

Cultural Cliteracy:

Exposing the Contexts of Women's Not Coming

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ABSTRACT

Cultural cliteracy denotes what an adequately educated person should know about the clitoris. This paper elaborates three ways to enlarge understandings of the clitoris. The first looks at the clitoris as a target of male aggression, a significant and persistent theme in Western history. The second describes an expanded anatomy of the clitoris, one which makes it as large and significant as the penis. The third connects consciousness of clitoral facts with empowerment beyond genital satisfaction and demonstrates that cultural cliteracy can improve readings of women's texts. To conclude, cultural cliteracy is shown to fuel growth, creativity, and individuation and to help women find and express personal power. This claim implies that integrating better understandings of and attitudes towards the clitoris into other academic and professional discourses could help women come into their own.

"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 suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives."¹

I. INTRODUCTION

As an object of academic study, the clitoris has fascinated few.

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1. Audré Lorde, *The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, in *SISTER OUTSIDER: ESSAYS AND SPEECHES* 53, 53 (1984).

Nevertheless, for the past thirty years, feminists writing for popular audiences have recognized the clitoris as worthy of investigation,² and my work on “cultural cliteracy” builds on their foundation. “Cultural cliteracy” denotes what an adequately educated person should know about the clitoris, which is that it is a culturally despised body part because it is an obdurate reminder of women’s independence and power and supports women’s liberation.

The epigraph from Audré Lorde’s “The Uses of the Erotic”³ articulates an assumption that informs this paper: that controlling women’s sexuality serves to reduce women to a version of what Foucault has called “docile bodies.”⁴ Docile bodies take direction from and accept subordination to a hegemonic group, with little resistance. Lorde uses the term “the erotic” to refer to forces of attraction and connection that bring people together and support the creation of agency.⁵ She claims that patriarchal culture has narrowed the conventional understanding of “erotic” to genitally focused “sensations,” which trivializes and defuses feminine powers of connection.⁶ Lorde’s discussion implies that patriarchal definitions of autonomy and agency also neglect the degree to which subjectivity is co-constructed. The continuation of male supremacy depends upon women being docile bodies, isolated, subjected, used, transformed, improved, dissociated, dominated. As long as women remain in such a condition they are de-centered and mystified, and they will not challenge efforts to control them. Discovering that a dominant group socially constructs what feels like the most private and personal part of oneself can be a powerful spur to what Paulo Freire has called “conscientization.”⁷ Cultural cliteracy aims to provide this shift in perspective.

Cultural cliteracy, grounded in Lorde’s definitions, is a counter or reverse discourse to current medical, gender, and consumer discourses that interpellate women as sex objects in the heterosexist regime that constitutes our current sexual culture.⁸ Lorde’s “erotic” entails profound respect for oneself and the

2. See, e.g., Natalie Angier, *The Well-Tempered Clavier: On the Evolution of the Clitoris*, in *WOMAN: AN INTIMATE GEOGRAPHY* 57 (1999); LONNIE BARBACH, *FOR YOURSELF: THE FULFILLMENT OF FEMALE SEXUALITY* (1975); BETTY DODSON, *SEX FOR ONE: THE JOY OF SELFLOVING* (1995); SHERE HITE, *WOMEN AS REVOLUTIONARY AGENTS OF CHANGE: THE HITE REPORTS AND BEYOND* (1972); LEONORE TIEFER, *SEX IS NOT A NATURAL ACT AND OTHER ESSAYS* (1995).

3. Lorde, *supra* note 1.

4. MICHEL FOUCAULT, *DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH: THE BIRTH OF THE PRISON* 135-69 (1977).

5. Lorde, *supra* note 1, at 53-59.

6. *Id.* at 54.

7. PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* 95 (1972). Freire defines “conscientization,” a term translated from the Portuguese, as learning that focuses on perceiving and exposing social and political contradictions and includes taking action against oppressive elements in one’s life. Conscientization is similar to critical consciousness or consciousness raising.

8. See TIEFER, *supra* note 2. Leonore Tiefer popularized “New View” perspectives. New View adherents return the discussion of sexuality to cultural factors and relational issues. Susan T. Cacchioni, drawing on Tiefer’s elaborations, has recently published a study on relational sex work and women’s “sexual dysfunction.” She points out that “it is increasingly taken for granted that ‘successful heterosexuality’ is contingent upon having a ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ sex life” and argues that “women with perceived sexual problems, regardless of whether or not they have been diagnosed with FSD, tend to engage in relationship based ‘sex work’: the

other. When both persons embrace the erotic, they promote living according to self-definitions, “from within outward” rather than according to images prescribed and projected by one’s culture.⁹ According to Lorde, choosing the erotic over the exploitative can be transformative.¹⁰ The erotic can encourage resistance to alienation by today’s dominant culture,¹¹ opening one to passionate pursuit suffused with meaning and joy. As E.D. Hirsch does for cultural literacy, whose title I have pilfered, I imagine that the body of knowledge subsumed by the term “cultural cliteracy,” when attained by the population as a whole, could “hold together the social fabric of the nation,”¹² now newly composed of citizens awakened to the possibilities of erotic fulfillment.

I originally wrote this paper as a feminist response to a landmark study in the psychoanalytic clinical literature, Nancy Kulish’s “The Mental Representation of the Clitoris: The Fear of Female Sexuality.”¹³ The body of literature that guides and extends psychoanalytic clinical practice contains seventy-six articles similar to Kulish’s but is dedicated to discussing mental representations of the penis or phallus.¹⁴ This fact is indicative of the phallocentrism Kulish faced when selecting “the clitoris” as a topic worthy of discussion. Today, fifteen years later, hers still remains the only study on this topic in psychoanalytic literature. While I applaud Kulish for writing her groundbreaking paper, I find that her assumptions, interpretations, and conclusions are androcentric, and hence require feminist reframing.

Because the relevance of psychoanalysis is often marginalized today,¹⁵ one may wonder why I cite a psychoanalytic text as a pretext for my work. Despite its ideological and practical shortcomings, psychoanalysis provides useful theories of agency that support ways to think beyond social determinism. It theorizes mechanisms that account for internalization of social processes, individual creativity, and the effects of trauma. Revisions of psychoanalytic drive theory can explain the erotic as a resource for resistance to domination,¹⁶ and trauma theory provides a useful lens through which to perceive the effects of

rationalization, improvement, and mastery of sex in their personal lives. Their decisions to take part in or resist sex work are closely connected to the discursive and material production of heterosexuality, gender inequalities and power differences amongst women.” Susan T. Cacchioni, *Heterosexuality and ‘the labour of love’: A Contribution to Recent Debates on Female Sexual Dysfunction*, 10 *SEXUALITIES* 299, 299 (2007).

9. Lorde, *supra* note 1, at 58.

10. *Id.* at 57.

11. R. EISLER, *THE CHALICE AND THE BLADE: OUR HISTORY, OUR FUTURE* 45-58, 166-68 (1988).

12. E.D. HIRSCH, *CULTURAL LITERACY: WHAT EVERY AMERICAN NEEDS TO KNOW* 1 (1988).

13. Nancy M. Kulish, *The Mental Representation of the Clitoris: The Fear of Female Sexuality*, 11 *PSYCHOANALYTIC INQUIRY* 511, 511-36 (1991).

14. Results of searching the Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing (PEP) database, which contains 50,000 articles from twenty psychoanalytic journals.

15. See Patricia Cohen, *Freud Today*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 25, 2007 (reporting that Freud has been dropped from most university psychology curricula).

