

Organs and Orgasms

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From personal accounts to anthropological analyses, from emancipatory discourses to debates on mutilation: having long been ignored, female pleasure is now being put into the spotlight.

Reviewed: Sarah Barmak, *Closer – Notes from the Orgasmic Frontier of Female Sexuality* (translated as *Jourir. En quête de l'orgasme féminin*, by Aude Secheret, Paris, Zones, 2019 [2016], 308 p., €17). Delphine Gardey, *Politique du clitoris*, Paris, éditions Textuel, "Petite encyclopédie critique", 2019, 154 p., €15.90.

The late 2010s saw an explosion in the publication of books about female sexuality, and in particular female sexual pleasure:¹ guides, journalistic accounts, reports on studies from a wide range of fields, feminist or, on the contrary, conservative essays, etc. The two works reviewed here are part of this wave of publications which investigate the specificity of female pleasure, the ways in which it is examined in academic research, but also the various ways of attaining it. They are however very different in nature.

We thus have on the one hand an essay by a Canadian journalist, Sarah Barmak, which she presents as a "quest" for the female orgasm, peppered with a few scientific

¹ We might mention, among others, the works of Maïa Mazaurette, a columnist who specialises in the topic of sexuality, who incidentally wrote an excellent preface to Barmak's book (these include *La revanche du clitoris* ("Revenge of the Clitoris"), Paris, La Musardine, in 2007, written together with a medical doctor, Damien Mascret; and more recently *Sortir du trou/Lever la tête* ("Coming out of the Hole/Lifting Up your Head"), Paris, Éditions Anne Carrière, in 2019), the guide written by journalist Clarence Edgard-Rosa (*Connais-toi toi-même - Guide d'auto-exploration du sexe féminin* ("Know Thyself – A Self-Exploration Guide to the Female Sex"), Paris, La Musardine, 2019) or the essay *Au-delà de la pénétration* ("Beyond Penetration") (Paris, Monstrograph, 2019), by author and artist Martin Page.

studies, but which nevertheless remains in essence more of a personal memoir that is put into perspective by its comparison with other women's accounts. On the other hand, we have Delphine Gardey—a professor of contemporary history at the University of Geneva—and her exploration of the history of the clitoris, be it in the West or in other cultural spheres, based on mainly historical, anthropological and sociological works, at the crossroads between gender and postcolonial studies. On the one hand we have “a provocation, a poke, food for further thought” (Barmak, p. 126) based on individual experiences, on the other “a methodical political anatomy” (Gardey, p. 14) based on other people's words (each chapter is structured around a specific quote). Both books, however, are targeting a wide audience: the aim is to provide the greatest number of people possible with knowledge and experience connected to the clitoris, orgasms and, more widely, female pleasure.

Sarah Barmak's book sets out to follow the path to the “frontier” mentioned in its title. While she starts off by outlining some historical landmarks connected to the “fear” of female pleasure, she devotes most of her text to the stories of the people she has met (a pain felt during intercourse that was not adequately dealt with medically, for example) and to her own experiences. Delphine Gardey for her part organises her book around three main sections, moving from technical and medical knowledge on to social and political perspectives: the first section outlines a history of the Western medical perspective on the clitoris, the second mainly focuses on the female genital mutilation of women of colour, developing ideas inspired by anthropological studies, and the third examines more contemporary perspectives on this organ, as much in order to reveal the scientific discoveries that have been made about it, as to encourage us to go beyond them.

Escaping from the Production of Ignorance

These two books delve into a fundamental aspect of our understanding of female sexuality: the ignorance which has long characterised it, be it in terms of the way in which the relevant organs function or of the pleasure it can procure. And this ignorance is not fortuitous, but is rather the result of a form of “production”, of an active practice,² as if knowledge were not cumulative. Delphine Gardey provides a

² On this topic see in particular Nancy Tuana, “The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women's Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance”, *Hypatia*, 2006, vol. 21, no. 3, p. 119.

detailed analysis of the case of the clitoris. She shows that this organ has regularly been “rediscovered” by doctors and researchers, and has just as regularly been “forgotten” when it no longer corresponded to the prevalent model of sexuality (for example, the model of the single sexual organ analysed by Thomas Laqueur,³ according to which the vagina alone constitutes an inverted equivalent to the penis). When Freud takes an interest in this organ in the early 20th century, thereby integrating women’s sexual lives into some form of “normality,” he does so by viewing it through the prism of the “lack” of a phallus.

