way of feeling deeply might shed light on the prejudices of convention that blind people to the conditions

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needed for their survival. For Audre's partner—about whom we can only speculate—this might require *not looking the other way* from the feelings that motivate his violence toward her. Raising those feelings to knowledge might in turn enable the recognition of how toxic and often racist ideals of manhood can destroy possibilities for human acknowledgment (see hooks 2004).

Consider another intimate example from *Zami*. Narrating an encounter with a much older, white woman, Lorde describes a transformation of capacities. From previously being lost in her feeling as a child and adolescent, here Lorde begins to feel agency in self-authorship, which arises from not looking the other way from her feelings and the knowledge they provide her. She writes:

> Night after night we had talked until dawn in this room about language and poetry and love and the good conduct of living. Yet we were strangers. As I stood there looking at Eudora, the impossible became easier, almost simple. Desire gave me courage, where it had once made me speechless. With almost no thought I heard myself saying,
>
> 'I want to sleep with you'.
>
> 'I don't know if I can', she said, still softly, touching the sunken place on her nightshirt where her left breast should have been. 'And you don't mind this?"
>
> I had wondered so often how it would feel under my hands, my lips, this different part of her. Mind? I felt my love spread like a shower of light surrounding me and this woman before me. I reached over and touched Eudora's face with my hands.
>
> 'Are you sure?' Her eyes were still on my face.
>
> 'Yes, Eudora. . . . I'm very sure' . . . As I spoke the words, I felt them touch and give life to a new reality within me, some half-known self come of age, moving out to meet her. (1982: 166–67)

Audre feels her capacities grow, and raising that feeling to speech closes a chapter of speechlessness that had constrained her earlier life. This is self-preservation in Lorde's dynamic sense, preservation of her 'half-known self' made possible through speaking from the knowledge afforded by feeling deeply.

Ethicists judging this encounter under the standard rubric of valid consent will define Eudora's responsibility to Audre based on whether the power differentials between them undermine consensuality. There might be reason to doubt the validity of Audre's affirmation if the encounter is judged according to conventions governing heterosexual consent: consent across differentials of age, race, and experience does not align with societal norms or (some) moral intuitions about the distribution of power necessary to ground an equitable sexual relationship.

Without detracting from the urgency of examining the effects of power differentials on sexual agency, I propose that we resist reading the ethical content of Audre's utterance—'Yes, Eudora, I'm very sure'—as a simple moment of clear consent to be evaluated for validity. Understanding Eudora's responsibility requires situating Audre's 'yes' within Audre's form of agency, not merely evaluating whether Audre's words validly give permission. This encounter should

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be read as Audre's attempt to act on the knowledge that comes from a feeling—to move toward newly minted possibilities of self-preservation. Whether Eudora chooses to sleep with her or not, to acknowledge and valorize Audre's agency here requires more than making sure Audre has the opportunity to say no. It requires responding to her 'yes' in a way that acknowledges its significance—acknowledging that her expression of agency has an origin in feeling and a trajectory toward a new mode of relating that might expand possibilities for self-preservation. Eudora's responsibility, whether in taking up the offer or turning it down, is to acknowledge through her response that for Audre something more is at stake—that Audre's agency is not reducible to maintaining her standing in the face of differentials of power (see Stewart 2017 on black women's agency and sexuality). If Eudora had more direct power over Audre—if she were a man or young Audre's professor—it would introduce further layers of responsibility that shape how this ought to be done, but it would not diminish the importance of acknowledging the validity of Lorde's agency in this way.

In both encounters, I have suggested that Lorde's expression of consent ought to be understood as calling for a response from her partner. But how much must Lorde's partners know of her feelings to respond adequately to her? Are they not afflicted, like Adrienne Rich in the exchange opening this article, with an inability to know what Lorde knows and feels? Because Lorde's feelings develop in opposition to dominant hermeneutical resources—particularly those of the 1950s United States, where these events take place—her partners certainly cannot take their cues from available sexual conventions. I cannot decisively resolve the question of whether one can access another's feeling in the way necessary to support this kind of responsibility. I want to highlight, however, that other resources may be available to complicate the role of knowing in such an endeavor, articulating a form of knowing *in the service of acting* that Lorde's account brings to the fore. In 'Knowing and Acknowledging' (2002), Cavell describes *acknowledgment* as the mode by which we can be said to 'know' another person's inner experience of a feeling. To know in a way that acknowledges, he explains, brings with it the 'requirement that I do something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge' (237). The second-personal statement, 'I know your pain'—Cavell's primary example—only attains its everyday meaning if it expresses sympathy, and it only succeeds in expressing sympathy 'because your suffering makes a claim upon me. It is not enough that I know (am certain) that you suffer—I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must acknowledge it, otherwise I do not know what "(your or his) being in pain" means' (243).

Because Lorde's actions are motivated by a knowledge that comes from feeling, her partners cannot adequately grasp (that is, know) the meaning of her expressions of desire or will unless they begin to *acknowledge* the feeling that those actions express. Since self-preservation for Lorde requires generating new possibilities for relating—what Sara Ahmed (2006) calls novel proximities and lines of contact—Lorde's agential expressions of sexual interest and consent are calls for her partners to follow her into new modes of connection. Lorde's actions place a claim on her partners, and her partners' responses ought to acknowledge the moral validity of that claim as an expression of agency.