16. See JOHN BOWLBY, *ATTACHMENT AND LOSS* 210-20 (1982); Heinz Kohut, *A Note on Female Sexuality*, in *THE SEARCH FOR THE SELF*, VOL. 2 783, 783-92 (P. Ornstein ed., 1978).

women's socially constructed inhibitions. Kulish's commitment to essentialized contents of the female psyche, however, implies little hope for changing gendered sexual dynamics and offers an excellent example of why one-person psychoanalysis, which nominalizes the psyche and ignores social processes, is inadequate today and requires re-visioning.

In her study, Kulish defines the clitoris as "a tiny ball," the site of powerful sexual sensations that provoke in women the fear that the drives will overwhelm the ego.¹⁷ She finds the feared clitoris in images of ceaseless spinning, dizzying twirling, compulsive dancing, tidal waves and volcanic craters in literature, fairy tales, dreams, symptoms, games, fantasies, and free associations.¹⁸ According to her, these are frightening images that express female genital anxieties, innate to all women.¹⁹ If sexual drives are always seen as threatening and never as enlivening and constructive, if the clitoris necessarily frightens women and never excites and pleases them, how can women use it with confidence to construct sexual agency? Kulish works from at least three assumptions we need not support. First of all, her drive theory builds on a hydraulic model of human psychology that has been successfully challenged by many.²⁰ Secondly, she commits the fallacy of taking a part for the whole. She ignores and overlooks representations of the clitoris that make the erotic pleasurable palpable. Thirdly, she assumes that the fears she finds are innate, not socially constructed. Although Kulish notes that Western culture suppresses female sexuality,²¹ she accepts this dampening as an artifact of human nature and its immutable sex differences, as viewed through ego psychology, rather than as the result of modifiable historical conditions. The influences of social or cultural forces upon representations of the clitoris do not enter her account.

While Kulish connects representations of the clitoris with threatening drives and frightening conflicts in a patient's personal unconscious, I argue that a social as well as a personal unconscious shapes mental representations of the clitoris and that the fears Kulish perceives in women are socially constructed not innate. In looking at the impact of culture upon the psyche, I draw upon clinical psychoanalysts Michael Vannoy Adams, Earl Hopper, and Ethel Person, who theorize a social or cultural unconscious.²² Philosophers Sandra Bartky and Alison Jaggar also argue for the social construction of emotion in ways useful to a gendered view of Western sexuality.²³

17. Kulish, *supra* note 14, at 526.

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.*

20. See, e.g., LAURA S. BROWN, *SUBVERSIVE DIALOGUES: THEORY IN FEMINIST THERAPY* 17-46 (1994); HEINZ KOHUT, *HOW DOES ANALYSIS CURE?* (1984); S.A. MITCHELL, *RELATIONALITY: FROM ATTACHMENT TO INTERSUBJECTIVITY* 13-14 (2003).

21. Kulish, *supra* note 13, at 511.

22. ERIC HOPPER, *THE SOCIAL UNCONSCIOUS: SELECTED PAPERS* 126-61 (2002); Ethel S. Person, *Female Sexual Identity*, in *THE SEXUAL CENTURY* 278 (Ethel S. Person ed., 1999); Michael Vannoy Adams, *African American Dreaming and the Beast of Racism: The Cultural Unconscious in Jungian Analysis*, 19 *PSYCHOANALYTIC PSYCH.* 182 (2002).

23. Sandra Lee Bartky, *Feeding Egos and Tending Wounds: Deference and Disaffection in Women's Emotional Labor*, in *FEMININITY AND DOMINATION: STUDIES IN THE*

Hopper, for instance, explains the social unconscious as “unconscious constraints of social systems on individuals and their internal worlds, and, at the same time, the effects that unconscious fantasies, actions, thoughts and feelings have on social systems.”²⁴ He claims:

An analyst who is unaware of the effects of social facts and social forces will not be sensitive to the unconscious recreation of them within the therapeutic situation. He will not be able to provide a space for patients to imagine how their identities have been formed at particular historical and political junctures, and how this continues to affect them throughout their lives.²⁵

As a sexuality educator, immersed in the sexual narratives of young women for a number of years, I have arrived at similar conclusions. Being privy to the intimate consequences for women of what Rich calls compulsory heterosexuality²⁶ and Connell conceptualizes as hegemonic masculinity²⁷ has sensitized me to the degree to which girls and women serve as objects of boys’ and men’s sexual aggression. This paper aims to specify cultural reasons for the fears that Kulish finds, look for positive experiences of clitoral representations, and establish how these positive experiences of the clitoris and its representations support resistance to hegemonic attitudes that diminish women’s agency and subjectivity.

My study has three parts—historical, anatomical, and practical—unified by a concern to transvalue the clitoris from an abject²⁸ body part to a powerful resource for women’s self-development and a symbol of abundant energy. The first part of this study describes moments in Western history that illuminate the degree to which women’s primary organ of sexual pleasure has been systematically attacked. The second part elaborates a new feminist view of the clitoris as a system as large, impressive and significant as the penis and surprisingly similar to it. While the second section enlarges the clitoris physically, the third section enlarges the clitoris symbolically, extending its meanings to include sexual agency and power for women. This third section concerns feminist practice and connects a feminist view of the clitoris with empowerment beyond genital pleasure. It discusses how a new view of the clitoris allows for new interpretations of women’s literature and art and calls for new, clitorally literate approaches to treating women. This section also demonstrates that placing women’s sexual experience at the center of interpretation often helps to make sense of women’s narratives. I conclude my study by briefly evaluating results of courses I have taught employing culturally

PHENOMENOLOGY OF OPPRESSION 99 (1991); Alison M. Jaggar, *Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology*, in *FEMINIST SOCIAL THOUGHT: A READER* 384 (Diana Tietjens Meyers ed., 1989).

24. HOPPER, *supra* note 22, at 126.

25. *Id.*

26. ADRIENNE C. RICH, BLOOD, BREAD, AND POETRY: SELECTED PROSE 1979-1985 23 (1994).

27. ROBERT W. CONNELL, *MASCULINITIES* 37 (2d ed. 2005).

28. JULIA KRISTEVA, *POWERS OF HORROR: AN ESSAY ON ABJECTION* 9 (1980).

cliterate pedagogies. An ongoing IRB-approved study of over five hundred students' sexual history papers, classroom contributions, and pre/post sexual self-efficacy scores, and of twenty-five students' indepth interviews suggest that cultural cliteracy can support growth, creativity, and individuation and fuel young women's personal power. What this study further implies for women's advancement and for the revaluing of "feminine" ethics remains to be considered.

II. REMEMBERING DISMEMBERING FEMALE GENITALS

"The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward women, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world."²⁹

Cross-cultural comparisons show that differences in how societies value a woman's genitals change how the woman experiences them.³⁰ In cultures that privilege the sexual pleasure of women over that of men and that consider women's orgasms as signals for the completion of sex acts rather than men's ejaculations, as in Western societies, female sexual dysfunction does not exist.³¹ For instance, adult women can expect to have three orgasms a day in Mangaia, one of the Southern Cook Islands, where older women initiate young men into partnered sex by teaching them techniques of stimulating the clitoris.³² In Mangaia, a man learns to feel shame if he fails to bring his partner to orgasm before he ejaculates and to feel pride to the degree he contributes to his partner's sexual pleasure.³³

Each society shapes its versions of proper adult sexuality in conformance with values and visions of how best to be human, and, unfortunately for women, Western culture equates being human with being male. Accordingly, Western culture considers sex proper when it is confined to actions needed to produce children. Reproductive sexuality not only serves to reproduce the patriarchy but it also privileges the pleasure of men and so increases their sense of importance.³⁴ *Genesis* 3:16, a foundational text of Western culture, lays down rules that still apply: "In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children . . . and thy

29. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions*, *Seneca Falls Conference*, in *WOMEN, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY: A READER*, 4TH ED. 486, 486 (Barbara J. Balliet ed., 2004).