Finally, the first “scientific description” of the clitoris was only made in 1998: it was provided by an Australian urologist, Helen O’Connell, who revealed the size of the organ, its volume, its internal and external functions and its connection to the rest of the body. The two authors also examine the most recent advances made in this field, in particular the 3D modelling of the clitoris made in the very early 2010s in France by the gynaecologist Odile Buisson and the urologist Pierre Foldès, as well as the open source sharing, from 2016, of a 3D model created by independent researcher Odile Fillod.⁴ These advances allowed a wide audience to view this organ in its entirety, and thus increased our overall knowledge of the female body: it is now no longer possible to claim that women have “nothing” between their legs.

These advances in terms of our understanding of the clitoris should nevertheless not detract from how backward our understanding still is regarding female sexuality more generally: Sarah Barmak thus discusses at length the case of squirting, or “female ejaculation”, which is still largely associated with pornography and the mechanics of which remain very scarcely studied and understood (due, among other things, to the fact that studies on pleasure alone receive very little funding). As far as female sexuality is concerned, she highlights the importance of the first statistical studies carried out on the subject (by Kinsey in the 1940s, and by Masters and Johnson in the 1960s), which place great emphasis on orgasms and, therefore, on the clitoris—at least within the framework of conjugal heterosexual sexuality, as Gardey also points out. But the lack of studies contributes to supporting the idea of a “mysterious”, “opaque” female sexuality compared to the norm that is defined by male sexuality. There is thus still a substantial gap between the orgasms that women and men report, and the attempts to make up for this gap mainly come from industry (through pills of uncertain effects or expensive gadgets, as Barmak notes). This is in fact the starting

³ Thomas Laqueur, *La fabrique du sexe. Essai sur le corps et le genre en Occident*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

⁴ Source: <http://carrefour-numerique.cite-sciences.fr/fablab/wiki/doku.php?id=projets:clitoris>, viewed on 27 February 2020.

point for Barmak's investigation: what can a North American woman try out in order to have better and more frequent orgasms?

Sexuality, Feminism and Treatments

By asking herself this, Barmak is returning to a question that feminists posed as early as the 1970s. Gardey charts how the question of "individuals' capacity for individual and sexual self-determination" (p. 61) was raised by the various movements that emerged during this period, and was in particular revealed by the calling into question of the vaginal orgasm, or even of heterosexuality itself; but also by the establishment of self-help movements, which aimed to teach women, through experience and touch, the workings of their own bodies and sexualities. This experiential dimension of one's relationship to oneself and to one's own pleasure underpins Barmak's approach, even if she does not draw on the feminist texts that might have shored up her thesis. But even if her text is not very much informed by feminist theory or, more widely, by the theoretical framework of gender studies, this does not stop her from criticising some of the approaches she observes or experiments with herself. She thus tells us, for example, about the "orgasmic meditation" she tries out during *Burning Man*, a major American artists' festival: this meditation is practised by two people, but within a group (access to which requires payment), and consists in one's partner manually stimulating the clitoris, ideally until one reaches orgasm, with both partners focussing throughout the exercise on their own sensations. While this exercise centres on female pleasure, it nevertheless remains conceived within a largely heteronormative framework, in which male and female are viewed as complementary; furthermore, it provides an opportunity for a flourishing business that has little in common with the exchange practices of self-help groups. Barmak nevertheless acknowledges the usefulness of studies carried out by sexual health researchers into the link between pleasure and the eminently trendy concept of "mindfulness."