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Of course, for Audre's actions to be acknowledged in this way requires that her affirmation be heard as a proposal to create something new—it requires uptake that already goes beyond heterosexual conventions of giving permission for sex. Here, perhaps a form of attentiveness akin to not looking the other way from feeling might occasion Lorde's partners to appreciate her project of self-preservation and to examine what feelings participation in that project might produce for themselves. Perhaps not looking the other way can enable two people to grapple with feelings that in principle remain opaque to one another, enabling them to become intimate despite the lack of ground to secure against the risk of misrecognition. Crucially, however, Lorde ought also not to evade her own responsibility to remain attentive to the others with whom she pursues sexual agency. The stories not told in her writing include those where her lovers found her to be forceful and manipulative, and where she used her revered status in lesbian circles to prioritize over the agency of others her own desire for sexual connection (de Veaux 2004: 126–29, 241). (Indeed, Audre in the first encounter above seems breezily willing to instrumentalize her male partner for sexual purposes.) This swirling of power and agency in Lorde's encounters points toward an ambiguity or multi-directionality of responsibility that merits further examination in future work.

In the first example, Audre's partner refuses to respond to her in a way that admits value to her agency; instead, he denies the moral relevance of her feelings and will and forecloses her pursuit of self-preservation. He looks the other way from both the value of Audre's self-preservation and from his own agency to loosen the grip of harmful conventions, and he thus fails to fulfill his responsibility to her. (He also refuses to base his action on the question of whether or not she consents, but this unambiguous wrong is a consequence of his refusal to acknowledge the moral claim posed by Audre's agency).

In the second case, Eudora responds to Audre's subversion of convention by recognizing and responding to—*acknowledging*—the basis of Audre's actions in a feeling-based agency to pursue self-preservation. The felicity of the encounter does not follow from a transparent match between how the two interpret Audre's 'yes, I'm very sure'. Rather, the lovers both face the inadequacy of socially available models for making sense of Audre's utterance in this moment, and together they create a new shape for intimate relating. Note that the limited usefulness of conventions to make sense of this encounter is a failure of social norms, not a failure of communicative conventions that make such an agreement intelligible and recognizable as carrying illocutionary force. While Lorde's utterance is clearly interpretable as a performative of affirmation, judging the *validity* of her act of consent—that is, whether it is intentional, volitional, competent—depends on social norms (and moral intuitions) to interpret the situation and her mental state. These are the conventions Lorde confounds, because her self-preservation requires resisting prevailing understandings of what desire, autonomy, competence, and so forth entail —both under heteronormative social norms that pretend to universality and under the separate norms foisted onto black women, lesbians, and others who do not live along prescribed lines of sociality. In the face of inadequate conventions, an act of shared creation such as that between Audre and Eudora requires that partners not only respect each other's refusals, but also respond to each other's affirmations in

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ways that acknowledge and valorize the feelings and agency—in this case the project of self-preservation—behind those expressions of consent.

Returning to the assumptions subtending the standard philosophical account of sexual consent, fruitful questions arise when we read Lorde's encounters contextually, with an appreciation of her account of agency. First, it seems that responsibility to a partner may be poorly mapped by a notion of consent-as-permission, since an expression of consent or desire gains its value and meaning—not only its moral validity—from the agency of the person who expresses it. Rather than simply give permission, consent demands a certain kind of response from a partner so that the value of this agential background is properly acknowledged. Specifically, Lorde's partners may be obligated to respond to her consent in ways that acknowledge the validity of her agency to pursue self-preservation. Second, Lorde's examples suggest that an act of consenting can call into question the value invested in conventions of meaning and behavior; it can reveal the need for new forms of interpretation and new models for intimacy. Acting responsibly to a sexual partner sometimes requires recognizing that intimacy together might entail pushing beyond the affordances of those norms.

VI. Conclusion

I have described Lorde's account of feeling, knowing, and acting toward self-preservation as a model for oppositional agency when a society undermines possibilities of knowledge and survival. With the growing philosophical interest in Lorde's work, I hope contextualizing her thought within this frame contributes to new insight into her concept of the erotic and her account of the role of feelings in coalition building. I have also suggested that considering Lorde's oppositional agency in this light can reveal something about how moral intuitions should evolve in response to nonideal social conditions, a question of central importance for current discussions of sexual consent.

I have also sought to demonstrate that drawing on Lorde's life and thought as a source of philosophical insight can introduce productive tensions in theoretical normative debates, perhaps holding theorists more accountable to the lives we attempt to understand and shape. For sexual ethics, Lorde's work encourages us to look beyond the assumption that the norm of consent provides the core moral content of sexual encounters. Responsibility to a partner requires more than recognizing a yes as a giving of permission and a no as a refusal under prevailing conventions. Lorde's agency—acting on felt knowledge toward self-preservation—reminds us that social norms are invested with value, and desires and intentions must often be pursued in opposition to the transparency that prevailing conventions might provide. This is to say that a sexual 'yes' is overdetermined in ways that demand further moral reflection and exploration.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2020.4 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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