30. See D.S. Marshall, *Sexual Behavior on Mangaia*, in *HUMAN SEXUAL BEHAVIOR: VARIATIONS IN THE ETHNOGRAPHIC SPECTRUM* 103 (D.S. Marshall and R. Suggs eds., 1971); MARGARET MEAD, *SEX AND TEMPERAMENT IN THREE PRIMITIVE SOCIETIES* 271 (2d ed. 2001).

31. Marshall, *supra* note 30, at 122.

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.* at 123.

34. See Elaine Showalter, *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness: Pluralism and the Feminist Critique*, in *THE NEW FEMINIST CRITICISM: ESSAYS ON WOMEN, LITERATURE, AND THEORY* 243 (Elaine Showalter ed., 1985).

husband . . . he shall rule over thee.”³⁵ If we agree with Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s epigraph, we are not surprised to see the long *durée* of women’s sexual history as a series of male attacks. While we usually consider sexual difficulties to be personal, perhaps psychological problems, a study of historical contexts makes clear that intra-psychic conflict often reflects difficulties individuals experience carrying out cultural imperatives and scripts.³⁶ Sexual problems express public as well as personal issues.

If “social facts and social forces” contribute to shaping the dynamic unconscious, it seems likely women in Mangaia would symbolize the clitoris far differently than would Western women, for whom the clitoris has been culturally constructed as a source of anger and shame rather than of pride and pleasure. While such a comparison would constitute another paper, the suggestiveness of this idea supports the case I am constructing.

Perhaps no story better illustrates the painfully confined place Western patriarchal culture has provided for female sexuality than the history of rhetorical and physical violence against the clitoris. Patriarchy’s primary strategy for controlling women has been female genital mutilation, real and symbolic clitoridectomy that erases female sexual agency. The desire to dominate has led men to remove the clitoris, if not from women’s bodies, then from their minds’ awareness of it. Man’s cultural discourses about woman’s sexuality have mystified the clitoris, making women wonder: Is the clitoris a vestigial masculine organ a feminine woman ought to renounce? Should the pleasure the clitoris provides be eschewed because sex is properly intended for procreation not recreation, re-creation? Are women’s clitoral desires pathological? Is clitoral pleasure lesbian pleasure and vaginal pleasure heterosexual? Because sexual enjoyment stimulates the imagination, when a woman’s clitoral sensations are numbed, parts of her psyche are also deadened. When women’s sexual response is muted or extinguished, the psychological function of orgasm to reaffirm the “incontrovertible truth” of personal existence³⁷ is also muted or extinguished. Subjectivity and sexual subjectivity go together.

Clitoridectomy, which Westerners mistakenly consider to be an exotic and primitive practice, has been a fundamental strategy for containing the power of women in Western cultures.³⁸ Denying, numbing, and cutting the clitoris teach

35. *Genesis* 3:16.

36. See J.H. GAGNON, *HUMAN SEXUALITIES* (1977).

37. Heinz Lichtenstein, *The Changing Concept of Psychosexual Development*, 18 J. AM. PSYCHOANALYTIC ASS’N 300, 313 (1970).

38. Readers may object to Westerners presuming to compare female genital mutilation (FGM) to Western women’s psychological damage incurred living under Western patriarchal arrangements. However, because clitoridectomy has not confined itself to non-Western cultures, using the language of clitoridectomy is not necessarily to invoke, appropriate, or trivialize the suffering of those who experience FGM in non-Western cultures. Cultural cliteracy is an attempt to use the metaphoric language of clitoridectomy to show the continuum that constitutes violence against women, particularly, violence against their sexuality.

Literature of domestic abuse makes clear that women suffering intimate partner abuse often report greater suffering from the psychological abuse they receive than from the

women their proper place in relation to men. What follows are some of “the social facts and social forces” that have shaped representations of the clitoris in Western minds, historical examples of Western erasure of the clitoris.

In Classical Athens (fifth and fourth centuries BCE), the “cradle of democracy,” sexual theories justified patterns of thinking that sanctioned the mistreatment and confinement of women. Some of these patterns continue in some form today. In Classical Athens, women were far from free or seen as equal to men. They were denied education, married off at puberty, consigned to the authority of a male patron, prevented from participating in public life, confined in dark and cramped domestic quarters, and even denied access to food equal to men’s.³⁹ They died ten years before their male cohorts.⁴⁰ Athenian citizens typically considered women’s bodies as accessories to their own, and Athenian sexual culture idealized relations between boys and men.⁴¹ From the fifth century BCE until the eighteenth century, women and men were seen as essentially similar, one lesser than the other, to be sure, but not a distinct and different sex.⁴²

According to Aristotle, women were “mutilated men.”⁴³ A prenatal disaster turned what was meant to be a man into a mistake, a woman.⁴⁴ If women had developed fully and properly in the womb, he claimed, they would have been born male.⁴⁵ Because of adverse uterine conditions, what was meant to be a child’s penis, able ultimately to produce the sperm solely responsible for

physical abuse, even when the latter sends them into intensive care. See JILL DAVIES, *SAFETY PLANNING WITH BATTERED WOMEN: COMPLEX LIVES, DIFFICULT CHOICES* 1-73 (1998); LEONORE E. WALKER, *THE BATTERED WOMAN* 71-165 (1979). Compartmentalizing violence against women into less serious emotional abuse and more devastating physical abuse betrays the experience women report. Domestic violence advocates claim that ignoring this reality re-traumatizes battered women. DAVIES, *supra* note 38. Conversion symptoms of hysterics, both subjugated women and combat-weary soldiers, attest to the physical power of psychological violence. Failure to see violence against women as a continuum makes it more difficult to stop the hostility patriarchal assumptions about women’s lesser worth inspire.

Another rationale for the language of clitoridectomy is that it parallels the language of castration, which enabled Freud to elaborate and make more visible the victimization Western males experience as a consequence of the social construction of Western masculinities. See, e.g., SIGMUND FREUD, *THREE ESSAYS ON THE THEORY OF SEXUALITY* (James Strachey trans., Basic Books 1962) (1905). Interestingly, no one (as far as I know) faults him for appropriating and trivializing the suffering of eunuchs (even though maybe we should). Cultural cliteracy provides a lens that enables us to see that controlling women’s sexuality is pervasive in Western history and in today’s social arrangements and is a cornerstone of sexism and male privilege.

39. See EVA C. KEULS, *THE REIGN OF THE PHALLUS: SEXUAL POLITICS IN ANCIENT ATHENS* 100, 108-10, 118, 119, 210-13 (1985); Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Private Life in Classical Athens*, in *GODDESSES, WHORES, WIVES, AND SLAVES: WOMEN IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY* 79 (1995).

40. KEULS, *supra* note 39, at 6.

41. *Id.* at 279.

42. THOMAS LAQUEUR, *MAKING SEX: BODY AND GENDER FROM THE GREEKS TO FREUD* 4 (1990).

43. ARISTOTLE, *DE PARTIBUS ANIMALIUM I AND DE GENERATIONE ANIMALIUM I* 23 (D.M. Balme trans., Clarendon Press 1992) (404 BC); see also Maryanne Cline Horowitz, *Aristotle and Women*, 9 J. HIST. BIOLOGY 183 (1976) (critiquing Aristotle’s thought).