Female Genital Mutilations, Constructions, Reconstructions

While Barmak does refer to some minority and marginalised situations, such as the sexuality of queer and trans individuals, in particular in connection to pornography, her argument is very largely focussed on white people, as she herself points out in her conclusion. Only a brief mention of the practice of twerking, a dance of which she condemns the naïve sexualisation in mainstream white culture, gives rise to the development of an argument regarding women of colour. In contrast, Gardey devotes a large part of her text to the latter, whether or not they live in the West. She first locates them within the context of wider practices, by drawing a parallel between the clitoridectomies (the “cauterisation, severing or crushing of the organ,” p. 37), that were practised in Europe and the United States from the start of the 19th century to the early 20th century on white women, and the “psychic excision” of these same women by science referred to by the psychoanalyst Marie Bonaparte (who herself had several operations to move her clitoris closer to her vagina).

But Gardey’s book is most innovative in its analysis of anthropological studies. Going far beyond a simple review, she provides us with a fascinating analysis of the way in which these studies reveal the gaze of white people as applied to the sexuality of black women. She shows that, as early as the beginning of the 20th century, the clitoris becomes a “civilizational marker,” used in the “construction of an alterity and subalternity that legitimise Western paternalism or even maternalism” (p. 75-76). Female genital mutilation and infibulation (i.e. the closing of the vulva and of part of the vaginal orifice) were, in particular from the 1960s, viewed less complacently than would have been permitted by an orientalist gaze. Above all, several female researchers show that these practices cannot be equated with circumcision, since this latter practice represents access to masculinity as knowledge and authority, while the former consist only of the repair of a lack, an imperfection: a “marking” by male domination, as Sylvie Fainzang argues.⁵ As Gardey points out, it is thus curiously at the level of symbolic interpretation that the first instances of such practices being called into question occur, rather than at the level of sanitary or moral condemnation.

Nevertheless, Gardey effectively highlights how the question of genital mutilation is taken on by white women, in particular from the 1980s, in accordance

⁵ Sylvie Fainzang, "Circoncision, excision et rapports de domination", *Anthropologie et Société*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1985, p. 117-127.

with a maternalist perspective that involves embarking, on behalf of women of colour in the “third world,” on “crusades” in which neither their consent nor their expertise are required. She stresses the necessity of decolonial thinking and uses the work of several researchers working within this theoretical framework to do away with the idea of Western “neutrality.” This probing into the local nature of Western perspectives nevertheless raises a question: must we then be reduced to condoning these practices, or at least to not doing anything to make them stop? For the author, we should be shifting the question: “sexual mutilations deserve to be fought against, and this fight calls upon the responsibility of Africanists to promote and help those who aspire to change” (p. 93). We must allow local populations to appropriate international campaigns for themselves, without these being purely and simply foisted upon them. Furthermore, Gardey shows how the representation of these mutilations has evolved, going through a process of redefinition during the 1990s and 2000s as “health risks” by NGOs and the UN, and thereby pushing sexuality and pleasure into the background.

But practices of genital and sexual mutilation of racialized women also affect Western countries due to the migration and movement of populations from the global South. In France, female genital mutilation was criminalised in 1979 as constituting a mutilation, and French doctors developed surgical techniques aimed at mutilated women, qualified as “restorative” techniques aimed at “saving” these women who were viewed as “other from the inside” (p. 103), as Gardey highlights. They nevertheless allow for an effective improvement of their sexual and reproductive health, and are experienced by women as a form of recovery of their femininity and sexuality, as explained by those who decide to undergo this operation.