44. ARISTOTLE, *supra* note 43, at 4.

45. *Id.*

creating the next generation of children, became an underdeveloped and sterile stump, a clitoris.⁴⁶ Women were therefore seen as inferior beings, only good as vessels in which men could incubate their pregnant sperm.⁴⁷ Symbolic of this unbalanced view of the sexes was the common Athenian gesture of flashing the phallus. Visitors to Athens noted what they considered quite an anomaly, men displaying their erect penises as a way to greet each other.⁴⁸ This method of consolidating male solidarity helped to construct a culture often referred to today as a “phallocracy,”⁴⁹ and it positioned the clitoris as a body part of embarrassing insignificance. Aristotle’s arguments about women’s reproductive inferiority were so compelling, probably because of the way they justified current gendered social arrangements, that not until ovulation was actually observed in the twentieth century was women’s genetic contribution to conception fully acknowledged.⁵⁰

During the Middle Ages, Christian somatophobia gave rise to paranoia about women and delusions about the clitoris. Fear of women’s bodies sparked extermination of countless women, innocent of the charges brought against them by the Inquisition.⁵¹ The Medieval Christian Church viewed women as sinful daughters of Eve, responsible for leading men into temptation.⁵² The *Malleus Maleficarum*, a 1486 guide for finding witches, identified the clitoris as a “devil’s teat,” through which the devil sucked out his victim’s soul.⁵³ Finding this bit of tissue on a woman proved she was a witch and justified the Inquisition’s eliminating perhaps as many as 9,000,000 women during its 250-year reign.⁵⁴ Although today we recognize that what was alleged to have been a “devil’s mark” was no more than a well-developed and swollen clitoris, the stigma attached to this organ centuries ago persists.⁵⁵

At the end of the eighteenth century, the rise of democratic ideologies and the decline of the power of monarchs threatened traditional gender hierarchies, giving rise to new attacks on the clitoris. Because the rights of man could be withheld from woman if woman and man were not the same kinds of being, cultural work to redefine men and women as more different than alike commenced. Medical and scientific discourses established radically new gender differences that positioned women as not just different from and inferior to the other sex, but as the polar opposite.⁵⁶ For the first time, anatomists drew female

46. *Id.*

47. *Id.*

48. *Id.*

49. KEULS, *supra* note 39, at 1-3.

50. LAQUEUR, *supra* note 42, at 42.

51. See BARBARA G. WALKER, THE WOMEN’S ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MYTHS AND SECRETS 171, 440-44 (1983).

52. *Id.* at 5.

53. *Id.* at 442, 798.

54. *Id.*; see also Richard J. Green, How Many Witches, Dec. 9, 2000, <http://www.holocaust-history.org/~rjg/witches.shtml>.

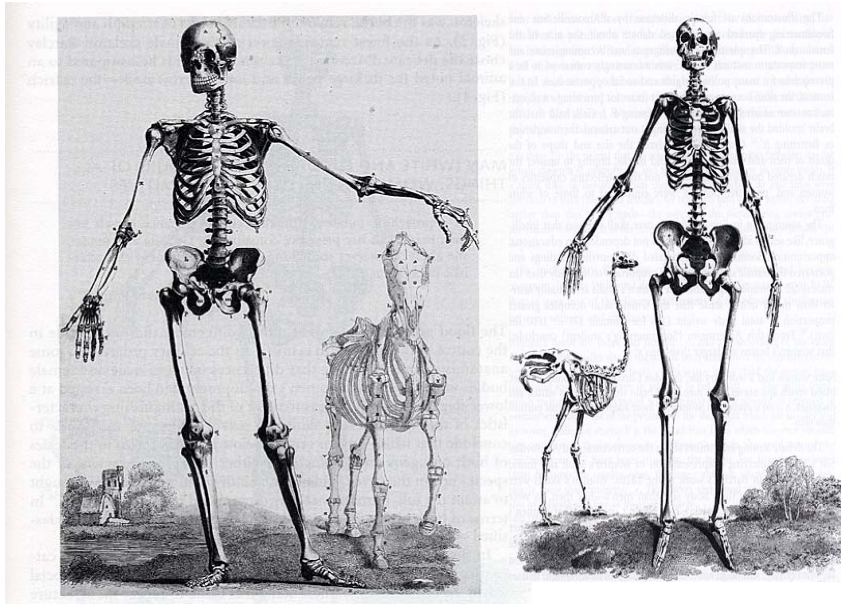
55. LANA THOMPSON & VERN L. BULLOUGH, THE WANDERING WOMB: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF OUTRAGEOUS BELIEFS ABOUT WOMEN 171 (1999).

56. LAQUEUR, *supra* note 42, at 166-69.

skeletons different from male ones.⁵⁷ Drawings illustrated women's smaller skulls and larger pelvises and provided evidence that nature intended them not for thought, civil rights, or leadership, but motherhood alone.⁵⁸

57. *Id.*

58. Londa Schiebinger, *Skeletons in the Closet: The First Illustrations of the Female Skeleton in Eighteenth Century Anatomy*, in *FEMINISM AND THE BODY* 25 (Londa Schiebinger ed., 2000).



Figures 1 and 2. Drawings of male (left) and female (right) skeletons in 1829, used by Schiebinger to illustrate the diverging anatomies of men and women in the nineteenth century.

While Medieval Church fathers had portrayed women as lustier than men, nineteenth-century medical men described women as naturally passionless. Medical discourse described women's sexuality as primarily maternal and lacking sexual responsiveness.⁵⁹ Anatomists represented the "normal" uterus as one that contained a fetus, assigned the clitoris to the reproductive or urinary system, and erased it from medical illustrations.⁶⁰ English urologist William Acton assured his public: "The majority of women . . . are not very much troubled by sexual feelings of any kind."⁶¹ Victorians typically considered "female orgasm" an oxymoron. Around 1850, by the time the vibrator was invented as a medical device for physicians to provide hysterical women with the paroxysm that could give them relief, few understood the treated women's shudders to be sexual pleasure.⁶² Doctors treated "nymphomania," indicated by masturbation or sexual pleasure during partner sex, by cauterizing or excising the clitoris.⁶³ These trends continued into the twentieth century.

59. LAQUEUR, *supra* note 42, at 189-92.

60. R. CHALKER, *THE CLITORAL TRUTH: THE SECRET WORLD AT YOUR FINGERTIPS* 81 (2000).

61. William Acton, *Want of Sexual Feeling in the Female in The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life Considered in their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations*, in *EMBODIED SELVES: AN ANTHOLOGY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TEXTS 1830-1890* 179 (Sally Shuttleworth & Jenny Bourne Taylor eds., 1998).

62. RACHEL MAINES, *THE TECHNOLOGY OF ORGASM: HYSTERIA, THE VIBRATOR, AND WOMEN'S SEXUAL SATISFACTION* 9 (2001).

63. SIGMUND FREUD, *NEW INTRODUCTORY LECTURES ON PSYCHOANALYSIS* 65 (1933).

In the early twentieth century, Freud made woman's "inferior genital" the bedrock of his female psychology.⁶⁴ Freud believed a sign of a woman's maturity was her abandoning clitoral pleasure for vaginal stimulation and orgasm.⁶⁵ Becoming a mark of women's immaturity and stunted development, "the clitoris" dropped out of the common language, something Harriet Lerner points to in *Parental Mislabeling of Female Genitals*.⁶⁶ Notions of penis envy, masochism, vaginal orgasms, and underdeveloped superegos have stood in the way of understanding female psychosexual development ever since Freud's myth of the vaginal orgasm gained ascendancy. It has proven to be one of the most effective examples of discursive clitoridectomy in history and continues to deter the spread of cultural cliteracy today as women and men refuse to give up the notion of the superiority of vaginal orgasms.

Symbolic clitoridectomy is not the only form of female genital mutilation practiced in the West. Actual clitoridectomies occurred until the 1940s. Masturbating and sexually expressive women were targeted as pathological and treated with clitoridectomy and other procedures—hysterectomy, ovariectomy, lobotomy, electroshock treatment, and psychiatric incarceration—became popular tools for containing women's sexuality.⁶⁷ At the turn of the century 200,000 women were institutionalized in the U.S.⁶⁸ The figure rose to 566,000 by 1936.⁶⁹ If actual clitoridectomy is now rare, attacks against women's sexuality persist. One in four women will be the recipient of abuse, incest, or rape sometime in her life.⁷⁰ Date rape is so prevalent that one in four female students report being violated on college campuses.⁷¹ When women kill those who batter them, they receive more severe jail sentences than male serial killers.⁷² Although clitoridectomy is rare today in the US, moving the clitoris closer to the vagina, tightening the vagina, trimming the labia, and injecting the g-spot with collagen are examples of creating designer vaginas increasingly popular with American women.⁷³

Fear of and defense against female sexuality are not relics of bygone days. Anatomical illustrators in the United States reacted to the promise of women's liberated sexuality in the twentieth century by deleting labels or parts of the

64. FREUD, *supra* note 63, at 126-28.

65. *Id.*

66. Harriet Lerner, *Parental Mislabeling of Female Genitals*, in *WOMEN IN THERAPY* 23 (Harriet Lerner ed., 1988).

67. See JEFFREY L. GELLER & MAXINE HARRIS, *WOMEN OF THE ASYLUM: VOICES FROM BEHIND THE WALLS, 1840-1945* (1995).

68. *Id.* at 178.

69. *Id.* at 255.

70. ROBIN WARSHAW, *I NEVER CALLED IT RAPE: THE MS. REPORT ON RECOGNIZING, FIGHTING, AND SURVIVING DATE AND ACQUAINTANCE RAPE* 11 (2d ed. 1994).

71. *Id.*

72. See, e.g., *DEFENDING OUR LIVES: A FILM ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE* (Cambridge Documentary Films 1994).

73. Deborah Olivier, *Designer Vaginas*, SALON.COM, Nov. 14, 2000, <http://archive.salon.com/sex/feature/2000/11/14/vagina/index.html>.

clitoris in their drawings.⁷⁴ Even today, high school biology textbooks often excise the clitoris from their anatomical drawings. Thus, we see that the practices of erasing the clitoris and of tailoring women to be sex objects are foundational to and persistent in Western society.

Much is gained in viewing Western clitoridectomy—both discursive and actual—as part of *systematic* suppression of female sexuality. The long history of women's construction as sex object and sexual threat can help explain contemporary women's often-muted sexual responses. Forty years ago, Glenn and Kaplan claimed that women were “unable to describe sexual feelings.”⁷⁵ Today researchers at the Kinsey Institute are finding the same problems.⁷⁶ Forty-six percent of female respondents to a 1994 survey, *Sex in America*, reported experiencing sexual dissatisfaction.⁷⁷ Social scientists Lisa and Marcia Douglass report a 46% orgasm gap in America.⁷⁸ While 75% of men orgasm during heterosexual acts, only 29% of women do.⁷⁹ Yet, 83% of women having sex with women orgasm during partner sex.⁸⁰ Before gaining cultural cliteracy, 90% of my students who participated in intercourse reported that they believed their sexuality was abnormal, that they were unnaturally blocked from orgasming with partners.⁸¹

When so many women in our culture experience sexual frustration and believe something is wrong with their genitals, we need to ask what part the misogynistic aggression we have briefly examined plays in their self-understanding and functioning. When aggressors project their hostility onto the Other, symbolized by the clitoris, the Other has something real to fear. What seems apparent from a cultural perspective is that women's “sexual dysfunctions” are at least partly the result of the painful power struggles that have characterized women's living under the shadow of the Western sex/gender system. Reconstructing the social unconscious undermines the naturalness of representations of damaged genitals and reveals a disturbing relationship between cultural clitoridectomy and dampened female sexual subjectivity. The long history of women's construction as demonized *femmes fatales* or passive sexual objects can help explain contemporary women's often muted sexual responses. When women report fearing there is something wrong with their

74. Lisa J. Moore & Adele E. Clarke, *Clitoral Conventions and Transgressions: Graphic Representations in Anatomy Texts c. 1990-1991*, 21 FEMINIST STUD. 255 (1995).

75. Jules Glenn & Eugene H. Kaplan, *Types of Orgasm in Women: A Critical Review and Redefinition*, 16 J. AM. PSYCHOANALYTIC ASS'N 550 (1968).

76. Susan Ekberg Stiritz, Interview with Kinsey Institute Researchers (Feb. 20, 2002).

77. EDWARD O. LAUMANN ET AL., THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF SEXUALITY: SEXUAL PRACTICES IN THE UNITED STATES 363 (1994).

78. LISA DOUGLASS & MARCIA DOUGLASS, THE SEX YOU WANT: A LOVERS' GUIDE TO WOMEN'S SEXUAL PLEASURE 3 (2d ed., 2002).

79. *Id.* at 363.

80. *Id.*

81. SUSAN EKBERG STIRITZ, UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN'S SEXUAL HISTORIES (2007) (on file with author).

genitals, as many of my students have,⁸² we need to ask what part masculinist aggression plays in their fantasies. The way in which fear of female sexuality has shaped our culture suggests we re-conceptualize girls' and women's genital anxiety by looking at how political processes shape personal ones.

III. A NEW FEMINIST ANATOMY OF THE CLITORIS

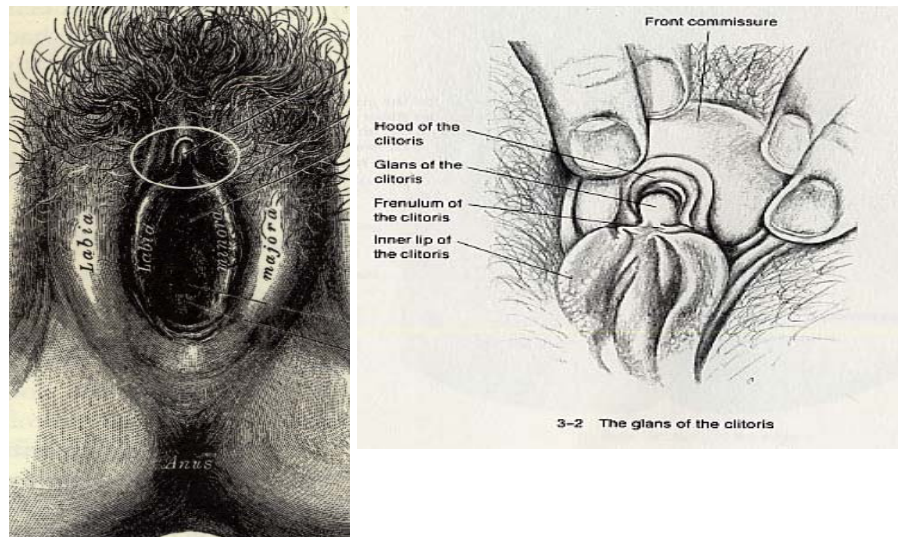
*I know no woman . . . for whom her body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meanings, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripenings. There is for the first time today a possibility of converting our physicality into both knowledge and power.*⁸³

Because Kulish writes within an essentialist framework that naturalizes hegemonic anatomies,⁸⁴ she neglects to consider that bodies themselves are representations revealing the work of a cultural unconscious.