But racialized women who have undergone female genital mutilation are not the only ones affected by genital organ surgery: the development of new norms regarding for example the size or shape of the vulva or labia (which both Gardey and Barmak attribute to pornography) has also led to the offer of cosmetic operations aimed at optimising wellbeing and sexuality. Women who decide to resort to such operations talk about them as constituting a modern form of self-care within the framework of their sexual emancipation, and no connection is drawn to the practice of female genital mutilation: “it is indeed the properly cultural dimension of Western practices that remains unseen,” notes Gardey (p. 116). The size of the clitoris also plays a role in the categorisation of intersex individuals (even if it is less central than the presence of a vagina or of a penis that is deemed large enough), and the sex reassignment surgery of male to female trans persons now aims not only to create a

vagina, but also a clitoris that will allow the person to feel something. Starting from the question of the female genital mutilation of women of colour and of anthropological works on this subject, we thus end up calling into question Western medical practices which are worth recontextualising in order to be able to study and understand them, rather than simply describe them.

Beyond Orgasms and Organs?

Throughout their books, these two authors engage in deconstructing sexual norms and should incidentally be commended for doing so. For Barmak, it is ultimately the female orgasm itself that is called into question, in order to refute the idea that one might be able to provide an objective and universal definition of it that might provide the basis for measuring performance in this field. If she insists throughout her text on the necessity of asking women about their subjective feelings regarding their sexual experiences—while underlining to what degree even such a simple approach can already be viewed as militant—she does so in order to affirm the idea that there is no such thing as a sexual “normality” and that *all women* are special cases. Without explicitly putting it into words, she thus reveals the contradictory injunctions that are placed on women where their sexuality is concerned: torn between a pressure regarding reaching orgasm and the idea that orgasm should be placed at a distance in favour of a kind of relaxation (which mindfulness can help you to achieve). Hence the necessity, which Barmak highlights, of a form of sex education that would allow you to have “an attempt to loosen ‘the mooring ropes’ that tie us to a limited self, to briefly become more than we are” (p. 198). Nevertheless, the vocabulary she uses here is characteristic of personal development and fits into a wider framework of depoliticisation that runs throughout her book. If bringing everything back to individual experience allows you to access a certain diversity of experience, it also tends to conceal power structures.

For her part, Gardey goes further than simply challenging the modalities of female pleasure: having analysed our existing knowledge of the clitoris, she then interrogates the place of this knowledge as a “key” to “the erotic, social and political emancipation of the woman-individual” (p. 128). In order to do this, she first relies on research carried out by scientists who are experts on the clitoris to determine the existence and location of a “G spot”, redefined as an internal point of the clitoris. This approach is in line with a naturalisation, or even a promotion, of vaginal penetration

as a sexual practice and thus, paradoxically, with a rehabilitation of the vagina as the central organ of a female sexuality that remains understood as naturally heterosexual. The issue here is once more to justify *anatomically* an experience that is in fact *social* above all. Gardey warns against the fetishisation that can be directed at the clitoris to the detriment of the rest of the body, by basing herself for this purpose on the theories of lesbian feminists, who aim for a “decolonisation” of bodies and try not to focus on the sole organs of the penis and the clitoris/vagina duo. The challenging of heteronormativity that models sexuality—and which makes certain practices the only ones deemed to be “natural”—requires us to develop other erotic modalities. These can be based on a refusal to think of the female body in a fragmented manner, and on the proposal of focussing instead, for example, on the attainment of a more global erotic energy: the central idea is that sexuality should not be limited to genitality. Gardey thus encourages us to go beyond science and look to art to better apprehend our sexualities. Invoking the performances, dissonances and destabilisations that occur in relation to bodies and marginal uses of these bodies, she concludes: “In short, what “makes a body” is always and already far more than the presence of an organ. The organ does not make the body and the body does not make the identity. Invention is elsewhere.” (p. 154)

While their scientific approaches and ambitions are different, these two books thus do not stop at allowing us to call into question our current understanding of the clitoris, orgasms and more largely of female sexual pleasure. By relying on personal experiences and following the codes of storytelling, Barmak’s work allows her to introduce contemporary ways of responding to the interrogations sparked by women’s sexuality. For her part, Gardey succeeds in putting these interrogations back into their historical and cultural context, and lays the foundations for a broader, emancipatory political criticism.

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