82. *Id.*

83. ADRIENNE C. RICH, *OF WOMAN BORN: MOTHERHOOD AS EXPERIENCE AND INSTITUTION* 14 (1986).

84. See Kulish, *supra* note 13.



Figures 3 and 4. On the left, “The External Organs of the Vagina,” from *Gray’s Anatomy* (1930), diminishes the clitoris. On the right, “The Glans of the Clitoris,” from *A New View of a Woman’s Body* (1991) reenvision the clitoris as a system as large as male genitals. This comparison shows that anatomical drawings of the vulva do not represent objective truth but a socially constructed one. (Used with permission from *A New View of a Woman’s Body* by the Federation of Feminist Women’s Health Centers. Illustrations by Suzanne Gage.)

A comparison of two images of female genitalia, one from *Gray’s Anatomy* of 1918 and 1930⁸⁷ and the other from the Federation of Feminist Women’s Health Centers’ *A New View of a Woman’s Body* of 1981⁸⁸ provides that feminist click of recognition that the personal is political, that the sexual is social. While Gray depicts a static, stiff, dead-looking vulva in which the clitoris is barely perceptible and the vagina is a gaping hole or hungry mouth that seems to have teeth in it, illustrator Suzanne Gage creates a graceful, sensuous, alive vulva. In fact, the model for Gray’s drawing was a cadaver,⁸⁹ while Gage’s models were live women stimulating and examining themselves in order to discover what they looked like at various stages during the sexual response cycle.⁹⁰

85. HENRY GRAY, *GRAY’S ANATOMY* (24th ed. 1930).

86. FED’N OF FEMINIST WOMEN’S HEALTH CTRS., *A NEW VIEW OF A WOMAN’S BODY* 151 (1991).

87. GRAY, *supra* note 85.

88. FED’N OF FEMINIST WOMEN’S HEALTH CTRS., *supra* note 86.

89. *Compare Id.*, with GRAY, *supra* note 85.

90. GRAY, *supra* note 85.

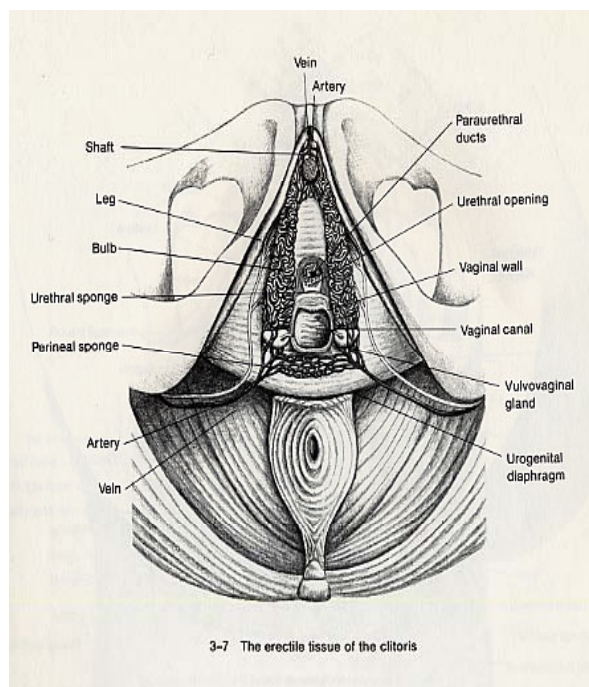


Figure 5. The Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers' new view of the clitoris shows its many parts. Nerves, muscles, veins, and erectile tissue combine with the glans to form the new clitoris. (Used with permission from *A New View of a Woman's Body* by the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers.

Gage's clitoris forms an emergent system of connected parts that work together to produce orgasm: glans, shaft, crura, muscles, two kinds of erectile tissue, veins, arteries, and nerves are included.⁹¹ Unlike Masters and Johnson, who place sexual response in the context of marriage,⁹² the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers illustrates women's sexual response in the context of masturbation.⁹³ Gage draws women soloing (masturbating) to orgasm, controlling their sexual response and owning their pleasure⁹⁴—not unlike the way men act in contemporary American sexual culture. Positioning female sexuality as more alike rather than different from male sexuality helps establish it as autonomous, active, and powerful.

91. FED'N OF FEMINIST WOMEN'S HEALTH CTRS., *supra* note 86.

92. WILLIAM H. MASTERS & VIRGINIA JOHNSON, HUMAN SEXUAL RESPONSE 12 (1966).

93. FED'N OF FEMINIST WOMEN'S HEALTH CTRS., *supra* note 86.

94. *Id.*

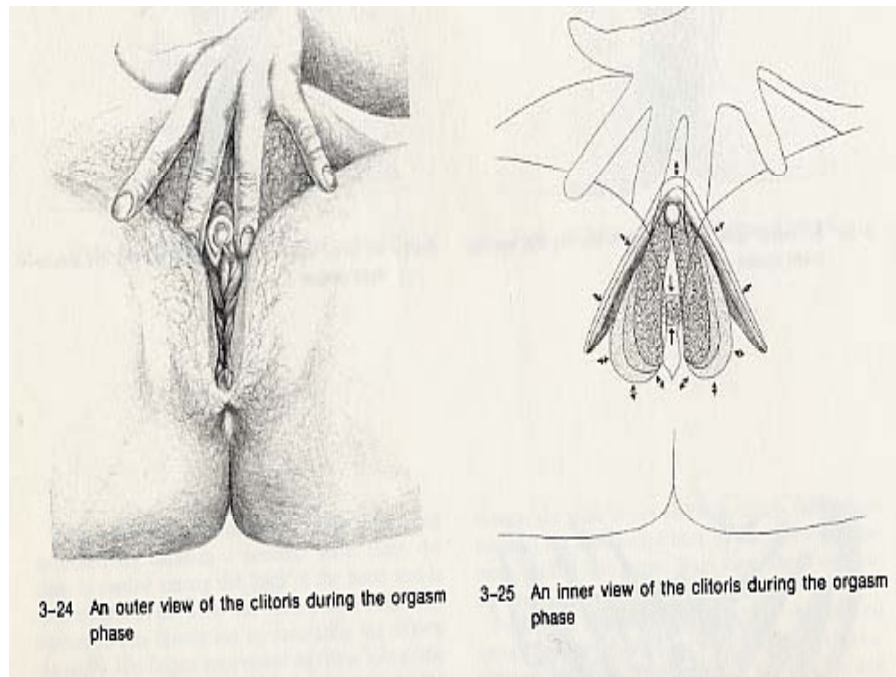


Figure 6. The Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers represents the new clitoris as women's primary organ of sexual pleasure, existing to please women, whether soloing or participating in sex with others. No longer the tiny bud it was thought to be, it now encompasses veins, muscles, erectile tissue, and nerves. (Used with permission from *A New View of a Woman's Body* by the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers. Illustrations by Suzanne Gage.)

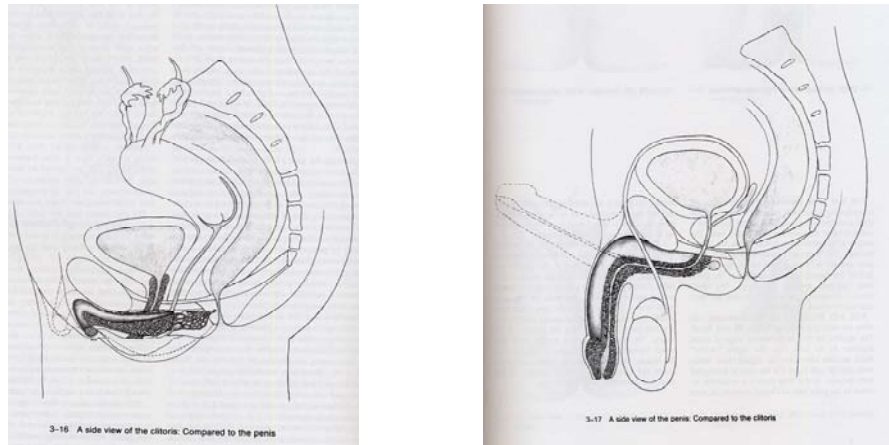


Figure 7 and 8. On the left, cross-sections of the clitoris before and after erection are drawn to resemble those of the male penis. On the right, cross-sections of the penis before and after erection. *Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers, A New View of a Woman's Body* 151 (1991). (Used with permission from *A New View of a Woman's Body* by the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers. Illustrations by Suzanne Gage.)

"What do women want?" This has been a hard question to answer because the clitoris has been erased from the lexicon. Therefore, words accurately describing female bodies and expressing women's desires either do not exist or are not easy to use. Traditionally, little girls have been told their clitorises are "vaginas." Do you know any child whose genital explorations have resulted in her hearing the name of her clitoris? A message such as, "Janie that's your clitoris. It feels good to touch, doesn't it?" needs to be added to scripts for girls. As Betty Dodson reiterates in her books and instructional videos: "Little girls need to have positive and accurate representations of their vulvas to help them learn about their sexual pleasure."⁹⁵ Recently, new words have been invented to help women communicate with a partner needing a road map to female pleasure. Combining letters from "clitoris," "vagina," and "g-spot," Lisa and Marcia Douglass coin the term "cligeva" to denote a woman's full pleasure zone.⁹⁶ They also invent a word for women's stimulation of choice—"clittage"—meaning "oral or digital massage of the clitoris."⁹⁷ Accurate yet attractive words, they reason, should make it easier for women to request what they want.⁹⁸ Because sex is more often alluded to than honestly and openly discussed, women in our

95. CELEBRATING ORGASM: WOMEN'S PRIVATE SELFLOVING SESSIONS (Betty Dodson Productions 2005).

96. DOUGLASS & DOUGLASS, *supra* note 78, at 33.

97. *Id.*

98. *Id.*

society have little chance of growing sexually unless they question the sexual culture and create sexual scripts that bring them pleasure.

Today, women are recognizing that the clitoris is the key to women's genital pleasure and asking those who care for them to recognize it as well. Women are seeking the sexual agency that at least some men have always felt entitled to. This involves their exploring and redefining the clitoris and the language with which they think, communicate, and experience it.

IV. CULTURAL CLITERACY: A NEW PRACTICE

"[I]llumination, a match burning in a crocus, an inner meaning almost expressed."⁹⁹

When a culture does not reflect or recognize images that represent the power and values of members of muted groups,¹⁰⁰ it drains meaning from their lives, while plumping up the egos of those whose symbols and experiences the culture does recognize and celebrate.¹⁰¹ In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf claims that women's passionlessness, self-denigration, and self-sacrifice exist in patriarchal societies to reflect men at "twice their normal size."¹⁰² Lorde describes sexual consummation as an experience that fills a person up and pulls a person together, helping them become more agentic.¹⁰³ Penis-in-vagina sex gives men the stimulation they need to climax while depriving most women of what they need to do so. Because the sexual practices of our culture are androcentric, they serve to flatter men and deplete women. Sexual flattery helps to convince men that their power and privilege are legitimate, while exhausting women who feel obligated to keep up the pretence that they are satisfied. Sex surveys conducted by students in my classes confirm that 80% of them fake orgasms with men.¹⁰⁴ They say they do so to protect their partners' egos and their own images of their femininity.¹⁰⁵ Audré Lorde's conception of the erotic as "the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge"¹⁰⁶ helps redefine sexuality gynocentrically, in ways more congenial to women, ways that support their resistance to subordination. To escape alienation and domination, Lorde advises pursuing sexual pleasure and using its abundance as a standard of excellence against which to measure all other experiences.¹⁰⁷

99. VIRGINIA WOOLF, *MRS. DALLOWAY* 32 (1925).

100. Showalter, *supra* note 34, at 262.

101. Bartky, *supra* note 23, at 99.

102. VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN* 77 (1929).

103. Lorde, *supra* note 1, at 55.

104. Stiritz, *supra* note 81.

105. *Id.*

106. Lorde, *supra* note 1, at 56.

107. *Id.*

Representations of the clitoris as an agent and object of wonder, awe, power, beauty, connection and pleasure can symbolize women's particular experiences of subjectivity, and readers of women's texts increasingly recognize the presence of such symbols in women's literature and art. Literary critic Paula Bennett elucidates 278 clitoral examples from the poetry of Emily Dickinson alone.¹⁰⁸ Reading the clitoris in women's literature and art turns the works in which they appear into artifacts and avatars of female power that can inspire, enliven, and motivate female-identified readers.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston describes with clitoral imagery her protagonist's developmental drive as sexual awakening:

That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? This singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness.

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. . . . Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds¹⁰⁹

The aptness of Hurston's erotic imagery to celebrate female sexuality and subjectivity went largely unappreciated until Alice Walker brought it to public attention in the 1970s.¹¹⁰ Beyond getting Hurston's oeuvre republished, Walker incorporated Hurston's scrutiny of the impact of androcentric sexual culture on female sexuality in her own work.¹¹¹ *The Color Purple* traces Celie's individuation as a sexual awakening.¹¹² Shug, her mentor in this journey, defines "virginity" for Celie as the state of not knowing how to enter fully into one's sexual pleasure with another.¹¹³ She encourages Celie to move

108. Paula Bennett, *Critical Clitoridectomy: Female Sexual Imagery and Feminist Psychoanalytic Theory*, 18 *SIGNS* 235 (1993).

109. ZORA NEALE HURSTON, *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* 10-11 (1937).

110. EVELYN C. WHITE, *ALICE WALKER: A LIFE* (2004).

111. *See id.*

112. ALICE WALKER, *THE COLOR PURPLE* (1982).

113. *Id.* at 76-77.

from being just something that provides friction for her lusting and abusive male partners to a someone who can choose, pleasure, enjoy, and cherish another. Shug instructs: “God love all them feelings. That’s some of the best stuff God did. And when you know God loves ‘em you enjoys ‘em a lot more. You can just relax, go with everything that’s going, and praise God by liking what you like.”¹¹⁴

By placing women’s sexual experience at the center of our interpretations, we can often gain what feminist rhetorical critic Starhawk calls “acrostic perspective.”¹¹⁵ Gaining acrostic perspective is like turning a kaleidoscope to a new view. Acrostic perspective scrambles conventionally androcentric ways of seeing to settle on a new perspective that brings women’s realities and interests into view. Acrostic perspective disrupts views of sex as purely genital and reconfigures it in ways that privilege women’s subjectivity. An acrostic perspective of Remedios Varo’s “The Call”¹¹⁶ reveals female sexuality as potentially nurturing and enlivening.

114. *Id.* at 196.

115. STARHAWK, *THE SPIRAL DANCE: A REBIRTH OF THE ANCIENT RELIGION OF THE GREAT GODDESS* 216, 225 (1999).

116. REMEDIOS VARO, *THE CALL* (Painting) (1961).



Figure 9. "The Call" (1961) by Remedios Varo (1908-1963). (Printed with permission of Walter Gruen.)

In Varo's painting, a woman wearing a cape and holding a red egg topped with an oil lamp walks towards us on a triangular-patterned floor.¹¹⁷ Recognizing its sexual symbolism transforms its details into a coherent narrative. The triangle traditionally symbolizes female genitals; Judy Chicago made it the prominent feature of her installation, *The Dinner Party*.¹¹⁸ The red egg symbolizes fertility and is an icon for Mary Magdalene, the sexualized Christian saint. The woman's cape resembles labial folds. At the top of this concealed vulva, where the glans of the clitoris would be located, is a cup with a

117. *Id.*

118. JUDY CHICAGO, *THE DINNER PARTY* (1974-79) (Mixed Media Exhibit).

spoon, suspended from the woman's necklace. Varo seems to be saying that female sexual pleasure is nurturing and life sustaining. The oil lamp the woman carries symbolizes the transformative power of fire, or passion, to illuminate. The electrifying aura surrounding Varo's protagonist suggests the radiance of the erotic, which stands her red hair on end. Connected to celestial bodies, her hair seems wired to cosmic power. The woman's eyes roll half back in her head as during orgasm, and her hand gestures a blessing. In my reading of Varo's painting, the erotic is a life force, as Lorde claims,¹¹⁹ not just the genital, as androcentric definitions of sexuality portray it. The picture is of a woman coming and coming out of a closet. The painting creates a sacred space out of female sexuality and calls women to reclaim sexual pleasure as the food of individuation, creativity, and life. Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*,¹²⁰ Carolee Schneeman's *Vulva's Morphia*,¹²¹ and Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*¹²² also represent the clitoris as a culturally denigrated organ that women throughout history have had to reclaim on their journey to self reclamation. When we read the clitoral as more than the genital, women's stories often become heroic myths of human development—not simply trivial stories of heterosexual romance. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène Cixous predicts that the decapitated goddess, female desire, will once again regain her head, if women will but write themselves and their bodies into culture.¹²³

Today, sexual self-efficacy in young women—supported by education that is culturally cliterate—is increasingly recognized as an anodyne to “pornifying”¹²⁴ forces in our culture.¹²⁵ According to a recent report of the American Psychological Association, objectification of girls and women undermines their cognitive functioning, distorts their body-image, interferes with their sexual response, causes them to internalize shame and self-hatred, and ushers them into lifelong roles as sex objects.¹²⁶ In turning a girl into a thing, sexual objectification robs her of her ability to be an agent. In a society in which a retail chain, Limited Too, sells thongs for eight year olds and a specialty chain, Libby Lou, provides rock star makeovers to kindergartners, this objectification is hard to stop and hard to avoid. Jackson Katz points out that in a rape culture, objectification forms part of the continuum of violence against women that includes rape and femicide; it is part of—not separate from—the rape process.¹²⁷

While objectification is apparent everywhere, the prevalence of rape is still under-recognized. In a recent university class of thirty-seven women, forty-six percent of them reported having experienced sexual coercion, and several others

119. LORDE, *supra* note 1, at 53-59.

120. CHICAGO, *supra* note 118.

121. CAROLEE SCHNEEMAN, *VULVA'S MORPHIA* (1995).

122. EVE ENSLER, *THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES* (2001).

123. Hélène Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, in *THE WOMEN AND LANGUAGE DEBATE: A SOURCEBOOK* 78 (Camille Roman et al. eds., 1976).

124. PAMELA PAUL, *PORNIFIED: HOW PORNOGRAPHY IS TRANSFORMING OUR LIVES, OUR RELATIONSHIPS, AND OUR FAMILIES* 1 (2005).

125. Susan Stiritz, *Framing Young Women's Sexual Self-Efficacy* (forthcoming 2008).

126. AM. PSYCHOL. ASS'N, *TASK FORCE REPORT ON THE SEXUALIZATION OF GIRLS* (2007).

127. JACKSON KATZ, *THE MACHO PARADOX: WHY SOME MEN HURT WOMEN AND HOW ALL MEN CAN HELP* 149-50 (2006).

claiming not to have experienced sexual coercion, related stories indicating that they had.¹²⁸ In another class, ninety of the students reported sexual coercion that “upset them greatly.”¹²⁹ As Jackson Katz points out, rape is a male problem in a culture that tolerates the colonization of women.¹³⁰ Furthermore, the violation of a woman—whether objectification or rape—does not end with the event of violation. The victims internalize the attitudes that condoned the violation. With objectification comes the deployment of unrealistic standards of beauty, which spoil girls’ ability to enjoy their bodies. All women in the group of thirty-seven students reported “hating” parts of their body, so the fact that 90% of them reported being dissatisfied with their sexual responses is not surprising.¹³¹ Symbolic clitoridectomy persists today as part of an ongoing process of violating women by colonizing their bodies to maintain male supremacy.

I conclude by mentioning some benefits of cultural cliteracy: learning the power of sexual knowledge, the enjoyment of sexual pleasure, and the need to dislodge the sexual double standard. Students’ scores on a sexual self-efficacy scale rose significantly after they took a course that investigated the social construction of sexuality; provided gynocentric views of relationships, the female body, and sexuality; exposed them to literature that helped them talk more openly about sexuality; and gave them a safe space in which to share their sexual experiences.¹³² As they felt more sexually articulate and empowered, they reported advances in other areas of their lives: “I gained confidence to try to shape my life and my sexuality better”; “I can talk to my boyfriend about sex for the first time”; “I have gotten the nerve to seek help with my anorexia”; “I came

128. Stiritz, *supra* note 81. A framework for understanding help-seeking processes among survivors of intimate partner violence offers a way of understanding differently what some might call “false consciousness.” Authors Liang et al. explain: “Victims’ definitions shift over time, depending on how ready they are to make changes in their lives. . . .” Belle Liang et al., *A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Help-Seeking Processes Among Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence*, 36 AM. J. OF COMMUNITY PSYCHOL., 71, 74 (2005). According to their model, problem solving emerges from a journey that starts in a pre-contemplation stage, proceeds to a contemplation stage, and arrives finally at a preparation stage, the point at which the survivor can face the problem. Pre-contemplation is not so much false consciousness as socially constructed obstacles to critical consciousness. Women’s avoidance and denial serve to preserve in patriarchy’s repertoire the practices that oppress women. Relational and socio-cultural factors often function to prevent a woman from identifying her abuse. The concept of false consciousness overly personalizes and individualizes the process of problem identification, which is more fruitfully viewed as a social process involving “overlapping influences of multiple factors.” *Id.* at 74. Doubting listeners, dismissive police officers, judgmental families are some of the factors that prevent women from defining and articulating their abuse in ways that can lead them to employ strategies of change. Judith Herman more simply explains abused women’s ignorance of what befalls them when she points out: “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*.” JUDITH HERMAN, *TRAUMA AND RECOVER: THE AFTERMATH OF VIOLENCE—FROM DOMESTIC ABUSE TO POLITICAL TERROR* 1 (1997).

129. Stiritz, *supra* note 81.

130. KATZ, *supra* note 127, at 5-18.

131. Stiritz, *supra* note 81.

132. See also Susan Ekberg Stiritz et al., Presentation Poster at the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality Annual Meeting: Sex Education From the Left (Nov. 2007) (describing my curriculum, developed collaboratively with students).

out”; “I am overwhelmed by the female body’s ability to derive pleasure from itself. . . . As I’ve come to see myself more as a sexual person, I have also gained confidence in myself to pursue my goals.”¹³³ One student finally faced the domestic abuse she grew up with and stood up to her abusive father when he tried to regain his position in the family he had fractured.¹³⁴ At the same time her panic attacks subsided.¹³⁵ When women are offered the opportunity to consciously address the hostility directed against their bodies and the pleasures of which they are capable, their anxieties abate, self-efficacy improves, and female sexual subjectivity comes into view.

In culturally cliterate environments, a woman defines sex according to her own values, desires, and pleasures. She becomes not only her own sexual person, but the protagonist of her own life. This happens because when cultural cliteracy supports women’s pleasure, it also supports her right to agency. This claim implies a need to integrate adequate understandings of the clitoris into discourses of sexuality, childrearing, psychology, sex education, health care, aesthetics, social work, politics, and, yes, law, if women are to come into their own.

133. *Id.*

134. *Id.*

135. *Id.*